

HIKING THE GEORGE DISNEY TRAIL

BY CANDACE DEAL

Our worn hiking boots trampled the bed of damp, deciduous leaves covering the forest floor. It was early morning, a beautiful beginning to Thanksgiving Day, and we were eager to reach the top of the Disney Trail, where Confederate soldier George Disney was killed and buried in early 1864. The misty blue sky and forest greens and browns stretched for miles around as we inhaled the cool mountain air. When we paused to take in the sweeping view of ridges and valleys stretching to the north and west, my hiking partner bent down to examine a plant crowned with small, creamy seed heads and drying elliptical-shaped leaves hugging its stems.

“Rabbit tobacco!” he exclaimed. “We used to smoke this when we were kids.”

I continued contemplating our surroundings. I identified the two corridors of Interstate 75 stretching north and south below, visualizing the valley as it was when advancing and retreating armies passed through during the Civil War. To the west lay the community of Mill Creek, and the western wall of the Blue Ridge Mountain Range was visible far to the east.

Following a brief rest on a huge boulder about midway up the ridge, but before our heart rates returned to normal, we resumed the hike. The Disney Trail is just 1.3 miles in length (2.6 mile round trip), but the sharp angle of ascent provides a tough cardio workout. During the climb, we alternately stepped over fat gnarly tree roots and scrambled up thick ridges of rock. I negotiated my way using a sturdy branch I’d found at the bottom of the trail as a hiking stick. The footpath was packed as hard as the Butterball turkey at home, thawing in the fridge, so there was no threat of slipping on loose soil, but the branch did help me propel my way up the steep climb.

This little trail has been dubbed the most challenging short hike in Georgia, and I understood why. It is breathtaking for more than its grand views.

Patches of morning sunlight bursting through tall pines blinded us as we turned our faces upright in pursuit of our goal. It was a relief when we cleared the steepest part of the climb and finally reached the grave of the trail’s namesake. George W. Disney served in the 4th Kentucky Infantry, part of the famous “Orphan Brigade” of the Confederate Army of Tennessee. The brigade carried its nickname because its troops were cut off from their home state, which lay far behind enemy lines.

Disney was killed at this rocky site overlooking Mill Creek Gap during the first of three skirmishes collectively referred to as Battle of Rocky Face Ridge. The Army of Tennessee, under the command of General Joseph E. Johnston, was posted at Dalton in early 1864, with strong fortifications guarding the mountain gaps to the west and north. Disney was part of a small group of soldiers stationed atop Rocky Face Ridge, where they could observe and report enemy troop movements in the

valley below. They formed a “living telegraph,” shouting information from the ridge tops, soldier to soldier, to their headquarters at the base of the mountain, relaying important military information about enemy troop numbers and movements.

In late February 1864, General George Thomas ordered a division of the Union Army of the Cumberland to advance from Chattanooga and scout for weaknesses in the Confederate defenses around Dalton. On February 24 and 25, these troops probed Dug Gap, Mill Creek Gap and Crow



ABOVE: Hikers on the George Disney Trail on Rocky Face Ridge can visit the grave of the Confederate soldier killed in February 1864. OPPOSITE: From Rocky Face Ridge, hikers have a panoramic view of Mill Creek valley, below and to the west.

Valley, pressing forward and skirmishing here and there to assess Confederate strength.

George Disney and his messmates were at the north end of Rocky Face Ridge, overlooking Mill Creek Gap. Popular lore has it that a stray bullet killed him where he stood, and his fellow soldiers buried him at the place where he fell.

According to Robert Jenkins, a Civil War historian, author, and attorney in Dalton, that wasn't exactly the way it happened. His research indicates that in 1911, almost 50 years after Disney died, Dalton resident William Sapp met a Confederate veteran from Kentucky during a train trip from Dalton to Louisville. Sapp was familiar with the story of Disney's grave and eagerly struck up a conversation with the

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veteran, who said he been one of Disney's messmates, and present when he was killed.

The Kentucky veteran told Sapp that he and his messmates began cooking their evening meal, taking turns tending it as it cooked over an open fire. After their meal, the soldiers grabbed some much-needed sleep. They awoke the following morning, sitting up and stretching out the kinks. Disney, after stretching and yawning, laid back down. His mates left him alone, assuming he needed a few more minutes of sleep. Eventually, a couple of them went to rouse him. They found him dead. At first, they suspected he'd suffered a heart attack, but a quick examination revealed a puddle of blood beneath his head.



“To explain Disney’s death,” Jenkins told me, “the soldiers speculated that when Disney sat up and opened his mouth to yawn, a Federal soldier noticing movement from the slope below fired a bullet that hit him in the mouth. And because it was fired from 600-800 yards away, it couldn’t be heard from the ridge.”

Jenkins walked over to the credenza in the conference room of his law office, where encased sets of Civil War bullets and other memorabilia are displayed. “The bullet was probably one of these three-ribbed minie balls,” he said, pointing to a conical bullet with three rims near the base.

Before leaving their station atop the ridge, Disney’s comrades buried him and covered his grave with stones. They also placed a crudely inscribed pine board atop the burial site. Their actions became significant years later, when the trail was named for Disney.

General Thomas quickly withdrew his soldiers after he’d gotten what he wanted. He determined that a direct attack on Dalton wasn’t advisable given the mountainous terrain and well-defended gaps. But eventually a Union army did find a weak point at Snake Creek Gap, about 13 miles to the south, threatening to outflank the Confederate army and forcing it to retreat.

William Sapp was a Scoutmaster in Dalton at the time he talked with Disney’s messmate. After the fateful train ride, he took his Boy Scout Troop on a hike in search of Disney’s grave. Once they located it, Sapp organized a scout project to restore the grave as well as to provide easier access to the site. As part of the project, his troop solicited a donor for a new marker. On May 13, 1912, the scouts took turns carrying the newly inscribed marble stone up the steep slope to the patch of ground where Private Disney was buried.

Today the Disney Trail links hikers to a significant historical event and serves as a memorial to the soldier buried there. Hundreds hike it annually, many of whom are history buffs or outdoor enthusiasts. This trail is one of the oldest in Georgia and pre-dates even the Appalachian Trail. In 2014 the trail and its surrounding four acres were dedicated as the Mill Creek Gap Civil War Battlefield Park. Fittingly, the trail is still connected to the Boy Scouts, as more than one local scout has improved the trail as an Eagle Scout project.

Although hikers have enjoyed the Disney Trail for more than a century, this was my first time walking it. Living just two miles from the trailhead in an area rich in Civil War history, I knew about Disney of course. When they were still home, my kids had hiked the trail with friends.

In fact, they had inspired this outing, because for the first time, none of them were home for Thanksgiving. Feeling a bit unanchored and with time to fill, I decided to change the holiday tradition a bit by starting with a hike rather than the usual Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade on television. I got much more than I’d hoped for: a connection to the past and immersion in nature’s beauty. A flood of endorphins coursed through my veins because I’d conquered the Disney Trail, perhaps starting a brand new Thanksgiving tradition.

Important Information: On I-75 north of Dalton, take Exit 336 and travel north on U.S. Highway 41 about a mile, toward Rocky Face. Turn left at the State Patrol Barracks, just past the Church of the Nazarene. Continue up the hill, passing the Tipton Family Life Center. The trailhead is on the left side of the Center’s parking lot. ▀

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