



fort rock

A Child Will Lead Them

the first rifle shot struck John James Buckman in the right side of the abdomen, just above the groin. He reeled backward and collapsed over a low rock wall. His comrades probably never heard Buckman screaming above the storm of bullets that poured down like summer rain.

Amid the terror and chaos of those first moments, the men under attack scrambled for whatever cover they could find. Three ran a short distance back to the safety of Fort Rock, a freight stop and mail station 65 miles northwest of Prescott.

But two more knew they'd never get that far. They joined Buckman behind the horseshoe-shaped wall of rocks, stacked to a height of about 18 inches, and remained there for most of the day, fighting off more than 50 Hualapai warriors.

The three lived to give a harrowing account of survival, made all the more incredible by one fact: The rock structure that saved them was built by Buckman's teenage son, Thad, as a play fort. But on November 10, 1866, it became a matter of life and death.

The fight at Fort Rock was part of the Hualapai War that shook northern Arizona in the mid- to late-1860s. It began after New York entrepreneur William H. Hardy contracted with the

**Poindexter and May helped load guns for Thad,
then boosted the wounded youngster up to the openings to fire.
'He was the only one who had good eyesight
and a steady nerve.'**

government to provide supplies to Whipple Barracks, the new military outpost at Prescott.

In January of 1864, he established the town of Hardyville on the east bank of the Colorado River a few miles above Fort Mohave and began construction of a toll road between Hardyville and Prescott, straight through Hualapai country.

Hardy gave Hualapai Chiefs Wauba Yuma, Hichie-Hichie and Sherum \$150 worth of merchandise in return for their marks on a "contract" promising not to hinder traffic along the road. The chiefs also agreed to allow the toll road company to build stations at natural springs along the route, including Fort Rock.

But the deal, signed July 15, 1865, collapsed the following spring when a drunken freighter named Sam Miller murdered Wauba Yuma, sending the Hualapai people on a vicious revenge spree. They killed

miners and shot up settlers' homes and pursuing military columns.

Buckman, a Kentucky-born farmer and the station's owner, sent his wife, Sarah, and three of his children back to the safety of Prescott but kept Thad, who was 14 or 15, at his side. Buckman was a tough man, who, according to military records, stood 5 feet 9 inches tall, had a dark complexion, gray eyes and black hair.

He served during the Civil War with the 6th Regiment of the Kansas Volunteer Cavalry until discharged at Fort Scott, Kansas, in July 1862 due to ill health. Buckman later took his family to northern Arizona in covered wagons. His daughter, Mary Ann, was believed to be the first white child born in Prescott, in the summer of 1865.

The attack on the stage stop began about 8 o'clock that Saturday morning. Buckman had stepped outside to harness a string of

horses and mules belonging to mail rider William G. Poindexter, who'd arrived at the station the night before with an escort of three soldiers from Whipple Barracks.

Poindexter's mail party was headed toward Hardyville, but the Hualapais had other ideas. When the elder Buckman collapsed from his wound, young Thad rushed out to assist his father, but he, too, was shot, the round striking him in the leg below the knee. Thad was near the station door when hit and was able to retreat inside along with Poindexter and Ed May, one of the escorting soldiers, sometimes identified as Charley May.

The station house, built from square granite rocks, had openings in every wall, giving the defenders good cover from which to return fire. In one of three surviving accounts of the fight, the *Prescott Courier* reported that Poindexter and May helped load guns for Thad, then boosted

the wounded youngster up to the openings to fire.

"He was the only one who had good eyesight and a steady nerve," the newspaper reported. The *Courier* story, written some years after the battle, was based on the recollections of an unnamed pioneer who visited the site.

Another account comes from a letter to Prescott's *Arizona Miner*, published November 30, 1866, and written by Alonzo E. Davis, a Hardyville lawyer who arrived at Fort Rock with a large wagon party two days after the fight.

In an unpublished memoir written in 1915, Davis again wrote about Fort Rock. This account, titled "Pioneer Days in Arizona" and filed at the Arizona Historical Society, contradicts some of what he wrote in his letter. But taken together, the two documents come close to an eyewitness view.

With Buckman on his back inside his son's rock fort, the Hualapais maintained an intense assault from behind a ledge of black rocks at the head of the valley to the north. At the station owner's side were soldier Patrick McAteer and a second member of the military escort, whose name remains unknown.

At one point, this soldier popped his head above the wall to return fire and was shot through the cheek, but, Davis wrote, he was a brave "boy soldier" who continued firing with good effect after he was hit.

McAteer grabbed a block of stone about 10 inches square and balanced it atop the wall as protection while rising to shoot. Davis noted that the barrier, still in place two days later, "showed the marks of many bullets as evidence that the Indians made many close calls upon him for his scalp."

The two men, firing from different corners of the wall, shot at every Indian who exposed any portion of his head or body. They had help from Thad. "Although painfully wounded," wrote historian James Barney, "the gritty young fellow would shoot with telling effect."

Much of McAteer's attention was focused on a group of Indians using a powerful Henry rifle. Several times during the fight, the soldier silenced the rifleman, but for every Hualapai he killed, another took his place.

The *Courier* story included an anecdote about the killing of one Hualapai who may have been a chief. The unnamed soldier spotted an Indian on a black horse approaching from the valley, several hundred yards out. He appeared to be giving orders.

The soldier told McAteer he thought the rider was out of range but that he still might be able to kill him. "Shoot away," said McAteer.

The unnamed soldier, armed with an old-fashioned Army-issue needle gun noted for its long-range accuracy, raised the weapon, adjusted the sight for distance and fired. "At the crack of the gun, the Indian went down," reported the *Courier*.

"I got 'im, Mac," the soldier exulted.

"Bully for you," responded McAteer.

The shooting stopped late in the day, possibly due to the death of the Indian presumed to be a chief. The number of Hualapais dead can only be estimated.

"They only exposed their heads while firing," Davis wrote, "but well-aimed rifles made that extremely hazardous for them. The blood of the red-skins stained the breastwork in many places, and it is thought that many of them bit the dust."

Alonzo Davis put the figure at 20. The *Courier* guessed double that number: "It was said afterward that the whole tribe were in mourning for the many killed — some 40 of their fighting men."

But the defenders of Fort Rock knew the Indians were still about. They comforted the wounded as best they could and, in Davis' words, remained "pent up, not daring to expose themselves lest the lurking [Indians] should send them their death warrant."

They held their positions for the remainder of Saturday and throughout the day and night of Sunday, emerging only at the arrival of the freighting train Monday night. In his memoir, Davis wrote that as the party approached the station, they heard gunshots and knew Indians had attacked:

"We drew our six-shooters, put spurs to our horses, fired a shot or two in the air as we went, and when we came fairly in the open — what a sight met our eyes. There, in the corral, lay nine dead horses and mules. The beleaguered people who had been in the pack house hastened out of their shelter and greeted us with, 'God bless you!'"

The rescuing wagon party consisted of 7 eight-mule teams and about 60 men, including Davis, Hardy, soldiers riding in escort, an Army surgeon and Sam Miller, the freighter whose murder of Wauba Yuma had ignited the war. The doctor treated the wounded men, and the next day the party pressed on toward Hardyville. But the Hualapais weren't done yet. About 5 miles from Fort Rock, Davis, Hardy and other

men riding beside the wagons in escort galloped ahead to water their horses.

"Suddenly the rattle of gunshots broke upon our ears," Davis wrote. "We jumped our horses immediately and drawing our six-shooters, galloped back to the train. We found everything in great confusion. . . . To our great consternation we could see the Indians on the hill above. They had already fired several shots and one teamster got a bullet through his hat rim."

Shooting as they ran, the men charged the hill from which the Indians were firing. This brave action, perhaps exaggerated in memory, caused the Indians to retreat down the opposite side of the hill.

"We continued to bang away at them, but we did not see anyone drop or falter, although they ran faster and faster," Davis wrote. "Going back to the wagons we found the ladies in hysteria." When control was regained, the wagons "moved forward as quickly as possible," and the group reached Hardyville four days later.

On his return from California, Miller stopped at Hardyville to ask how long Buckman had lingered before death. When told he'd survived, a surprised Miller found Buckman and said: "What did you do to keep alive?"

"Oh," Buckman answered, "I just ate lots of coarse food and stopped up the holes in my gut."

The Hualapai War ended in 1868 without the Indians ever returning to attack the station. But what of its famous defenders? Little is known of May, or the unnamed soldier who comported himself well despite a hole in his cheek. But three others died violent deaths.

Poindexter went on to become a prominent cattleman and miner in Pima County. He died in Tucson in 1887 from injuries suffered when his wagon overturned. McAteer was killed in January 1884 when a man with whom he'd been feuding shot him in the back in a Prescott courtroom.

Tough old John J. Buckman lived another 34 years, dying July 17, 1900, after being gored by a bull on his ranch in Yavapai County's Thompson Valley.

As for young Thad, builder of the makeshift fort and the real hero of the fight at Fort Rock, he dropped from view after the incident, and his fate remains unknown. ■

Leo W. Banks of Tucson has visited the scene of the Fort Rock fight.

Phil Boatwright's grandfather bought him his first crayons, and taught him to appreciate the Old West. He lives in Dallas, Texas.