The Battle of Bayou Vermilion

Much Sound - Little Fury

By Jim Bradshaw

As the fall of 1863 settled across Acadiana, the Yankees were on the move again. They had used the Morgan City area (Brashear City and Berwick City) as a staging base for one of the largest armies ever to mass in Louisiana, and were now moving north, roughly following what is today Louisiana Highway 182.

Their plan was to follow Bayou Teche to the north, then to turn west to Niblett's Bluff (near Vinton in Calcasieu Parish), to ferry across the Sabine River there, and then to march into Texas.

The advancing Bluecoat columns had stopped at New Iberia early in October, while the commanders tried to decide whether they would cut west from there or move on up the road to Vermilionville (Lafayette) before turning. They had met only token opposition as they moved up the Teche, but Federal commanders and common soldiers, too - were certain that Confederate General Alfred Mouton was waiting for them at Vermilionville and would force the battle there.

From a New Yorker.

It was universally known among rank and file that since the evacuation of this country in the spring, the enemy had concentrated a large force upon the northern bank of the Vermilion River where he had constructed heavy earthworks.

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There were at least two reasons to think this Vermilionville was Mouton's home town, and, secondly, Mouton had learned that many of the Union soldiers went into camp for the night. The men rested uneasily, they were sure that tomorrow, at Vermilionville, there would be battle.

Nonetheless, the Yankees decided to move on to Vermilionville. Commanding General Nathaniel Banks apparently wanted to force the battle. He did not like the idea of marching across the wide open Cajun prairies with Confederates nipping at his heels. As one historian put it, he knew that "Yankees on foot and in the open (are) simply no match for the mounted cowboys and Cajuns."

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On Thursday, October 8, the Yankee advance reached the tiny community of Cote Glee (near Broussard) - where many of the Union soldiers went into camp for the night. The men rested uneasily, they were sure that tomorrow, at Vermilionville, there would be battle.

Sure enough, smoke filled the air as the Bluecoated columns approached the Vermilion River the next day, Friday, October 9. The Rebels were burning the Pinhook Bridge again - as they had done to delay the Union advance in the spring.

In Vermilionville itself, two miles back from the river, townsfolk climbed to rooftops to try to get a glimpse of what was happening. While these sentries yelled their reports to people in the streets below, the rest of the town was busy loading family possessions aboard wagons, carts, anything that would roll. They knew they were in a precarious place.

The Yankees thought there were at least 3,000 Confederates hidden in the trees along the river, ready to defend Vermilionville. The townpeople knew that there were really only 500, maybe fewer than that.

General Mouton had decided that he wanted to do just what General Banks feared. Mouton had moved most of his army north toward Opelousas and was waiting for the Yankees to turn west - so that he could use his cavalry to attack the long, slow-moving Yankee column as it trudged across the prairie.

The Federal attack focused on a point roughly where Hwy. 182 now crosses the Vermilion.

On the extreme right was a band of Union cavalry from Texas. Next to them were the six 800-pound cannon of Nimitz 2nd Massachusetts Battery, reputed to be one of the finest artillery outfits in the Federal army. In the center, were the six artillery pieces of Battery L, of the First U.S. Artillery. Next, facing what is today Bendel Gardens, were the six guns of the 1st Indiana Artillery. Next to them was the 1st Louisiana Union cavalry. Ranged along the entire line were heavy cannon from Battery A of the 2nd Illinois.

The artillery barrage began at 11 a.m., and, as one correspondent put it, "for about an hour the firing was very warm."

As shot from the smaller artillery exploded over and onto Crow Ave. (Pinhook Road today, named for Basil Crow, who had a sugar house on the river), the bigger guns topped trees, blasted craters into the river bank. In the town itself, the big Yankee artillery pieces rattled windows and shook the ground. Wayday shells fell well back from the river, some of them plopping up craters on what is today the UL campus. As the artillery barrage whizzed over their heads, the 161st New York infantry fanned out and began to move toward the river - advancing a few yards, dropping to the ground and firing, then advancing a few yards more.

Behind them, two infantry divisions moved along the road from Cote Glee and into attack formation - forming up shoulder to shoulder in a double line about a mile long.

It was an awesome sight of gunpowder and manpower. Looking at all of this, the 500 Rebel, as the reports put it, "withdrew in a brisk fashion."

The Battle of Vermilion Bayou was over. It had cost the Union only five hurt, nobody killed.

Now, without so much as a sniper to hamper them, the engineers went to work to rebuild the bayou's bridge. By the next day the men and wagons were crossing the river in a steady stream. They would turn Vermilionville into a Yankee campsite.