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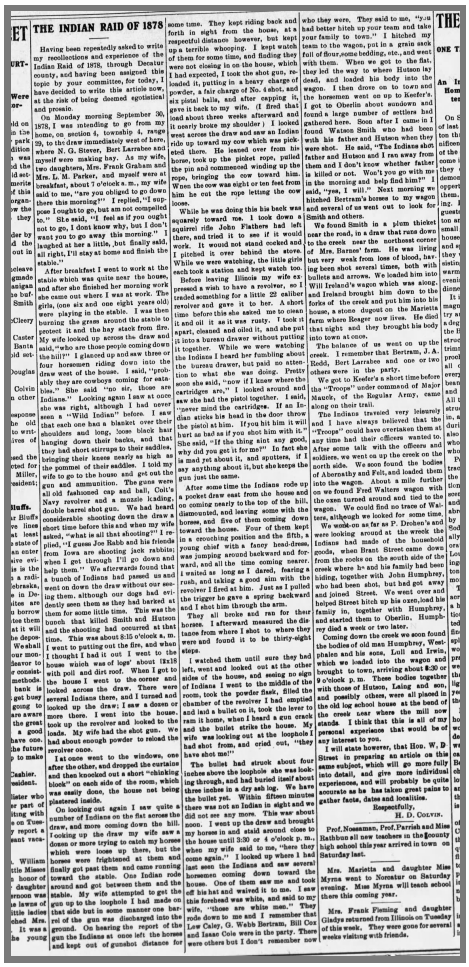

THE INDIAN RAID OF 1878

Having been repeatedly asked to write my recollections and experience of the Indian Raid of 1878, through Decatur county, and having been assigned this topic by your committee, for today, I have decided to write this article now, at the risk of being deemed egotistical and prosaic.

On Monday morning September 30, 1878, I was intending to go from my home, on section 4, township 4, range 29, to the draw immediately west of here, where N. G. Stever, Bert Larrabee and myself were making hay. As my wife, two daughters, Mrs. Frank Graham and Mrs. L. M. Parker, and myself were at breakfast, about 7 o'clock a. m., my wife said to me, "are you obliged to go down there this morning?" I replied, "I suppose I ought to go, but am not compelled to." She said, "I feel as if you ought not to go, I dont know why, but I don't want you to go away this morning." I laughed at her a little, but finally said, all right, I'll stay at home and finish the stable."

After breakfast I went to work at the stable which was quite near the house, and after she finished her morning work she came out where I was at work. The girls, (one six and one eight years old) were playing in the stable. I was then burning the grass around the stable to protect it and the hay stack from fire. My wife looked up across the draw and said, "who are those people coming down the hill?" I glanced up and saw three or four horsemen riding down into the draw west of the house. I said, "probably they are cowboys coming for satalites." She said "no sir, those are Indians." Looking again I saw at once she was right, although I had never seen a "Wild Indian" before. I saw that each one had a blanket over their shoulders and long, loose black hair hanging down their backs, and that they had short stirrups to their saddles, bringing their knees nearly as high as the pommel of their saddles. I told my wife to go to the house and get out the gun and ammunition. The guns were all old fashioned cap and ball, Colt's Navy revolver and a muzzle loading, double barrel shot gun. We had heard considerable shooting down the draw a short time before this and when my wife asked, "what is all that shooting?" I replied, "I guess Joe Rabb and his friends from Iowa are shooting jack rabbits; when I get through I'll go down and help them." We afterwards found that a bunch of Indians had passed us and went on down the draw without our seeing them, although our dogs had evidently seen them as they had barked at them for some little time. This was the bunch that killed Smith and Huton and the shooting had occurred at that time. This was about 8:15 o'clock a. m.

I went to putting out the fire, and when I thought I had it out I went to the house which was of logs about 18x18 with poll and dirt roof. When I got to the house I went to the corner and looked across the draw. There were several Indians there, and I turned and looked up the draw; I saw a dozen or more there. I went into the house, took up the revolver and looked to the loads. My wife had the shot gun. We had about enough powder to reload the revolver once.

I at once went to the windows, one after the other, and dropped the curtains and then knocked out a short "chinking block" on each side of the room, which was easily done, the house not being plastered inside.

On looking out again I saw quite a number of Indians on the flat across the draw, and more coming down the hill. I cocking up the draw my wife saw a dozen or more trying to catch my horses which were loose up there, but the horses were frightened at them and finally got past them and came running toward the stable. One Indian rode around and got between them and the stable. My wife attempted to get the gun up to the loophole I had made on that side but in some manner one barrel of the gun was discharged into the ground. On hearing the report of the gun the Indians at once left the horses and kept out of gunshot distance for some time. They kept riding back and forth in sight from the house, at a respectful distance however, but kept up a terrible whooping. I kept watch of them for some time, and finding they were not closing in on the house, which I had expected, I took the shot gun, reloaded it, putting in a heavy charge of powder, a fair charge of No. 4 shot, and six pistol balls, and after capping it, gave it back to my wife. (I fired that load about three weeks afterward and it nearly broke my shoulder.) I looked west across the draw and saw an Indian ride up toward my cow which was picketed there. He leaned over from his horse, took up the picket rope, pulled the pin and commenced winding up the rope, bringing the cow toward him. When the cow was eight or ten feet from him he cut the rope letting the cow loose.

While he was doing this his back was squarely toward me. I took down a squirrel rifle John Fathers had left there, and tried it to see if it would work. It would not stand cocked and I pitched it over behind the stove. While we were watching, the little girls each took a station and kept watch too.

Before leaving Illinois my wife expressed a wish to have a revolver, so I traded something for a little 22 caliber revolver and gave it to her. A short time before this she asked me to clean it and oil it as it was rusty. I took it apart, cleaned and oiled it, and she put it into a bureau drawer without putting it together. While we were watching the Indians I heard her fumbling about the bureau drawer, but paid no attention to what she was doing. Pretty soon she said, "now if I knew where the cartridges are," I looked around and saw she had the pistol together. I said, "never mind the cartridges. If an Indian sticks his head in the door throw the pistol at him. If you hit him it will hurt as bad as if you shot him with it." She said, "if the thing aint any good, why did you get it for me?" In fact she is mad yet about it, and sputters, if I say anything about it, but she keeps the gun just the same.

After some time the Indians rode up to the house and came nearly to the top of the hill, dismounted, and leaving some with the horses, and five of them coming down toward the house. Four of them kept in a crouching position and the fifth, a young chief with a fancy head-dress, was jumping around backward and forward, and all the time coming nearer. I waited as long as I dared, fearing a rush, and taking a good aim with the revolver I fired at him. Just as I pulled the trigger he gave a spring backward and I shot him through the arm.

They all broke and ran for their horses. I afterward measured the distance from where I shot to where they were and found it to be thirty-eight steps.

I watched them until sure they had left, went and looked out at the other sides of the house, and seeing no sign of Indians I went to the middle of the room, took the powder flask, filled the chamber of the revolver I had emptied and laid a bullet on it, took the lever to ram it home, when I heard a gun crack and the bullet strikes the house. My wife was looking out at the loophole I had shot from, and cried out, "they have shot me!"

The bullet had struck about four inches above the loophole she was looking through, and had buried itself about three inches in a dry ash log. We have the bullet yet. Within fifteen minutes there was not an Indian in sight and we did not see any more. This was about noon. I went up the draw and brought my horses in and staid around close to the house until 3:30 or 4 o'clock p. m., when my wife said to me, "there they come again." I looked up where I had last seen the Indians and saw several horsemen coming down toward the house. One of them saw me and took off his hat and waived it to me. I saw this forehead was white, and said to my wife, "those are white men." They rode down to me and I remember that Low Caley, G. Webb Bertram, Bill Cox and Isaac Cole were in the party. There were others but I don't remember now who they were. They said to me, "you had better hitch up your team and take your family to town." I hitched my team to the wagon, put in a grain sack full of flour, some bedding, etc., and went with them. When we got to the flat, they led the way to where Huston lay dead, and loaded his body into the wagon. I then drove on to town and the horsemen went on up to Keefer's. I got to Oberlin about sundown and found a large number of settlers had gathered here. Soon after I came in I found Watson Smith who had been with his father and Huston when they were shot. He said, "The Indians shot father and Huston and I ran away from them and I don't know whether father is killed or not. Won't you go with me in the morning and help find him?" I said, "yes, I will." Next morning we hitched Bertram's horses to my wagon and several of us went out to look for Smith and others.

We found Smith in a plum thicket near the road, in a draw that runs down to the creek near the northeast corner of Mrs. Barnes' farm. He was living but very weak from loss of blood, having been shot several times, both with bullets and arrows. We loaded him into Will Ireland's wagon which was along, and Ireland brought him down to the forks of the creek and put him into his house, a stone dugout on the Marietta farm where Reager now lives. He died that night and they brought his body into town at once.

The balance of us went on up the creek. I remember that Bertram, J. A. Redd, Bert Larrabee and one or two others were in the party.

We got to Keefer's a short time before the "Troops" under command of Major Mauck, of the Regular Army, came along on their trail.

The Indians traveled very leisurely and I have always believed that the "Troops" could have overtaken them at any time had their officers wanted to. After some talk with the officers and soldiers, we went on up the creek on the north side. We soon found the bodies of Abernathy and Felt, and loaded them into the wagon. About a mile further on we found Fred Walters wagon with the cows turned around and tied to the wagon. We could find no trace of Walters, although we looked for some time.

We went on as far as P. Drohen's and were looking around at the wreck the Indians had made of the household goods, when Brant Street came down from the rocks on the south side of the creek where he and his family had been hiding, together with John Humphrey, who had been shot, but had got away and joined Street. We went over and helped Street hitch up his oxen, and he, family in, together with Humphrey, and started them to Oberlin. Humphrey died a week or two later.

Coming down the creek we soon found the bodies of old man Humphrey, Westphalen and his sons, Loll and Irvin, which we loaded into the wagon and brought to town, arriving about 8:30 or 9 o'clock p. m. These bodies together with those of Huston, Laing and son, and possibly others, were all placed in the old log school house at the bend of the creek near where the mill now stands. I think that this is all of my personal experience that would be of any interest to you.

I will state however, that Hon. W. D Street in preparing an article on this same subject, which will go more fully into detail, and give more individual experiences, and will probably be quite as accurate as he has taken great pains to gather facts, dates and localities.

Respectfully,

H. D. COLVIN.

Prof. Nossaman, Prof. Parrish and Miss Rathbun all new teachers in the county high school this year arrived in town on Saturday last.

Mrs. Marietta and daughter Miss Myrna went to Norcatur on Saturday evening. Miss Myrna will teach school there this coming year.

Mrs. Frank Fleming and daughter Gladys returned from Illinois on Tuesday of this week. They were gone for several weeks visiting with friends.

1909-10-09 The Indian Raid of 1878

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