



Patrick Edward Connor, shown after his promotion to general, established Camp Douglas in 1862 and commanded the soldiers who participated in the Bear River Massacre. (Photo by Flaglor, Utah State Historical Society)



CHAPTER 13

Harold Schindler

THE BEAR RIVER MASSACRE

NEW HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

Controversy has dogged the Bear River Massacre from the first.

The event in question occurred when, on January 29, 1863, volunteer soldiers under Colonel Patrick Edward Connor attacked a Shoshoni camp on the Bear River, killing nearly three hundred men, women, and children. The bloody encounter culminated years of increasing tension between whites and the Shoshonis, who, faced with dwindling lands and food sources, had resorted to theft in order to survive. By the time of the battle, confrontations between the once-friendly Indians and the settlers and emigrants were common.

So it was that “in deep snow and bitter cold”

Connor set forth from Fort Douglas with nearly three hundred men, mostly cavalry, late in January 1863. Intelligence reports had correctly located Bear Hunter’s village on Bear River about 140 miles north of Salt Lake City, near present Preston, Idaho. Mustering three hundred warriors by

Connor’s [p. 301] estimate, the camp lay in a dry ravine about forty feet wide and was shielded by twelve-foot embankments in which the Indians had cut firing steps. . . .

When the soldiers appeared shortly after daybreak on January 27 [sic], the Shoshonis were waiting in their defenses.

About two-thirds of the command succeeded in fording ice-choked Bear River. While Connor tarried to hasten the crossing, Major [Edward] McGarry dismounted his troops and launched a frontal attack. It was repulsed with heavy loss. Connor assumed control and shifted tactics, sending flanking parties to where the ravine issued from some hills. While detachments sealed off the head and mouth of the ravine, others swept down both rims, pouring a murderous enfilading fire into the lodges below. Escape blocked, the Shoshonis fought desperately in their

positions until slain, often in hand-to-hand combat. Of those who broke free, many were shot while swimming the icy river. By mid-morning the fighting had ended.

On the battlefield the troops counted 224 bodies, including that of Bear Hunter, and knew that the toll was actually higher. They destroyed 70 lodges and quantities of provisions, seized 175 Indian horses, and captured 160 women and children, who were left in the wrecked village with a store of food. The Californians had been hurt, too: 14 dead, 4 officers and 49 men wounded (of whom 1 officer and 6 men died later), and 75 men with frostbitten feet. Even so, it had been a signal victory, winning Connor the fulsome praise of the War Department and prompt promotion to brigadier general.¹

Controversies over the battle have tainted it ever since. For one thing, Chief Justice John F. Kinney of the Utah Supreme Court had issued warrants for the arrest of several Shoshoni chiefs for the murder of a miner. But critics have questioned whether the warrants could legally be served, since the chiefs were no longer within the court's jurisdiction.² The legality of the federal writs was irrelevant, however, to Colonel Connor, commander of the California Volunteers at Camp Douglas.



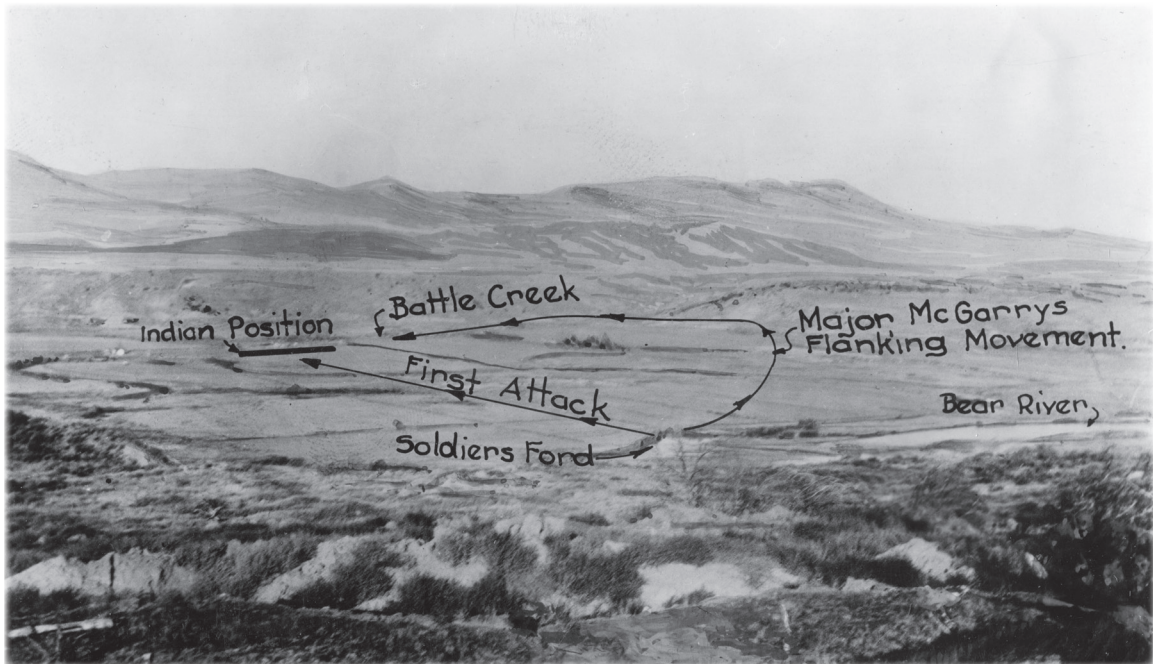
*A young Shoshoni brave. Shoshonis bore the brunt of the January 1863 attack.
(Photo by William H. Jackson, Utah State Historical Society)*

At the onset of his expedition against the Bear River band, he announced that he was satisfied that these Indians were among those who had been murdering emigrants on the Overland Mail Route for the previous fifteen years. Because of their apparent role as “principal actors and leaders in the horrid massacres of the past summer, I determined . . . to chastise them if possible.” He told U.S. marshal Isaac L. Gibbs that Gibbs could accompany the troops with his federal warrants if he wanted, but “it [p. 302] was not intended to have any prisoners.”³

However—and this is another controversy—there have been many who have questioned whether Connor's soldiers actually tangled with the guilty Indians.

Recently discovered evidence, while it resolves neither of those debates, does address a more fundamental aspect of the encounter that ultimately claimed the lives of twenty-three soldiers and nearly three hundred American Indians: that is, Bear River began as a battle, but it most certainly degenerated into a massacre. We have that information from a participant, Sergeant William L. Beach of Company K, 2nd Cavalry Regiment, California Volunteers, who wrote an account and sketched a map just sixteen days after the engagement, while he was recuperating from the effects of frozen feet.

The sergeant specifically describes a crucial moment in the four-hour struggle: the point at which the soldiers broke through the Shoshoni fortifications and rushed “into



Battle action superimposed on a picture of the battlefield. (Utah State Historical Society)

their very midst when the work of death commenced in real earnest." Having seen a dozen or so of his comrades shot down in the initial attack, Beach watched as the tide of battle fluctuated until a desperate enemy finally sought to surrender.

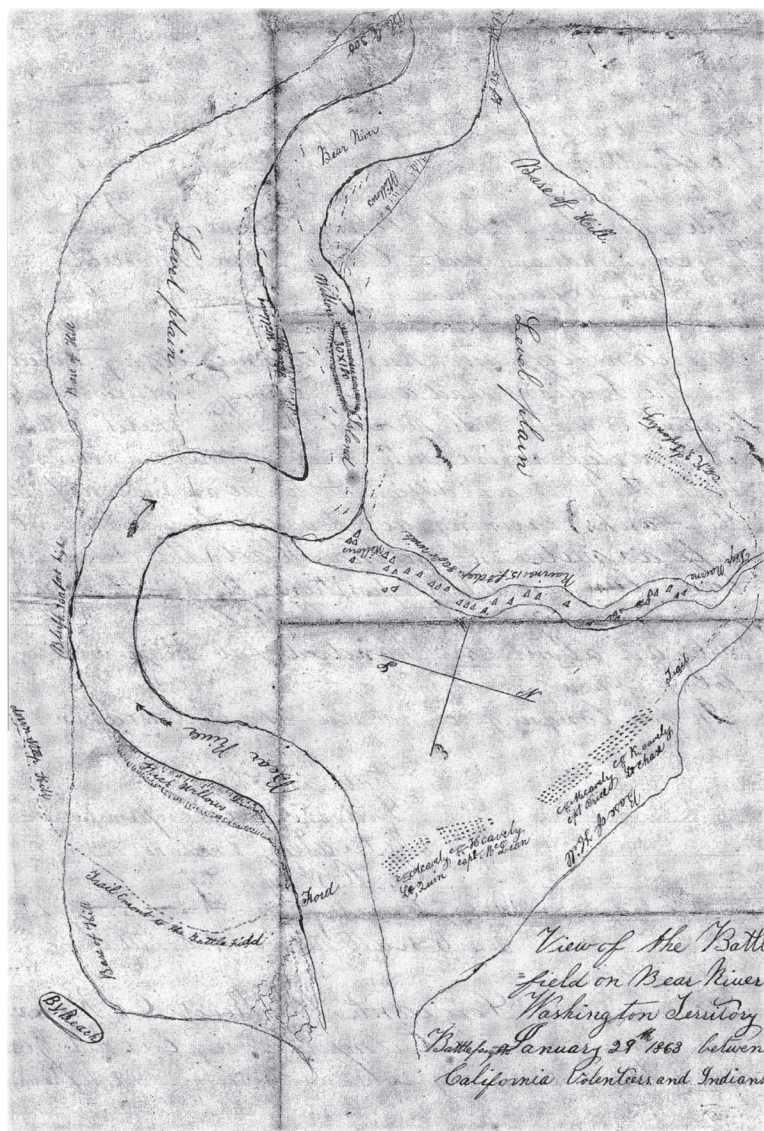
Midst the roar of guns and sharp report of Pistols could be herd the cry for quarters but their was no quarters that day. . . . The fight lasted more than four hours and appeared more like a frolick than a fight the wounded cracking jokes with the frozen some frozen so bad that they could not load their guns used them as clubs.

The "cry for quarters" fell upon deaf ears as the bloody work continued.

In his account, the cavalry sergeant also provided valuable insights concerning the movement of troops as the attack took shape; he carefully recorded the position of each unit

and located the Indian camp and its defenders on a map of the battlefield. He also charted the course of the river at the time of the engagement and pinpointed the soldiers' ford across the Bear. From his map, historians learn for the first time that some of the Shoshonis broke from the fortified ravine on horseback.⁴ Beach traced the warriors' retreat on the map with a series of lowercase "i" symbols.

The manuscript and map came to light in February 1997 after Jack Irvine of Eureka, California, read an Associated Press story in the *San Francisco Chronicle* about Brigham D. Madsen, University of Utah emeritus professor of history, and learned that Madsen had written *The Shoshoni Frontier and the Bear River Massacre*.⁵ Irvine, a collector of Northwest documents and photographs, telephoned Madsen that night and told him that he had collected Sergeant Beach's narrative and map. He sent the historian a photocopy and so opened a sporadic correspondence and telephone



Map drawn by Sergeant William L. Beach shortly after the Bear River Massacre in 1863.
(Courtesy of Harold Schindler family, University of Utah Press)

dialogue that would continue over the span of some eighteen months.

The manuscript has an interesting, if not sketchy, pedigree. According to Irvine, he obtained the four pages from the estate of Richard Harville, a prominent Californian and a descendant of Joseph Russ, an early 1850s overland pioneer to Humboldt County who became fabulously wealthy as a landowner

and rancher. Harville had an abiding interest in local history and was a founding member of the Humboldt County Historical Society. He also owned a large collection of California memorabilia, which was put up for sale after his death in 1996.

Irvine found the narrative and map folded in an envelope and was intrigued because the documents referred to Bear River, which he at first took to be the Bear of Humboldt County. When he found that it was not the Northern California stream, he briefly researched the Connor expedition. Although he determined that Joseph Russ had been alive when the regiment was organized in 1861, he could find no connection between the pioneer and the soldier to indicate how the manuscript had come into Russ's possession. After his research, Irvine put the document away and thought no more of it until

he saw the *Chronicle* article a year later.

Both Irvine and Madsen agreed that the document should be made available to scholars and researchers, preferably those in Utah. The only obstacle was in determining a fair exchange for the four-page manuscript.⁶ When Irvine suggested a trade for Northwest documents or photos, Madsen contacted Gregory C. Thompson of the University of



Looking along the line of the old riverbank where Indians were camped the morning of the massacre. (Utah State Historical Society)

Utah's Marriott Library Special Collections. He also contacted me. Special Collections had nothing that fell within Irvine's sphere of interest, but after some months of dickering, Irvine and I were able to reach a mutually acceptable agreement.⁷ Beach's narrative and map would return to Utah.

Madsen feels that the Beach papers are very important in resolving some of the issues surrounding the encounter. He also says the papers can "emphasize and strengthen the efforts of the National Park Service to bring recognition, at last, to the site of this tragic event, which was the bloodiest killing of a group of Native Americans in the history of the American Far West."

Madsen's comment points to the fact that, although Bear River has long been considered by those familiar with its details as the largest Indian massacre in the Far West, scholars and writers continue to deny the encounter its rightful place in frontier history. Yet, Beach

confirms the magnitude of the massacre when he cites the enemy loss at "two hundred and eighty Killed." This number would not include those individuals shot while attempting to escape across the river, whose bodies were swept away and could not be counted.⁸ While the fight itself has been occasionally treated in books and periodicals, Sergeant Beach's narrative and map are singularly important for what they add to the known record. Here is his account as he penned it:

This View Represents the Battlefield on Bear River fought Jan. 29th /'63 Between four companies of the Second Cavalry and one company third Infantry California Volunteers under Colonel Conner And three hundred and fifty Indians under Bear hunter, Sagwich and Lehigh [Lehi] three very noted Indian chiefs. The Newspapers give a very grafic account of the Battle all of

which is very true with the exception of the positions assigned the Officers which Cos K and M cavalry were first on the ground

When they had arrived at the position they occupy on the drawing Major McGeary [Edward McGarry] gave the commands to dismount and prepare to fight on foot which was instantly obeyed. Lieutenant [Darwin] Chase and Capt. [George F.] Price then gave the command forward to their respective companies after which no officer was heeded or needed The Boys were fighting Indians and intended to whip them. It was a free fight every man on his own hook. Companies H and A came up in about three minutes and pitched in in like manner. Cavalry Horses were sent back to bring the Infantry across the River as soon as they arrived. When across they took a double quick until they arrived at the place they occupy on the drawing they pitched in California style every man for himself and the Devil for the Indians. The Colonels Voice was occasionally heard encouraging the men telling them to take good aim and save their ammunition Majs McGeary and Galiger [Paul A. Gallagher] were also loud in their encouragement to the men.

The Indians were soon routed from the head of the ravine and apparently anticipated a general stampede but were frustrated in their attempt Maj McGeary sent a detachment of mounted cavalry down the River and cut off their retreat in that direction Seeing that death was their doom they made a desperate stand in the lower

end of the Ravine where it appeared like rushing on to death to approach them But the victory was not yet won. With a deafening yell the infuriated Volunteers with one impulse made a rush down the steep banks into their very midst when the work of death commenced in real earnest. Midst the roar of guns and sharp report of Pistols could be heard the cry for quarters but there was no quarters that day. Some jumped into the river and were shot attempting to cross some mounted their ponies and attempted to run the gauntlet in different directions but were shot on the wing while others ran down the River (on a narrow strip of ice that fringed the shores) to a small island and a thicket of willows below where they found [found] a very unwelcome reception by a few of the boys who were waiting the approach of stragglers. It was hardly daylight when the fight commenced and freezing cold the valley was covered with snow—one foot deep which made it very uncomfortable to the wounded who had to lay until the fight was over. The fight lasted four hours and appeared more like a frolic than a fight the wounded cracking jokes with the frozen some frozen so bad that they could not load their guns used them as clubs No distinction was made between Officers and Privates each fought where he thought he was most needed. The report is current that there were three hundred of the Volunteers engaged That is in correct one fourth of the Cavalry present had to hold Horses part of the Infantry were on guard with the wagons While

others were left behind some sick with frozen hands and feet. Only three hundred started on the expedition.

Our loss—fourteen killed and forty two wounded Indian Loss two hundred and eighty Killed.

The Indians had a very strong natural fortification as you will percieve by the sketch within it is a deep ravine {with thick willows and vines so thick that it was difficult to see an Indian from the banks} runing across a smooth flat about half a mile in width. Had the Volunteers been in their position all h—I could not have whiped them. The hills around the Valley are about six hundred feet high with two feet of snow on them. . . .

In the language of an old Sport I weaken

....	Trail in the snow
^^^^^^^^	Lodges or Wickeups in Ravine
iii iii iii	Retreating Indians
::: ::: :::	Co. K, 3rd Infantry
!!!!!!	Cavelry four companies afterwards scattered over the field

Sergeant W. L. Beach. Co. K, 2nd c. C. V.
Camp Douglas. Feb. 14th /63

I recieved six very severe wounds in
my coat. W. L. Beach

Beach had enlisted in the California Volunteers on December 8, 1861, in San Francisco. After his hitch was up, he was mustered out at San Francisco on December 18, 1864.⁹ After that, Sergeant William L. Beach may have faded away as old soldiers do, but his recollections of that frigid and terrible day in 1863 at Bear River will now live forever in Utah annals.

The late Harold Schindler was a member of the Advisory Board of Editors for the Utah Historical Quarterly and an award-winning historian of Utah and the West.

NOTES

This article originally appeared in the Fall 1999 issue of *Utah Historical Quarterly* and is reprinted by permission of the Utah State Historical Society.

1. Robert M. Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue: The United States Army and the Indian, 1848–1865* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 223–24. Other accounts tell of soldiers ransacking the Indian stores for food and souvenirs and killing and raping women. See Brigham D. Madsen, *The Shoshoni Frontier and the Bear River Massacre* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1985), 192–93. Madsen's study is the best account of the expedition and of the circumstances surrounding it.
2. The Bear River Indian camp, located twelve miles north of the Franklin settlement, was in Washington Territory.
3. "Report of Col. P. Edward Connor, Third California Infantry, commanding District of Utah," *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1897), 185.
4. In the past, the belief was that the warriors had been cut off from their herd of ponies.
5. "Historian Delights in Debunking Myths of Old West," *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 8, 1997.
6. The manuscript was written in ink on a large sheet of letter paper folded in half to provide four pages measuring 19.3 cm by 30.6 cm. Beach's map covers the fourth page. There are two large tears in the paper,

one in the upper right corner of the first page and another across the bottom of the same leaf. Evidently, the paper was ripped before Beach began his narrative, for he wrote around the ragged edges, thus preserving the integrity of the account. His penmanship is quite legible though flavored with misspellings.

7. Schindler owned a California-related manuscript that Irvine was willing to trade for the Beach papers. The battle narrative and map are presently in the possession of the Schindler family.
8. Most histories of the American West mention the massacres at Sand Creek, Colorado, in 1864; Washita, Indian Territory, in 1868; Marias River in 1870; Camp Grant, Arizona, in 1871; and Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in 1890. Yet Bear River is generally ignored. Body counts vary widely in these histories, but typical numbers of Indian fatalities listed in traditional sources are Sand Creek, 150; Washita, 103; Marias River, 173; Camp Grant, 100–128; and Wounded Knee, 150–200.

Sergeant Beach's first-person assertion of at least 280 Shoshoni deaths lends additional support to Madsen's claim that the Bear River Massacre was the largest in the Far West. The toll would almost certainly have been even higher had Connor been able to press his

two howitzers into action, but deep snow prevented the cannons from reaching the battlefield in time.

Madsen's book conservatively places the number of Shoshoni dead at 250. It also addresses the question of why Bear River has been generally neglected and advances three reasons: (1) at the time, the massacre site was in Washington Territory, some eight hundred miles from the territorial capital, so residents of that territory paid little attention; (2) the event occurred during the Civil War, when the nation was occupied with other matters; and (3) Mormons in Cache Valley welcomed and approved of Connor's actions, and some historians may have been reluctant to highlight the slaughter because of the sanction it received from the massacre that involved Mormons. See *Shoshoni Frontier*, 8, 20–24. Currently, Madsen says, some traditional military historians are still opposed to using the term "massacre" relative to Bear River.

9. Fortunately, none of Beach's "wounds" seems to have penetrated beyond the coat; officially the sergeant was listed among the men hospitalized with frostbitten feet. See Brigadier General Richard H. Orton, comp., *Records of California Men in the War of the Rebellion, 1861 to 1867* (Sacramento: State Printing Office, 1890), 178–79, 275.

ADDENDUM

By Ephriam D. Dickson III

When Hal Schindler first published Sergeant Beach's historic map of the Bear River Massacre in *Utah Historical Quarterly* in 1999, he noted that little was known of this soldier. Since then, however, much has been discovered about Sergeant Beach's background.

William Leake Beach was born in August 1832 in Abbeville County, South Carolina, the son of Chauncey and Huldah Beach. By 1840, the family had located in Upson County, Georgia. William Beach left home in 1849 at the age of seventeen, joining thousands of young men who headed west to

the California gold fields, hoping to find their fortune. Failing in that, he worked at a variety of odd jobs until the outbreak of the Civil War. In 1862, Beach enlisted in Company K, Second California Volunteer Cavalry, and spent the next seven months at Camp Alert near San Francisco learning the basic skills of a soldier. He was promoted to corporal on March 1, 1862, and to sergeant five months later.

In July 1862, the Second California Cavalry joined Colonel Connor's column as they marched over the Sierra Nevada Mountains, bound for Utah Territory. In the Ruby Valley, they established Fort Ruby and then headed

for Salt Lake City. As Connor led his column east, Sergeant Beach's company was assigned to Major McGarry as he swung north to punish the Shoshoni who had attacked a wagon train near Gravelly Ford. His company participated in several later Indian campaigns, including the attack at Bear River and a fight near Fort Ruby in which fifty-three Goshute were killed.

Company K was transferred back to California in the summer of 1864 where Sergeant Beach was mustered out of the service in December that year. He returned home to Georgia after the war, but finding the area economically devastated, he soon headed back west. Beach operated a meat market in St. Louis and later in Salina, Kansas, before moving his family to Washington Territory. William Beach retired in Seattle, where he died on September 30, 1904. He is buried in the Grand Army of the Republic Cemetery—his grave marked with the white military headstone bearing his unit and years of service during the Civil War.

Sergeant Beach rarely spoke about his army experience, saying only that he remained haunted by what he witnessed during his



William L. Beach (center with beard) and his family, circa 1894. Photo by Charles H. Pautzke, taken at Auburn, Washington. (Courtesy of David Vandergriff)

Indian fighting service in Utah Territory. That he had been a participant at Bear River and had drawn a map of the battlefield was a surprise to his descendants. Hal Schindler died a year before the Beach map was published, and the original document appears to have once again disappeared. Despite a diligent search by his son through his father's papers, this important historical document could not be located. Perhaps one day, Sergeant Beach's map will once again reemerge and hopefully find its way into a public repository where it will be available for all those who wish to further explore this chapter of Utah history.

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