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Stoneman is more than just a lake



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Staff Reporter

*Virgil Caine is the name and I served on the
Danville train*

*'Til Stoneman's cavalry came and tore up the
tracks again*

*In the winter of '65, we were hungry, just
barely alive*

By May the tenth, Richmond had fell

It's a time I remember, oh so well

The night they drove old Dixie down...

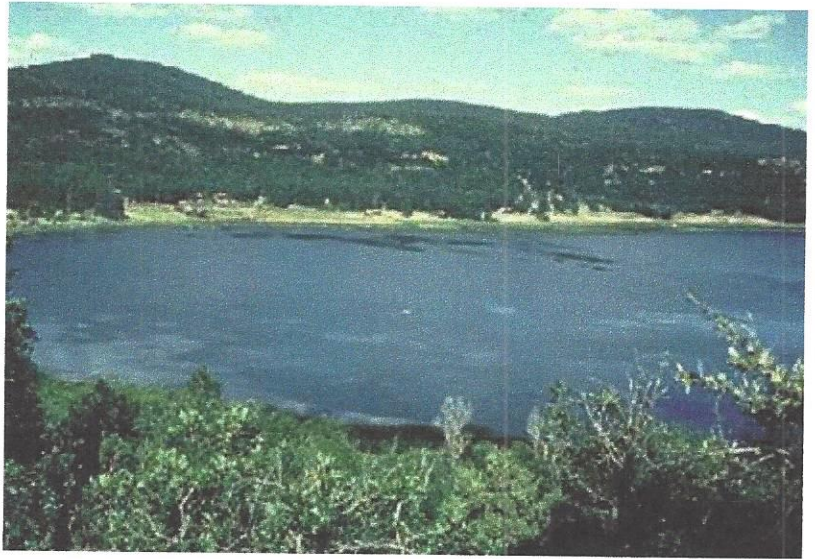
That is the opening of Robbie Robertson's 1969 ballad, "The Night they Drove Old Dixie Down" of Confederate despair, partly from the raids of Union General George Stoneman, penned for The Band in 1969.

Stoneman was celebrated among the Union forces during the Civil War. After the war, Stoneman would be assigned to defeat the Indian unrest in the West, but when he could not achieve rapid satisfaction, it was General Crook who took the Arizona command and settled the territory.

In the West, his name is best know for the Central Arizona Lake which took his name and as a one-term California governor.

Stoneman wasn't the first to discover the 80-acre lake that fills the mouth of a caldera 45 miles south of Flagstaff and northeast of Sedona. And we don't know if Stoneman ever visited the lake that is his namesake. Three hundred years before Stoneman, Spanish conquistador Antonio de Espejo led an expedition through Texas and the recent New Mexico and Arizona in search of silver and is thought to have seen the lake.

Raised in New York, Stoneman was chiefly distinguished as a Union commander of the cavalry during the Civil War though he commanded the Presidio in California in early years. He was celebrated enough that at a time when he was captured by the Confederates, Gen. William Sherman made a personal plea for his release.



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The first European eyes to see the lake are thought to be from an expedition led by Antonio de Espejo, and for a time it bore the name of Chavez, but for many years it has been recognized as Stoneman.



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Cabins that now stand on the shores of Stoneman Lake often face a dry marsh.

Stoneman's life took a sharp turn after the Battle of Chancellorsville.

He was assigned to lead his Cavalry Corps deep into Robert E. Lee's rear ranks and destroy vital railroad lines and supplies, distracting Lee from Major Gen. Joseph Hooker's assaults. But "Fighting Joe" Hooker considered Stoneman a disappointment.

The Cavalry Corps quickly bogged down after crossing the Rapidan River and Stoneman accomplished little. Hooker thought he was one of the principal reasons for the Union defeat at Chancellorsville. Hooker relieved Stoneman from his cavalry post and he was sent back to Washington, D.C., for medical treatment. Stoneman suffered from chronic hemorrhoids made worse by cavalry service.

In July, Stoneman was assigned to a desk job as the chief of the U.S. Cavalry Bureau. A cavalry supply and training depot on the Potomac was named for Stoneman.

Bored and fighting for a new field assignment, Stoneman, in mid 1870, was assigned to the command of Arizona Territory in the Military Department of California with headquarters at Fort Whipple. He assumed command in July. But the assignment was prickly. Some historical analysts say it was the impatience of Arizonans for Stoneman to tame Indian raiders that led to downfall.

It was during his Arizona command that the name of the volcanic basin near the Chavez Trail was re-named for Gen. Stoneman.

In the late 19th century, a rugged but direct travel road had been used by Lt. Col. Francisco Chavez of a well-respected New Mexico family. Chavez was assigned to escort the newly appointed territorial governor John Goodwin to present-day Prescott. The trail was based on the original Hopi trail that stretching from the Hopi mesas to the Verde Valley. Used in the territorial days, it originated at "Sunset Crossing," now Winslow, through Chavez Pass, near the present Stoneman Lake to the Verde Valley over Copper Canyon to Prescott.

The lake near the trail was also named for Col. Chavez and was known as Chavez Lake. That was until Prescott newspaper editor John Marion thought it was important to re-name it to honor Stoneman. The name stuck.

The lake stands at about 6,900 feet, but is not very deep. It is reported to collect not much more than 10 feet of water but it fluctuates based on precipitation, fed by several springs and has been known to dry up. This year, apparently, the water depth is suffering from the prolonged drought and the couple dozen cabins that now stand there face a dry marsh.

In a diary of territorial life, Martha Summerhayes lamented her rugged life-threatening ride down the rugged Chavez Trail but hailed Stoneman Lake as "the most beautiful spot I ever saw in Arizona."

After his dismissal from the Arizona territory, Stoneman moved his family back to California and got into politics, first on the railroad commission. He was later elected 13th governor of the state in 1883. His policies were not universally popular, including putting prisoners on parole and limiting the power of the Southern Pacific Railroad. He served only a single term and it is believed that his San Gabriel home was destroyed in fire by political rivals. In financial ruins, he returned to New York to live with his sister. He suffered a stroke and died in 1894.

Historian Marshal Trimble reports that George Stoneman was a tough taskmaster. "Stoneman was a cantankerous individual with few friends. One story is told of his funeral in which a large crowd showed up to pay last respects. When a young officer expressed surprise at the huge audience for someone so universally disliked, a fellow officer replied, 'It just goes to show, you give the people something they want and they will show up every time.'"