

EKVN-HV'LUUCE

SITE OF OKLAHOMA'S FIRST CIVIL WAR BATTLE

By Orpha Russell*

Historians have been making special research trying to determine the exact location of the first battle fought during the Civil War in what is now the State of Oklahoma.

Chief S. W. Brown, of the Euchee tribe, says that Opothleyahola never entered present Payne County and has two affidavits from very old people who know and can verify the story told to him and the site pointed out to him by persons who made the tragic march north into Kansas with the aged Opothleyahola.

In his youth, Brown drove cattle over a part of the old trail and the spot was pointed out to him by older men who had participated in that first battle between the forces of Opothleyahola and the Confederates. He recalls that the 9,000 who made the march left quite a large strip of land barren and that much of it was still evident during the days he drove cattle over their trail. The better known Coyote Trail crosses Opothleyahola's trail within a stone's throw of the end of the mountain range overlooking Keystone, Oklahoma, approximately twenty-two miles west of the heart of the City of Tulsa.

Ekvn-hv'lwuce, as the Indians who made the march north in 1861 described the battle site, signifies "the round end of a mountain," and not "round mountain" nor "round mounds," as has been reported. This interpretation has kept local historians searching for years for natural round mounds, and the Payne County Historical Society has adopted the view that the battle site was determined when they located Twin Mounds west of Yale, in Payne County. The Payne County Historical Society claims that Special Agent John T. Cox's report from Ft. Gibson, dated March 18, 1864, is the sole piece of evidence against their selection of the Twin Mounds location.³

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¹ *Ekvn'lwuce* is pronounced nearly "ekun-hulth'wuche," and literally means "a hillock" or "a mound" (R. M. Loughridge, D.D., *English and Muskokee Dictionary* [Philadelphia, 1914]).—Ed.

² This map by John T. Cox indicates the site of the "Battle of Red Fork" (i.e., Round Mountain) north of the Cimarron River in the vicinity of present Keystone, in Pawnee County. Chief Brown's map accompanying this article shows the site of the battle south of the Cimarron about "a ¼ of a mile." This skirmish

Dr. B. B. Chapman of the Oklahoma A. and M. History faculty and Miss Angie Debo offer a copy of a statement by Confederate Creek leaders (1868) as evidence,³ but the old Indians say a fight between two hostile Indian tribes was fought at the Twin Mounds a few years after Opotheyahola had reached Kansas.

Pieces of broken wagons and metal rims for wheels, offered by the Payne County group, are not conclusive evidence because all first hand accounts of Opotheyahola's march, given to Brown by the participants, said that the group had no wagons; ponies packed what the Indians could not carry on their person. Reports of Indian Commissioners filed during the years 1862 and 1863 confirm these statements.

George W. Collamore's report (April 12, 1862) to William P. Dole, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, in Washington, D. C., states in part:⁴

"Agreeably to your request I furnish herewith an account of my recent visit to the loyal Indians, who were obliged to flee from their pursuers (the rebel Indians and Texans) in the dead winter, and who are now encamped on the Neosho River in the southern part of Kansas.

"The battles in which they participated, and which eventuated in their expulsion from their own country, and forced them to seek shelter in Kansas, formed a part of the history of this war. The battle of December last was particularly unfortunate to these people, and the disasters of the defeat left them in the helpless condition I found them. . . .

"Their march was undertaken with a scanty supply of clothing, subsistence, and cooking utensils, and entirely without tents, and during their progress they were reduced to such extremity as to be obliged to feed upon their ponies and their dogs, while their scanty clothing was reduced to

between Opotheyahola's forces and the Confederates in 1861 was not in regular battle formation, the fighting having undoubtedly taken place at different points within a radius of two, or even three miles, some south and others north of the Cimarron wherever the Creek allies were encamped in friendly groups. The reports of the skirmish would depend upon the location of the informant and his friends within the radius of the fighting, the general reference of these reports, however, among the Creeks being "Ekvnhvlwuce," or the "mound" or "round end of the mountain." This general designation referring to the "battle" with Opotheyahola seems to have been used after the period of the Civil War. The original map by John T. Cox, entitled "Retreat of the Loyal Indians from the Indian Country under A-pothleyahola in the winter of 1861," is in the records of the U. S. Office of Indian Affairs, Washington, D.C. A facsimile of this map appears in Annie Heloise Abel's *The American Indian as Slaveholder and Secessionist* (Cleveland, 1915), p. 254. See also notes on the life of John T. Cox by Dean Trickett, of Tulsa, appearing in Notes and Documents "Ad Interim Report on Site of the Battle of Round Mountain," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 4 (Winter, 1950-51), pp. 492-4.—Ed.

³ Angie Debo, "The Site of the Battle of Round Mountain, 1861," *ibid.*, Vol. XXVII, No. 2 (Summer, 1949), p. 190.

⁴ Commissioner of Indian Affairs, *Report 1862*, pp. 155-58. (Opotheyahola was never in the line of recognized chiefs though he is referred to here as "one of the oldest, most influential, and wealthy chiefs of the Creek Nation." He served as Speaker for the Upper Creek Towns, and was one of the great leaders in the history of the Creek people.—Ed.)

threads, and in some cases absolute nakedness was their condition. Let it be remembered that this retreat was in the midst of a winter of unusual severity for that country, with snow upon the prairie. Many of their ponies died from starvation. The women and children suffered severely from frozen limbs, as did also the men. Women gave birth to their offspring upon the naked snow, without shelter or covering, and in some cases the new-born infants died for want of clothing, and those who survived to reach their present location with broken constitutions and utterly dispirited.

"Thus I found them encamped upon the Neosho River bottom, in the timber extending a distance of some seven miles. Not a comfortable tent was to be seen. Such coverings as I saw were made in the rudest manner, being composed of pieces of cloth, old quilts, handkerchiefs, aprons, etc., stretched upon sticks, and so limited were many of them in size that they were scarcely sufficient to cover the emaciated and dying forms beneath them. Under such shelter I found, in the last stages of consumption, the daughter of Opothleyohola, one of the oldest, most influential, and wealthy chiefs of the Creek Nation."

The writer accompanied Chief Brown and Willie Bruner, a full-blood Muskogee (or Creek), who is said to be over one hundred years old, to the site of the mounds where Opothleyohola's group had dug in for the winter, and remained only one month after the Battle of *Ekvn-hv'lwuce*. An affidavit was secured from Bruner in which he states in part:⁵

"My father, George Bruner, was a Northern soldier. My mother, Annie Bruner, went north with Hopo-thle-yohola and a band of Creek or Uscelarnappee Indians. The Uscelarnappee Indians were allies with Hopo-thle-yohola as brother members of one fire. They had no wagons, and very few had ponies.

"Their first battle took place on the south side of the Arkansas River at the round end of the mountain. The *Ekvn-hv'lwuce* was the end of the range of mountains ending $\frac{1}{4}$ mile south of the Cimarron River.

"They built four mounds 2- $\frac{1}{2}$ miles below where the Owa-Chartygee or Cimarron River emptied into the Arkansas River on the north side of the Arkansas, and the mounds were where Hopo-thle-yohola took his stand for a month, sending his women, old men, and children on east where they turned north to camp for some time."

"I played in the round mound hide-outs when I was a boy, and killed four deer on one hunt north of these mounds. Two old full-blood Indians, members of my Locha Poka town lived near the mounds; one Stephen about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile east, and another William Gooden about one mile east.

"Several of Hopo-thle-yohola's men were out hunting when the southern Indian soldiers attacked them and killed several of the men. Later Hopo-thle-yohola followed up with his men and then the BIG BATTLE TOOK PLACE.⁶

"It was mid-winter, and it snowed and sleeted when they took their stand. My mother told me many times about their hardships on that trip."

⁵ Affidavit signed by William C. Bruner, and witnessed on March 17, 1951.

⁶ This "Big Battle" was the Battle of Chusto Talasah or "Caving Banks" that took place on December 9, 1861.

Elizabeth Sapulpa, founder of the Indian Methodist Church in Sapulpa, Oklahoma, gave an affidavit that reads in part as follows:⁷

"I, Elizabeth Sapulpa, heard my Aunt Mary Hutka talk about the hardships of the people going north in the time of the Civil War. She lived with me and I built a little home for her in my yard so she could be near me and I could care for her in her declining days until her death. She was grown woman (at the time of the Civil War) and all she had was the clothes she had on and a pair of Turtle Shells that she danced with and when they were removed back to their homes in the Indian Territory she brought the Turtle Shells back with her.

"Some had ponies to ride and those that didn't have ponies trudged along on foot and Aunt Mary Hutka was one of many who didn't have a pony.

"Hopo-thle-yahola was the leader of the many different Indian tribes that went north. When they got to what is now Keystone (the Indians call it Red Fork) there was a battle and some were killed. There was a man of the Ussellarnoppee Tribal Town by the name of Nokas-Ho-Lo-Thla that crossed the Arkansas River where Red Fork or Cimarron River empties into the Arkansas River, with women and old people and children for their protection. For shelter he and his men dug four big caves and rounded the earth up.⁸ That was later called Round Mountain battle between the south and north."

Brown says that Mekko-Hutkee's camp was north of Eufaula and his group were allies of Opothleyahola. Mekko-Hutkee's group started marching north toward Kansas earlier than the aged Opothleyahola, who was waiting for all loyal Indians from all tribes to assemble. Nokas-Ho-La-Tho, a soldier that led the Uscelarnaptee clan, was in Mekko-Hutkee's group that followed the old Indian trail to a natural ford just below where the Cimarron empties into the Arkansas River. Threatening bad weather—sleet, snow and bitter cold—forced

⁷ Affidavit signed by Elizabeth Sapulpa, and witnessed by Joseph J. McCombs and Susanna Sapulpa, July 24, 1951.

⁸ Colonel Cooper's report, as Commander of Indian Department, First Choctaw and Chickasaw Regiment, C.S.A., states that his forces found Opothleyahola's camp near the North Fork abandoned but followed the retreating Creeks until November 19th, when some of the latter were seen, and a few prisoners taken. "From those prisoners information was obtained that a portion of Hopoethleyahola's party were near the Red Fork [i.e., Cimarron] of the Arkansas River, on their route towards Walnut Creek, where a fort was being erected [italics added here], and which had for some time been their intended destination in the event of not receiving promised aid from Kansas before being menaced and attacked." (Report of Douglas H. Cooper, Colonel, C. S. Army, Commanding Indian Department, dated from Fort Gibson on January 20, 1862, in *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. VIII, p. 5). It seems that the phrase "on their route towards Walnut Creek" was used by Cooper parenthetically, and his statement "a fort was being erected" apparently referred to the "four big caves" and the mounds of earth built up by "Mekko-Hutkee's" men. The reader should bear in mind that the prisoners were reporting to Cooper's forces what was being done by the Creeks "near the Red Fork of the Arkansas River." These are important data since they indicate that Opothleyahola's forces had primarily planned to concentrate within the Indian Territory near the Kansas line but were precipitately routed and took flight to Kansas following the Battle of Caving Banks on December 9th, and their still later defeat at Chustenalah on December 26th.—Ed.

them to "dig in" for protection, and in the process of digging in, mounds of dirt were piled high near their caves or trenches.

Brown believes those mounds have confused historians too long, and that the "round mounds" for which Miss Debo and Dr. Chapman have been searching were not natural mounds, but mounds thrown up by Mekko-Hutkee and Nokas-Ho-La-Tho as they dug in for protection from the elements.

Chief Brown's father, So-Pathla, who was elected chief of the Euchees in 1867, had just returned from New Mexico late in 1861 when Opothleyahola sent a messenger asking him to come to Roro-Culka, meaning "Fish Pond", about ten miles northwest and five miles south of what is now Okemah, Oklahoma, on North Fork of Canadian River, to interpret a letter. Roro-Culka (Hluhlo-Kulka) was one of the forty-four tribal towns that constituted the Muskogee (or Creek) Nation. The older Chief Brown, an orphan son of a fullblood Euchee mother and a young lieutenant in the United States Army, had been reared and educated by a missionary who gave the boy his own name, Brown. The youth was well known throughout the various tribal towns and often acted as an interpreter.

When the youth reached Opothleyahola's camp he found a letter from President Abraham Lincoln, soiled from much handling. He twice read the letter to Opothleyahola's group of 3,000 Indians. President Lincoln asked Opothleyahola to remain neutral. He explained that the war in which his people were engaged was not an Indian war, but one between the northern states and the southern states.

The now aged Opothleyahola had pledged his allegiance to the United States after the battle of Tohopeka or the "Horse Shoe" on Tallapoosa River in Alabama in 1814, a pledge he kept until death. He told his people he would remain neutral in the war between the northern and southern states. A skirmish with Colonel McIntosh's group followed and all Opothleyahola's town arbors were burned. (Daniel N. McIntosh, of the Creek tribe, had been made a Colonel in the Confederate Army.)

Opothleyahola with around 9,000 followers, including Creeks, Seminoles, Chickasaws, Quapaws, Euchees, Keechis, Caddoes, Ionies, Delawares, Wichitas, Cherokees, two white men, George Sofley and William F. Brown, who were married to Euchee women, and a few Negroes who claimed to be free because their master had joined the Southern Confederacy, started their march toward Kansas where they hoped to secure arms and supplies to enable them to return to Indian Territory and recover their property. Wishing to remain in neutral territory the loyal old Creek leader marched north over a worn Indian Trail to an Indian marker, now in the heart of Sapulpa (named for Cypulpy of Cussetah Town). Old-timers described the marker as from ten to twelve feet high and about four feet square with pictures

on all four sides: the sun on the east, a buffalo head on the west, a two-horned snake on the south, and a wild goose on the north. The late Thomas F. Meagher, authority on early Indian Territory history, believed this marker had been built by the Osages as a guide post for all Indians, and that the so-called "Battle of Round Mountain" was fought near this marker in the southwest corner of Tulsa County. But, children of those who made the march were told, by their parents, that the group marched northwest of the marker and that the main body had reached the "round end of the mountain" before they were overtaken by the Confederates.

After this battle, Opothleyahola's warriors joined their women and children, who had already joined Mekko-Hutkee and Nokas-Ho-La-Tho, across the river, and camped for almost a month before moving down the north side of the Arkansas River.

The Loch-Poka Indians, living where Tulsa now stands, joined Opothleyahola's group, known as the Tuckabahtchi, as they moved toward Bird Creek. So-Pathla (Chief Brown's father) recovered from illness in time to join them in their most decisive battle, near Turley on Bird Creek, known as Chusto Talasah or "Battle of Caving Banks" December 9, 1861. This site and fifteen Confederate graves have been marked by the Tulsa Historical Society of Tulsa's Central High School, under the leadership of Mrs. Louise M. Witham. The inscription on the marker reads:

"The Battle of Caving Banks' was fought December 9, 1861 between 1,500 Texas and Indian cavalymen under Confederate Col. D. H. Cooper and 2,500 Loyal Creeks and Cherokees enroute to Kansas with Chief Opothleyahola.

"The struggle centered around a log house near the tip of the Horse Shoe Bend in Bird Creek west of this point. 15 Confederate dead are buried on this battle field; many others lie in unknown graves.

"—Marked by the Historical Society of Central High School and the Tulsa Indian Women's Club, April 15, 1945."

After the engagement at Caving Banks, So-Pathla went to Mayesville to enlist in the First Indian Home Guards in the Federal Army, and was pensioned as acting captain, retired. Chief Brown has an old tin-type of So-Pathla made the day he was discharged from active duty. So-Pathla's group, known as Company K, was composed entirely of Euchees. He wrote all discharges for the remaining members, May 31, 1865, and was the last of that group to die, February 21, 1935.

Other testimony regarding Keystone as the site of the first Civil War battle in what is now Oklahoma was given to Brown years ago by the following persons no longer living: Sak-Ka-Senney (Little Bear), Ko-Ka-Lathloney, Co-Pat-Cheney, Checo-Tet-Ho-Ney (Pulling in the Water), and Seber-Talocco. All told Brown that their first skirmish with the Confederates did not amount to much and that Opothleyahola only lost three men at the round end of the mountain."

Sin-Co-Hah, a great-uncle of Chief Brown's, died later during the march, but not before he had an opportunity to discuss the battle with Brown's father, So-Pathla, who joined the group before their battle near Tulsa.

Seber-Talocco, also known as Nocus or Nokos Harjo, was buried in 1911 in the old Indian cemetery at the southeastern edge of Sand Springs in a small plot fenced for preservation by the late Charles Page.

Chief Brown and Elizabeth Sapulpa would like to see a marker placed at *Ekvn-hv'lwuce*, the "round end of the mountain" overlooking Keystone, Oklahoma, because they are positive that is the place the first battle of the Civil War in the Indian Territory occurred.