

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## Westward with the Gardners

The Spirit Lake Massacre is the bloodiest episode in the annals of Iowa. Measured in terms of sheer cruelty, wanton destruction, and fiendish torture for the few surviving captives, the massacre has few parallels in American history. Because it was perpetrated by a renegade Indian who was feared by members of his own tribe, the Spirit Lake Massacre must be differentiated from those bitter outbreaks of the red man led by such great leaders as King Phillip, Pontiac, Tecumseh, or Black Hawk.

The story of the Spirit Lake Massacre can best be told through the eyes of Abbie Gardner, who, as a child of fourteen, witnessed the bloody carnage and underwent all the sufferings, horrors, and human indignities that could be meted out by a vicious and depraved band of outlaws. As related in her *History of the Spirit Lake Massacre and Captivity of Miss Abbie Gardner* (which first appeared in 1885 and went through nine editions by 1923) the story is replete with stark



drama, combining matchless courage and fortitude in the face of unbelievable adversity.

In her later years Abbie Gardner looked backward with fond memories to her childhood. Her father, Rowland Gardner, was a typical American frontiersman. Restless, energetic, courageous, Gardner was richly endowed with those New England virtues of thrift and industry, coupled with a belief in Almighty God and the need for education. Throughout his life, however, an all-consuming wanderlust drove him steadily westward to the American frontier.

Born in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1815, Gardner had been employed as a youth in a comb factory. The dull routine of a factory laborer held little interest for him so he moved westward to Twin Lakes in Seneca County, New York. There, on March 22, 1836, he married Frances M. Smith, who as time passed bore him four children — Mary M., Eliza M., Abigail, and Rowland. It is through the pen of Gardner's third child, Abigail, that most of our story henceforth will unfold.

Rowland Gardner was twenty-one years old at the time of his marriage in Twin Lakes, New York. He had just settled down after his first westward thrust in 1836, the first of several moves that ended exactly twenty-one years later on the banks of Lake Okoboji in northwestern Iowa. But in 1836 Iowa itself was young, having undergone white settlement for a period of only three years.



Price 25 cents.

HISTORY  
OF THE  
SPIRIT LAKE MASSACRE!

AND OF  
MISS ABIGAIL GARDINER'S  
THREE MONTHS' CAPTIVITY  
AMONG THE INDIANS.

ACCORDING TO HER OWN ACCOUNT.



L. P. LEE, PUBLISHER,  
NEW BRITAIN, CT.  
1857.

Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1857, by L. P. LEE, in the Clerk's Office of  
the District Court of Connecticut.

[Cover of first printed account of massacre.]



A scant ten thousand whites lived in the Black Hawk Purchase and the Indian still held title to four-fifths of Iowa.

Twin Lakes was but the first of many moves by Rowland Gardner. Soon after Abigail was born at Twin Lakes in 1843, Gardner moved to Greenwood in western New York. In later years Abigail recalled the Canisteo River, the busy hum of her father's sawmill, and her happy school days. The recollection of her teachers — Lydia Davis and Sarah Starr — always brought back pleasant memories to her. Abbie recalls her parents as consistent members of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Her father was a strict temperance man, never using liquor or tobacco in any form, and he always sought to instill the principles of temperance and virtue in his children.

In 1850 the family was once more uprooted as Rowland Gardner found a more suitable sawmill at Rexville, a few miles from Greenwood in western New York. Here, in 1851, the eldest daughter, fifteen-year-old Mary, was wedded to Harvey Luce, of Huron, Ohio. The Luces left for Ohio at once and the Gardner family pulled up stakes two years later and set out across Ohio. At Norwalk they were joined by the Luces and their prattling "blue-eyed baby boy." Continuing on to northwestern Ohio and Indiana, Rowland Gardner took a contract for grading the Lake Shore and Michigan Southern Railroad. Abbie



continued her studies in Ohio and Indiana, but her formal school days ended when she was less than fourteen as her father made his final move far beyond the American frontier.

Rowland Gardner had always dreamed of a home across the Mississippi on one of the "far-famed prairies" of Iowa. Accordingly, in the fall of 1854, he left Indiana with his family, halted briefly at Joliet, Illinois, and then continued westward, crossing the Mississippi at Davenport. Despite the lateness of the season, the Gardner and Luce families continued in a northwesterly direction across the lush Iowa prairies toward the setting sun.

As their covered wagon creaked slowly westward, young Abigail noted that the settlements became "more scattered" and the villages smaller and "more remote" from each other. Some days passed without catching even a glimpse of a town. It was then that Abigail realized for the first time where the family was going. A few days more and Rowland Gardner would be in the very heart of the "great wild country" toward which his oxen steadily plodded.

"Crossing the Cedar river at Janesville," Abbie recalls, "we followed the valley of the Shell Rock until we came to the village bearing its name. We were only one hundred miles west of the Mississippi, but the chilly winds of October warned us of the approach of winter; and it was decided to



remain at Shell Rock until spring, or until the selection of lands on which to settle."

Shell Rock contained "no churches, no school-houses, not even a store" when the Gardners arrived in the fall of 1854. School and religious services were both held in private homes, Abbie notes, and the settlers had to go to Janesville for supplies. Although warm friends were made during the winter months, the Gardners were once more on the move the following March. According to Abbie: "Our course still led up the Shell Rock valley to where the town of Nora Springs now stands, thence west to Mason City, which consisted of one store and two or three other buildings; from here to Clear Lake — ten miles distant — the place of our destination."

It was while at Clear Lake that the Gardner family had its first experience with the Sioux Indians in what became popularly known as the "Grindstone War." One of the settlers, James Dickerson, had been visited by a band of Indians, one of whom chased and killed his only rooster, knocking down and breaking his grindstone during the pursuit. Furious at this wanton destruction, Dickerson felled the Indian with a piece of the grindstone while the entire band of Indians looked on. The Indians promptly demanded compensation for the wounded man, and he was finally given five or six dollars, some bed quilts, and several other less valuable articles.



Aware that the Sioux must be taught a lesson, a band of twenty-five men under the leadership of John Long of Mason City, marched from the scattered settlements leaving their wives and children unprotected, and in mortal fear of annihilation. When Long and his men reached the Indian camp, the chief indicated a desire to parley, the money and articles given by Mrs. Dickerson were all returned, the pipe of peace smoked, and the Sioux agreed to leave that part of the country, which they had previously vacated by the Treaty of 1851. Long and his men returned to their homes, to the joy of their families. The "Grindstone War" thus came to a happy end.

Meanwhile, rumors spread among the whites that the Sioux to the number of five thousand were encamped a few miles distant, prepared to attack and overwhelm the settlers. Panic-stricken, the Gardner family and all their neighbors retreated to what is now Nora Springs, where they pitched camp for three weeks, until the danger of Indian attack abated.

Abbie recorded in her book a personal crisis that occurred during the flight of the settlers from Clear Lake to the vicinity of Nora Springs.

When the time came for our family to go I remembered an old hen, with a brood of young chickens, which I wished very much to take with me, as I feared they would be killed by the Indians or die of starvation. But no room for them could be found in the wagon, so I ran out just



before we started to take a farewell look, and lingered to pound for them some extra ears of corn, as they were too small to eat the whole kernels, and there being no mills within seventy miles the corn had to be cracked for them. With tearful eyes I parted from my chickens and took my place in the wagon, terrified with thoughts of the vicious Sioux, who were the cause of so much trouble.

When the family returned to their Clear Lake cabin, Abbie rushed to the barn to see her pets. "The old hen was gone," she records in her book, "but the chickens which in three weeks had grown nearly out of my knowledge were all nestled together in their accustomed corner."

Despite the danger from wandering bands of Indians, Rowland Gardner determined to push westward far beyond the frontier. Once more young Abbie recalls the sorrow attending such an uprooting.

Bidding adieu to the dear friends at Clear Lake, with whom we had shared so many privations, hardships, and dangers during the sixteen months we had tarried there, we again took up our line of march, in company with Harvey Luce and family, now consisting of himself, wife and two children — Albert, aged four years, and Amanda, one year. Our journey extended this time into the beautiful region of Spirit and Okoboji Lakes.

It required no little courage to traverse the trackless prairies of Iowa in the spring of 1856. As Abbie recalled in later years:

On the route taken, no traces of civilization were discernible west of Algona in Kossuth county. The Des



Moines river was unbridged, and the sloughs being filled with water were frequently impassable. On the way we frequently encountered the "redskins" by day, and were entertained at night by the howling of wolves. Still we went forward unhesitatingly in our lonely journey; driving the slow-footed oxen and wagons, loaded with household goods, agricultural implements, and provisions, making our own road over many miles of desolate prairie.

As long as danger from Indian attack was not imminent the Gardners could feast their eyes on the rich Iowa prairies.

The far-stretching prairie, clothed in its mantle of green, luxuriant grass, studded here and there with the golden stars of the resin-weed, and a thousand flowering plants of a humbler growth but no less brilliant hues, presented to the eye a scene of enchanting beauty, beside which the things of man's devising fade like stars before the morning sun. Nor were prairies the only attraction. Here and there a babbling brook and sparkling river came together, eager to join hands and be away to the sea; and along their banks were shady groves of maple, oak, and elm, festooned with wild grape, woodbine, bitter-sweet, and ivy, in most fantastic forms and prodigality. Herds of elk and deer, in all the grace of their native freedom, fed on the nutritious grasses, and sought shelter in groves. Every variety of wild fowl — in flocks which no man could number — filled the air and nested on the ground.

On July 16, 1856, the heavy emigrant wagons of Rowland Gardner and Harvey Luce lumbered to a stop on the shores of Lake Okoboji — an Indian name signifying "a place of rest." After prospecting for a few days the two men decided to



locate on the south shore of West Okoboji where Arnolds Park now stands. Gardner built his log cabin a few rods from the Lake. Harvey Luce began erecting his cabin a short distance to the east of the Gardner cabin, but was unable to finish it before the approach of winter. Both families accordingly occupied the Gardner cabin, which Abbie records was the "first dwelling" in Dickinson County. The new "Eldorado" proved a magnet for other settlers, however, so by November 1st six families and several single men were snugly housed within six miles of the Gardner cabin. The nearest trading center for these hardy souls was Fort Dodge, eighty miles to the southeast.

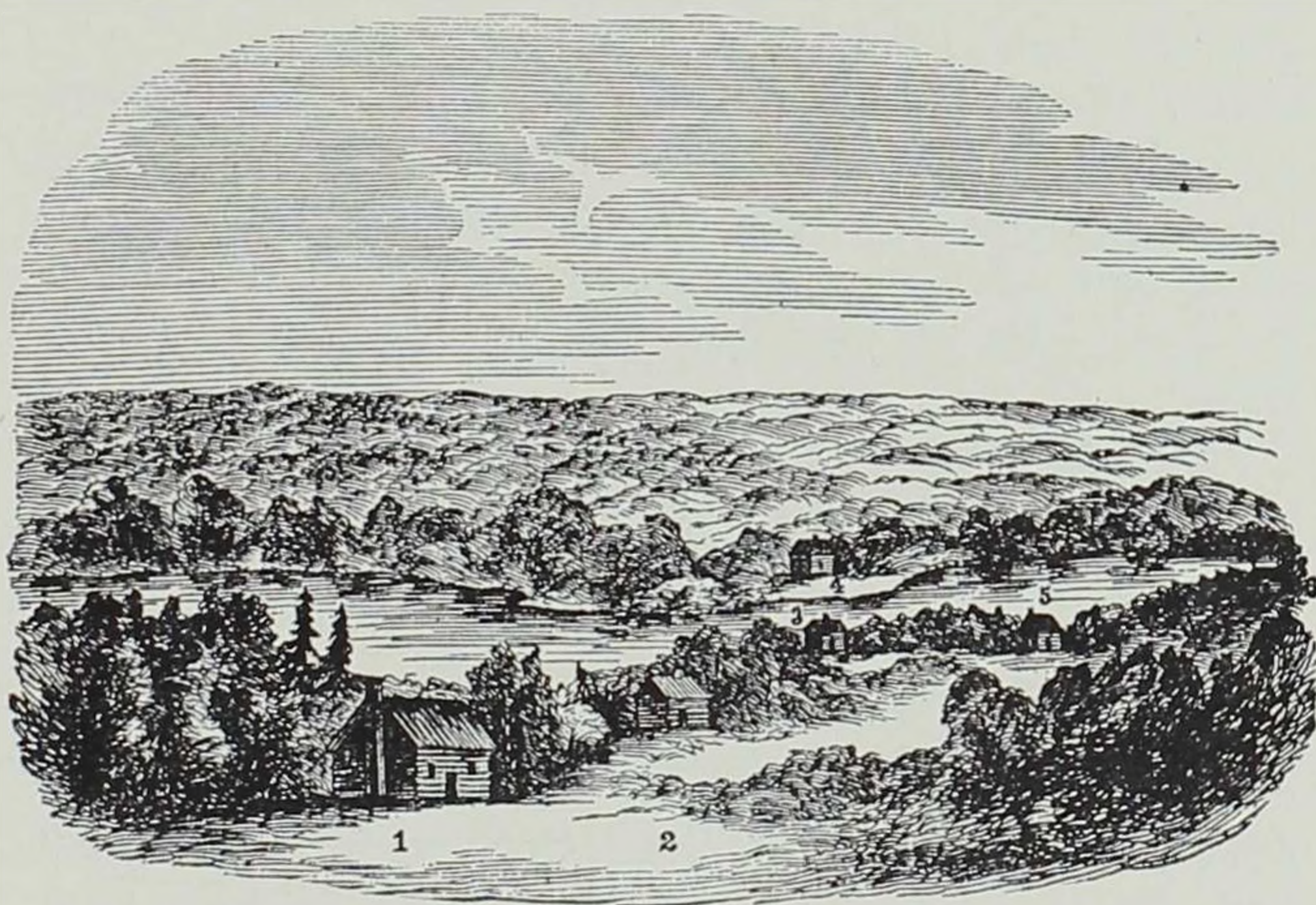
According to Abbie Gardner, four residents of Red Wing, Minnesota (William Granger, Carl Granger, Bertell A. Snyder, and Dr. I. H. Harriott) came to Lake Okoboji to hunt and fish in the summer of 1856. All were young bachelors except William Granger, who had left his family behind. Before snow fell the four men had erected a cabin on the peninsula north of the strait, between East and West Okoboji, now known as "Smith's Point." The other neighbors recorded by Abbie Gardner were:

James Mattock, with wife and five children, came from Delaware county, and established a home, south of the strait, nearly opposite the Granger cabin. These two dwellings stood in close proximity to each other. There was also with Mr. Mattock a man by the name of Robert



Mathieson, who had taken a homestead on the west shore of Okoboji Lake. His wife and four children remained in Delaware county, expecting to come in the spring.

Joel Howe's family consisted of himself, wife, and six children; besides four married children who were not at this time members of his household, and only one, Mrs. Nobles, was in the settlement. He settled on the east side



*Thus forty persons . . . were dispersed among the picturesque groves, bluffs, and lakes of Dickinson County . . .*

of East Okoboji, at the south side of the grove. The names and ages of their children were as follows: Jonathan, aged twenty-three, Sardis, eighteen, Alfred, fifteen, Jacob, thirteen, Philetus, eleven, and Levi, nine. Alvin Noble, son-in-law of Joel Howe, with his wife and one child, some two years old, and Joseph M. Thatcher, with wife and one child, seven months old, came with the fam-



ily of Mr. Howe, from Hampton, Franklin county. They were formerly from Howard county, Indiana. These two families also settled on the east side of East Okoboji, erecting one log cabin, which was occupied by both families. Their cabin was at the north end of the grove, about one mile from the home of Mr. Howe. . . .

There was also, residing for the winter with Messrs. Noble and Thatcher, a man by the name of Morris Markham, who also came from Hampton, and originally from Howard county, Indiana.

Mr. Marble and wife, who came from Linn county, were the first and at this time the only settlers on Spirit Lake. Their location was on the west shore of the lake, about four miles from the present town of Spirit Lake, in the south edge of what has since been known as Marble Grove.

Thus forty persons — men, women and children — were dispersed among the picturesque groves, bluffs, and lakes of Dickinson county, where the chief scenes of this narrative transpired.

In addition to the above, Abbie recalled small settlements at Springfield, (now Jackson) Minnesota. A few families had arrived on the west branch of the Des Moines in Palo Alto and Emmet counties, and a sprinkling of cabins along the Little Sioux between Smithland in Woodbury County and southern Clay County. All these points lay far beyond the frontier line of 1856 and were remote to the Okoboji pioneers perched on the very rim of settlement.

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