

The Battle of Pecatonica

There's some debate about exactly why Chief Black Hawk left Iowa in 1832 and crossed the mighty Mississippi. He claimed that he and his band had been robbed of their homeland, and all he ever wanted was to return to the land where his ancestors were buried.

That claim may have been deceptive. Some historians believe he wanted to build a Native Confederacy. More and more white faces were showing up on land that once belonged to the tribes who trapped and hunted the lush woodlands along the Rock, the Pecatonica, and the mighty Mississippi.

Black Hawk's people left Iowa that year for peaceful purposes, but the crowd that formed around him was a who's who of local tribes—his own Sauks, some Fox and Kickapoo and Potawatomi, a few Ho-Chunks, then called Winnebagos.

Black Hawk's band swelled to a thousand. Their old folks came with, as well as the women and children, more than enough *en masse* to chill the willies of white settlers.

Then came Stillman's Run, a battle named that way because Mr. Stillman high-tailed it when they mistook a handful of Black Hawk's warriors for an entire army. When Stillman ran, white folks took a beating.

There's a little county park in Lafayette County, Wisconsin, not all that far from Dubuque, a quiet place where the road through hardwoods leads down to a little oxbow lake—water still as glass. The road needs some work. Picnic tables sit out in open spaces and camping sites in the trees are clearly marked—you're on your honor to pay. It's not a thriving business.

It's a county park, so funding, I suppose, is always a question. No water slides. No cottoncandy. The place probably doesn't get much business.

If you want to pitch a tent, a hand-painted sign says you can't take the open spot around the monument. "No camping by monument," it says. Show some respect because the monument tells that story of what happened right there where you're standing.

After Stillman's Run, separate bands of Black Hawks' warriors roamed hither and yon throughout the region, raising cane, scaring the wits out of the miners and their families. After all, a whole militia had turned and run once they saw the savages.

So right there at the monument a reenergized militia went through that deathly still water after a few of Black Hawk's rebels. They marched into the woods on the other side where the warriors hid behind the trees. Hand-to-hand combat went on right there, the militia killing every last one of the rebels.

It was the kind of win white people needed. So historians claim that the Battle of Pecatonica was a turning point in Black Hawk's War. Soon, what was left of his people, would cross the Mississippi and take refuge here, in Iowa.

Black Hawk's insurgency failed. That's what the monument says—the one you can't camp beside. It was set there by the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1922, almost a century ago. It tells the whole bloody story, maybe fifty feet from the ox-bow, right there.

I'm not sure why the DAR put quotes around this line, but they're there: "The annals of Indian warfare offer no parallel to this battle," it says, a quote. That's pushing it.

There's more. "Of the twenty-one soldiers engaged, three were mortally and one seriously wounded," it proclaims. Then, "The seventeen Indians were slain"—which is to say, all of them.

Finally, this: “Thus was our land made safe for settlement.”

That’s how the DAR saw it in 1922.

But someone defaced that monument. The “our” in “Thus was *our* land made safe for settlement” is blackened out. The only word on the sacred plaque that’s beaten up.

So the line reads, “Thus was land made safe for settlement.”

Now, I don’t want to encourage vandalism, but I can’t help think Black Hawk himself might say that the blackened *our* tells the real story. The whole story.