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An Indian Battlefield Near Melrose.

By H. von Noszky.

Although it is well known that the neighborhood of Melrose is rich in Indian mounds and a fine hunting ground for flint arrowheads, pottery; and the like, few are aware that within a few miles of Melrose was fought one of the most important battles on Florida soil. This struggle took place between DeSoto's forces and the Indians under Vitachuco, some time in 1539. Garcilasso de la Vega, in his "History of the Conquest of Florida" (edited in English by Barnard Shipp in his "DeSoto and Florida") says that DeSoto landed at Ucita (the big mound on the government reservation at Tampa), June 1, 1539, that after a month he went on to Uri-baracua (near Dade City), thence northwest on the Withlacoochee River, crossed into the province of Acuera, thence twenty leagues (50 miles to Ocala, on the Ocklawaha River, thence to Vitachuco; near Melrose, the capital or chief town of Vitachuco, the chieftain. This town is described as being located on a plain with one or more large mounds for the huts of the chiefs in the centre.

Vitachuco had invited DeSoto to remain in his town for several days during which he planned to destroy the Spaniards. This plan became known to Jean Ortis, who had been among the Indians at Tampa as a slave for ten years, having been captured by Harriga from the ship sent to search for Narvaez. Ortis could understand their language and he informed DeSoto. So when Vitachuco invited DeSoto out to see his army whose arms had been concealed, DeSoto took his army along, and also took as a personal escort twelve of his strongest men to offset the twelve strong Indians Vitachuco had taken with him to seize DeSoto.

Of the battleground the narrative says that it took place on a plain, or level place, that it was bordered on the left by wood and on the right by marshes or ponds, one of which had a good sandy bottom and water so deep that at four paces from the edge it was over a man's head. The other lake, or marsh, was three-quarters of a league wide and they did not see the other end of it. The Indians formed a crescent in the centre

of this plain, and when the Spaniards came against them their cavalry went between the Indians and the woods on the left, and the foot soldiers with DeSoto at their head marched between the Indians and this pond, or marsh.

When on the plain DeSoto had a musket fired as a signal and they charged the Indians with great fury. The narrator states that the battle lasted three hours and that when the Indians tried to flee thousands were killed. Nine hundred of them jumped into the deep pond and would not surrender until the next day, or until they had become completely exhausted from swimming.

After they had remained several days at Vitachuco, DeSoto left and marched four leagues to a river, and so the narrator proceeds to relate the further adventures of the explorer. After reading the above history I began to inquire as to the possible situation of the town of Vitachuco, and with the kind assistance of Dr. Frank McRae I was able to locate it perfectly. The crescent shaped lake - Two-Mile Pond ; the marsh-now called Whahoo Hammock ; the small river - Etonia Creek ; even the large Indian mound was found; and the given distances are fairly correct. The tribe of Indians located around Lake Santa Fe and Newnan's Lake must have been wonderful workmen to judge from the fine arrowheads and other flint instruments found, some of which are real works of art. Thanks are also due to W. L. Andrews, Opelika, Alabama, for information and data.