

The Battle of Mine Creek: The Crushing End of the Missouri Campaign

Joseph Beilein

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Review

Beilein, Joseph

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Stalnaker, Jeffrey D. *The Battle of Mine Creek: The Crushing End of the Missouri Campaign*. The History Press, \$19.99 ISBN 978-1-60949-332-5

Examining the Missouri Campaign

Prompted by the sesquicentennial of America's greatest war and the elevated level of interest sparked by the anniversary, historians and authors have sought to cover new aspects of the war or offer new insights into old stories. Jeffrey Stalnaker's *The Battle of Mine Creek: The Crushing End of the Missouri Campaign* is a bit of both. Stalnaker writes about the little-known battle of Mine Creek, not simply because it has yet to receive a modern study, but because the battle was more important than the small amount of attention paid to it would suggest. To this end, he claims that the battle was the only Civil War battle fought in Kansas (presumably by formal armies of the Union and Confederacy) and reveals that it was one of the largest cavalry clashes of the war regardless of location. While Lumir Buresh examines the battle in his book, *October 25th and the Battle of Mine Creek* (1977), Stalnaker gives the battle a more modern and much-deserved second look. In so doing, he offers an analysis of the Union reaction to Confederate General Sterling Price's entire 1864 Missouri Campaign, or Price's Raid as it is known to some, while offering new insights into the battle itself.

Stalnaker's joy in writing the history of this battle is evident in his investigation of this battle. The strongest aspect of *The Battle of Mine Creek* is Stalnaker's skill in providing fascinating analysis where other authors may have bypassed the opportunity. When the author gets to the actual battle of Mine Creek, he brilliantly analyzes what some may see as otherwise ordinary details to provide powerful conclusions. Take for instance Stalnaker's examination of the Union forces as they prepared to initiate battle with the Confederate force's position on the bank of Mine Creek. The author points to the complimentary nature of the two Union cavalry units in the battle. Stalnaker says, "[John]

Phillip's brigade, armed with heavier weapons...were able to really support [Frederick] Benteen's charge once it began. Benteen's men, a veteran cavalry force, were accustomed to the charge and were prepared to hit the enemy hard in the teeth" (79). This combination of movement and fire support would propel the Union forces to victory. In tandem with this sort of analysis, Stalnaker never loses the point of view of the Union officers in the battle. It is this combination of insight and ground level perspective that makes this book truly entertaining.

Unfortunately, when Stalnaker is not focusing on the actual battle, *The Battle of Mine Creek* is not as analytically strong. On the one hand, in the early chapters of the book there is quite a bit of background regarding Price's Raid, perhaps too much. This is not to say that the raid is undeserving of attention, only that there are some parts of the discussion that do not appear to be directly relevant to the author's analysis of the battle of Mine Creek. However, on the other hand, there are sections of Missouri's wartime history that deserve more consideration. For instance, the narrative goes from the antebellum conflict along the Kansas-Missouri border directly to Price's Raid in 1864. The choice to ignore wartime events in Missouri preceding 1864 is a decision to ignore guerrilla warfare (or "guerilla" warfare as it is unfortunately spelled in this work. This was an honest mistake, no doubt, but one that should have been caught by the press). Such a discussion could have added greater depth to the analysis brought to bear by the author. He could have used that discussion to broaden the reader's knowledge of cavalry tactics and provide important context for the skill of the Union troops in the battle, as many of them had cut their teeth fighting against arguably the best armed, best mounted, and most ferocious fighters of the war, the Missouri bushwhackers.

All things considered, this work is a joy to read and adds to our knowledge of a little-known, but important battle. Whether you are interested in Price's Raid or the wider history of Kansas in the Civil War, cavalry tactics or the war in the West, this book will be a nice addition to your library. While too often, we, as consumers of the past look at the outcome of certain battles as foregone conclusions or as just tiny engagements making up the aftermath of some larger clash, Stalnaker reminds us that, to the men fighting on the bank of Mine Creek on 25 October 1864, this was the most important battle of their lives. As Union and Confederate cavalry fought "boot to boot, stirrup to stirrup," there was no more important moment in time than the one they were trying to survive. We should appreciate the desperation, fear, mourning, and exultation felt by these men, as well as Stalnaker's dedication in bringing these experiences to light.

Dr. Beilein is an Assistant Professor of History at Penn State Erie, The Behrend College and is the author of the article, "The Guerrilla Shirt: A Labor of Love and the Style of Rebellion in Civil War Missouri," which appeared in the June 2012 edition of Civil War History.