

THE SHAWNEES, CORNSTALK AND THE KERRS CREEK MASSACRES

Compiled by Henrietta C. Dunlap

Ignorance Club, 1937–38

WHEN WE DECLARED OURSELVES an independent nation, there were on our borders three groups of Indians. The northernmost were the Iroquois or Six Nations, who dwelt in New York and stretched down into Pennsylvania. They had been for two centuries the terror of every other Indian tribe east of the Mississippi, as well as of the whites; but their strength had already departed.

The very reverse was the case with those Indians, tenfold more numerous, who lived along our western frontier. There, they were themselves our main opponents, the British simply acting as their supporters; and instead of their fate being settled by the [1783] treaty of peace with Britain, they continued an active warfare for twelve years after it had been signed. Had they defeated us in the early years of the contest, it is more than probable that the Alleghanies would have been made our

Henrietta Campbell Dunlap (1884-1975) was a teacher at Ruffner School for 47 years and principal there for two decades. M. W. Paxton Jr. wrote of her: "She taught the eighth grade, which was required only of those students who through learning difficulties or disciplinary problems were not considered ready to move on to high school. Miss Nettie could handle them with one hand tied behind her." Miss Dunlap's chronology occasionally seems whimsical, but the essay is interesting for her interviews and research into now-obscure sources.

western boundary at the peace. We won from them vast stretches of territory because we had beaten their warriors, and we could not have won it otherwise; whereas the territory of the Iroquois was lost not because of their defeat, but because of the defeat of the British.

There were two groups of these Indians, corresponding roughly with the geographic division. In the northwest, between the Ohio and the Lakes, were the Algonquin tribes, generally banded loosely together; in the southwest, between the Tennessee — then called the Cherokee — and the Gulf, the so-called Appalachians lived. Between them lay a vast and beautiful region where no tribe dared dwell, but into which all ventured now and then for war and hunting.

The Algonquin were divided into many tribes of ever-shifting size. It would be impossible to place them all, or indeed to enumerate them, with any degree of accuracy, for the tribes were continually splitting up, absorbing others, being absorbed in turn, or changing their abode, and, in addition, there were numerous small sub-tribes or bands of renegades, which sometimes were and sometimes were not considered as portions of their larger neighbors. The chief tribes, however, were well known, and occupied tolerably definite locations. The Delawares dwelt farthest east, lying northwest of the upper Ohio, their lands adjoining those of the Senecas, the largest and most westernmost of the Six Nations. Westward of the Delawares lay the Shawnee villages, along the Scioto River [in central Ohio] and on the Pickaway plains; but it must be remembered that the Shawnees, Delawares, and Wyandots were closely united and their villages were often mixed in together.

In the decade before Lord Dunsmore's War* there had been much mutual wrongdoing between the northwestern Indians and the Virginia borderers. The chief offense of the whites was that they trespassed upon uninhabited lands, which they forthwith proceeded to cultivate, instead of merely roaming over them to hunt the game and butcher one another. Every year parties of young red warriors crossed the Ohio to plunder the outlying farms, burn down the buildings, scalp the inmates, and drive off the horses. Year by year the exasperation of the borderers grew greater and the tale of the wrongs they had to avenge longer. Occasionally they took a brutal and ill-judged vengeance, which usually fell on innocent Indians, and raised up new foes for the whites. The savage grew continually more hostile, and in the fall of 1773 their attacks became so frequent that it was evident a general outbreak was at hand.

The Shawnees were the leaders in all these outrages; but the outlaw bands, such as the Mingos and Cherokees, were as bad, and parties of Wyandots and Delawares,

* Virginia-led attack in 1774 on the Shawnee Indians of Kentucky, removing the last obstacle to colonial conquest of that area. Named for Virginia's royal governor, John Murray, fourth earl of Dunsmore.

as well as of the various Miami and Wabash tribes, joined them. Thus the spring of 1774 opened with everything ripe for an explosion.

The Virginia borderers were fearfully exasperated, and ready to take vengeance upon any Indians, whether peaceful or hostile; while the Shawnees and Mingos, on their side, were arrogant and overbearing, and yet alarmed at the continual advance of the whites.

There were on the border at this time three or four men whose names are so intimately bound up with the history of this war that they deserve a brief mention. One was Michael Cresap, a Maryland frontiersman, who had come to the banks of the Ohio with the purpose of making a home for his family. He was of the regular pioneer type: a good woodsman, sturdy and brave, a fearless fighter, devoted to his friends and his country; but also, when his blood was heated and his savage instincts fairly roused, inclined to regard any red man, whether hostile or friendly, as a being who should be slain on sight. Nor did he condemn the brutal deeds done by others on innocent Indians.

The next was a man named Daniel Greathouse, of whom it is enough to know that, together with certain other men whose names have for the most part, by a merciful chance, been forgotten, he did a deed such as could only be committed by inhuman and cowardly scoundrels.

The other two actors in this tragedy were both Indians, and were men of much higher stamp. One was Cornstalk, the Shawnee chief: a farsighted seer, gloomily conscious of the impending ruin of his race, a great orator, a mighty warrior, a man who knew the value of his word and prized his honor, and who fronted death with quiet, disdainful heroism; and yet a fierce, cruel, and treacherous savage to those with whom he was at enmity, a killer of women and children. The other was Logan, an Iroquois warrior, of whom an old pioneer hunter said, "Logan [was] the best specimen of humanity he ever met with, either white or red."

Unfortunately, the first stroke of the Indian trouble fell upon friendly Indians. A trader, in order to recover some of the pelts of which he had been robbed by the Cherokees, had sent a canoe with two friendly Shawnees toward the place of the massacre. Cresap and his followers ambushed these men and killed and scalped them, amid protests from the better backwoodsmen.

The next day, he again led out his men and attacked another party of Shawnees. One hostility led to another. Cornstalk had from the first opposed the war with the whites, but when he felt that his people had been mistreated, he led his long files of warriors, with noiseless speed, through trackless woodland to the banks of the Ohio. This brave chief commanded his forces well and it was not uncommon for

Cornstalk, Shawnee chieftain (1720-77).

the whites to hear his deep, sonorous voice as he cheered on his braves, and bade them "be strong, be strong."

Cornstalk died a grand death, but by an act of cowardly treachery on the part of his American foes — one of the darkest stains on the pages of frontier history. Early in 1777 he came to the garrison at Point Pleasant to explain that, while he was anxious to keep peace, his tribe was bent on going to war; and he frankly added that of course if they did he would have to join them.

He and three other Indians, among them his son and the chief Redhawk, were detained as hostages. While they were confined in the fort, a member of a company of rangers was killed by the Indians nearby, whereupon his comrades rushed in furious anger into the fort to slay the hostages. Cornstalk heard them, and knew that his hour had come. With unmoved countenance he exhorted his son not to fear, for it was the will of the Great Spirit that they should die there together. As the murderers burst into the room, he quietly rose up to meet them, and fell, pierced by seven or eight bullets.

As settlements were extended from the sea shore, and when the white population reached the Blue Ridge, the valley between it and the Alleghany was uninhabited. This country was used as hunting grounds and as a highway for belligerent parties of different nations, in their military expeditions against each other. The Indians used this region frequently, and the Shawnees were the terror of the inhabitants of Augusta County from the frontier to the Blue Ridge.

Passing nowadays from Clifton Forge to Lexington, one follows the Midland Trail, a thoroughfare in marked contrast to the real old-time trail followed by the settlers and Indians in the days of border warfare.

About half a century ago there was published in the "Rockbridge Citizen" at Lexington the story of the Kerrs Creek massacres — for there were two of them, a year or more apart — written by the Rev. Dr. Samuel Brown. At the time of the



massacre, he was a boy and had heard the story of the horrible tragedy from the lips of some of those who were spared the butchery. Here is his story.

THE SECOND INVASION OF KERRS CREEK was thought to have occurred on or before October 10, 1765. In the opinion of some it was in 1766. The late John T. McKee, my authority for the date, was very confident it was the former. This also was composed of Shawnees and, no doubt, in part by some who were in the first expedition. They would best know the condition of the settlement, and the fitting of the scalp to the head of Miss Cunningham, when they returned to Ohio, is further proof of the same. She had been partially scalped during the first raid and the hair taken by the Shawnees back to Ohio. In the next raid she was taken there herself, so in the Indian village she ran into her scalp. The number of Indians in the second visit is not known with certainty but was generally estimated from forty to fifty.

The families and remnants of families left on the creek, after the first massacre, had repaired their losses. Rude cabins were built to take the place of those destroyed, and their domestic comforts were gathered about them. The heaviest part of their affliction was the cruel death of members of the family, and the dark uncertainty which hung around those in captivity.

For some time, there had been vague reports of Indians, and at length the savages made their approach — but more cautiously than before. They crossed North Mountain, and encamped at a spring where Andrew Hayslett now lives, a position which secluded them from the view of anyone passing over the mountain, and from which they could send out spies to mark the state of affairs on Kerrs Creek. In this concealed position they remained for one or two days. Someone discovered their moccasin tracks in a corn field and, crossing to the top of the hill, saw them in camp. The alarm was given about the time they started out for their awful work. The inhabitants of the creek fled with all haste and collected at the Big Spring, at the house of John Cunningham. They were packing their horses in great haste to leave for the larger white settlement at Timber Ridge.

William Gilmore and other men started to walk up the creek to see if any danger was at hand. Some of the Indians, who had crept up very close, immediately fired on them, and two were shot down. With a war whoop the whole body of savages rushed on the unprepared crowd. Two or three brave young men advanced to meet them and were killed. Then commenced a scene which beggars description: the screaming of women and children and the utter dismay that seized upon them all.

This remarkable spring covers, perhaps, three acres of land, and was at that time surrounded by a thick growth of weeds and brush, in which many tried to hide themselves. A Mrs. Dale, hidden a short distance off, witnessed the whole awful tragedy. She said the terror-stricken whites ran in every direction trying to hide, and the swift savages, each singling out his prey, pursued them round and round through the weeds with yells. Some threw up their hands for mercy. Some were spared their lives, but most were stricken down by the tomahawk. Any of the men who attempted resistance were shot down. The wife of Thomas Gilmore, standing with her three children over the body of her husband, fought with desperation the Indian who rushed up to scalp him.

A second Indian ran up to dispatch her with his tomahawk when the first one, with whom she was contending, threw up his arm and warded off the blow, saying she “was a brave squaw,” a trait which the Indians never failed to admire. She and her son, John, and two daughters were made prisoners.

Cunningham, the owner of the house at the spring, was killed and the house burned. The bloody work did not cease until all who could be found were either killed or taken prisoner.

Very soon the Indians made preparations to leave. The prisoners were gathered in a group, an imperfect list of whom are: James Cunningham, Archibald Hamilton, Marion Hamilton, Mary Hamilton, the Gilmores, Betty Henry and Margaret Cunningham. A partial list of the dead were: whole family of Daughterty, Mrs. Cunningham, five Hamiltons, Thomas, Elizabeth, and William Gilmore and Jane Logan McKee, my great, great, great, great, great grandmother.

The most reliable accounts which I could receive from aged people and from the descendants of the sufferers state that in the two invasions, from sixty to eighty persons were killed, and in the last invasion, from twenty-five to thirty were carried into captivity. Those taken captive were brought to the Shawnee town north of the Ohio River, near to where Chillicothe, Ohio, stands. The captives related that the Indians took other prisoners as they passed, onto the Ohio. These were probably taken on the Cowpasture River, as it is generally believed that some were captured there about this time. Some of the stories of brutal killings on the wearisome march are heartbreaking, and I see no need in rehearsing them now.

At one of the encampments, some of the prisoners found some leaves of a New Testament, and being anxious to preserve them, were drying them at the fire, when one of the Indians snatched them up and threw them on the fire, no doubt thinking they were some communication which they wished to send home.

Mrs. Gilmore and John were separated from the two girls after crossing the Ohio, and they were never heard of again. Later on, she and John were also sepa-

rated, she being sold to French traders and taken to Fort Pitt, while John remained with the Shawnees. Both finally came back to Kerrs Creek. A number of others were eventually sought out and brought back by their friends.

Another touching incident is related. When the captives had crossed the Ohio River, the Indians, feeling greatly elated over their success, requested the captives to sing for them. It is said that Mrs. Gilmore struck up, with plaintive voice, the One Hundred and Thirty-Seventh Psalm of Rous' hymnal, in use then in all the churches. Its appropriateness may be seen from the two following verses:

*On Babel's stream we sat and wept,
When Zion we thought of
In midst thereof we hanged our harps
The willows trees thereon.*

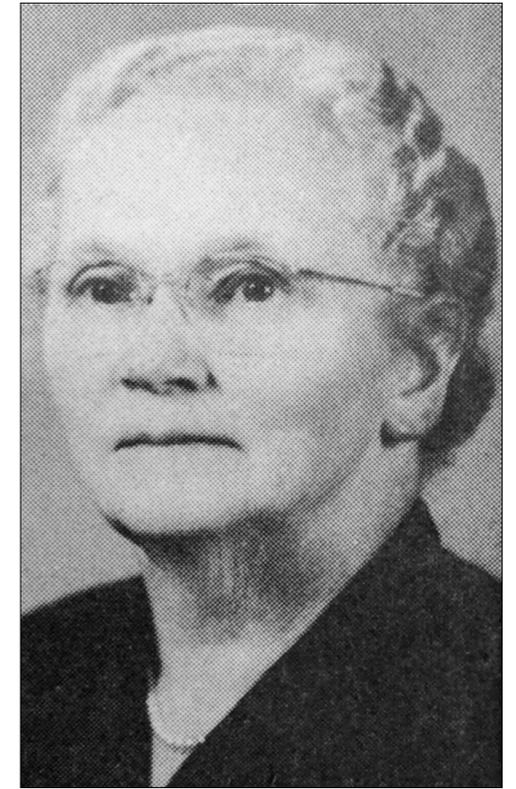
*For then a song requested they,
Who did us captive bring;
Our spoilers called for mirth, and said
A song of Zion sing.*

The old McKee burying ground near the Big Spring was begun when those killed in the first massacre were buried. The big tree in the corner has been pointed out as the place where those who suffered death were laid to rest.

Dr. Brown* says:

“In closing the narrative I have been able to collect of these dark and bloody days, in the history of our country, I am satisfied if I have saved it from being entirely lost. Many of the names and incidents, which would have been interesting, are hopelessly gone. I have tried to present a true statement of the facts, as far as I have been successful in gathering the material for them. The account, imperfect as it is, may interest many aged persons, who have heard their fathers and mothers talk about it. And it may remind the young of the trying times through which their forefathers passed in securing for them the peaceful homes they now enjoy.

I may furthermore state, by way of confirming what has been written, that I have submitted these papers to Captain William C. Gilmore, a son of one of the captives, and who, of course, has heard much all his life in relation to these matters and that the narrative now given meets with his entire approbation.”



Henrietta C. Dunlap, “Miss Nettie.”
Courtesy Lexington News-Gazette.

Author's Bibliographic Note

In compiling this paper, I have used freely the following:

Annals of Augusta History — Waddell

The Winning of the West — Roosevelt

The Covington Virginian — September 8, 1930

* See pp. 2-3.