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PRESERVATION NEWS

BY RICHARD A. WOLFE

Rich Mountain Battlefield Foundation

One hundred and fifty years ago the Battle of Rich Mountain and the First Campaign in Western Virginia was front page news across America. As the Civil War escalated the attention was shifted to larger battles.

In the spring of 1861 the loyal citizens of Western Virginia requested Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan, who commanded the Department of the Ohio, for protection from the Virginia Secessionists.

The destruction of bridges on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad was the spark that was needed to set General McClellan in motion. Union forces swept through Western Virginia pushing the Confederates beyond the foothills of the Allegheny Mountains.

In early July General McClellan's forces moved within striking distance of Confederates, under the command of Robert S. Garnett, blocking turnpikes at Laurel Hill and Rich Mountain. McClellan's plan was to attack and defeat the Confederate troops at Rich Mountain and trap General Garnett at Laurel Hill.

Lt. Col. John Pegram commanded the Confederates at the western base of Rich Mountain. Here the Confederates had constructed formidable earthworks designated Camp Garnett. On July 10, 1861, Brig. Gen. William S. Rosecrans and a civilian, whose family lived on Rich Mountain, came to General McClellan's rescue.

The civilian, David Hart, told General Rosecrans that he could lead the Union forces up a little-known trail to the top of Rich Mountain and attack the Confederates from the rear.

Rosecrans started out on the morning of July 11 with David Hart in the lead and a force of 1,900 men. After an arduous all-day march the Union forces attacked a detachment of 310 Confederates on the Staunton and Parkersburg Turnpike at the top of Rich Mountain.

With the help of a well fought 6-pdr. cannon, the small group of Confederates made a fight of it in spite of the overwhelming odds.

The Union victory in this small battle had a big impact.

1. It pushed Confederate forces away from the vital Baltimore and Ohio Railroad.

2. It disrupted Confederate recruiting in Western Virginia.

3. It influenced citizens who had not decided whether they would stay loyal to the Union or support secession.

4. It propelled George B. McClellan to the command of all Union forces.

5. It set the stage for West Virginia statehood.

This important battle was soon forgotten. The Harts continued farming. Soon after the war soldiers buried on the Hart farm were removed. The Confederates were reburied in a mass grave overlooking the town of Beverly and Union remains were reinterred at the Grafton National Cemetery.

Except for a few veterans visiting the battlefield, a West Virginia Historic marker and a few relic hunters, the scene of McClellan's victory went neglected for 130 years.

In 1991 local historians and interested citizens formed the Rich Mountain Battlefield Foundation. The mission of Rich Mountain Battlefield Foundation (RMBF) is to preserve and protect the Rich Mountain Battlefield and related Civil War sites, including protection and management of the Rich Mountain Battlefield Civil War Site, and preserving and interpreting the Civil War heritage of West Virginia.

The first land acquired was Camp Garnett, the Confederate camp with its well preserved 1861 earthworks and artillery lunettes. Within six months RMBF partnered with the Association for the Preservation of Civil War Sites (now the Civil War Trust) which purchased 40 acres that encompassed the core battlefield.

In 1997 RMBF purchased the Crawford Building, which had been General McClellan's headquarters in July 1861. This became a museum and visitor's center for the battlefield.

From humble beginnings, RMBF has acquired over 400 acres. Some of this is historic land and some serves as a buffer to protect the battlefield and Camp Garnett.

Our most recent land acquisition was a

well-preserved artillery redoubt at Camp Elkwater. RMBF is now a partner with Historic Beverly Preservation and the Crawford Building is an integral part of the Beverly Heritage Center. An exciting new museum display tells the story of the Battle of Rich Mountain and the First Campaign.

The 150th commemoration of the Battle of Rich Mountain was just completed. We were highly gratified by the interest and attendance. Events included lectures, a world-class Civil War art exhibit, a two-day First Campaign tour, living history, battlefield tours, reenactment, and battle commemoration. We teamed with other organizations to make this a memorable time.

Some of our visitors had ancestors who fought at Rich Mountain. Two Rich Mountain veterans even returned! One was a Bible that was captured by an Indiana soldier on the battlefield. An original 10-pdr. Parrott rifle from Loomis' Battery, 1st Michigan Light Artillery, was also on display. That very gun had campaigned through Western Virginia in 1861.

That's the good news. We have preserved a very important Civil War battlefield, but with this comes the upkeep. As a small non-profit organization we have the challenges of mowing grass, picking up trash, keeping trails clear, dealing with vandalism and paying the bills.

In our 20-year history we have had help from foundation members and donors, local organizations, private foundations and state and federal agencies. We are very appreciative of the generous support we have received.

It is an ongoing challenge to fund the daily operations and maintenance. We try to be creative in our fundraising, which usually falls to a small dedicated group. Help support Rich Mountain Battlefield.

For information on Rich Mountain Battlefield Foundation contact PO Box 227, Beverly, WV 26253, (304) 637 7424, or visit www.richmountain.org

Richard A. Wolfe is President of the Rich Mountain Battlefield Foundation. He is a retired Marine Corps officer and employed by Lockheed Martin. He is a member of the West Virginia Sesquicentennial of the America Civil War Commission. He is active with the West Virginia Civil War Task Force, Mason-Dixon Civil War Round Table and the Stonewall Jackson Civil War Round Table.