The War on the Pacific Railroad

Missouri’s Civil War

The City of Pacific, once known as Franklin, takes its name from the railroad that bustles through town. Up to the time of the Civil War only the Pacific Railroad ran from St. Louis to this point.

The main line of the Pacific Railroad was constructed in the 1850s. It reached Jefferson City in 1855, and by 1861 reached Sedalia. When the first division of the line was opened in July, 1852, the town of Pacific was the westernmost point reached by any steam railroad in the United States.

The promoters of the Pacific Railroad built a branch line called the Southwest Branch, Pacific Railroad. Construction began here in 1855. The Southwest Branch was completed as far as Rolla, Missouri in December, 1860. The junction of the two lines was 300 yards northeast of the place you are standing. Now the Burlington line runs from St. Louis and follows the route of the old Southwest Branch.

When the Civil War began in Missouri in May, 1861, there were six railroads in the state (counting the Southwest Branch), and four of these emanated from St. Louis. Pacific was one of two junction points on these roads outside of St. Louis, and it was a critical military resource.

The first Union unit to occupy Pacific in force was the 9th Iowa Volunteer Infantry, which established a camp known as Camp Herron. The 9th Iowa arrived in Pacific on October 11, 1861. The Iowans remained here on guard duty until January, 1862, when they joined the federal campaign that ended in the Battle of Pea Ridge, Arkansas. The 26th Missouri was another unit with roots in Pacific. Several companies of the 26th Missouri, made up largely of Franklin County recruits, entered service on the Pacific Railroad near Tipton, the 9th Iowa Infantry was moved forward to Pacific to protect Frémont’s supply line. Ironically, the impact of the war on Missouri’s railroads doomed Frémont’s dream of a railroad to the Pacific, and cleared the way for the northern route that became the Union Pacific.

The troops in Pacific were devastated by disease during the Fall and Winter of 1861. The 9th Iowa lost over 20 men to measles, typhoid fever, chronic diarrhea and other such causes. Some Franklin County boys of the 26th Missouri died in hospital the week of Christmas, 1861, even before being mustered in.

The War revisited Pacific in 1864, when a Confederate force attacked both branches of the Pacific Railroad. Known as Price’s Expedition, this campaign featured a force of 12,000 cavalry and mounted infantry under the command of former Missouri governor Maj. Gen. Sterling Price. The Confederates entered southeast Missouri on September 16, 1864. Moving north in three columns, after the Battle of Pilot Knob the Confederates reached the Southwest Branch at Leadbeard on September 29 and at St. Clair on September 30. There is a marker at the top of the bluff to your north, at Blackburn Park, which provides more information about the Battle of Pacific.

To reach Blackburn Park, drive west from here one block to Second Street. Turn left on Second, then left on Walnut to the top of the hill.


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