

TALES OF THE CHEROKEES IN IOWA

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MRS. O'BRIEN AND VALIANT SON

This story had its beginning in 1854.

John O'Brien and Mary, his wife, bought land in what is now Pottawattamie county, near Neola, and settled there in the southwest corner of the township. After turning the sod the first thing Mr. O'Brien did was to plant a ten-acre cottonwood grove. He procured the seedlings from the Missouri river bottom lands. The grove became a landmark.

Mr. O'Brien had little cash left after paying for the land, so the farmhouse which he built was very small. It had only two rooms. The kitchen was also the living room and the other room used as a bedroom and for storage of supplies.

Council Bluffs was the nearest place to trade or get corn and wheat ground. Early pioneers had to follow the divides between streams, as there were no bridges. When occasion demanded Mr. O'Brien followed the divide between the Pigeon and Mosquito creeks. These creeks meandered through the divides, making a distance of twenty-eight miles to Council Bluffs. It took an entire day to travel one way, especially with a loaded wagon. This made it necessary to be away from home three days to get a grist ground.

The incident I desire to tell about happened late in November, 1855, and it was during Mr. O'Brien's absence from the mill. It was cloudy and threatening rain all day. Sleet began falling shortly before four o'clock in the afternoon and darkness came early.

Two Cherokee Indians walked into the house, boldly, without knocking, and placed their percussion cap, muzzle-loading shotguns down in the kitchen near a bench

on which was kept the family water pail. The Indians demanded food, making signs.

Mrs. O'Brien placed a pan of baked beans and corn bread before them on the table. She made for them the last coffee she had, which she had been saving for themselves until Mr. O'Brien would return. When the Indians had gorged themselves one drew up a rocking chair near the cook stove to dry his clothing. The other layed down on the opposite side of the stove. When no man showed up, and it became dark, the Indians decided to remain by the fire all night. Mrs. O'Brien's oldest child at that time was young John, then eight years old, and in the meantime, he had carried wood, filled the wood box, and brought a fresh pail of water.

In the bedroom, against the wall, hung Mr. O'Brien's rifle, but it was not loaded. To make matters worse, there was no ammunition. It all had been shot away at coyotes, that almost daily raided the poultry flocks. The nearest thing to a weapon she could wield was a churn dasher. While the Indians dozed, she placed the dasher close at hand. As double insurance she poured water down the gun barrels of the Indians' guns!

When the deed was done she immediately grew panicky. She thought should they discover the deed when they tried to fire guns, they would take revenge, and she imagined the worst.

SOUGHT HELP FROM NEIGHBORS

Being thoroughly frightened, she thought she needed protection, so she sent young John out into the darkness and sleet storm to the nearest neighbor, Mr. Handbury, who lived three miles distant. She cautioned young John to hurry, as her life depended on his getting to Handbury's as quick as possible.

The wind swung around to the north and it grew colder. All the country was mantled with a heavy sleet.

It was fully three hours before Mr. Handbury and other neighbors living along Potato creek arrived. Mr. Handbury aroused the Indians and in their own language told them to "Puck a chee," which meant to get out. The Indians obeyed without a murmur.

Mrs. O'Brien insisted that a guard be maintained until daylight and the whereabouts of the Indians was definitely known. So it was that all night the vigil was kept, with men stationed fifty yards apart and some fifty yards distant from the house. To the east was placed a young boy with a single barrel muzzle-loading shotgun, loaded with very small pellets for shooting quail.

The night wore on and the sleet ceased. There was no moon. Only the stars shone after the sky had cleared, and to the frightened boy, standing guard just beyond the well, it was lonesome. His alertness kept him wide awake; however, he was shivering with cold.

It was three o'clock in the morning when he heard a crunching noise of cracking, sleety prairie grass. It was like two men walking side by side. That was enough! He was positive he heard the Indians. He was too frightened to give an alarm, so he did the next best thing. Bang went the gun as he fired in the general direction of the approaching men or beast. The men came running as fast as they could over the sleety surface. They all heard the crunching noise, but were admonished by Mr. Handbury to hold their fire until the approaching object came near enough to determine whether it was man or beast.

Imagine, if one may, their consternation when the O'Brien family cow, now dry and allowed to roam the prairie at will, hove in sight. When the weather grew cold the cow headed for home and the warm strawshed.

INDIANS QUIETLY DISAPPEARED

Daylight came at last. The men walked south along the hill to look down into the Mosquito creek valley, and there

they saw smoke curling skyward in the crisp morning air from the Indian camp. Shortly afterward the Indians broke camp, loaded their belongings upon travois and took off up the creek in the direction of the site of the present town of Neola, Iowa.

Mr. O'Brien returned from Council Bluffs that day and Mrs. O'Brien related the story in detail. She told how brave young John was, to travel over the icy prairie in the storm to Handbury's. Said Mr. O'Brien, "I never yet have seen an Irishman that was afraid, and although he is a wee bit of a lad, he is Irish for true."

The writer had as a boy friend and almost daily a companion, John's son, Dennis O'Brien. He later was a business partner. Dennis became a telegrapher, afterwards became a salesman, and was killed by a train at Olathe, Kansas. His brother, Nick, was deputy sheriff. He was shot in the stomach by a robber. When placed under arrest and on the way to jail the robber whipped out a revolver, which he had secreted in front beneath the waistband of his trousers.

Nick was a long time recovering from the wound. The robber was eventually caught and convicted for another crime and served years in a New York prison. The wound developed into a cancer from which Nick died. At the time of his death he was a candidate for sheriff.

All of Mrs. O'Brien's children are dead and she passed on years ago. As a little old lady, Mrs. O'Brien was kind to all. A devout Christian, she always had the family cooky jar full, except when Dennis and I had raided it.

John O'Brien, Sr. and youngest son, Dennis, are buried in the Neola cemetery. A fifty-year old pine tree shades their graves in summer and sighs with the winds of winter. From the location of their graves one may look toward the southwest, but the old landmark, the ten-acre cottonwood grove, has long since been sawed into lumber, and much of the rich soil of the O'Brien homestead has eroded and aggraded, as a part of the Mosquito valley, like so many of the pioneer farms.

GRAVE OF TWO BEAR CLAW

In 1932 some Cherokee Indians from Oklahoma came to the vicinity of Quick in Pottawattamie county, Iowa. The oldest man of the group said they were looking for the grave of Two Bear Claw, his grandfather.

There were about twenty men, women and children, who traveled in a caravan of a station wagon and two automobiles. They camped across the road from the Shaw filling station on Highway Number Six and remained several days.

Someone told the Indians that the county historical society might have some information. The curator had been in that vicinity a number of times and had charted all the Indian villages and camp sites. So it was that the writer became engaged to do the almost impossible thing. The old Indian gave a description of the locality, as he remembered it, and it was very indefinite; one that would exemplify almost any township in the west part of Pottawattamie county, particularly the part intersected by the Mosquito creek.

Said the Indian, "Me see creek valley from grave. Lookum that way," pointing to the northwest.

Having waded up or down most every creek in the county at one time or another, in search of Indian relics, I decided the location of the grave should be along Little Mosquito creek, at about four miles east of Council Bluffs. To this place I conducted the entire group. "How does this place compare with what you remember?" I asked.

"Um lookum like um. Maybe so. We dig. We find big red rock near big oak tree."

We were in a field growing to timothy and clover, walking along a line fence. We sat down in the shade of an elm tree to rest and talk.

Adjoining the hayfield was a pasture with cattle grazing. I knew if we did any digging in the meadow some-

one would have to pay the damage, so I held down the middle strand of wire and invited all to creep through.

The old Indian paced a few steps northwest and told two young Indians to dig. At least that is what I thought he said, for it was in an Indian tongue that I did not recognize. The two young men began their work. At about two depths of the spade they unearthed the red rock. A little south of the rock at the same depth was found the skeleton of a human. There were the shards of a broken pot, three flint arrow points and a stone ax, which was tendered to the writer.

I cartographed the spot taking measurements from the creek and the line fence, and later got the section number and spotted it on my field map.

When I asked how and why the grandfather had acquired such a name, I was told that the grandfather had a long time ago killed a bear that had lost its claws from being caught in a trap. So his tribe called him Two Bear Claw. And thus the grandson was able, after the lapse of many years, through his memory of a spot of ground, plus my knowledge of the locality, to locate the last resting place of his ancestor.

DOG-EATING CHEROKEE INDIANS

On Thanksgiving day in 1888, four Neola youths went to Melton Kilmer's timber, near Yorkshire, over the line in Harrison county, to see some Indians in camp there. It was a clear cold day and all of us had dined on turkey and the trimmings, cranberry sauce and mince pie. We were feeling fine, singing songs as we rode along. The boys were Fred Heath and his brother, Edward, John McCauley and the writer.

Fred Heath and John McCauley were a few years older than Edward Heath and the writer. Both of them were tobacco chewers. Fred Heath was the driver and the team belonged to a brother-in-law, who ran the livery barn. We had a spring wagon with two seats and cowhide lap robes; so we were comfortable.

When we arrived and hitched the team to the fence, we walked up to within thirty yards of the big canvas tepee, and stood watching a lone squaw at work preparing their midday meal.

Suspended on a pole by smooth wire and hanging over a hot wood fire was a black shepard dog. It had not been skinned or viscerated. Every few minutes the squaw poked the carcass with a pointed stick to see if it was roasted enough for consumption. When she thought it was about done, she went to one of the two wagons and got a ten-pound sack of sugar and dumped it into a large tin dish pan, pouring clay-colored water dipped from Mosquito creek to make syrup. While it was coming to a boil, and when boiling, she stirred it with the pointed stick. This done she went to the wagon and brought seven loaves of bakery bread. She then piled oak leaves over the bread and set the leaves afire. We could distinctly smell the toasting bread and get a nose full of the roasting dog. Now, when all was in readiness, she put her hand to her mouth and gave a yell, with a staccato, and fourteen men, women and children piled out of the tepee.

Digressing for the nonce, let me describe that tepee. It was fully twenty feet in diameter and twenty-five feet high, with the poles roped together at the top, and there was a vent through which blue-colored smoke arose. On either side of the flap entrance were decorations depicting a buffalo hunt, Indians on horseback, some with bows and arrows and others with guns and spears. Another was a mountain range with eagles soaring high in the sky, a bighorn sheep guarding the flock from an advantageous cliff and buffalo grazing at the base. It was an ideal picture, well-known in years gone by.

The teams and wagons were government property, the horses branded, and the wagons of the kind the government furnished to Indians who were being taught farming.

THE DOG EATING BEGINS

Now, the squaw began the carving of the dog, and it was here the writer began to feel something wrong in the abdomen. A big Indian man was given the whole of one hind leg, and others various parts; but the squaw kept for herself the heart and liver. That is about all I saw. The big Indian man with the leg dipped a half loaf of bread into the syrup, stepped back to give others the privilege of a dip of their bread into the syrup; then turned and face toward us, at the same time taking a huge bite of the leg-of-dog.

This was too much for my overloaded stomach and I headed toward the spring wagon. I got as far as the fence where the team was hitched. But I could not negotiate the fence. Just that bit of a stoop was too much. I would have straddled between the strands of wire, but the stomach said no and involuntarily I gave one big heave and lost my turkey dinner. I was soon followed by Edward Heath, who also was unable to crawl through the fence; and likewise had to submit to nature's instinctive action to eject what his breadbasket held.

About this time the older boys and tobacco chewers came and seemed to be in a hurry to get away from the place. We had not driven more than a couple of hundred yards when Fred Heath lost his dinner, when he attempted to take a fresh chew of tobacco.

* All this time John McCauley sat stoically and taciturn, but I saw his Adam's apple going up and down rapidly. By this time we had come to the farm of "Hickory Jackson"—William Graybal, a character I shall never forget. We stopped to get a drink and wash out the last of the lingering obnoxious taste from the episode just experienced. Here John McCauley enhanced the value of a part of Hickory Bill's farm, in losing the last meal he had devoured.

Back in school a few days later the professor questioned Edward Heath and the writer about the visit to see the Indians, and had us describe the Indians. We failed to mention the dog feast partaken by the Indians and told only of the wagons, horses and the squaws and children we had seen.

PROFESSOR IDENTIFIES INDIANS

"Ah ha," said the professor, "they were Cherokee Indians, the dog-eating kind. Yes, they were from Oklahoma, and no doubt given permission by the Indian agent to visit their old home in the vicinity of Cherokee, Iowa."

The mention of "dog-eating" set my stomach to a queasy, queer jumping sensation, and I felt very ill; so I asked to leave the room. I did not wait for a reply. Out in the hall I paced to and fro the full length of the hall, viciously chewing a wad of gum.

About this time Edward Heath came into the hall and grabbing up his cap and coat, rushed out and into a blinding fall of snow. The professor had sent him to the postoffice a quarter of a mile away. All the while he spent in making the round trip I was trying to subdue the feeling of nausea, but gave it up, and went home to bed.

Now, at seventy-five years old, I am just able to forget the visit to Kilmer's grove and the effect it had on my stomach. Truly they were the "dog-eating Indians."

My companions of that day have all passed away—the two Heaths by natural death, and John McCauley by being hit by an automobile on the highway at Weston, Iowa. The writer is the sole survivor.

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