

Battle of Mansfield remembered

On April 8, 1864, Union General Nathaniel P. Banks and a large Federal Army was moving up the Red River toward Shreveport. On this day, the Confederate Army commanded by Gen. Richard Strother Taylor fought against Banks' troops at Mansfield, DeSoto Parish, La. in the largest battle west of the Mississippi. Among the most important weapons captured by the victorious Rebels was the Val Verde Cannon, a model 1861 Ordnance Rifle made of wrought iron, weighing 816 pounds, which was manufactured by Phoenix Iron Company of Phoenixville, Penn. and put into Union service on Oct. 25, 1862. The Val Verde Battery played an important part in the Confederate victory at Mansfield. Approximately 1,000 Confederate soldiers were killed or wounded in this battle, along with approximately 2,400 casualties on the Union side. On the following day, the Confederate Army pursued retreating Union soldiers south and fought the Battle of Pleasant Hill in neighboring Sabine Parish, where the two sides suffered another 2,200 casualties. Following the disasters at Mansfield and Pleasant Hill, General Banks halted his offensive and abandoned plans to invade Texas.

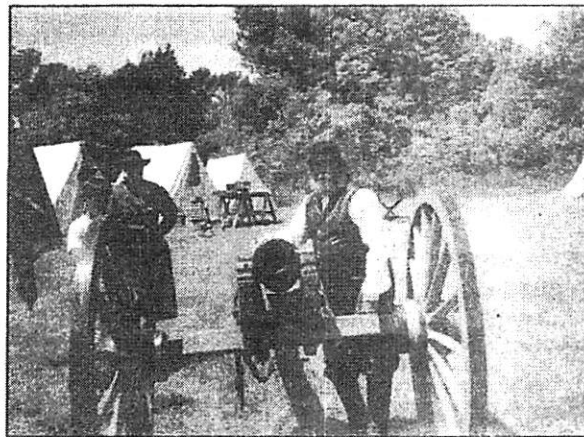
After the 1865 surrender of Gen. Robert E. Lee at Appomattox Courthouse, Va., soldiers from Freestone County under the command of Captain T. D. Nettles who had fought at Mansfield carried the Val Verde Cannon back to Texas and disbanded at Fairfield, the county seat of Freestone County. For many years, the cannon was fired during meetings of the United Confederate Veterans at the Moody Reunion Grounds in Fairfield. Later, the cannon was mounted on a concrete pedestal and placed on the lawn of the Freestone County Courthouse. In 1964, the Freestone County Historical Survey Committee had the cannon remounted. In April of that year, it was carried to Louisiana and fired during the 100th Anniversary of the Battle of Mansfield.

The Fairfield High School Band participated in this celebration and was designated as the official band for the state of Texas at this event. Freestone County residents played a prominent role on this occasion, as they had on the battlefield one hundred years earlier. On Aug. 8, 1997, the cannon was restored to its present condition from funds raised by the Johnson-Sayers-Nettles Camp No. 1012 of the Sons of Confederate Veterans.

While the cannon can no longer be fired, it was again taken to Louisiana and placed on display at the 150th Anniversary of the Battle of Mansfield that was held April 24-27. More than 700 re-enactors from various states converged on the Mansfield State Historic Site. The Saturday morn-



Pictured above (from left) at Black Smoke BBQ are Kem Jones, Bob Uzzel and Earlie Hewitt.



Pictured with the Val Verde Cannon at Mansfield is Calvin Nicholson of Palestine.



Uzzel

ing events included the commemoration program of the Crescent Regiment in Mouton's Trail area and a special presentation near the park museum by Louisiana Lt. Gov. Jay Dardenne regarding the acquisition of acreage that was part of the original land where the battle was fought by the Civil War Trust, a non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation of endangered Civil War battlefields.

Tom Gilmore, real estate director for the Trust, announced that 282 acres to the northeast of the museum at the state-owned site are under contract. Remarks were made by Mansfield Mayor Curtis W. McCoy and by Carolyn Calhoun Huckaby, Reimer Calhoun Jr., and Thomas Allen Calhoun.

The 1848 ancestral home of the latter three, which served as a field hospital during the war, will be incorporated into the battle site. On Saturday afternoon, there was a re-enactment of the battle.

I traveled to Mansfield on Saturday, April 26 and attended the special presentation and the re-enactment. I met many people from Texas, Louisiana, and other states with whom I share a passion for

history. My Masonic brother Earlie Hewitt, Worshipful Master of Stars of Prince Hall Lodge No. 241, met me at the battlefield and, afterward, we had dinner at Black Smoke BBQ on State Highway 175 across from his lodge hall and not far from the Mansfield State Historic Site.

Throughout the day, I passed out flyers promoting my upcoming book *The Durhams of Fairfield: An African American Genealogy*, which traces my wife Debra's family tree to the slaves of the Durham family who moved from Fairfield County, South Carolina to DeSoto Parish, La. before the Civil War. Hwy. 84 runs directly from Mansfield, La. to Fairfield. This was probably a dirt road or trail during Reconstruction.

More than likely, the Freestone County men who had fought at Mansfield traveled this route home after the war. More than likely, the newly freed Durhams — Belton, Allen, Minor, Christopher and Anderson — traveled this route when they joined their mother Mary and their younger brother Isaac in their new home in the Butler community of Freestone County.

The Durhams of Fairfield is scheduled for publication in June.