

REMEMBERING THE BATTLE OF BENTONVILLE

by Dora Hood Kirkman

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In the little village of Bentonville, quietness and peace reigned. Each day men went to and from their work exchanging friendly greetings while the house wives were busy with their work of cooking, sewing and looking after the little ones.

Carriage shops owned and operated at that time by my father, John C. Hood, afforded work for almost all the men in this little town. It was the first days of spring that the menacing clouds of war began to darken the horizon of the village and the lives of the people who were filled with apprehension and a foreboding of the trying times to come.

To the mind of the ten year old little girl that I was, the storm seemed to break suddenly. One day was peace and quiet and happiness, and the eve of the next was war and confusion and bold bloodshed. Long before the appearance of soldiers, the villagers were seeking places to conceal their treasures. Silver, Chinaware, money were buried. Unique places to hide them were found for food and other household supplies. My father, wishing to save a large supply of meat dropped it between the ceiling and weatherboarding of his house. I remember that my mother was very much afraid that the grease from the meat would run through the weatherboarding.

Fearing that the Negroes might be persuaded to betray the whereabouts of their hidden possessions, the whites tactfully suggested that the Negroes bury their own valuables in the same places.

The battle raged. Homes and out buildings of all kinds were filled with the wounded, dead and dying. Operations were performed without anesthetics. It seems I can almost hear the groans of the wounded even yet. It was stamped on my mind so forcibly as they went to my father's wash shelter, and there, went through these terrible experiences of having their wounded limbs removed without anything to help them bear the pain. The village people, day after day, administered to the blue and gray alike. On the third day of the battle, my brother, who was suffering from the measles, was taken seriously ill and it became necessary that someone go for aid. My father, together with other men of Bentonville, had been taken by the Yankees to be tried for the murder of one of their soldiers. So the dangerous mission was assigned to me, a small child of 10.

I left the house and went through the crowd of Union soldiers, under horses, dodging soldiers, pushing, running, crawling, any way to reach, at last, the haven of the neighbor's house about the distance of four blocks.

Having found it impossible for the neighbor to leave her home, as the Yankees were in it then ripping open her feather beds and destroying other things, I started back alone. I had not gone but a few steps when, to my horror, one of the Yankee soldiers stopped me to inquire where I was going. Upon being told of my mission and destination he insisted that the trip was too dangerous and that I ride on his horse with him. Mistaking his kindly intentions, and fearing that if I placed myself in care of this terrible enemy, I would never again see my dear old mother, I tremblingly found a refusal. However, on the insistence of everyone around, and half fearing not to, I finally allowed myself to be lifted up on the horse and away we rode, safely home.

On learning how very ill my brother was, this soldier went out and brought in a Yankee doctor. My brother died late that evening, and there was no one to help my mother shroud him except an old colored woman, Aunt Jane. I remember he had to be buried in a goods box, and after the war was taken up and put in a casket.

Many houses were being burned, and people lived continually in the fear of seeing their homes go up in flames. My father placed a guard at his house, but several times attempts were made to fire the place even while he made his rounds. My father's shop and store house were burned, our home and a few more were the only ones left standing. During the hottest of the battle, flying shot and shell made it dangerous to stay even in the house. The neighbors had all come in, and we were all huddled up in one room. I remember there was one little lady, her name was Mrs. Cole, who got between the feather bed and mattresses. My father had already a hole dug under the house. We were advised to go there. We had to lie flat on our faces and slide under. My baby brother was just five weeks old. We doubted if my mother could take the baby under, and this little Mrs. Cole, who was very funny and original said; "Mrs. Hood, I'll eat the devil if you can get under here with your baby". We stayed under the house in this hole for a day and a night. Coming out when we heard they were going to burn the house over us. My father was shot during this battle, though not seriously. He came in from a neighbor's house very pale and bleeding. He had received a wound in his shoulder. A Yankee had told him to halt, but father, not hearing him did not stop and so was shot.

During the latter part of the battle, Gen. Johnston was wounded and brought in our home to await the ambulance. I remember that my mother was called on for all the pillows and quilts she had, being promised they would be returned, but of course she never saw them again.

The horror of this war was indelibly written on my memory. Shots and shells, wounded, dead and dying, houses burning, blood flowing, groaning of the wounded all linger with me. So far as I can recall, my brother T. R. Hood and I are all that are still living that were in Bentonville during the time of the battle. I am glad to see some recognition being paid to this historic place.

Editor's note: In March, 1865, sixty thousand Federal troops commanded by General William T. Sherman arrived in North Carolina. Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston had assembled thirty thousand men, hoping to stop Sherman and thus prevent him from linking forces with General Grant in Virginia. The result was the Battle of Bentonville — the largest land battle ever fought in North Carolina, the only significant attempt to stop Sherman on his march northward from Atlanta, and the last major Confederate offensive of the Civil War. The battle was fought over an area of six thousand acres of pine woods and fields. 543 men were killed, over 2800 wounded, and nearly 900 listed as missing.

We are indebted to Lifetime Member Thomas A. Hood, of Fayetteville, for bringing this wonderful article to our attention. Mr. Hood is the grand nephew of the author, Dora Hood Kirkman. As a youth, Thomas had many fascinating conversations with his Great Aunt Dora.