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Battle of Marianna Raged around St. Luke's, circa 1960s

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Photouring Florida

By HAMPTON DUNN



BATTLE OF MARIANNA RAGED AROUND ST. LUKE'S

By HAMPTON DUNN

MARIANNA --- The peaceful looking and most attractive St. Luke's Episcopal Church, which stands besides busy U.S. 90 in this West Florida town, belies the hectic history the vestry has had.

The structure actually is relatively new, built in 1947, but the history of the church goes back to Florida's territorial days. St. Luke's came into being in 1838, in times described as "very favorable circumstances." The first church structure was a little native limestone rock building erected in 1851. But it tumbled down a few years later. A second church building was put up in 1863 --- only to become a victim of the ravages of war a year later.

Yes, this religious sanctuary became the storm center on that memorable day of Sept. 27, 1864, the day noted for "The Battle of Marianna." A band of U.S. soldiers led by General Asboth raided the town and put most of it to the torch. Troops involved were Negroes who came to Marianna, hell-bent to destroy it.

Quickly, the alarm spread and young boys and a Home Guard composed of old men and a few sick and wounded Confederates home on leave quickly rose to defend Marianna. The militia was outnumbered eight to one, but they made up with guts what they lacked in numbers. The motley company staved off the invaders all morning long. The home soldiers were backed into the church where they continued to fire at the Federals with their squirrel guns and other weapons. They also dodged around through the tombstones in the ancient cemetery. But finally, the church itself was fired. Many of the victims of that day's fierce fighting rest in St. Luke's cemetery. It is here that Gov. John Milton, Florida's Civil War governor, also is buried.

One respectful "Yankee" soldier reportedly saved St. Luke's great pulpit Bible that day. It eventually was returned to the church and rests on the lectern at the entrance to the church. The soldier who rescued the Bible also reportedly had hollered "You shall not burn the church! We are not all a bunch of foreign vandals." But burn it, they did.

