

Trip to Taos, New Mexico October 2005, by Richard L. Thayer

In order to find some answers to questions about the life and death of John Mansfield I decided to visit Taos, New Mexico and the surrounding areas. While there I was able to buy an additional informative book and visit with a local Taos historian. He told me how to find some local historic sites and told a few stories that he knew of the battle of 1847.

The notes below will be a bit disjointed, but are only meant to supplement and clarify the previous story about the life of John Mansfield.

When Sterling Price marched north out of Santa Fe on the road to Taos on January 23 1847 he followed the approximate route of today's highway 285. The command was comprised of the following units of the 2nd Missouri Mounted Militia: Company A under Captain Boone, Company D under Captain McMillan, Company K under Captain Williams, Company L under Captain Slack, Company M under Captain Halley and Company N under Captain Barber. There was also a contingent of Missouri Infantry commanded by Captain Angney, and a contingent of local mounted volunteers and mountain men under the command of Captain Ceran St. Vrain, a former partner of the murdered Governor Charles Bent. Captain Fisher of the Missouri Light Artillery had command of the 4 pieces of 12 pounder mountain howitzers and the 6 pounder cannon. Highway 285 runs slightly west of north toward its junction with the Rio Grande River. A town along the river about 25 miles north of Santa Fe originally called Canada is now named Santa Cruz. During the battle of Canada on January 24 John Mansfield along with the men of Company L 2nd Missouri Mounted Militia were assigned as support troops to protect the artillery of Captain Fisher. There were no losses in Company L during this battle but Price had total casualties of 3 killed and 6 wounded while the enemy was reported to have lost 36 killed. These casualty figures seem even more disproportionate when we learn that there were only about 353 men serving under Price in this battle against an estimated 1500 enemy combatants.

After the short battle at Canada, Price moved north up the Rio Grande River with his command which had now been joined by Captain Burgwin and his contingent of Companies G and I of the 1st US Dragoons and another company of 2nd MMM. These additional troops brought the command up to 479 men, some mounted but most on foot. North of Canada the road followed the east side of the river and the command began to enter the ever-deepening canyon of the Rio Grande

Due to the fact that it was the middle of winter and the terrain was very desert like there was a severe shortage of fodder for the horses. Even though the Missouri troops were originally all mounted when arriving in Santa Fe the horses had to be greatly dispersed and tended by troops assigned to forage duty. These troops acted to garrison small outlying villages along streams where a number of horses could survive by ranging for grass and other desert plants. One of these small towns was Mora 35 miles southeast of Taos, which was garrisoned by troops from Company G, 2nd MMM.

While Price was still at Canada 1st Lieutenant Zadock Holcomb of Company L arrived with a number of Company L horses. I have not been able to determine where these horses had been kept while foraging for winter food. It is presumed that 2nd Lieutenant John Mansfield had a horse or mule to ride after this time if he had not had one before. It was about this time that John Mansfield is reported to have purchased a mule from Zadock Holcomb for \$46. I do not understand what might have prompted this purchase unless his horse or mule had died or been stolen and John Mansfield had to replace the animal or be forced to march along with many of the men.

As Price ascended the Rio Grande along the difficult road he eventually came to the area known as Embudo Pass on January 29th. This is approximately between the towns of La Jola and Embudo, today. The canyon here is very narrow and filled with large black volcanic boulders. The road departed from the main course of the river in order to make travel easier, but this created an ideal spot for an ambush. There was a brief battle among the rocks and dense cedar trees. It is documented that Company L was at La Jola when the firing commenced and they were dispatched on horseback to come to the aid of Lieutenant White and the troops of Company K on the left wing. Company L recorded no casualties at Embudo Pass. There were casualty figures of one killed and one wounded reported for the Americans and twenty killed and 6 wounded on the Mexican/Indian side.

After the battle of Embudo, Price proceeded toward Taos following the road that now left the river in order to climb out of the steep walled canyon and entered the plain of Taos on February 1st. By the 2nd he had arrived at the town of Rio Chicito after marching his men through 2 feet of snow. The official reports speak of many men suffering from frostbite due to the fact that the men had to march in front of the horses pulling the artillery and wagons in order to break trail through the snow for the draft horses.

Price and his men arrived at Taos Pueblo on February 3 and started the battle even though it was late in the day. The next morning the battle resumed with Captain St. Vrain and Captain Slack positioning their troops along the east and southeast side of the Pueblo complex in order to prevent the escape of the enemy troops in that direction. The attack of the main body of troops was from the west and north against the pueblo and the fortified San Geronimo Church. It was presumed that the enemy would try to flee into the mountains by following the stream and the dense trees in that direction. I believe that Company L was chosen for this duty because it was the company that had the most mounted troops of the various 2nd MMM troops at Taos.

No details of how 2nd Lieutenant Mansfield may have been wounded have been found. He is reported as being slightly wounded in an after-battle report, but it must have been more than slight to have been fatal 12 days later. After the battle of Taos, Price took part of his command and returned to Santa Fe, but he left 3 companies of 2nd MMM at Taos to garrison the town and to keep order during the trials of the captured insurgents. I have not been able to determine which companies these were, but even if it was not Company L, I presume that the wounded were left in Taos to be treated and hopefully recover.

In an account left by Conrad “Dick” Wootton, who was a mountain man who fought under St. Vrain during the battle, we are told that 35 men of Price’s command died in the battle of Taos. One was Captain Burgwin, who died February 7, and was buried at Taos in a grave by himself, (later reburied at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas) “while the other 34 who were killed, were buried side by side in a long trench near where they fell.” I have considered where this mass burial might have been and I do not believe it is near Taos Pueblo, which is about 2 miles northeast of Taos. I only know of one older cemetery in Taos and that is the Kit Carson Cemetery where the famous scout was buried when he died in 1868. There is a monument in this cemetery that was erected years after the battle to commemorate the US troops who died in the battle. This monument is only a few yards from the Kit Carson plot. Due to the prevailing sentiment among the local native population the monument has been defaced and the large brass memorial plaque has been totally removed and destroyed. Only the large stone remains.

I do not know if John Mansfield is buried in the Kit Carson Cemetery, but that is my best guess for now until more and better information surfaces.

Additional reading:

“Taos 1847, The Revolt in Contemporary Accounts”, Michael McNierney, Editor, Johnson Publishing Company, 1980

“Wah-to-yah and the Taos Trail”, Lewis H. Garrard, W.H Derby & Company, 1850

“Uncle Dick Wootton”, Howard Lewis Conrad, W.E. Dribble & Company, 1890