

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

BATTLE OF THREE FORKS AND THE OWYHEE CANNON

Number 239

The following newspaper articles tell of the preliminary events and then the actual combat and give what references there were in the newspapers at the time to the infamous Owyhee Cannon, which has never been found.

Owyhee Avalanche, May 19, 1866:

MAJOR MARSHALL came over to Owyhee a few days ago and took a survey of matters and things. Is disposed to move on the works of the enemy. Is trying to find out the haunts and is willing to go after male and female. Has gone to the Owyhee via Flint District. Expects to establish a station or two in that direction. Will do all he can to protect the workmen while they bridge the Owyhee and make the road passable. We are informed that with this understanding, Col. Fogus is bound to open the route immediately. It will shorten the road to California by fifty miles. Have not seen the Major but are told that he is "on it"--that is, the Indian business.

Owyhee Avalanche, May 26, 1866:

ANOTHER wholesale Indian slaughter has occurred west of the Owyhee just above the mouth of Jordan Creek. Fifty Chinamen were on their way to Idaho City and all but one were murdered by brutal Indians at the place mentioned, on the 21st. Their bodies were mutilated in the most shocking manner. They had thirteen horses and a full complement of mining tools--the former were all taken, and of the latter, the picks were stuck through the bodies and heads of the victims. Were mostly scalped and cut in sickening style. It is believed there were between two and three hundred Indians--part on foot and many horseback. Had white men been there they would probably have shared the same fate. Here's another fine text for skim-milk philanthropists to exercise their ex[c]usatory powers, and justify these poor ignorant savages who don't know any better, who don't know murder is wrong, who merely slaughter a few pioneers now and then for fun--which is their right. O, mush!

Owyhee Avalanche, June 2, 1866:

SURPRISE BY AND FIGHT WITH THE INDIANS.--An Express Messenger, belonging to the U.S. Service, arrived in town yesterday morning. He reports that the military were surprised by the Indians near the Forks of the Owyhee, and that stock, grub, blankets, etc., were captured; and one soldier (named Phillips), killed, scalped and dragged up a hill by a rope round his neck. We hear so many contradictory reports that we'll await further intelligence.

ADDITIONAL.--Since the above was in type, we learned that Major Marshall had arrived, and at once paid him a visit and got the following: He found the Indians five hundred strong, on last Sunday, at the Forks of the Owyhee. Had a four hours' fight, he on the west and the enemy on the east side of the river. Indians kept up a continuous fire with rifles--not an arrow was shot. Was at least two hundred and fifty armed warriors. Major is confident that seven were killed and twelve wounded. Among the killed was one Chief--a gay cuss dressed in red trappings, mounted on a splendid, white American horse. Ordered men to fire on him and saw him tumble off the horse on his head. Was carried away among the squaws when a terrific howl of lamentation rent the air. Of the wounded, two had their legs broken and the others bodily wounds. Threw five shells into the wick-I-ups--could not say with what effect. Tried to cross the river with the howitzer and boat was capsized and gun went to the bottom, where it now lies. Will get that again. Would have crossed the river, but the Indians were so well armed 'twould have been madness and murder to have made the attempt, as the enemy were so numerous, well fortified and armed. Major's command lost one man next day; none wounded. Says he'll go after them continually, if he can't wipe them out this Summer, will go after them in the Winter and keep doing so till the job is completed. Says the party has about one thousand head of good horses which were driven up the middle fork of Owyhee.

Idaho Statesman, June 5, 1866:

INDIANS AGAIN.--Major Marshall and Colonel Coppinger, with eighty-five men, had a brush with the Indians near the forks of the Owyhee, last week, in which from the superior number of the latter they were obliged to withdraw and leave the Indians on their ground. The whole number of Indians was estimated at from four to five hundred, with two hundred and fifty to three hundred fighting men. The first day they fought across the South Fork of the river, killing seven and wounding twelve Indians. In the night Major Marshall moved down the river to cross and attack the enemy in the rear. Having crossed the men he sent a scout up the bluff, which was high and precipitous, to reconnoiter, when reaching near the top it was fired upon by the Indians from behind the rocks, and one of the men killed. There being but one pass by which the top of the bluff could be reached it was impossible to storm that, and useless if it could be done, with so large a number of Indians in front and but eight-five men to work with. Major Marshall then recrossed the river and came back to Fort Boise to await the arrival of more men. In recrossing the river the only boat he had, a frail canvas affair, was accidentally swamped and the howitzer lost.

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