

FIRST DRAFT

Battle near Moab in 1881 was a disaster for whites and Natives

When a bullet grazed Jordan Bean's temple the morning of June 15, 1881, it knocked him unconscious. He revived late that afternoon but spent hours hiding in the La Sal Mountains — thirsty and terrified — while Ute and Paiute Indians searched within yards of him.

"I lay still until dark, but oh how I suffered for water," he recalled of his experience in the Pinhook Draw Fight. He crawled to a spring and drank until he was sick. Finally, he began walking.

At dawn, Bean saw some of his companions riding toward him. He was helped onto a horse, and taken back to their camp at Mason Springs, about five miles from Pinhook Draw.

The Little Castle Valley Fight, which later became known as the Pinhook Draw Fight, was the bloodiest confrontation ever between Natives and whites in Southeastern Utah. Most of the whites involved were from Colorado.

Some 32 Indians and whites are believed to have been killed. Three groups of civilians totaling more than 75 people, plus Buffalo Soldiers from New Mexico, were involved in the battle or its aftermath. Yet the battle is barely mentioned in histories of Colorado and Utah.

Confrontations between settlers and Natives began years earlier, when ranchers started grazing livestock on the rich grass between the Colorado-Utah border and the Abajo Mountains, then called the Blue Mountains.

Jordan Bean was one such rancher, having settled near Colorado's Big Bend of the Dolores River in 1879 with his father.

"The Indians were bad all the time," Bean said decades later. "At night, we never exactly knew where we were going to wake up, above or below."

It's no secret why the Indians were angry. For centuries, members of the Weeminuche Band of Ute Indians shared this land with their allies, the San Juan Paiutes. From the Dolores River west to the Colorado River and from Monument Valley north to the Utah Bookcliffs, they hunted deer, gathered plants and grazed their horses. They visited treasured camping spots and watering holes. The Blue Mountains and La Sals provided defensive hideouts.

"With the arrival of the Anglo Americans, life for the Utes (and Paiutes) began to change dramatically," first in Colorado, wrote Rusty Salmon and Robert McPherson in a 2001. "The Utes living in Utah encountered similar problems as Anglo civilization spread throughout the Four Corners region."

Mining communities sprang

up in the San Juan Mountains of Colorado. White ranchers, eager to supply beef to the miners, moved into Colorado's southwestern valleys, then west into Utah.

Beleaguered Natives begged for food from ranchers, stole horses, killed livestock and destroyed fences and cabins.

On May 1, 1881, a dispute between the two groups erupted in gunfire when a rancher from Big Bend named Dick May and his friend Byron Smith visited horse rancher John Thurman near present-day Dove Creek, Colorado.

Dick May's body was found a few days later in Thurman's burned-out cabin. Thurman's body was discovered a half mile from the cabin. Smith's body was never found.

Someone rode to Big Bend and told May's two brothers Billy and George about the killings. They went to Thurman's ranch and buried Thurman, but took Dick May's body to Big Bend.

About the same time, a group of about 90 Utes and Paiutes camped near Bluff, Utah, with about 150 horses, plus sheep and goats.

After a few days, the Indians headed north, stealing more horses and killing cattle. A confrontation with other ranchers near the Blue Mountains left one Indian dead. The Indians headed toward the La Sals.

Billy May rode to Rico, Colorado, and recruited a posse. By May 31, about 60 men from throughout Southwestern Colorado, including Jordan Bean, had gathered at Big Bend. They left the next morning in pursuit of the Indians.

Meanwhile, a second group of 25 to 35 Blue Mountain men, led by rancher Spud Hudson, formed to recover their stolen horses.

The Big Bend posse split into two groups, with William Dawson leading the first group and Billy May in charge of the second. They encountered the Blue Mountain cowboys and all followed the Indians' trail to the La Sals.

But as the journey approached two weeks, posse members dropped out, including Billy May and the Blue Mountain cowboys.

By June 15, Dawson had 31 men, and he left 13 of them about five miles south of Pinhook Draw to guard horses recovered from the Utes. The remainder continued the head of the draw.

Dawson sent a handful of men, including Bean, down the draw to try to spot the Natives. They walked into an ambush. Utes and Paiutes hidden on the high ground on either side rained bullets upon them. When Bean was shot, his companions left him for dead and continued down the draw.



BOB SILBERNAGEL



PHOTO BY BOB SILBERNAGEL, WITH PERMISSION FROM THE MOAB MUSEUM

This Model 1873 Springfield Carbine, a single-shot breech loader, was reportedly recovered during or after the Pinhook Draw Fight and donated to the Moab Museum in the 1950s. Although Museum officials can't prove it was used during the battle, a study of the weapon conducted for the museum in 1922 shows it is old enough to have been used then. It would likely have been used by members of the white posse, since the Indians involved reportedly had repeating rifles.

Further up the draw, Dawson and his men heard the shooting but were uncertain what had occurred. Dawson was unwilling to send more men into the chasm.

During the night, another group arrived from Moab to assist the Coloradans. On June 16, shooting continued sporadically until evening, when both Indians and whites abandoned the fight. The Indians fled down the valley and the posse men pulled back to Mason Springs.

Several days later, certain the Indians were gone, the whites trekked into the draw to search for their companions.

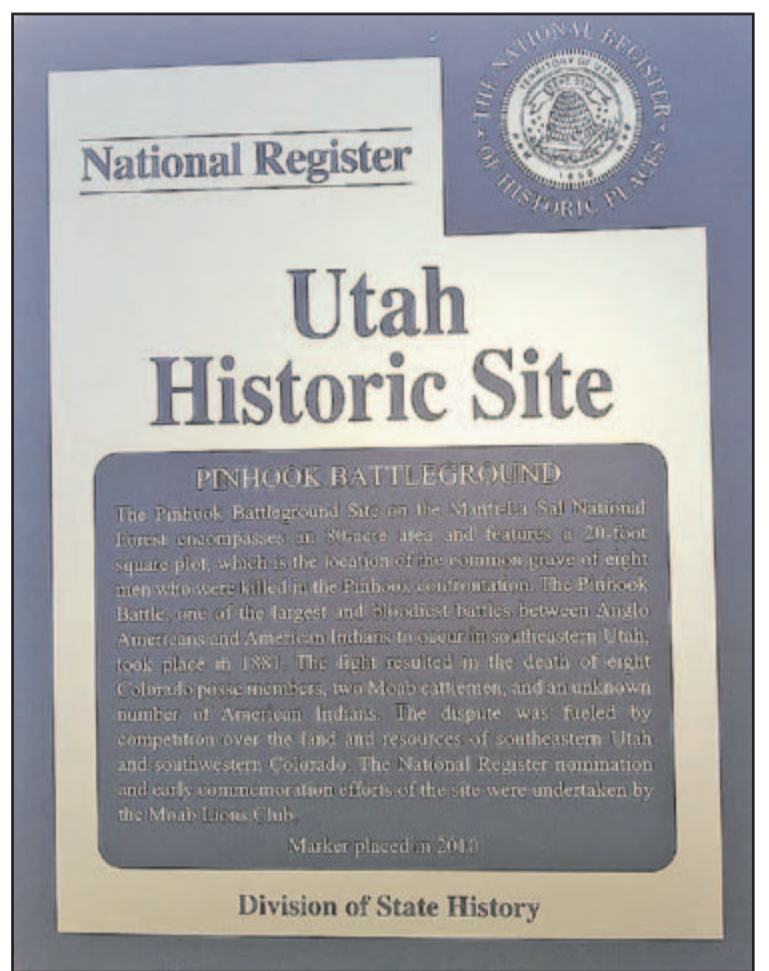
The bodies of seven posse members were discovered. One man was missing and presumed dead. Additionally, the bodies of two Moab brothers who had been herding cattle but weren't part of any posse were found near the battle area. They also found the body of two Indians, one a woman.

The exact number of Natives killed is unknown. A Paiute man named Mancos Jim, who said later he'd been involved in the fight, claimed 22 Indians were killed.

During the battle, Dawson had sent men to Rico to gather yet another posse. Still others had alerted the Army to the battle, and members of the Ninth Cavalry, Buffalo Soldiers, traveled 500 miles from southern New Mexico, to arrive in late June.

All the groups converged near Spud Hudson's Double Cabins camp. Most of the Coloradans returned home then, but a few continued to the battle site to search for more bodies, horses and anything else they could find. A single-shot carbine now in possession of the Moab Museum, might have been found at that time.

The Cavalry spent another



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This marker was installed in 2010 near the Pinhook Draw battle site.

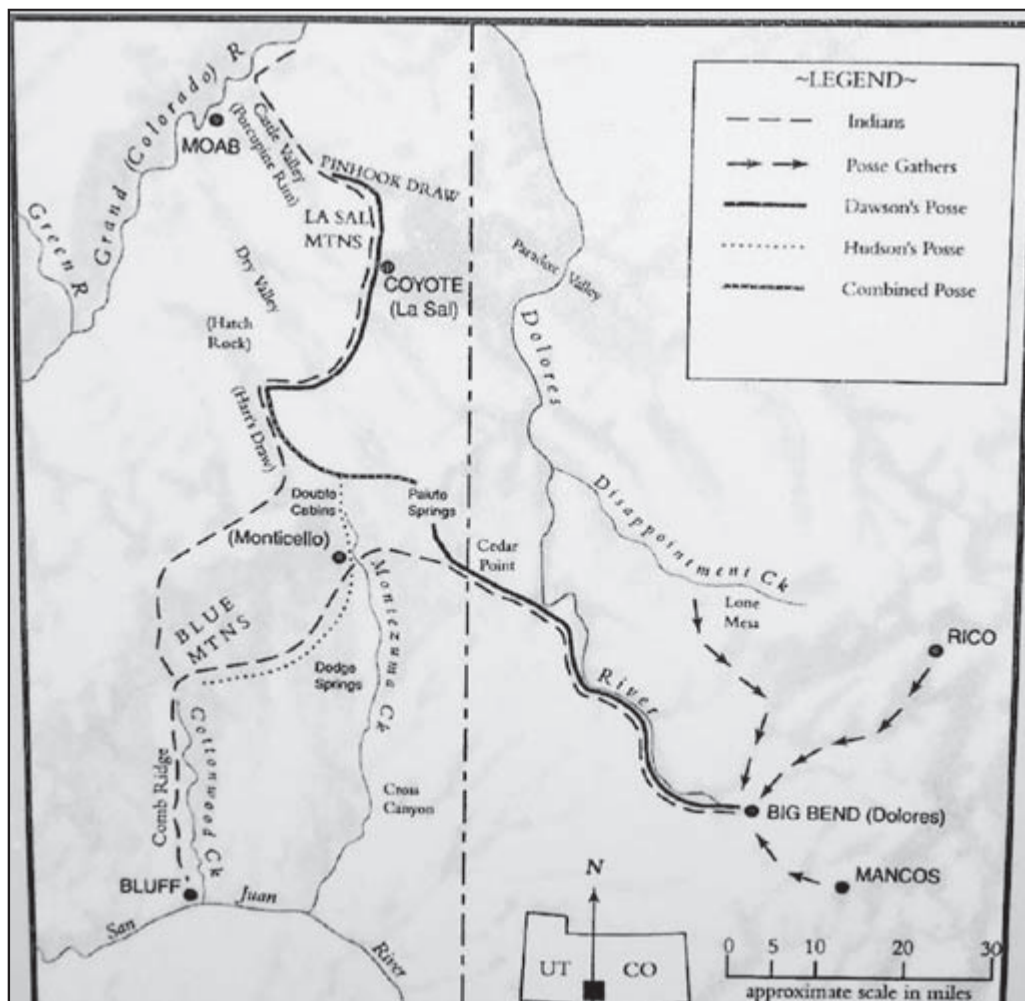
month chasing the Indians, with no success. Mancos Jim and a man called Poke both later admitted to being involved, but weren't arrested. Two Paiute men caught on the Southern Ute Reservation said they knew about the battle but claimed they weren't involved. They were later imprisoned at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas.

Tension between white settlers and Natives continued to fester. It would result in more violence in 1885 in Colorado, in 1915 near

Bluff and again in 1922.

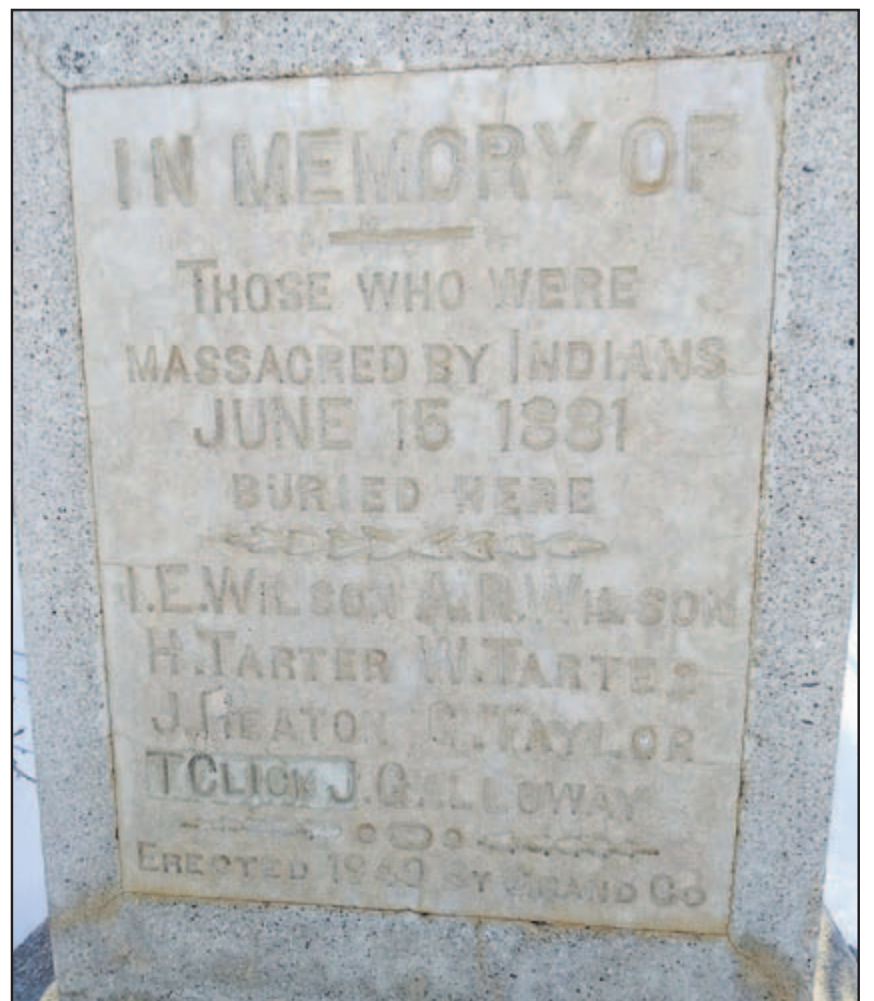
Sources: "Jordan Bean's Story and the Castle Valley Indian Fight," by Jordan Bean, Colorado Magazine, January 1943; "Cowboys, Indians and Conflict: The Pinhook Draw Fight, 1881," by Rusty Salmon and Robert S. McPherson, Utah Historical Quarterly, Winter 2001; "The Little Castle Valley Fight," by Rusty Salmon, Canyon Legacy magazine, Spring, 2001.

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A map posted on a historic marker near the site of the Pinhook Draw fight shows Southeastern Utah and Southwestern Colorado and the routes taken by some of the groups involved in the fight.



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This marker, erected in 1940 near the Pinhook Draw battle site, lists eight of the white men killed during the fight.