

## Seven Civil War Battle Sites in Six Days

A recent solicitation for funds from the Civil War Trust to continue expanding the battlefield at Perryville got me to think about a trip taken to explore several Western theater battlefields.

In the Fall of 2005 a former colleague and fellow Civil War buff, Bill Walker, and I decided that we needed to learn more about some of the battlegrounds west of the Alleghenies. We were both mindful of the late Shelby Foote's admonition that it was essential to visit the battlefields to fully understand Civil War conflicts. And so on **Day One**, a Monday morning in early October 2005, we left Athens, and headed south. We hardly had any specific plans; instead we had a vague checklist of places we thought we like to see. We set aside seven days to accomplish this trip.

We did make **Chickamauga** our first target. After driving all day along Interstate highways, and stopping for a leisurely lunch at a Cracker Barrel, we arrived that evening at Chattanooga. To start **Day Two** of our trip we drove to the Chickamauga battlefield, stopping first at the Visitors' Center where we were pleasantly surprised by a prominent display honoring Charles Grosvenor who commanded the 18th OVI at Chattanooga but perhaps more significantly had introduced and managed the passage of legislation that helped establish the National Park Service. Otherwise by comparison to other visitors' centers, the Chickamauga center was relatively new with much useful information.

We purchased a Braintran audio tour that, coupled with the park service map, was supposed to provide a guided tour around the battlefield. (For our purposes it might be useful to use the link to the Civil War Trust where outstanding maps of these battlefields can be found.) I suppose it was better than nothing but Chickamauga is a very difficult battleground to comprehend and to interpret. The units were widely scattered (the park consists of almost 5,600 acres) and kept moving laterally; intelligence on both sides was sketchy at best. Commanders had little control since visibility was so poor meaning that much of this two or three battle was a soldiers' fight. I returned to Chickamauga a few

years later after reading more about the battle and after studying and taking along several maps, and I still found it a difficult battlefield to interpret. I believe if I had an opportunity to return to Chickamauga again I would try to follow the movements of one general, probably George Thomas, and then do the same thing with another general, perhaps Bedford Forrest.

Driving back to Chattanooga we discovered there isn't much left of the Chattanooga battlefield. The slopes of **Missionary Ridge** have been developed into substantial housing. There is a small museum and gift shop at the top of the ridge. On my second trip I found some markers and artillery pieces along the crest of the ridge but otherwise very little to give any flavor of what that battle must have been. To complete our second day we drove north to Murfreesboro, Tennessee, where we enjoyed an excellent dinner at a Don Publo restaurant.

**Day Three:** Of course **Stones River** was our purpose in driving to Murfreesboro. Stones River is another nicely preserved battlefield of less than 500 acres, and in contrast to Chickamauga, because it is fairly level with relatively little forest is easy to visualize. Stones River was fought in terribly cold weather. Among Civil War battles it was peculiar if not unique in that there was a day's break between the two days of actual fighting. It was fought along a broad front with not much lateral redeployment of units. The Confederates won a narrow tactical battle but as happened from time to time were forced to withdraw due to manpower and logistical shortages. We enjoyed a small Visitors' Center and found that the rangers were happy, almost eager, to discuss various aspects of the battle and the grounds.

In a perfect world, or at least with time permitting, it would be great from an orientation viewpoint to be able to tour these battlefields in the same sequence in which they occurred. Stones River occurred approximately nine months prior to Chickamauga; Stones River was Rosecrans' first major engagement as commanding general of the Army of the Cumberland while Chickamauga would be his last. Braxton Bragg was also the Confederate commander at Perryville (more about that later) and after commanding at Stones River he would also be relieved of command after Chickamauga.

Next we drove north a few hours to **Franklin**, Tennessee, not knowing exactly what to expect. It was a good thing we did not have high expectations because at that time Franklin had little to offer. Franklin might have been one of the most stupid, and certainly one of the costliest, battles of the Civil War. It featured a frontal charge much larger, and certainly more deadly, than Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg. Eight Confederate generals were either killed or mortally wounded. When we visited that afternoon in 2005 there was only a small, rustic museum featuring a movie in which the re-enactors were wearing wrist watches and wing tipped shoes. The museum was located in a well established residential area leaving almost nothing of the battlefield where so many soldiers have bravely fought and perished in vain.

The good news is that subsequent to our visit the Civil War Trust has been able to help buy several tracts of the battlefield, and after razing many commercial and residential structures much of the battlefield has been restored to something resembling its 1864 condition. It's not exactly a bucket list item but I'd certainly like to re-visit Franklin one of these days. And if I do have the opportunity to go back to that area I'd also like to visit Spring Hill, site of one of the most bizarre events in the Civil War where I understand General Motors has donated sizable acreage that once had been part of its Saturn plant.

But back to our 2005 trip, during the remainder of our third day we drove - having lunch at another Cracker Barrel -- to Savannah, Tennessee, (where we stayed at our third Comfort Inn) in order to be positioned to visit the **Shiloh** battlefield. Although we had not anticipated visiting Shiloh until the next day, we decided there was still early enough to drive to the battlefield for a quick self-guided tour. Given the lateness of the hour, and with dusk beginning to envelope the all but empty battlefield, it was one of my most mystical experiences as it was easy, almost compelling, to imagine the spirits of dead soldiers passing through the beams of our headlights. That evening we enjoyed a delicious meal of catfish, prepared to perfection in an establishment called Worley's World, which I understand is no longer in existence.

The next morning, **Day Four** of our trip, we arrived bright and early to tour the battlefield. Shiloh is one of the oldest Civil War battlefields consisting of almost 3,900 acres, and at that time at least its visitors' centers reflected that veneration. Another "vintage" movie with re-enactors wearing wrist watches and wing tipped shoes. And in broad daylight without the specter of ghosts the battlefield was somewhat anti-climatic. Again we had to rely upon a touring map provided by the park service and while we were able to identify several key locations, such as where Albert Sydney Johnston died from blood loss, I, speaking only for myself, left the battlefield being slightly underwhelmed. One of the problems of touring a multi-day battlefield such as Shiloh is that the tour keeps flipping between days of the battle making it difficult to follow the ebb and flow of the battle. In other words, here is a key piece of terrain, perhaps a lane where artillery had been positioned but was that one day one or day two? Perhaps the mistake is trying to do the whole battle at once instead of doing a tour of day one followed by a second tour of day two.

Another difficulty is that these Western battlegrounds simply do not compare in scenic wonder with the Eastern battlefields, especially Gettysburg where the vista from certain spots is little less than breath taking. Historians might argue about the actual significance of Little Round Top but there's no doubt about the terrific beauty of the panoramic view from that site. Nor do the Western battlefields have the recognizable and photogenic landmarks found at such battlefields as Antietam with its Burnside Bridge, Dunker Church, or Bloody Lane.

In any event, we were finished with Shiloh by noon, and since we had heard several favorable comments about the facility at **Corinth** we decided to deviate from a plan that we really didn't have to drive south, recreating the Northern pursuit, such as it was, of the retreating Southern army. It easily took less than an hour to reach Corinth, in contrast to Halleck's "pursuit" that took almost a month in 1862. Corinth is a funky town with little attraction except for its Interpretative Center that had been funded largely through the efforts of then Senator Trent Lott. Instead of the typical collections of uniforms and firearms found in traditional Civil War museums, the Corinth Interpretative Center features several

exhibits and seven short movies about the war as it happened in that area, including the second battle of Corinth, a hard fought affair that occurred in October, 1862. Since much of that battle happened in downtown Corinth it is unlikely that its site will ever be restored.

After returning to our lodging at Savannah, the next morning, **Day Five** of our trip, we started north for a three hour drive to **Fort Donelson**, consisting of not quite 550 acres on the Cumberland River close to the border between Tennessee and Kentucky. Fort Donelson is associated with Grant's earlier victory at Fort Henry (which is now underwater due to downstream damming) and is where Grant gained his nickname of Unconditional Surrender after "negotiating" the surrender of the Confederate garrison with his former friend Simon Buckner.

Fort Donelson had a modest museum with a typical slideshow. With the help of an audio tour we drove around the battlefield as well as though the adjacent town of Dover. The battleground still has some of the most impressive fortifications of almost any battlefield. Furthermore the battery of heavy artillery guns that forced the Federal gunboats to retreat provide an impressive view of the Cumberland River.

After a dreadful lunch in Dover we drove on to Bardstown, Kentucky, where we registered at yet another Comfort Inn before having a delightful meal at the Old Talbott Tavern. Janey and I returned to Bardstown a few years ago and determined that Old Talbott is but one of that city's several excellent dining experiences.

For **Day Six** we made a short drive to the **Perryville** battlefield, which was almost inconspicuous, especially considering its significance as a turning point in the Western theater. I'm not certain there were any signs pointing the way to the battlefield and it would have been easy to have driven past the entrance to the visitor's center, which was in a small rundown building with a cluttered interior without a movie or slideshow. In contrast to most battlefields, Perryville is a state park. In 2005 the park included but only a small portion of the battle's action and there were no roads through the battlefield for vehicles.

Perryville's terrain resembles the foothills found in S.E. Ohio. The battle itself was confusing since the armies met almost by accident with each commander believing the bulk of the other's army was still located elsewhere. The Confederates, under Bragg's command, won a narrow tactical victory but overnight withdrew and began a retreat when Bragg realized that a major portion of the Federal army had not even been engaged in the previous day's battle. Among the confused battle itself, an inadequate touring map, and difficult access to the interior of the battlefield it was almost impossible to gain any feel for the dynamics of the battle.

When I returned with Janey a few years ago we found that a much improved visitors' center had been built, in part I suppose because the Civil War Trust had had an annual meeting in the area. The park's acreage has been significantly increased since 2005 but at the vehicular tour still went around the perimeter of the battlefield. Like almost all other attempts for self-guided tours the value of the tour is greatly enhanced by advance preparation, including maps that show troop locations and movements.

After touring the battlefield -- and Bill did dismount to hike along one of the paths -- we drove on to Harrodsburg, Kentucky, where we lunched at the Beaumont Inn. The Beaumont Inn features an anteroom festooned with several prints and pictures of Robert E. Lee, which defies logic since Lee never fought in Kentucky and indeed consistently resisted attempts to reinforce units fighting in the Western theater. Furthermore although much of Kentucky seems to have bought into Lost Cause mythology the historic fact is that its men simply refused to join Bragg's army when given a chance to do so. Anyhow, at that point we had seen about all the battle sites we had intended to see, and so we decided to head back to Athens where we arrived by 6:45 pm.

Naturally we had an ample amount of drive time during our trip. Not only did we discuss the battles, the battlefields, and the skills and personalities of the commanders but we also began to discuss the possibility of organizing a Civil War roundtable in Athens. Naturally our experience helped to create some excitement about the possibility of sharing the experiences and viewpoints of other Civil War

enthusiasts, and the logistics of starting such a group seemed reasonably feasible. Thus within a couple months we had compiled a prospective membership list and arranged for a meeting space at the Athens Public library. Belatedly we also realized a previous roundtable had once met on a regular basis but had since become dormant . Once contact was made with a representative of the previous group we agreed to merge our efforts including the use of the previous group's name. After ten years the renewed roundtable still meets on a regular basis with a link to its website found elsewhere on this website.

In the space of five days, plus the first day merely getting to the first battlefield, we had visited some of the most significant, and certainly some of the bloodiest, battlefields of not just the Western theater but of the entire Civil War. Several Ohio regiments fought on these grounds, in many cases spilling an inordinate amount of blood; Ohio generals, including Grant, Sherman, Sheridan, Buell, and Rosecrans, had been in command, often with distinction. Although the landscapes of these battlefields might not have seemed as spectacular as some Eastern battlefields, a visitor still could not help but appreciate the difficulty imposed by the terrains of the various battlegrounds. And among other things I learned the importance of prior preparation before visiting battle sites such as these if one is to gain a full appreciation of strategies, troop movements, and tipping points. If given a chance I'd certainly like to do it again although with a significant increase of preparation and at a different pace to allow for more detailed explorations of the battlefields. Over the years I've toured many battlefields, particularly in the East, and never failed to learn more about each respective battle during each tour.