

# Bear river essay



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Patrick Edward Connor, a fiery, ambitious Irishman of 42, was unhappy. He had served with a Texas regiment under the command of Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston in the Mexican War, but before the war ended he had resigned his commission and joined the gold hunters in California.

Unsuccessful in finding gold, he became a California ranger, a surveyor and a businessman. Still, his interest in the military life never waned. When the Civil War broke out, Connor, with 10 companies of troops, was called back to duty. Seven of the companies, along with Connor, were assigned to Utah.

Since Connor and his men wanted desperately to fight in the “real war,” he sent a letter to the secretary of war requesting reassignment. The request was denied, and Connor came to Utah with a burning desire to do

something—anything—to gain the military recognition he felt he had been denied. Connor arrived in Utah Territory in 1862 with about 750 volunteer troops from California and Nevada. Disgruntled when he did not get

reassigned to lead Union forces in Civil War battles, the disconsolate Connor established a permanent U. S. Army post at Camp Douglas (later called Fort Douglas), at the foot of the Wasatch Range overlooking Salt Lake City.

Connor liked the location because, to soothe his bruised feelings from his unwelcome assignment, he could keep an eye on the activities of the Mormons. The primary objective of Connor’s troops was to relieve the

Mormons of the task of guarding the Western mail routes and telegraph lines, a temporary assignment given the Mormons by President Abraham Lincoln. Policing the Indians was considered a legitimate secondary purpose,

but Connor, it seems, fabricated an assignment of his own to watch the Mormons. Connor’s recorded correspondence shows that he felt his “duty of assuring Mormon loyalty was...as important as preventing Indian raids along

the...mail and telegraph routes." Although the feisty Connor respected Brigham Young, he had little use for the man personally. Young, in turn, was upset by the establishment of the camp above Salt Lake City and apparently let Connor know his concern. According to one historian, " from this point on Connor waged a cold war with Mormon authorities." Reporting to his superiors in Washington, Connor wrote that the Mormons were " a community of traitors, murderers, fanatics...and whores." He apparently held that opinion most of his life. Aligning himself with non-Mormon businessmen, Connor promoted extramilitary prospecting and mining in the area. He was involved in settling early-day Corinne, a non-Mormon settlement west of Brigham City, which for a time was called Connor City after the strong-willed Irishman. Connor and his cohorts were desirous of making Corinne the " Chicago of the West." When the railroad came and then left, Corinne's future went with it. As a soldier, Connor was brave, able and determined. He was quick to snuff out Indian uprisings. When the so-called Bear River trouble loomed, the ambitious Connor grabbed the chance to further build his reputation as a great military leader and gain an army promotion. Miner William Bevins signed an affidavit on January 19, 1863, claiming that two days earlier he and seven others on their way to Salt Lake City from the Grasshopper gold mines at Bannack (in what would soon be Montana Territory) had been attacked by hostile Indians. One of the miners had been killed. Bevins also reported that another party of 10 miners en route to Salt Lake City had been murdered by the same Indians. Shoshone and Bannock raiders had been known to be operating in the area. Bevins' word was enough for Connor, who painted all Indians with the same brush and did not bother to investigate the attacks. Warrants for the arrest of three Shoshone

Indian chiefs—Bear Hunter, Sandpitch and Sagwitch—were given to U. S. Marshal Isaac L. Gibbs, who promptly turned the matter back over to Colonel Connor. Another miner from Bannack traveling to Salt Lake City had spoken to some of the Cache Valley Shoshone. The Indians told him they had nothing against settlers but meant to continue to take revenge on white travelers for the injustices done them by Major Edward McGarry's troops. McGarry, charged by his men with "being drunk most of the time," was Connor's right-hand man and a bloodthirsty, Indian-hating officer. With 100 cavalymen, he had been sent by Connor to the Bear River ferry north of Brigham City, where a large Indian encampment was supposedly holding stock stolen from emigrants. Somehow the Indians learned about the coming of the troops, cut the ferry rope and moved the camp north and into the Cache Valley. McGarry infuriated the Indians when he took four unwary warriors hostage, tied their hands to a ferry rope, and executed them, firing 51 shots. The Indians long remembered the dastardly act. Connor sent word to Gibbs that his expedition against the Indians in Cache Valley was ready and that "it was not my intention to take any prisoners." Respected Mormon leader George A. Smith observed "the highly mysterious army preparations going on at Camp Douglas and heard Connor's intention to 'exterminate' the Indians." Secrecy about Connor's troop movements was necessary to keep the Indians from moving before the troops arrived. Connor did not want to deprive his soldiers of what he called "a little Indian killing." The colonel considered winter the best time to attack an Indian village because "the warriors would be settled and encumbered with their wives and children." The first month of 1863 was fearfully cold and severe. Ice was everywhere, and the marching possibilities were so bad that when the Indians were told

that Connor's men were going to attack, they laughed and said, " No! Too cold for soldiers." Connor gave the order to his troops on January 19, 1863, to be ready to march at any moment. On January 22, Captain Samuel W. Hoyt of K Company, 3rd Infantry Regiment, was given the order to move out. The group consisted of 69 infantry volunteers, 15 wagons loaded with enough supplies to last 20 days, and two 12-pounder mountain howitzers with 50 rounds of ammunition for each cannon. It was snowing heavily when the troops left Camp Douglas. Word was passed that their mission was to escort wagon trains hauling grain out of Cache Valley. The foot soldiers marched sloppily, allowed their uniforms to fall into disarray, and gave every indication of being an undisciplined band of dunderheads out on a lark. The Indians, through friends or perhaps even through smoke signals, presumably would get the message: The soldiers were a foolish outfit of squaws—all the warriors had to do was wait. The first day out, the men traveled 13 miles and camped at Sessions Settlement, present-day Bountiful. Twenty-five miles were covered the second day, the column stopping at Brownsville on the Weber River. On the following day the detachment moved on to Willow Creek. Meanwhile, with Connor in command, the cavalry left Camp Douglas on the evening of January 24 and covered 68 miles during the night to arrive at Brigham City in the morning. The sky was clear, but a cold wind was blowing, dropping the temperature so low that one observer reported, " the men were not able to talk because of the ice in their beards." Since the ground was covered with snow between 2 and 5 feet deep and it was intensely cold, about 75 of the group of 275 officers and men were put out of service as the result of frozen feet and other cold-weather problems. Those with the worst cases of frostbite were left in settlements along the way. The

infantry on January 25 marched 29 miles to Empey's Ferry, also known as Hampton's Ford, north of Brigham City, where they camped for the night. The following morning the infantry moved 25 miles, crossing into Cache Valley over the pass where the mountain at Wellsville dwindles to a small hill, and stopped at Mendon. Connor's cavalry had been resting in Brigham City, and on the evening of the 26th it made another all-night ride, going up Box Elder Canyon, through Sardine Pass and entering Mendon from the south on the morning of the 27th. The infantry, meantime, had also been resting and preparing. Connor ordered them out at 11 p. m. to begin an all-night march to the small community of Franklin (in present-day Idaho), 30 miles north and east of Mendon. On January 28, at about 5 p. m., three Indians were in Franklin to pick up the usual gift of wheat that settlers gave to keep the peace. The Indians, loading the wheat on their horses and seeing the infantry approaching, jumped on their horses and rode off. It was assumed that the Indians knew about the approaching infantry but did not know about the cavalry, which arrived about midnight in Franklin, some 15 miles from the Indian encampment. At 1 a. m., on January 29, Connor ordered the infantry to move out so that they could arrive at the battle site at the same time as the cavalry. Failure to find a local guide delayed the departure of the infantry until 3 a. m. Connor and the cavalry left an hour later, passing the infantry about four miles from Bear River and the Indian village. At 6 a. m. they arrived at the bluffs overlooking Bear River. Standing on the bluff, a pleased Connor could observe smoke from the early morning cooking fires in the Indian village. He had been concerned that the Indians might flee if they knew the real strength of his troops. To foil any attempt to escape, Connor ordered McGarry to take command of four companies, cross the river,

surround the camp and hold the Indians until the infantry could arrive.

Crossing the river was not easy. Said one private: " That was a bad looking river, half frozen and swift. The horses did not want to go in it. Two old boys got throwed by their horses." When the infantry arrived at the river ford, McGarry had already taken a force of 20 men to scale the bluffs, and the fighting had begun. The infantrymen, not wanting to miss any of the fight, crossed the river on foot, two of their number almost drowning in the icy water. Connor then sent the cavalry back with horses so the rest of the infantrymen could ride across the river. The Indians had prepared a position of strong natural defense, almost inaccessible to troops. They were in a ravine 6 to 12 feet deep and 30 to 40 feet wide, with very steep banks. On the level ground above the banks the Indians had constructed steps from which they could deliver fire without exposing themselves. Screens of thickly woven willows were also constructed, from behind which the Indians could fire unobserved. As the infantry moved in, the battle began on a small tributary of Bear River called Bear Creek. About an hour later the cavalry went into action, passing the plodding infantry just south of the river. At that point, Chief Bear Hunter rode out in front of his lines and challenged the soldiers to fight. Some Indian braves openly taunted the soldiers by loudly singing, " Fours right, fours left, come on you California SOB's." The cocky Connor, angry at Bear Hunter's arrogance and the taunting, ordered his men to charge—a colossal mistake. His troops were easily thrown back by the Indians in their strong position. As he retreated, Connor devised another stratagem by dividing his troops into three parts, with the infantry attacking from the front and the cavalry units striking from the flanks. " Being exposed on a level and open plain, while the Indians were under cover gave them the

advantage, fighting with the ferocity of demons,” said Connor. “ My men fell thick and fast around me, but after flanking them we had the advantage and made good use of it. I ordered a flanking party to advance down the ravine on either side, which gave us the advantage of gunfire directed from either flank and caused some of the Indians to give way and run toward the mouth of the ravine. “ I had a company stationed who shot them as they ran out.... Few tried to escape but continued fighting with unyielding obstinacy, frequently engaging hand to hand with the troops.” After about four hours of bloody battling on a bitter cold day, the soldiers, many of whom had been killed, wounded or frozen themselves, had almost completely annihilated the Indian encampment. A San Francisco Bulletin reporter described the battle scene: “ The carnage presented in the ravine was horrible. Warrior piled on warrior, horses mangled and wounded in every conceivable form, with here and there a squaw and papoose, who had been accidentally killed.” The howitzers, which might have shortened the battle considerably, never arrived. The smoothbore cannon could fire a variety of shells, the standard being a steel ball filled with explosives, but the guns had been too heavy to transport in the deep snow. The infantry used the 1861 rifle, a muzzle-loaded, percussion . 58 caliber; the cavalry had two weapons, the saber and a . 44-caliber revolver. The Indians used blackpowder rifles, knives and bows and arrows. Connor’s force killed between 250 and 300 Indians (Connor’s estimate), including Chiefs Bear Hunter and Lehi. Chiefs Sandpitch, Sagwitch and Pocatello escaped, along with about 50 warriors. Soldier casualties were 21 dead and 46 wounded. Conditions on the night following the battle were described by one soldier: “ The night of January 29th 1863, I shall never forget (how can I). There we camped on the bank of Bear River with our dead



and dying wounded and frozen, 2 feet of snow on the ground. Nothing for fire but green willows which would burn about as well as snow. Oh, the groans of the frozen seems to ring in my ears and the poor fellows, some lost their toes and some a portion of their feet. I worked nearly all night bringing water from the river to wet clothes to draw frost from their frozen limbs. It was a dreadful night to me, but I managed to get through it while some never saw the morning." Chief Sagwitch was shot through both legs during the fight. The intense cold, hovering below zero, congealed the blood and prevented him from bleeding to death. Under fire from the soldiers, the chief dragged himself down to Bear Creek, jumped into the water and swam one-eighth of a mile almost entirely submerged. He then dragged his frozen body ashore and crawled and slid 20 miles across the snow to a friendly lodge. He remained on the Fort Hall Reservation until the day of his death, badly crippled and deeply dejected. The Mormon bishop of Franklin sent William Head, captain of the local militia, and two other men to check the battlefield and discover if any Indians were still alive. The men found bodies everywhere—in several places, three to five deep. Two Indian women whose thighs had been broken by bullets were found alive, as well as two boys and one girl about 3 years old. The little girl had eight flesh wounds in her body. The victims were taken back to Franklin for care. A nephew of Chief Sagwitch also ran toward the river during the fight, with soldiers in close pursuit. When the lad reached the river he fell into the water, feigning death, and then floated under the ice, making an air hole just far enough out of the water to allow him to breath. The soldiers spotted him and fired again, wounding him in the thumb. After the troopers gave up their attempts to kill him, the boy swam to some willows and lay hidden for several hours in the intense cold.

He would later settle on the Washakie Reservation and live to be 100 years old. Chief Sagwitch's son Yeagar Timbimboo was about 12 years old at the time of the massacre and also miraculously escaped death. The youngster came upon a small grass tepee that was so full of people that it was actually moving along the ground. Inside the shelter, Yeagar found his grandmother. At her urging, the two of them went outside to lie down among the dead before the soldiers could set the tepee on fire. Near the end of the battle, as the soldiers were searching among the dead Indians, one of the volunteers came across the inquisitive youngster who was looking around to see what was happening. The soldier stood over Yeagar with his gun pointed at him. The two stared at each other; the gun was lowered, then raised a second time before finally the soldier lowered it and walked away. In his official report to the War Department, Connor boasted, " I captured 175 horses, some arms...and a large quantity of wheat and other provisions which had been furnished them by the Mormons." (The Mormons offered provisions and help to all travelers passing through the territory.) But Connor was not one to credit the Mormons with any assistance. In his official report he also wrote, " I should mention here that in my march from this post no assistance was rendered by the Mormons, who seemed indisposed to divulge any information regarding the Indians and charged enormous prices for every article furnished my command." He failed to acknowledge the food, clothing and shelter given by Mormons to his suffering and wounded soldiers in the northern Utah settlement of Logan, Wellsville and Brigham City. Luckily, he had legendary Mormon scout Porter Rockwell as a guide to go among the Mormons and acquire 18 sleds to carry the dead and wounded back to Camp Douglas. On their return, the troops remained all night in Logan, the citizens

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furnishing them supper and breakfast. The settlers provided teams and sleighs to assist them in carrying the dead, wounded and frozen back to Camp Douglas. In crossing the mountains between Wellsville and Brigham City, the troops toiled and floundered all day through the deep snow until, worn out, they returned to Wellsville. The next day, Bishop W. H. Maughan gathered the men and teams in the place and assisted the troops through the pass to Salt Lake valley. Even though the settlers in Cache Valley deplored the cruelty of the battle, they saw some good coming out of the campaign. One wrote: “ The victory was of immense value to the settlers.... It made the flocks and herds and lives of people comparatively safe.” Connor couldn’t understand Brigham Young’s philosophy that it was better to feed the Indians than to fight them. Even The New York Times wondered if conciliation wasn’t better than a fight. The slaughter of the Indian men, women and children, said the paper, was unwarranted, unnecessary, harsh and brutal. Connor received a general’s star for his victory in the Battle of Bear River (which is now sometimes called the “ Massacre of Bear River”), but he also received some criticism for the number of soldiers killed. His obsession with the Mormons continued. In his dispatches to the War Department, Connor complained about Brigham Young and his “ absolute and tyrannical control of temporal and civil affairs.” Patrick Edward Connor was finally relieved of his command in 1866. Connor eventually became known as the father of mining in Utah and did a credible job of opening the industry in the Utah Territory. He diligently worked to build a non-Mormon population in the area to wrest control from Mormon leaders. In this, too, he failed, dying among the Mormons in Salt Lake City on December 17, 1891. Retired newspaperman Quig Nielsen is author of Temple Square: the Crown

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Jewel of the Mormons. For further reading, he recommends: Brigham Madsen's *The Shoshoni Frontier and the Bear River Massacre*; Orson Whitney's *History of Utah*; and James Varley's *Brigham and the Brigadier*.

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