

Bloody Basin

“A place perfectly named”

Written By
Zeke Crandall
Author & Historian

Heading north out of Phoenix on the Interstate 17, which connects Phoenix with Flagstaff, get off at the Bloody Basin exit, which is the second exit north after the Sunset Point rest area exit. The next exit is the Badger Springs exit. Badger Springs got its name from the fact that there is a natural spring about five miles southeast of the Interstate 17 turnoff and the trail is well marked.

Below is a picture of one of the small pools along Badger Springs.



Near the spring is the home of a family of badgers. Anyone who comes near the spring has to deal with pound for pound the meanest nastiest animals for their size that lived in the southwest.

On the next page is a picture of an adult male American Badger. A full grown male can reach 3 feet in length and weigh up to 30 pounds. Not even

a mountain lion will try to take a badger. I have personally been cornered by one that looked exactly like the one below.



When I was a teenager, me and some of my friends would drive up to Badger Springs, then hike into where the spring begins and go skinny dipping in the pools. One time we got a little too close to one of the badger's home and we had one stand just like this picture and snarl at us. Seeing those major league teeth was enough for us to stop dead in our tracks and take a different trail.

The next exit heading north after the Badger Springs exit is the Bloody Basin turnoff. If you make a left turn you go back under I-17 and the road continues for about three miles to a fork at the ghost town of Cordes. From there you can go right to Mayer and left to the ghost towns of Cleator, Bumblebee and Crown King. If you make a right turn at the Interstate 17 turnoff you are dead on the Bloody Basin road it continues for 30 miles

east and ends at the New Sheep Bridge that extends over the Verde River.

About eight miles in on the Bloody Basin road there is a pile of rocks looking south about two hundred yards from the road that marks the place of the famous battle that the area is named after.

There is also Apache Burial grounds near the spot of the battle where the braves that were killed in the battle were buried. When I was a boy the area was covered with arrowheads, pottery, other artifacts, and skeletons that had been dug up by varmints. Today there is not much left since there is such a demand for Indian artifacts, which by the way is against the law to take from any Indian burial grounds. It is very sad to see the deprivation of these historical areas.

Our government, if aware of these burial grounds generally converts them to Wilderness Areas. Wilderness areas prohibit any motorized vehicles from entering. There are a lot of folks that disagree with this logic but I for one believe we need to preserve these historical areas for our future Americans.

There are several stories that have been told over the years about how it received its name. The most convincing story but also not correct was the story that a herd of sheep were slaughtered on this land by cattlemen who were trying to protect their grazing land from the sheep herds that grazed in the winter months in Bloody Basin. The Bask sheep ranchers that lived in the Mesa drove their herds of sheep from the valley in the summer months to Bloody Basin to graze then back to

Mesa in the winter months. Bloody Basin was Cattle Country. The problem was that Sheep ate the foliage right down to the roots. Cattle and horses will only eat to the ground so the plants will come back next spring. After the sheep are through, nothing grows back for several years.

In fact the slaughtering of a sheep herd by cattlemen in the Bloody Basin area could very well have happened because there was a huge range war here in the Arizona Territory between the Tweksbury family, Sheep Herders, and the Graham Family Cattle Herders.

This range war was called the Pleasant Valley War which mostly took place in the area located south of Payson, Arizona but there were incidents that are recorded in other areas of the Arizona Territory between cattlemen and sheep herders during that time period.

In this story I am going to share with you the real story of the incidents that lead up to the battle for which Bloody Basin Road was named and the battle itself. By the way Bloody Basin is also a great place to hunt for Javelina, wild pigs, although they are really not from the pig family and are from the rodent family. Yep that's right they are just like a big rat or squirrel!

White men started to invade Arizona, which was what the Mexicans called our area in the mid 1800's. The name was eventually shortened to Arizona, a Pima Indian word for "Enemy." There ensued constant warfare between white settlers and the native Apache Indians that lived in the area.

In March of 1873 there occurred an Indian raid along the Hassayampa River below the town of Wickenburg in which Augustine C. (Gus) Swaim, John McDonald and an eighteen year old boy, George Taylor, were ambushed one by one, then tortured and killed by Indians. This was less than a year and a half after a stagecoach massacre of eight people just west of Wickenburg.

Gus Swaim was an old "Hassayampa" area veteran who had come into the gold fields around Prescott in early 1864, the year the town was founded, and was an experienced mountain man and Indian fighter. For several years Gus had mined around Prescott and then for a couple of years had farmed at Walnut Grove, located about ten miles south and of Prescott near Walnut Creek.

Gus had become accustomed to Indians and had lost all fear of them. While living in Walnut Grove, which lies in the Bradshaw Mountains, a mountain range that lies south of Prescott and continues south to Crown King, a distance of forty miles from Prescott to Crown King, one day a hungry Indian came to his cabin. The Indian was in search of food.

Gus had a pot of beans on the stove that had started to ferment. He gave the beans to the Indian, who cleaned them out. About an hour later the Indian's stomach started to swell up and he became very sick. Gus thought it was a great joke.

In another incident just a month after the sick Indian incident, five Indians snuck up on Gus and his partner John White as they were taking a bath in Walnut Creek. One of Indians fired his rifle at

Gus. As it so happened it was the same Indian that Gus had poisoned but the Indian missed. Gus fired from the hip, shot and killed the Indian. Gus and White then put the body high in a tall pine tree and it stayed there until it was just a skeleton. And we say the Indians were brutal. One has to wonder if they learned their savagery out of what they were taught by the early settlers.

In the winter of 1872-73 Gus was staying in Wickenburg when he decided to start a road house and stage station on the desert between Phoenix and Wickenburg where present day Morristown is located. Since he did not have a well, he was forced to haul water from the nearby Hassayampa River. The most convenient place to get water was above Smith Mill where ore from the famous Vulture Mine was being treated.

Unfortunately for Gus, his water barrels became empty at the same time that a band of 200 or more Tonto Apaches happened to be traveling through the area. Not knowing they were near, Gus hitched his mules to the wagon with the empty barrels on the morning of March 11, 1873 and was driving the team up the sandy river bottom just as the Indians arrived at its brushy banks.

The Indians saw him approaching and took him completely by surprise. They shot him full of arrows as he drove past their ambush, rendering him incapable of using either his pistol or his rifle. When his body was found later there were six deep arrow wounds in his breast indicating he had been shot at close range and his head had been smashed

with what looked like had been done by a large rock that was lying near his nude body.

The Apache's stripped Gus of his guns and his clothing and unhitched the mules from the wagon. Taking them back a distance from the river, they immediately killed one of the mules, started fires and proceeded to cook and eat it. Horses and mules were simply mobile food as far as the Apaches were concerned. In the meantime they posted sentinels to watch for travelers.

Within an hour after the death of Gus, George Taylor the eighteen year old son of John Taylor, Smith's Mill's foreman, came walking down the streambed on his way to the mill from the head of the ditch that supplied water to the mill.

Although he was armed with a pistol, the sudden flight of arrows, several of which pierced his body and fierce yells of the Indians so shocked and stunned him that he couldn't use the gun. He ran a short distance before he hit the ground badly wounded but not dead. When his naked body was found later it was evident he had been thrown into a clump of cactus and also tortured.

Apparently the Indians remained in their camp that night, for when John McDonald, one of Smith's mill hands, came riding along about daylight the next morning on his way to Wickenburg, the Indians killed him and also left his nude body near Gus Swaim's body. Taking all of the dead men's horses, they broke camp and headed off in a north easterly direction, toward their camp just beyond the Matazal Mountains located about fifty miles from Wickenburg.

That same morning Smith and several others came looking for young Taylor, who had failed to arrive back at the mill the previous evening. They came upon the bodies of Swaim and McDonald near the wagon and after some search found George Taylor's body back among the rocks about one hundred yards from the other two.

A wagon was brought and the bodies were taken away to be buried. Word of the murders was sent immediately to the nearest military post, Camp Date Creek, which was about thirty miles north of Wickenburg.

As soon as they received word from General Crook, the army was on the renegade Apache's trail in one of the most efficient and relentless pursuits in the annals of Arizona military operations against the warring Indians. The trail left by the renegades was very easy to follow as they did not try to hide their tracks. The Date Creek troopers had no problem following the trail. Also troops from Fort McDowell, Fort Whipple and Camp Verde were also dispatched by General Crook, who was in charge of the Army here in the Arizona Territory and was stationed at Fort Whipple were also on their trail.

With Al Sieber, Tom Horn, the Apache Kid, the scouts that knew the territory and the direction the renegades had taken, they all met about five miles from the renegades camp in Bloody Basin. The scouts informed the Army leaders that the perpetrators were camped near them and that after visiting their camp unnoticed, they informed the leaders that they did not have any sentries posted.

There was no doubt according to the scouts that they had the right band of renegades. The size of the trail left indicated there were over two hundred renegades on the run and after the scouts returned from their scouting mission and they assured General Crook these were the correct Apaches.

A plan by General Crook was set in action and while the renegades slept during the night the troops completely surrounded the renegades and were ready for action by daybreak.

One of the Indians, who was captured after the battle told the scouts that they were sure they had thrown off any pursuit so when they arrived at Bloody Basin so they did not think it was necessary to post any sentries. They made camp, killed another one of the mules that had been taken from the wagon when they killed Swain and proceeded to cook and eat the beast. After a great dinner they all fell asleep with full stomachs, especially after such long ride they were tired.

Since they had no sentries posted they were completely unsuspecting when the troops raided their camp at daybreak. The army rushed into the camp at daybreak and caught the renegades still sleeping. Before the renegades even realized what was happening over one hundred of them were slaughtered before they could escape or even put up a weak fight.

It was reported back to General Crook that the army took no mercy it is said that the area was covered with human bones and skulls some seven years after the battle. Cattlemen that came to the area a few months after the battle reported the

butchery that occurred and word spread through the territory that the army would treat renegades the same way they treated their enemies.

The bodies of these renegades that rotted on that lonely ridge in Bloody Basin were the same ones that so cruelly killed Swaim, Taylor and McDonald and when the word spread through the territory it sent a major message to the rest of the Apache's that they were now in a battle with an equally nasty bunch of Army soldiers that would treat them the same way they treated the whites.

Below is a picture of Bloody Basin. The site of the massacre is on the right below the ridge.



Below is a picture of the Old Sheep Bridge that fords the Verde River where the Bask families that lived in the Mesa area crossed the river to get to their winter grazing land in the Bloody Basin Area. This is where the Bloody Basin Road ends. There

is hot springs in the reeds to the bottom right of this picture. A trail leads through the reeds to a pipe that comes out of the rocks into an old bathtub with a stream of water at a constant temperature of 120 degrees and from the tub flows into the River.



Below is the new Sheep Bridge. Construction was completed in 1989

