

Prologue

Cherokee John Bowles held onto the faint hope that his valiant chieftain father would escape the battlefield unscathed. He and his brothers had fought alongside their aged parent for nearly two hours this day, braving the deadly rifle balls that whistled past their heads and sporadically cut down some of their comrades. They had managed in the first 90 minutes of conflict to repel all efforts by the Texans to charge their defensive position in the deep creek bed.

John and his fellow Cherokees had created confusion and fear in the Texans earlier in the battle by trying to flank their opponents and stampede their horses. But the Texans were simply too numerous this day, and their firepower had eventually driven John and his fellow Indians back to their stronghold in the creek. The shooting was intense and both sides were taking casualties in the heat of mid-July afternoon in East Texas.

At age 43, John was a rising star among his Texas Cherokees. His father had entrusted him and a friend, Fox Fields, to ride into the Texan's camp the previous day to deliver a final message to the Indian commissioners. John had announced that the previous week's diplomacy attempts had failed. His father's followers were ignoring the Texans' demands to surrender and they were breaking camp to fall back across the Neches River. Hours later, John's Cherokees had engaged the Texan forces in a sharp skirmish in which lives were lost on both sides.

Now, less than 24 hours later, his fellow Native Americans were fighting valiantly to hold onto the land in Texas that had

once been promised them by Sam Houston, president of the young Republic of Texas. Allies from twelve other East Texas tribes had banded with the Cherokees to make a final stand against the Texans, who numbered more than 900 men.

John's 83-year-old father, Chief Bowles, was the proud leader of more than 800 Indians who were challenging the Texas frontiersmen now charging down upon them from all sides. Their final assault was well executed, and the Cherokees suffered many casualties before those surviving were forced to flee from the creek bed toward the cover of heavy forest behind them.

John turned and urged his fellow people to flee for cover... retreat, lick their wounds and prepare for the chance to engage the Texans again the following day from a stronger position. He glanced back to see his aged father perched atop his horse, still valiantly clutching his ceremonial sword and waving it defiantly in the air. John's heart was heavy but he understood tribal custom. His father represented their people and he intended fully to carry out his people's wishes to fight to the bitter end against the Texans who intended to drive them out like cattle.

Chief Big Mush, the war leader of the Texas Cherokees, had already perished on the Neches River battlefield. John Bowles knew that his father would soon be martyred as well, leaving him to assume leadership of whatever Cherokees might survive the massacre.



Chief Bowles, the elderly leader of the Texas Cherokees, was indeed slain during the battle of the Neches on July 16, 1839, in East Texas. The afternoon's battle was the turning point of a short affair known in Texas as the Cherokee War, during which the immigrant Native American tribe was driven from the fledgling Republic of Texas back into Indian Territory.

The battle of the Neches, although not widely familiar to residents of the Lone Star State, was in fact the greatest battle ever fought between Texans and Native Americans. More than 1,600 Indians, Texas Rangers, Texas Army soldiers, and Texas Militia volunteers clashed on July 15 on Battle Creek and again the following day at the Neches battle.

The only battle between Native Americans and Texans forces of comparable size during the ten-year Republic of Texas era was the battle of Plum Creek in 1840, which was fought between about 1,200 Comanche and Texan opponents. Other major Indian battles within Texas during the 1860s and 1870s—such as Adobe Walls, Dove Creek, Blanco Canyon and Palo Duro Canyon—may have had a greater number of combatants, but these engagements largely involved U.S. Army or Confederate troops versus native Texans fighting against immigrant Native Americans.

As far as the fabled Texas Rangers are concerned, they fought in a number of famous engagements with Comanches and other tribes, under such noted Ranger commanders as Captains Jack Hay, John "Rip" Ford and Lawrence S. "Sul" Ross (who recovered Comanche prisoner Cynthia Ann Parker in 1860 after she had been taken from Parker's Fort 24 years earlier). None of these Ranger versus Indian battles, however, came close to matching the number of combatants involved. The 1839 battle of the Neches was the largest sustained Indian battle in which the Texas Rangers participated. More than 400 Rangers in seven companies rode and fought in the two-day conflict with Chief Bowles' Cherokees. They suffered four Rangers killed and nine wounded.

The central issue that sparked the Cherokee War in 1839 was the demand of the Texas government that Bowles' tribe leave Texas. Yet, the Cherokees had, in fact, struggled to gain rightful land titles to their area of settlement almost from the very day that they had crossed the Red River in 1819 to live in the present Dallas area.

Bowles had opted to move some 300 of his followers from the present Arkansas area of Indian Territory into Texas under the belief that he could secure proper land rights from the Mexican authorities after they secured their own independence from Spain. In the two decades following the migration of the Texas Cherokees, they would be met with bitter disappointments, broken promises, rebellions, accusations and, finally, the ultimatum from Texas President Mirabeau Lamar of expulsion or war.

The Cherokee War commenced with tense days of negotiations within East Texas but Bowles' people finally pushed him to reject ejection from their land in favor of making a final stand.

In writing this history of one of the most dramatic Indian battles in Texas history, I decided to put modern technology to work to unearth some artifacts from the Neches battleground. My goal was to precisely pinpoint the major areas of conflict and to hand over some of these historic remnants to the organizations on both sides of the conflict—to the American Indian Cultural Society that maintains the Cherokees' Neches battleground property and to the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum in Waco.

The final chapter relates our team's successful efforts to recover relics from the Neches battleground and to turn them over to people who can put them on display for the future benefit of other history fans. We organized search teams armed with Garrett metal detectors, high-tech electronic instruments that scan the ground for metallic artifacts. The Graphic Target Imaging feature on our GTI 2500s and 1500s allowed the searchers to ignore much of the metallic junk metal accumulated over 170 years and instead on more significant items.

In the end, we were able to determine through recovery of relics the location where the first Texan scouts engaged the Cherokees on July 16, the area of the main battlefield, and an area of heavy conflict along a deep creek that runs below the main battlefield. The rifle balls and buckshot we unearthed with our metal detectors helped us map out the battlegrounds of this historic fight between Anglo settlers and the immigrant Native American tribes that took a stand against the Texan initiative to drive them out. We could trace the path of the battle as it moved across a prominent hill down to the creek and through a thick forest toward the lonely Centennial Marker which stands at the spot where Chief Bowles' colorful life was ended by a pistol.



I must thank a number of people for their roles in helping to bring to print this story on the last stand of the Texas Cherokees. Donaly Brice, an archivist of the Texas State Library and Archives Commission, offered his assistance in retrieving important documents regarding the Cherokee War and various letters of Chief Bowles to Texan leaders. East Texans resident Elvis Allen, author of an article on the Cherokee War, provided information

on the Neches battleground. The land owners who allowed our search teams to scour their properties for battle evidence made the most significant contributions to our efforts.

Eagle Douglas and Sondra McAdams, leaders of the American Indian Cultural Society that maintains the 70 acres (Eagle and his wife Jeena Douglas own two of the acres) containing the Chief Bowles Centennial Marker, were open to our cause and followed our efforts with interest. Sondra, in fact, is the one who urged that a new book on Chief Bowles should be written. The adjacent landowners, Thurman and Alice Jett, were equally supportive of our mission and allowed us full access to sweep their prairies, creeks and forests with our detectors. Landowners Herbert Riley and Jim Barr also allowed relics searches along Kickapoo Creek near Frankston, site of another 1838 battle involving Texans, Kickapoos, Cherokees and other participants.

A number of metal detecting enthusiasts lent their time and sweat into digging hundreds of modern bullets and ample metallic trash before we finally locked onto the correct area of the Neches battlefield. Included were: Robert Jordan, Joe Wilson, Stan May, Paul Wilson, Mike Skinner, Dave Totsky, Rusty Curry, Bob Bruce, Matt Bruce, Robert Jeffrey, Richey Davidson, Brenda Davidson, Ray Wathar, Ronnie Morris, Bob Slocum, Keith Wills, Vaughan Garrett and Brian McKenzie. Their willingness to give up their battle relics for historic preservation by the Cherokees and the Texas Rangers is greatly appreciated.

The recovered relics adequately pinpointed the battlefield, and those who offered us this opportunity have helped identify a significant area of the early American conflict between settlers and Native Americans. The landowners and AICS respectfully request that other metal detectorists do not contact them about searching on the land of the Neches battleground. The American Indian Cultural Society does, however, welcome anyone to join their meetings at the battleground to learn more about the Cherokee culture or to assist with their preservation efforts.

My interest in this battlefield is a result of years of research I have put into a book series that documents the early years of Texas frontier forces and the Indian wars of the Republic era. My great-great-great grandfather William C. Moore married a Cherokee woman in 1848 in Texas. In addition to thus claiming

ties to the Cherokees, I also had two ancestors, William Turner Sadler and John Morton, who fought on the Texas side of this 1839 Neches River battle.

Data on early Texan and Native American weapons and identification of projectiles was offered by Dr. Gregg Dimmick, an accomplished advocational archaeologist who works on 1830s-era Texas artifacts, Doug Scott, a ballistics expert who has worked with artifacts from significant Indian wars battlefields, and Byron Johnson, the executive director of the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum in Waco.

Hal Dawson, who lent his editorial expertise to this project, deserves credit for his efforts to improve the readability of this text. Finally, I must thank the Garrett family for supporting the efforts of our search teams to discover relics on the battlefield where Republic of Texas-era frontiersmen had forever dimmed the light of hope held by the Cherokees to peacefully settle on Texas soil.