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Bob Bell, a re-enactor from Camp Nelson's 12th U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery, will speak Sunday and be part of the honor guard at a ceremony dedicating a historical marker at the site of the "Simpsonville slaughter." The ceremony will be on the 144th anniversary of the day that members of the 5th U.S. Colored Cavalry were massacred as the regiment was driving a herd of cattle to a railhead near Louisville. The victims are presumed to have been buried in a mass grave.

Marker Revives Memory of 'Simpsonville Slaughter'

Slain members of the 5th U.S. Colored Cavalry
memorialized near mass grave

By Jeff McDonald
Special to the Herald-Leader

In January 1865, a company of black soldiers was assigned the task of driving 900 head of cattle from their base at Camp Nelson in Jessamine County to a railhead near Louisville. From there, the cattle would travel south on the L&N Railroad to Nashville to provide food for hungry Union troops.

A few months earlier, nearly all of the soldiers had been slaves. When the commander of the Kentucky forces authorized the formation of "colored" regiments, area slaves flocked to Camp Nelson to volunteer.



Pvt. Samuel Truehart was a member of the 5th U.S. Colored Cavalry. Truehart's great-great-grandson David E. Brown of Maryland will speak at the marker dedication ceremony on Sunday.

Now the men tasted a semblance of freedom, albeit as members of the 5th U.S. Colored Cavalry.

For this assignment, the men guided the cattle along a path that became U.S. 60.

As they passed through Simpsonville on Jan. 25, 1865, snow was falling. A scout from a roving band of Confederate guerillas had learned of the cattle drive, and 15 marauders surprised the rear guard of the cattle drive, "yelling like very devils and shooting their pistols in the air. ... They began shooting down the men without compunction," according to a newspaper account in the Shelby Record.

Then, quickly, the guerillas made their escape.

Fellow soldiers toward the front of the herd were probably oblivious to the attack, but townspeople from Simpsonville heard the commotion. By nightfall, they had collected the dead — 22 by one estimate — and buried them in a mass grave. The wounded were carried into town and were cared for.

Northern newspapers dubbed the event "the Simpsonville slaughter."

On Sunday in Simpsonville, a ceremony will be held to erect a marker at the site.

"This will be the first formal recognition of the contribution that these soldiers made," said David E. Brown, who will speak at the event. "The official military records still show these men as missing in action. After 144 years, it's almost as if this will be their funeral."

Brown, who lives in Columbia, Md., has a special connection to the proceedings. Through genealogical research, he discovered that his great-great-grandfather, Samuel Truehart, was from Shelby County and served in the 5th USCC.

"He may have well been part of the regiment that was at the front of the herd," Brown said. In any case, Truehart survived the war and lived out his days in Kansas.

Diligence and outrage

A few years ago, Brown created a Web site dedicated to his Civil War ancestor and the history of the 5th USCC. Although Brown will set foot in Simpsonville for the first time on Sunday, his Web site's Simpsonville slaughter notes became a valuable reference tool for some Shelby County residents who began digging into the history in their own back yard.

Shelby County Cemetery Preservation Board member Uley Washburn took notice of Brown's Web site and began his own research. As he probed deeper, his curiosity turned to outrage.

"About that time, I saw an article where we were spending thousands to send a team to Iwo Jima to search for remains of one soldier," Washburn said. "But we were doing nothing for some soldiers that are on our own soil."

He began an e-mail campaign to tell the story of the forgotten veterans to anyone in Frankfort who would listen. He urged neighbors to call their legislators. He passed out homemade brochures at the Simpsonville Fall Festival.

"Uley is the person that really got things going," said Bob Bell, a re-enactor from Camp Nelson's 12th U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery who will take part in the ceremony on Sunday.

Narrowing the search

In March 2008, the Kentucky African American Heritage Commission awarded a \$5,000 Lincoln Preservation Grant to the Shelby County Historical Society to identify, rehabilitate and preserve the mass grave and burial site associated with the ambush of the 5th U.S. Colored Cavalry.

"The Lincoln grant allowed us to bring in the Kentucky Archaeological Survey to do ground-penetrating radar to try to locate the mass grave," said J.T. Miller of the Shelby County Historical Society.

"The search focused around an existing African-American cemetery that had been abandoned for about 40 years, yet was very close to the site of the attack," Miller said. "We came to the conclusion that this African-American cemetery probably grew up around the mass grave."

Because of the uneven terrain and heavy undergrowth, the exact site of the mass grave has not been determined.

"Our original objective was to get a roadside marker to memorialize an incident that has been absolutely forgotten, and we've accomplished that," Miller said.

Additional funding for the marker came from Camp Nelson's reactivated 12th U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery, the Camp Nelson Restoration and Preservation Foundation and the Shelby County Historical Society.

Plans call for nominating the site to the National Register of Historic Places and placing individual headstones at the site with the names of each slain man.

If you go: The black soldiers who lost their lives in Simpsonville will be memorialized during a marker-dedication ceremony at 2 p.m. Sunday at the Whitney M. Young Job Corps Center Gymnasium in Simpsonville. The ceremony will conclude outdoors at the site of the historic marker.

The itinerary for Sunday's ceremony is online at www.campnelson.org.

'Horrible massacre'

On January 25, 1865, Co. E. 5th United States Colored Cavalry (USCT) attacked by Confederate guerillas while driving herd of 900 cattle to Louisville. About 22 men killed and at least eight severely wounded. Based at Camp Nelson, nearly all of the recruits were former slaves. The 5th also fought in 1864 Saltville battles.

Reverse: **African American Cemetery.** The 5th USCC troopers killed in 1865 Simpsonville slaughter were buried in a mass grave by local residents. Area used as African American cemetery. Members of the Trim #2 United Brothers of Friendship Lodge operated the cemetery until the last member died in 1965. Lodge hall located in Simpsonville.



Uley Washburn, left, Bob Bell and J.T. Miller visited Lincoln Ridge Cemetery in Simpsonville on Jan. 13. The grave above is that of Joseph H. Todd, who was not involved in the Simpsonville slaughter but was a member of a Union African-American military unit. Local histories say that Lincoln Ridge, an African-American cemetery, was started near a mass grave where the victims of the Simpsonville Slaughter were buried. Washburn has led an effort to locate and preserve the site of the mass grave. Photos by David Perry.