Des Moines Civil War Roundtable

September 2026

Headquarters District Iowa General Order No. 512

The First meeting of the 2026 Fall campaign will be Wednesday, September 2nd, at the Machine Shed

Speaker – Brian Rumsey – Cedar Falls/UNI

Presentation – "From Strategic Cover to Foraged Food: Fruit and Nut Trees During the Civil War."

5:30 pm – Social Hour – Cash Bar Opens
6:30 pm – Dinner by Reservation and advance payment
7:15 pm – 8:00 pm - Program

Dinner – Machine Shed meals are served family-style. $27.00
2 Entrées:
Marinated Grilled Chicken Breast Flavored with our house blend and grilled
Old Fashioned Pot Roast Slow-roasted beef with onions, carrots, and baby red potatoes
Sides: Coleslaw, cottage cheese, vegetable, choice of potato, and freshly baked bread
Beverages are included: coffee, tea, milk, or soda.

Reserve & Pay for Dinner

Reservation Deadline – Sunday, August 30, 2026

President: Gordon McKenzie
Program Director: Marv Wilson Thanks to John Liepa for many years of outstanding service!
Treasurer: Dave Moraniec Thanks to Ron Nurmi for many years of outstanding service!

Our web address: dmcivilwar.org email: dsmcivilwar@gmail.com
Link to Upcoming Programs

Link to Special Sept Newsletter

Holding Missouri: Iowa Soldiers and the Battle of Pea Ridge

— DES MOINES CIVIL WAR ROUNDTABLE —

Pea Ridge is often treated as a remote Trans-Mississippi sideshow, yet the March 1862 battle secured a strategic result the Confederacy never reversed: Missouri remained in Union hands. Iowa regiments, including Grenville Dodge's 4th Iowa and the 9th Iowa, fought in a campaign where logistics, divided Confederate command, and disciplined artillery mattered as much as battlefield courage.



Elkhorn Tavern on the Pea Ridge battlefield, a focal point of the March 7–8, 1862 fighting. National Park Service photo.

Why Pea Ridge mattered

The campaign that culminated at Pea Ridge, Arkansas, on March 7–8, 1862, was fundamentally about Missouri. The state's divided loyalties, river connections, manufacturing capacity, and geographic position made it strategically valuable to both governments. Union Brigadier General Samuel R. Curtis pushed Sterling Price's Missouri State Guard south during the winter of 1861–62 and then paused in northwestern Arkansas, operating at the end of an increasingly tenuous supply line. Confederate Major General Earl Van Dorn saw an opportunity to strike, destroy Curtis, and reopen a road into Missouri. [1]

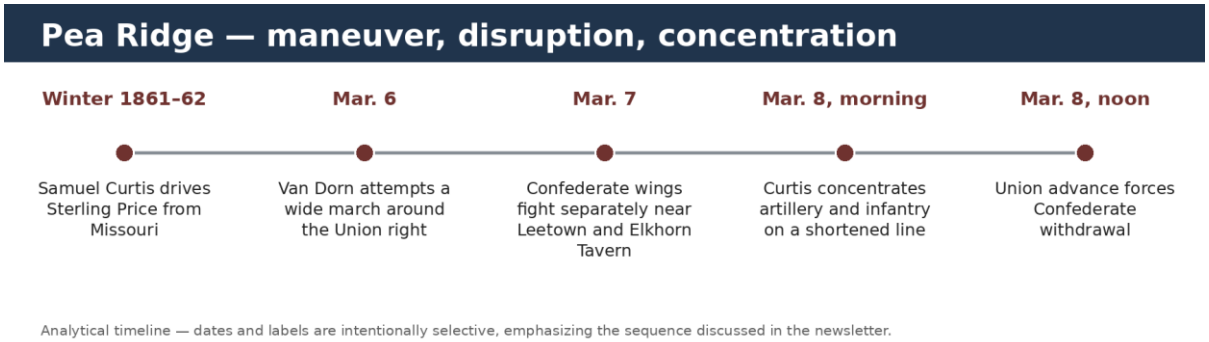
Van Dorn's plan was audacious: move around the Union right and rear, cut the Telegraph Road, and attack Curtis from a direction the Federals did not expect. Audacity, however, magnified the cost of poor staff work. The Confederate movement was exhausting, supply arrangements were weak, and the army's wings became separated. Pea Ridge became a classic case in which an enveloping maneuver created tactical opportunity but also dissolved command cohesion.

Iowans in a Trans-Mississippi army

Iowa's 4th and 9th Infantry Regiments were among the Union formations that gave the Army of the Southwest much of its fighting power. The 4th Iowa, commanded

by Colonel Grenville M. Dodge, had already endured arduous campaigning. Dodge—a Council Bluffs civil engineer and railroad man before the war—brought an engineer's attention to roads, terrain, and communications that would mark his later career. At Pea Ridge he was wounded while his regiment fought around the Elkhorn Tavern sector, where the Confederate right under Price pressed hard against the Union line. [2]

The 9th Iowa also suffered heavily. Its experience reinforces an important point about western armies: regiments that had only recently been raised were rapidly learning how to maneuver across broken ground without the institutional depth of the prewar regular army. Their effectiveness depended on company officers, file closers, and noncommissioned officers maintaining enough local order for the regiment to continue functioning when smoke and wooded terrain obscured higher command.



Analytical timeline prepared for this newsletter.

Van Dorn's divided battle

The Confederate army's strongest possibilities on March 7 were undermined by division of effort. Ben McCulloch's wing became entangled around Leetown, where McCulloch and Brigadier General James McIntosh were killed and Colonel Louis Hébert was captured. Price's wing, meanwhile, fought near Elkhorn Tavern. With senior leaders gone and the wings physically separated, Van Dorn could not fully coordinate the pressure against Curtis. [3]

Curtis, by contrast, shortened and reoriented his line. This was not a glamorous maneuver, but it was decisive. Instead of reacting to each Confederate thrust as an isolated emergency, he created a more coherent front and brought artillery into effective mass. The Union army had been attacked from an unexpected direction, yet by the second morning it had converted that surprise into a defensible geometry. This capacity to restore a common operational picture is one of the battle's most instructive features.

The second morning: artillery and logistics decide

On March 8, Union batteries opened an increasingly concentrated bombardment. Federal infantry then advanced against Confederate positions that had become difficult to sustain. Van Dorn's ammunition and supply problems were acute; some

Confederate trains had been sent on routes that left them unavailable when needed. What had begun as a plan to cut Curtis off instead left the attackers short of the resources required for a prolonged battle. [4]

The Confederate retreat ended the immediate threat to Union control of Missouri. Pea Ridge did not eliminate guerrilla warfare, political conflict, or Confederate raiding in the region, but it prevented the large Confederate field army from regaining the strategic initiative there. In that sense, the battle's significance was greater than its place in popular memory suggests.

Dodge and the larger western war

Pea Ridge also foreshadowed the importance of technical and logistical leadership in the western theater. Dodge later became one of the Union's most valuable railroad and intelligence officers, repairing lines, building networks of scouts, and supporting William T. Sherman's Atlanta Campaign. The habits visible in Arkansas—attention to routes, information, and physical infrastructure—would become central to the Union way of war. [5]

For Iowa, Pea Ridge deserves attention alongside the better-known Mississippi Valley battles. It linked the state directly to the contest for Missouri, demonstrated the growing competence of volunteer regiments, and showed that strategic outcomes can hinge on mundane matters such as wagon routes and ammunition access. Van Dorn's concept was bold. Curtis's army, including its Iowa regiments, proved more durable.

Notes and Sources

1. William L. Shea and Earl J. Hess, Pea Ridge: Civil War Campaign in the West (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

2. National Park Service, biography of Grenville M. Dodge and unit histories for the 4th Iowa Infantry; Dodge was a Council Bluffs engineer before entering Union service.

3. Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series I, vol. VIII, for campaign reports and orders of battle.

4. National Park Service, Pea Ridge National Military Park, battle history and order-of-battle material.

5. Stanley P. Hirshson, Grenville M. Dodge: Soldier, Politician, Railroad Pioneer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967).