

General Curtis, Unsung Hero of Civil War

Victor of Pea Ridge a First Class Fighting Man

By JOHN A. MENAUGH

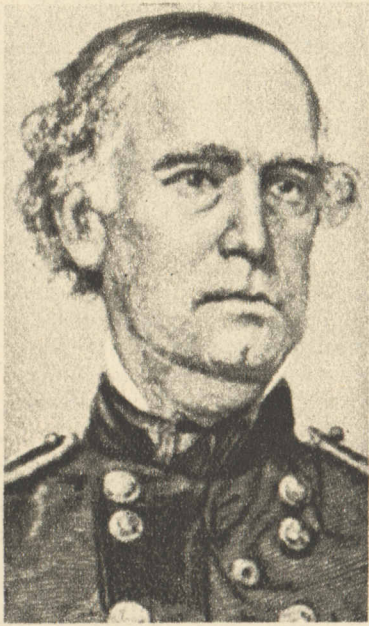
DOWN in the extreme northwestern corner of Arkansas, only a few miles below the Missouri state line, is a mountainous formation known as Pea ridge. It was here on March 7 and 8, 1862, that Union forces achieved an amazing victory over the Confederates. This was the first decisive northern victory of the Civil war to be won west of the Mississippi river.

Responsible for this triumph was Brig. Gen. Samuel Ryan Curtis, who not only was a remarkable military leader but a man outstanding in other ways. Curtis, with an army of 10,500 infantry and cavalry and forty-nine pieces of artillery, defeated a southern force under Maj. Gen. Earl Van Dorn that aggregated 16,200 cavalry and infantry and was greatly superior to his numerically in cannon. It was mainly his genius for skilfully maneuvering his troops that brought victory to Curtis. The enemy, including the commands of Maj. Gen. Sterling Price, Brig. Gen. Ben McCulloch, and Brig. Gen. Albert Pike, outflanked the Union army on the eve of the battle, but Curtis so successfully met its thrusts by rapid maneuvering of his own forces that in the end the Confederates were routed.

As has been pointed out by military experts, the army that is outflanked not always is at a disadvantage. At the battle of Pea ridge, or Elkhorn tavern, as it is called in the south, the army under Curtis was compelled to right-about-face and fight off attacks from two sides and the rear, yet so expertly was it directed and so swiftly were its various commands moved to meet every new assault from one position to another along lines that were considerably shorter than those of the enemy that it emerged the victor. In this engagement contracted lines were more effective than extended lines, and Curtis made the most of the situation. The night of March 7 saw the Union army apparently in desperate straits. But March 8 saw it turn the tables on the enemy.

Curtis, the victor of Pea ridge, today is virtually an unknown

engineering to law, was admitted to the bar, and set up a law office in Wooster, O. The legal profession held his attention until the outbreak of the Mexican war. In June, 1846, he was appointed colonel of the 3d Ohio volunteer infantry. Although he saw little active service against the Mexicans, he was made military governor of Matamoras and later of Camargo, Monterrey, and Saltillo. He was discharged from the service in June, 1847, and soon after accepted the posi-



MAJ. GEN. CURTIS

tion of chief engineer of the improvement of the Des Moines river. He moved with his family to Keokuk, Ia., which remained his home the rest of his life.

The Des Moines river project met with numerous difficulties despite the splendid planning of



Last hour of the battle of Pea ridge, March 8, 1862, with Union forces advancing to retake Elkhorn tavern. From painting by H. P. Wilson, owned by Southern Historical society, St. Louis.

(All photographs and map, except picture of General Sigel, reproduced from "Battles and Leaders of the Civil War," by Johnson & Buel, courtesy D. Appleton-Century Co.)

gress. In the following November he was directed to assume charge of military affairs in St. Louis and its environs, and soon he was given command of the southwestern district of Missouri. He launched an active campaign against the enemy in that state and Arkansas from his headquarters at Rolla, Mo. Also stationed at Rolla at that time was Brig. Gen. Franz Sigel. There arose a dispute as to which was the ranking commander, but, since Curtis' name stood higher on the official list than that of Sigel, the last named was compelled to accept the subordinate position. To his credit, however, it must be said that he served faithfully under General

in the war. His proclamation was concluded in this manner:

"I enjoin on the troops kindness, protection, and support of women and children. I shall to the best of my ability maintain our country's flag in Arkansas and continue to make relentless war on its foes; but I shall rejoice to see the restoration of peace in all the states and territories of our country; that peace which we formerly enjoyed and earnestly desire, and I implore for each and all of us that ultimate eternal peace which the world cannot give or take away."

A few days later the little army of Curtis met the combined forces of Price, McCulloch, and Pike, under the command of Van Dorn, at the battle of Pea ridge.

been able on the second day of the battle to concentrate his forces for quick and deadly thrusts and because of the excellence of his artillery fire that he vanquished an army that was vastly superior numerically. The casualties were about 1,300 on each side. Among the Confederates slain was General McCulloch.

As a result of the Pea ridge victory both Curtis and Sigel were elevated to major generals. Four weeks after the engagement Curtis led his army south-east across Arkansas through the Ozark mountains on an extremely difficult march. His object was to take Little Rock, but the plan was abandoned. Putting down guerrilla warfare and attempting to keep lines of communication open occupied most of his time until he finally decided to move his force to Helena, Ark., on the Mississippi river. He arrived there July 14.

In the meantime, on July 1, the act for the construction of the railroad to the Pacific had

been approved by President Lincoln. Curtis was named as one of the corporators, and he took a short leave of absence in September to journey to Chicago to attend the convention of the newly formed railway organization.

Placed in command of the department of Missouri, which included Missouri, Arkansas, Kansas, and Indian Territory, Curtis soon was in the midst of the worst sort of warfare. Guerrilla bands everywhere were harassing the countryside, and political skulduggery was rife on every hand. Although the fighting was not on a large scale, it none the less was dangerous. Unscrupulous persons in the north were sending contraband goods to the enemy in his department. Factional strife broke out, and Curtis incurred the enmity of Gov. H. R. Gamble. Lack of cooperation between civil and military authorities caused the President in May, 1863, to remove General Curtis, since, as he explained, he had no authority to remove

the governor. Gen. John M. Schofield superseded Curtis in command of the department of Missouri. Not long after his removal from this command General Curtis was bereaved by the loss of his son, Maj. Henry Z. Curtis, who was killed near Baxter Springs, Mo., by a guerrilla band under the leadership of the notorious W. C. Quantrill. Curtis was without a command until January, 1864, when he was assigned to the department of Kansas, consisting of the state of Kansas, the territories of Nebraska and Colorado, and Indian Territory. His new headquarters was at Fort Leavenworth, and his main job was to protect settlers from hostile Indians at the west.

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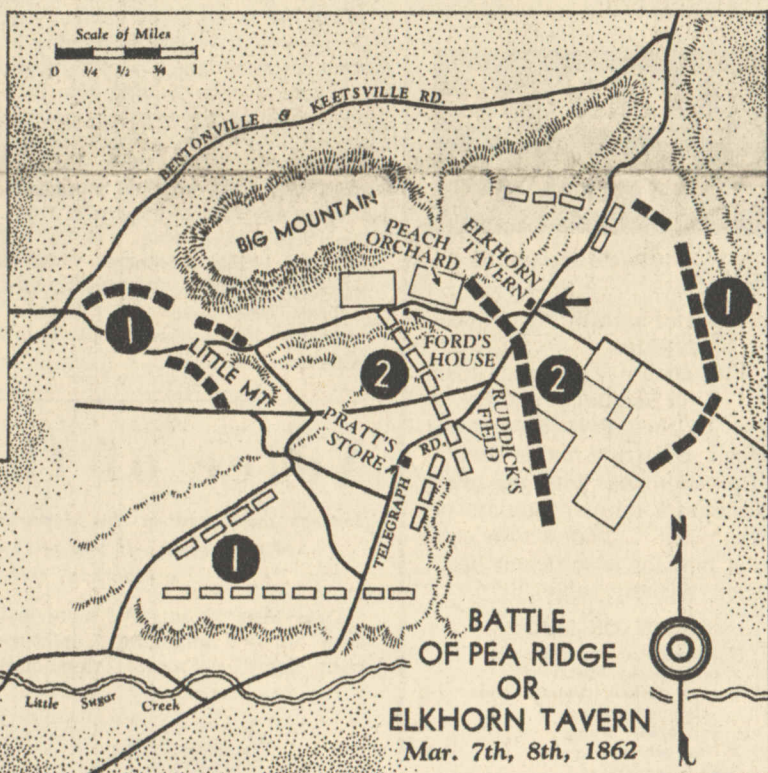
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A Confederate force under General Price late in the summer of 1864 entered Missouri and marched through the state into Kansas, threatening to take Leavenworth. Although many of his troops were far to the west engaged against the Indians, Curtis met the emergency in an admirable manner. He collected all available troops and drove Price out of his department. The Confederate casualties in this campaign were estimated at more than 10,000. Among battles of the campaign was one fought on the present site of Kansas City, Mo., on Oct. 21 to 23. This has been called the "Gettysburg of the west."

The army under Curtis pursued the enemy back into Arkansas and across the old battlefield at Pea ridge.

In spite of his splendid defense of Kansas, Curtis was removed from command on Jan. 30, 1865, and assigned to the department of the northwest, with headquarters at Milwaukee. This department was abolished a few months later and Curtis was appointed a member of a board to treat with hostile Indians in the west. In April, while still engaged in treaty negotiations with the Indians, he was discharged from the army.

Immediately he switched his interests to the affairs of the Union Pacific railroad, of which he had been a promoter. It was just after he had finished inspection of a stretch of this new railroad near Omaha that he died on Dec. 26, 1866.



soldier. In the mass of writings about the Civil war he has been given little mention. Pea ridge was only a second-rate fight compared with Shiloh and Gettysburg, and the better known heroes, such as Grant, Lee, and the rest, have garnered most of the glory. Yet Curtis was a first-class fighting man. In addition he was a capable politician, engineer, and lawyer.

Samuel Ryan Curtis was born on a farm near Champlain, N. Y., on Feb. 3, 1807, the son of Zarah, a Revolutionary war veteran, and Phalley Yale Curtis. In 1809 the family moved to Licking county, Ohio, and when Samuel was 20 years old he obtained a cadetship at West Point. He was graduated in 1831 and assigned as a second lieutenant to duty with the 7th Infantry at Fort Gibson.

Lieutenant Curtis resigned his commission in 1832 and returned to Ohio, accepting employment as a civil engineer on a project known as the National road. In the meantime he had married Belinda Buckingham of Mansfield, O. In 1837 he became chief engineer of the Muskingum river project. Losing interest in a plan that he knew to be futile, Curtis turned his attention to railroads, and after leaving the river job he was instrumental in having presented before congress a petition for a public grant for a railway to the Pacific coast.

In 1841 Curtis turned from

its chief engineer, and by 1850 Curtis was ready to resign. He accepted the post of city engineer of St. Louis. There he was instrumental in providing the city with an adequate sewerage system and new levees and wharves. A change of administration in 1853 threw him out of employment, and for the next few years he was engaged in railway engineering work, although throughout this period he maintained a law office in Keokuk. He was elected mayor of the Iowa city in the spring of 1856 and in the autumn of that year he was selected as national representative for the First congressional district of Iowa. He was a Republican.

In 1858 he was reelected to congress, and again in 1860, and was serving in the house of representatives when the Civil war came. Curtis returned to Keokuk on the 1st of June, 1861, and was unanimously chosen colonel of the 2d Iowa infantry, the first regiment of that state to be enrolled for three years. His first service was the guarding of a railway between Hannibal and St. Joseph, Mo. Through his prompt movement of troops he saved the line from seizure by the Confederates.

At the suggestion of Gen. Winfield Scott, Curtis was appointed a brigadier general, and on Aug. 6 he resigned his seat in con-

Curtis. Among other leaders who served under Curtis in that campaign were Col. P. J. Osterhaus, a former officer of the German army, who commanded the 1st division of Curtis' army; Brig. Gen. Alexander Asboth, a Hungarian exile, who was in command of the 2d division; Col. Jefferson C. Davis of Indiana, at



Col. Carr

Col. Osterhaus

the head of the 3d division; and Col. Eugene A. Carr, commander of the 4th division. Philip H. Sheridan, who later became a famous general of the Civil war, was chief quartermaster of Curtis' army.

In February, 1862, Curtis undertook a drive to clear southwestern Missouri of Confederates who were bent on the capture of St. Louis. On the 13th of the month he took Springfield after it had been evacuated by the army of General Price. Pursuing Price's army, he advanced across the state line into Arkansas, issuing a statement to the people of that state that they would be treated justly if they took no hostile part

But early on the morning of the 7th the Union leaders discovered that the enemy was working around them on the northeast. Between 6 and 7 o'clock skirmishing began between advance guards. The Union army, deprived of its advantage of position, was forced to reverse and advance to the north to meet the enemy. Its left wing thus received the full force of an attack by more than 10,000 Confederates under McCulloch and was able to resist successfully. But its right wing was sorely pressed by Price's army of more than 6,000 men. The southerners pushed forward and after desperate fighting captured Elkhorn tavern, after which they named the battle. This tavern was situated at a crossroads considered one of the key points of the battlefield. When evening came the enemy not only held the tavern but several other of the important key positions, and the outlook of the Union army was gloomy indeed.

During the night, however, Curtis shifted his divisions about to an advantage. The morning of the 8th saw a terrific artillery concentration. The northern gunners outshot their enemies, and by 11 o'clock many of the Confederate batteries were blasted out of action. Heavy artillery fire forced the Confederate infantry to seek cover in the wooded areas that lay on the battlefield. It was only on an eminence near the tavern that they continued to hold out in menacing strength. A rain of solid shot against this position, upon which the enemy infantrymen were concealing themselves behind huge boulders, finally cleared it.

By early afternoon Van Dorn's entire army was in retreat. It was because Curtis had

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