

Captives of the Sioux

The four women who were made captive by the Sioux during the Spirit Lake Massacre underwent incredibly horrible experiences. Immediately after they left the Lakes, Abbie Gardner commenced worrying about her only living sister, 16-year-old Eliza M., who had left the Gardner cabin before the massacre to assist a pioneer family in Springfield, Minnesota.

When we encamped at Heron Lake, fifteen miles from Springfield, on the 26th of March, the warriors painted themselves in their most fierce and hideous fashion, and rifle in hand and scalping knife in belt, again sallied forth on the warpath, leaving us captives in charge of one of the warriors and the squaws. Before leaving they took special pains to communicate to us by signs and gesture, and their jargon, the terrible work they meant to do. Knowing, as I did, that my sister was among their intended victims, and thinking that she would either be killed, or share with me what I felt to be a worse fate — that of a captive — the anxiety I felt for her, and the rest of the people at Springfield, baffles description; but I could only await in suspense for their return. . . .

After an absence of two days, the warriors who had gone to the attack on Springfield returned to our camp, bringing in their plunder. They had twelve horses, heavily laden with dry goods, groceries, powder, lead, bed-quilts, wearing apparel, provisions, etc. They gave us to

understand that they had met with a repulse; but to what extent we could only conjecture. They told us they had killed only one woman. Whether that was my sister or not, I could not tell.

Among this plunder were several bolts of calico and red flannel. Of these, especially the flannel, they were exceedingly proud; decorating themselves with it in fantastic fashion. Red leggings, red shirts, red blankets, and red in every conceivable way, was the style there, as long as it lasted. Could anything have amused me in those sad days, it would have been to see their grotesque attempts to wear the habiliments of the whites; especially the attempts of the squaws to wear the tight-fitting garments of the white women. They would put in one arm and then reach back and try to get in the other; but, even if they succeeded in getting both arms into the sleeves at the same time, they were too broad-shouldered, and brawny, to get the waist into position, or to fasten it; so after struggling awhile they would give up in disgust. They were altogether too much the shape of a barrel to wear the dresses of white women. So they cut off and threw away the waists, and made the skirts loose fitting sacks after the squaw fashion. All this amused them greatly; they would laugh and chatter like a lot of monkeys. . . .

Early on the morning after the warriors returned from Springfield, the Indians started for the unbroken northwestern wilderness. The squaws and prisoners were loaded with seventy and more pounds of camp equipment, food, and plunder, while the braves strode ahead unencumbered. These hardships proved too much for Mrs. Thatcher whose babe had been torn from her bosom and killed.

Taking cold, as she inevitably must, she was thrown into phlebitis fever and a combination of ills, resulting in the most excruciating suffering. One breast gathered and broke, and one limb, being swollen to nearly twice its natural size, turned black, even to her body, and the veins were bursted by the pressure. No woman in like condition at home would think of being out of bed . . . but she, poor woman, was compelled not only to tramp through the snow and wade through ice-cold water, waist-deep, but even to chop and carry wood at night. . . .

Although the fear of pursuit had subsided still we journeyed westward, knowing no rest. Frequently breaking the ice with the horses, the Indians waded through, and we followed, where the water was waist-deep. Then, with clothing wet and frozen, we tramped on through wind and storm, lying down at night in the same clothing in which we had forded the streams. Often we went without food for two or three days at a time, and when we did get any it was the poorest and most unpalatable. The Indians themselves were never entirely without food long at a time; but we captives got only what they did not care for. No hay was carried, and no grass could yet be found, so the poor horses fared if possible, worse than we. From time to time, one of them would die of starvation; and then the Indians had meat. But as the horses died our burdens were increased. Such things as they could not put upon the backs of the already overburdened squaws and captives, they buried; marking the place by blazing trees, by boulders, and by streams, etc.

Our journey led through the famous pipestone quarry, in Pipestone county, Minnesota. It is situated on a small tributary of the Big Sioux, called Pipestone creek. . . . Our captors rested themselves here for about one day, in which time they were engaged in the delightful task of gathering the pipestone and shaping it into pipes, which

were formed in the manner foretold ages ago. . . . After six weeks of incessant marching over the trackless prairie, and through the deep snow, across creeks, sloughs, rivers and lakes, we reached the Big Sioux (at about the point where now stands the town of Flandrau). Most of the journey had been performed in cold and inclement weather, but now spring seemed to have come. . . .

The Big Sioux posed a problem in crossing which happily for the Indians was solved by giant trees which had been undermined by the current and fallen across the river at various points. Piles of driftwood collected against these trees, forming a fairly good albeit precarious bridge.

On such a bridge, we were to cross the now swollen waters. Mrs. Thatcher, whose painful illness and terrible sufferings have been alluded to, had now partially recovered, and was compelled to carry her pack as before. During the six weeks of her captivity, with fortitude heroic and patience surprising, through slush, snow, and ice-cold water; through famine and fatigue, and forced marches; with physical ills that language cannot adequately portray; and with heart wounds yet deeper, she had been upborne by the hope of yet being restored to her husband and relations. . . . As we were about to follow the Indians across one of these uncertain bridges, where a single misstep might plunge us into the deep waters, an Indian, not more than sixteen years old, the same who snatched the box of caps from my father, and who had always manifested a great degree of hatred and contempt for the whites, approached us, and taking the pack from Mrs. Thatcher's shoulders and placing it on his own, ordered us forward. This seeming kindness at once aroused our suspicions, as no assistance had ever been offered to any

of us, under any circumstances whatever. Mrs. Thatcher, being confident that her time had come to die, hastily bade me good-bye, and said, "If you are so fortunate as to escape, tell my dear husband and parents that I desired to live and escape for their sakes." (It will be remembered that Mr. Thatcher was away from home at the time of the massacre.) When we reached the center of the swollen stream, as we anticipated, this insolent young savage pushed Mrs. Thatcher from the bridge into the ice-cold water, but by what seemed super-natural strength she breasted the dreadful torrent, and making a last struggle for life reached the shore which had just been left, and



The Cruel Death of Mrs. Thatcher
With long poles shoved her back into the angry stream.

was clinging to the root of a tree, at the bank. She was here met by some of the other Indians, who were just coming upon the scene; they commenced throwing clubs at her, and with long poles shoved her back into the angry stream. As if nerved by fear, or dread of such a death, she made another desperate effort for life, and doubtless would have gained the opposite shore; but here again she was met by her merciless tormentors, and was beaten off as before. She was then carried down by the furious, boiling current of the Sioux; while the Indians on the other side of the stream were running along the banks, whooping and yelling, and throwing sticks and stones at her, until she reached another bridge. Here she was finally shot by one of the Indians in another division of the band, who was crossing with the two other captives, some distance below. . . .

The tragic death of Mrs. Thatcher left only three captives, each of whom could readily envision a similar fate from their relentless foes. All these women were young and prior to their capture had looked forward to a long and happy life. Mrs. Noble was particularly bereaved because she was a cousin of Mrs. Thatcher and had lived with her for many years.

While making this journey, we had frequently met roving parties of Indians, from the various bands of Sioux, who always seemed to be "Hail fellows well met," with our captors. It has been claimed by the Sioux generally, that Inkipaduta and his band were "bad Indians," and dis-fellowshipped by them. But I surely saw nothing of the kind while I was among them. Whenever we met any of the other bands, our captors would go over the story of their achievements, by word, gesture, and the display of

scalps and booty, giving a vivid description of the affair; reproducing in fullest detail even the groans and sighs of their victims. To all this the other Sioux listened, not only without any signs of disapprobation, but with every indication of enjoyment and high appreciation. . . .

On the sixth of May, as we were encamped some thirty miles west of the Big Sioux and near a small lake, known to the Indians as Chau-pta-ya-ton-ka, or Skunk lake, we were visited by two Sioux brothers, by the name of Ma-kpe-ya-ha-ho-ton and Se-ha-ho-ta, from the reservation on Yellow Medicine river, Minn. They remained over night, enjoying the hospitality of Inkpaduta; and were especially entertained by a pantomimic representation of the march through, and *heroic* deeds done in Iowa and Minnesota. After the entertainment was over, the visitors proposed to purchase me, but were informed that I was not for sale. Perhaps they might have bought Mrs. Noble, but in some way got the impression that she was German; and, as is well known, the Sioux have a prejudice against the Teutons. So Mrs. Marble was the favored one, for whom they paid, as they claimed, all they had — all their trading stock. . . .

Before leaving her two friends, Mrs. Marble explained how she had been purchased and expressed confidence that she would be returned to her people. If so, she promised to do everything in her power to rescue Abbie and Mrs. Noble. Mrs. Marble was brought safely to civilization; remarried and spent the remaining years of her life in California.

It was perhaps three weeks after our capture, when our own clothing actually became worn out, and we were compelled to adopt the costume of the squaws, a style of dress

having, at least, one thing in its favor, it was better adopted to our mode of life than that of the civilized nations. . . .

As before stated, we from time to time met with strange bands of Sioux, of the various subordinate tribes. Hence, in about four weeks after the departure of Mrs. Marble, we fell in with a small party of Yanktons. One of them by name Wanduskaihanke, or End-of-the-snake, purchased Mrs. Noble and myself. What he paid I never knew. His motive was to make money by selling us to the whites. Unfortunately our purchaser did not take an immediate departure, as did the purchaser of Mrs. Marble, but continued to journey with Inkpaduta. Now, for the first time since our captivity, Mrs. Noble and I were allowed to lodge in the same tepee. Our owner treated us about the same as our former masters, and we were required to trudge along and carry a pack as before. Our master was a one-legged Indian, and having no artificial limb he hobbled about on a crutch. It might be well said, he lived on his horse. He went hunting mounted, and his squaw, or one of us captives, had to follow after him and pick up the game. I have followed after him many a weary mile for this purpose. If any game was shot in the water, his dog, being trained for that purpose, would bring it out to the shore, where I would take it and carry it on.

One evening, a few days after we were sold, just as we supposed we were settled for the night, and as Mrs. Noble and I were about to lie down to rest, a son of Inkpaduta, of the name of Makpeahotoman, or Roaring Cloud, came into the tent of the Yankton, and ordered Mrs. Noble out. She shook her head and refused to go. I told her she had better, as I feared he would kill her if she did not. But she still refused. Mrs. Noble was the only one of us who ever dared to refuse obedience to our masters. Naturally of an independent nature, and conscious of her superiority

to her masters in everything except brute force, it was hard for her to submit to their arbitrary and inhuman mandates. Frequently before, she had refused obedience, but in the end was always compelled to submit. All the reward she got for her show of independence was heavier burdens by the way, and a bloody death at last.

No sooner did she positively refuse to comply with Roaring Cloud's demand, than, seizing her by the arm with one hand, and a great stick of wood, she had a little while before brought in for fuel, in the other, he dragged her from the tent. When I saw this I well knew what would follow. It would have been madness, and in vain, for me to interfere; the Yankton did not, except by words. I could only listen in silence to the cruel blows and groans, as the sounds came into the tent; expecting he would return to serve me in the same manner. He struck her three blows, such as only an Indian can deal, when, concluding he had finished her, he came into the tent, washed his bloody hands, had a few high words with the Yankton, and lay down to sleep.

The piteous groans from my murdered companion continued for half an hour or so — deep, sorrowful, and terrible; then all was silent. No one went out to administer relief or sympathy, or even out of curiosity. She was left to die alone, within a few feet of those she had faithfully served, and of one by whom she was tenderly loved. Gladly would I have gone to her side, but was perfectly paralyzed, and terror-stricken with the sights and sounds around me. I evidently would not have been permitted to leave the tent, and any attempt to do so would, doubtless, have brought on my defenseless head a like thunderbolt. Mrs. Noble was about twenty years of age, rather tall and slender though of good form and graceful in her manners. She was a member of the Disciples church, and during the

dark days of captivity I have frequently heard her sing gospel hymns of praise of Him who rules the universe.

...
The next morning the warriors gathered around the already mangled corpse, and amused themselves by making it a target to shoot at. To this show of barbarism I was brought out and compelled to stand a silent witness. Faint and sick at heart, I at length turned away from the dreadful sight, without their orders to do so, and started off on



Death of Mrs. Noble at Hands of Roaring Cloud
He struck her three blows, such as only an Indian can deal.

the day's march, expecting they would riddle me with their bullets; for why should I escape more than the others? But for some unaccountable reason I was spared. After going a short distance I looked back, and they were still around her using their knives cutting off her hair, and mutilating her body.

All this time the whole camp was in confusion. The squaws were dragging down the tent-poles, wrapping the canvas into bundles, packing the cooking utensils, and loading up the dogs. At last the bloody camp was deserted, and the mangled body left lying upon the ground unburied. Her hair — in two heavy braids, just as she had arranged it — was tied to the end of a stick, perhaps three feet long, and during the day, as I wearily and sadly toiled on, one of the young Indians walked by my side and repeatedly slashed me in the face with it; thus adding insult to injury, and wounding my heart even more than my face. Such was the sympathy a lonely, broken-hearted girl got at the hands of the "noble red man." . . .

If Mrs. Noble could only have escaped the vengeance of Roaring Cloud a few days longer, she doubtless would have been set at liberty and restored to civilized society and the companionship of her sister and two brothers. These were living at this time in Hampton, Iowa. Could she only have known the efforts being made for her rescue, and how near they already were to success, she would have had courage to endure insults a little longer and hope to bid her look forward. At the very moment when she was dragged from her tent and brutally murdered, rescuers under the direction of the United States commissioner, fully prepared for her ransom, were pressing forward with all the dispatch possible.

It was only a few days after her death that we reached the banks of the James river, where now is situated the town of Old Ashton, in Spink county, D[akota] T[erritory]. Here was an encampment of one hundred and ninety lodges of Yanktons, a powerful branch of the Sioux nation. I counted the lodges and would have been glad to count the Indians had that been practicable. . . .

The arrival of a white woman in their midst

proved a sensation to the Yanktons and a steady stream of Indians came to Abbie's tent to see her fair skin and exclaim over it. Despite her unhappy situation Abbie could not help being amused at the opportunity afforded her owner to gain wealth through his unique exhibition. On the serious side she worried about the future as the lone white captive of the Sioux. She had no powerful friends to seek her release and during her captivity she could not be sure she had a living relative, since she did not know whether her sister was dead or alive.

Of all the living things taken in Iowa and Minnesota, Dr. Harriott's pony and myself were all that remained. Of the seventeen horses taken, all save this one had succumbed to the severity of the journey and the cruelty of their masters. The horses had starved to death, or died from exhaustion, and been eaten by the Indians before grass had come, and while game was scarce. . . .

The morning of May 30th dawned as fair and lovely as any mortal eye has ever seen. . . . While the Yanktons, as usual, were crowding our tent to see the "white squaw," there came into the tent three Indians dressed in coats and white shirts, with starched bosoms. Coming into the camp of the Yanktons, who were without a single shred of white man's make, these coats and shirts would naturally attract attention and excite wonder. To me the interest was deep and thrilling. I knew at once that they were from the borders of civilization, whether I should ever reach there or not; but it was some comfort even to see an Indian clothed in the habiliments of the whites.

No attempt was made by them to communicate with me, and I was left in doubt as to the object of their visit. I at

once discovered, however, that there was some unusual commotion among them, and was not long in divining that it was concerning me. Councils were held after the usual fashion of the Indians. First they gathered in and around the tepee where I was; and then, they adjourned to the open prairie, where they sat in a circle and talked and smoked and smoked and talked. . . .

All this parley and these repeated councils, I subsequently learned, were occasioned by the fact that the council was divided. The head Yankton chief seems to have been something of a "granger," and disposed to ignore middle-men. He therefore proposed that they should themselves take me to the military station on the Missouri river, claiming that they would get more for my ransom than these Yellow Medicine men were able to pay; that is, more tobacco and powder. At last, however, his consent was obtained, somewhat as the votes of pale-faced legislators have often been. A present was made to him, and then all "went merry as a marriage bell."

The price paid for my ransom was two horses, twelve blankets, two kegs of powder, twenty pounds of tobacco, thirty-two yards of blue squaw cloth, thirty-seven and a half yards of calico and ribbon, and other small articles, with which these Indians had been provided by Major Flandrau.

The bargain having been agreed to and the price paid, I was at once turned over into the hands of my new purchasers. But so great a business transaction as this must be sealed and celebrated by nothing less than a dog-feast. Of all the feasts known to the Indians, a dog feast is the greatest and the giving of such a feast to me and my purchasers was the highest honor they could have conferred upon us. . . .

This was my last night with the Yanktons; one never to be forgotten. I was still in uncertainty, but felt thankful

to get rid of those from whom I had suffered so much, and who had murdered so many dear to me. . . .

The Indians who negotiated the ransom of Abbie Gardner lost no time in departing from the Yankton village. Two Yankton warriors escorted them lest Inkpaduta or some members of his band



Return of Abbie Gardner with Her Ransomers
Abbie was installed as driver of the wagon.

should waylay and kill their former captive. Abbie was drawn across the James River in a bull-boat. Once safe across, her liberators produced a wagon and span of horses which had been carefully hidden during the negotiations lest the Yanktons demand them as a part of the ransom.

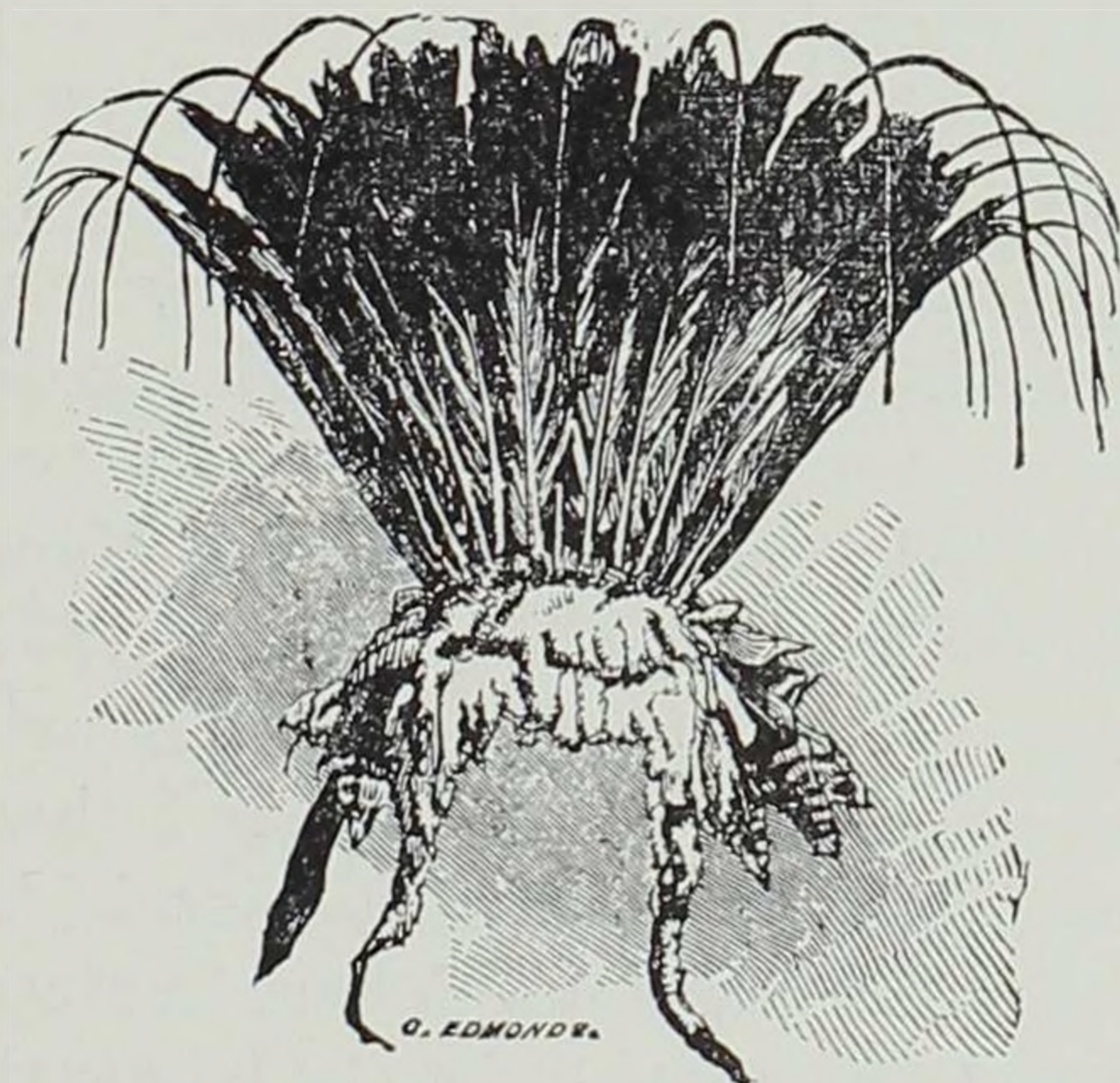
The three Indians who had negotiated Abbie's release were headed by Mazaintemani, or Man-who-shoots-metal-as-he-walks, but more familiarly known among the whites as John Other Day, the beloved president of Dr. Stephen Riggs' Hazelwood Republic. They were, according to Abbie, "quiet, intelligent-looking, middle-aged men, and prominent members of the church at the mission-station on Yellow Medicine.

Abbie was installed as driver of the wagon, which the Yanktons filled with dried buffalo meat, buffalo robes, etc. The five Indians (three Yellow Medicine and two Yanktons) struck out eastward in single file. Soon they reached Lac qui Parle on the Minnesota River whence they proceeded to the Yellow Medicine Agency, and then to the mission station of Dr. Thomas S. Williamson. Here they found the Indians in an uproar because of the failure of their annuities to arrive at the scheduled time.

While at the agency one of the Yanktons presented Abbie with a beautiful Indian war-cap topped with thirty-six large eagle feathers which had been carefully packed away in the wagon without her knowledge. "In the presentation speech," Abbie records, "it was stated that it was given as a token of respect for the fortitude and bravery I had manifested and it was because of this that Inkpaduta's Indians did not kill me. It was also stated that as long as I retained the cap

I would be under the protection of all the Dakotas."

Leaving Dr. Williamson's station, Abbie and her escort proceeded down the Minnesota River. The Sabbath was spent at a doctor's home at Redwood, or Lower Agency, thirteen miles above Fort Ridgely. At the latter post Abbie was showered with gifts before proceeding to Traverse des



The Yanktons presented Abbie with a beautiful Indian war-cap topped with thirty-six large eagle feathers.

Sioux where they boarded a steamboat for St. Paul.

Abbie was taken to the Fuller House at St. Paul where she was turned over to Governor Medary by the Indians the following day. After appropriate speeches, the three Indians were each given \$400 for their services. A purse of \$500 was contributed to Abbie by the generous people

of St. Paul. Two days later, on June 24, she left St. Paul on the steamboat *Galena* for Iowa. From Dubuque she made the eight-day journey by stage coach to Fort Dodge where she was welcomed and entertained by Major William Williams. Here she learned that her sister had escaped, married, and was living with her husband at Hampton. Her reunion with her sister was a happy one, despite the frightful experiences the two girls had passed through since they had last been together on the shores of Lake Okoboji. A scant five months after the Spirit Lake Massacre, on August 16, 1857, Abbie married Casville Sharp of Hampton.

After varied experiences in Iowa, Kansas, and Missouri, she finally settled down in 1891 on the Gardner homestead at Arnolds Park where she had acquired thirteen acres of her father's land. In March, 1894, the 25th General Assembly appropriated five thousand dollars to erect a commemorative monument on the site where the Spirit Lake Massacre began on March 8, 1857. A bronze tablet contains the names of those who lost their lives on that fateful March day a century ago. Abbie continued to live in her home at Arnold's Park where her story was heard by countless thousands until her death in January, 1921, the last living survivor of the Spirit Lake Massacre.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN