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BATTLE OF BEAR RIVER, JANUARY 29, 1863

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During the winter of 1862-1863, a large band of Cache Valley Shoshoni Indians were encamped near the confluence of Battle Creek and Bear River, about twelve miles northwest of Franklin. The principal leaders of this group were Bear Hunter and Sagwitch. Following extensive hostilities along the Oregon and California trails near Soda Springs, Massacre Rocks, and City of Rocks, considerable friction with these Indians disturbed many of the settlers of Cache Valley. In the latter part of December, 1862, a party of Salmon River miners, heading toward Salt Lake City to secure supplies, was followed and attacked by the Indians while crossing Bear River. Upon their arrival in Salt Lake City they reported their loss; one man and property. Utah's chief justice heard their complaint and issued a warrant for the arrest of the chiefs of the band of Indians. (Since the Indian band was in Washington territory, he should have had the governor of Utah apply to the governor of Washington for extradition, but, mainly through geographical ignorance, that formality was dispensed with.) The marshal who was to serve the warrants asked Colonel Patrick E. Connor, the commander of Camp Douglas, if he would like to accompany him on the mission. However, after hearing of the Indian actions in the north, Colonel Connor had already begun preparations for an expedition against these Indians. He gave the marshal permission to come along, but said he did not intend to take any prisoners. On January 22, 1863 Connor ordered his infantry to begin the advance north; the cavalry followed the next day. The weather was extremely cold, and many of the men were frost bitten during the day and night marches. At dawn on January 29, the troops, numbering just over two hundred, found themselves on the east bank of the Bear River facing an Indian camp of approximately four hundred and fifty. The Indians were well fortified in a deep ravine on Battle Creek. They had cut fire steps on the east side of the ravine and had interwoven the willows on the same bank, leaving holes from which to shoot

without being seen. An open treeless valley extended east about one mile to Bear River, which received the waters of Battle Creek southwest of the camp. To the north and west (left and rear) of their position were hills covered with stunted cedars. The ravine of the creek afforded an avenue of escape to the left rear, and the bank of Bear River an escape route to the right rear. Connor ordered the camp surrounded, but his men were engaged before this could be accomplished. At that time a frontal attack was attempted by Major Edward McGarry. Here the Army suffered its worst casualties. By the time the Indians were finally routed from their positions, the cavalry had sealed off both avenues of escape. Consequently, as the Indians tried to evade their attackers, they were cut down by the well placed troops. Following the four-hour battle, the Army reported 20 whites killed and 44 wounded. Colonel Connor indicated that he had counted 224 dead Indian bodies on the field. He also reported capture of 160 women and children (most of all of whom were deceased, at least by the next day) and 175 horses. He brought the horses back to Salt Lake, but left the Indians at Bear River. Settlers from Franklin, who examined the battleground the next day counted around 400, two-thirds of whom were women and children. Sagwitch and a few of the Indians escaped.

This military action completed one of the most successful expeditions of the West against hostile Indians. The battle casualties were the greatest of any engagement fought in Washington or Idaho, which was established as a territory less than six weeks later. The Army victory made the emigrant route in the general area a lot safer, and since the Cache Valley Shoshoni were wiped out, the settlers of Cache Valley were freed from further Indian difficulties. A whole series of Shoshoni treaties resulted from this battle.

Prepared by Larry Jones