

The Tegarden Massacre

The aboriginal inhabitants played a more prominent rôle in the pioneer history of Fayette County than in most Iowa counties. Of these Indian activities, the incident which has left its sharpest impress upon the consciousness of Fayette County people was the Tegarden massacre, in which three white persons lost their lives just a century ago, on March 25, 1843.

In comparison with the Spirit Lake massacre of 1857, in which thirty-two persons were killed, the Tegarden massacre seems insignificant, yet it cost the lives of more white residents of Iowa than any other similar Indian depredation, except the one in Dickinson County. With the exception of a few scares, and some thieving, the settlers on the Iowa frontier were not seriously molested.

Much of the Indian history of Fayette County centered around the Winnebago farm, school, and mission associated with Fort Atkinson on the Turkey River in Winneshiek County. Located originally on the Yellow River in Allamakee County, the school was transferred in 1841 to the north end of what is now Auburn

Township in Fayette County and was maintained there longer than it had been at the Yellow River location, and enrolled a much larger number of redskin children to receive paleface training in education, religion, and farming methods. The centennial of Fort Atkinson was celebrated with elaborate and largely attended ceremonies in 1940. This fort has two distinctions: it is claimed to be "the only fort ever erected by the United States government to protect one Indian tribe from another," and it is the only pioneer fortification in Iowa of which a single original stick or stone remains to be seen.

Fort Atkinson was built in the Neutral Ground, which was a zone forty miles wide extending from the Mississippi River more than halfway across the State to the Des Moines River. The area was established in 1830 to separate the Sauk and Fox Indians from the warlike Sioux. The south boundary of this strip cut off approximately the northern two-thirds of Fayette County from legal white settlement. This line enters Fayette County from the east at a point about where primary road No. 56 crosses the Fayette-Clayton County line, and leaves Fayette at the Bremer County line a few miles northwest of Westgate. The exact location was figured out in 1934 by S. M. Foote, Jr., assistant county

engineer of Fayette County, from the notes of the original surveyors. In 1840 the Winnebago Indians were moved into the Neutral Ground from Wisconsin to form a buffer between the hostile Sauks and Foxes and Sioux. The underlying conditions leading up to the Tegarden massacre grew out of the location of the Neutral Ground, because settlers and traders, forbidden to enter the tract, sought to get just as close to the boundary line as they dared. Inasmuch as no official surveys had been made at that time they had to do a good deal of guessing. The cabin of Tegarden, a trader with the Indians, was close to the line, on the trade route from Dubuque to Fort Atkinson. Like most of the traders, who were of a roving, unstable character, he made his home where opportunity beckoned. As a class, the traders often provoked their untutored customers by unscrupulous dealing, and sowed seeds of trouble by illegally selling to the Indians liquor which roused their savage instincts.

No more is known now about this early-day tragedy than was known in 1878, when a firm which published county histories sent a man to Fayette County to do research work and writing. Even though his very name is now forgotten, this "historian" has enjoyed the reputation of having

been assiduous in his efforts and reliable in his conclusions. "The old history", as the term goes, is always cited as authentic. This account of the Tegarden massacre is derived mainly from that volume.

Though the scene of the Tegarden massacre was definitely known in 1878, the exact location is in some doubt today. And even in 1878 some uncertainty existed as to names of the principal figures in the affair, then only thirty-five years in the past.

The locality is in what is sometimes referred to as the historical center of Fayette County. About half a mile west of primary road No. 150, and about two miles southwest of the town of Fayette, stands the memorial boulder with historical marker dedicated on June 2, 1940, on the spot where stood the cabin of Franklin Wilcox, erected just a century before as the first dwelling of a white family in Fayette County. Nearby and across the road is the Alexander mansion, still occupied as a dwelling, which in its day in the 1850's was the finest residence in the county, being the home of the county's wealthiest resident. Only a few rods behind the Alexander house is the site of the second cabin of James Beatty and William Orrear, two single men who came in 1841 or early in 1842, and whose first cabin,

several rods to the southwest, probably was the second dwelling erected in the county. At the edge of the road nearby is the famous Alexander elm which, with its diameter of six feet and four inches and its limb spread of 118 feet, is claimed to be the largest tree in northeastern Iowa.

Just about a mile west of this cluster of historic spots, and south of a county road, near a draw which in wet seasons becomes a small creek, is the supposed location of the Tegarden cabin, which was a combined dwelling and trading post. It was occupied in 1843 by a man whose name probably was Henry Tegarden, together with his wife, a son whose age was variously stated at from nine to thirteen years, a daughter said to have been either seven or eleven years old at that date, and a "baby" about three years old. A trading partner named Atwood was at the Tegarden house at the time of the massacre.

A trapper and Indian trader in Dubuque County in 1837 and 1838 was known as Henry T. Garden or T. Garden. In Clayton County the name is variably spelled T. Garden, or Tegarden, or Tegardner, the last variation appearing in a marriage record of 1846. In Fayette County the spelling style of Tegarden has been generally followed. In the indictment of the

Indians for murder, still another difference is noted, the decedent being named as Moses Tegarden.

Atwood had a bad reputation, and may have been the man whose manner of dealing with the Indians provoked the retaliation; but both Tegarden and Atwood in their trade with the Winnebagoes made whisky their staple merchandise. One of the Winnebagoes of Little Hill's band had pawned his gun to either Atwood or Tegarden, in exchange for whisky. The trader sold the gun, and so could not produce it when the Indian came to reclaim his property. The brave was apparently pacified with a little more firewater, but the transaction evidently rankled.

The Indian who had figured in the gun trade, together with two companions, came to the Tegarden cabin in the afternoon of March 25, 1843, and by evening the three Indians and the two white men were all thoroughly intoxicated. The signs pointed toward trouble. As evening approached Mrs. Tegarden walked a mile east to the Franklin Wilcox home for refuge, but was not permitted by her husband to take the children.

"After carousing until late in the evening", according to a statement of A. J. Hensley as quoted in the Fayette County history of 1878, "all went to sleep on the floor except the little girl, who

was in the bed. Along in the night the Indians awoke, and moving about stealthily bound Atwood and Tegarden securely with cords before their doomed victims awoke. The red fiends, maddened with whisky, began hacking Atwood with their tomahawks. He yelled lustily, but without avail; his cries gradually becoming weaker, and the little girl thought they were about half an hour in killing him. They then commenced cutting her father, but he begged of them 'if they were bound to murder him to shoot him at once, and not murder him by inches,' whereupon one of them seized a gun and shot him through the head. They then killed the little 'three year old,' and badly wounded the older boy, leaving him for dead. One of them came to the bed where the little girl lay listening and shuddering as the murderous work went on, and struck her two or three times with a tomahawk, cutting her badly; one blow laid open one side of her face. The little heroine told Mr. Beatty that she supposed they would have killed her, too, only she had noticed, while they were pounding and cutting the others, that the more their victims writhed and screamed the more the Indians struck, so when they struck her she cried out once or twice and then lay perfectly still and quiet, so that they left her thinking that she too was dead."

After the slaughter, the Indians went out to harness Tegarden's horse to his cutter. While they were gone the two wounded children, scantily clad because they had not dared to wait to dress, fled from the house into the brush. The Indians soon returned, took what property they wanted, and set fire to the cabin, which burned to the ground.

The night was cold and the ground was covered with fifteen inches of snow. The boy was so badly hurt that he was able to travel only with the help of his injured sister. Though struggling bravely, they soon reached the limit of their endurance. It was daylight when they got as far as Beatty's fence. Worn down by pain, loss of blood, and exposure to cold, they could go no farther. Climbing on the fence, they screamed until Beatty heard. He came to their rescue, took them into his cabin, and gave them the best care he could. Both children had been badly hacked about the face and shoulders. Both survived, though they were left with bad scars, and the little girl lost all her toes from freezing.

Beatty and Orrear went a few days later to the Tegarden cabin site, gathered up the remains of the three persons and the fragments of property, and covered them with a mound of earth which Mr. Hensley said he "had seen many a time".

When the Fayette County history was being prepared in 1878, the "historian" went to the site indicated by A. J. Hensley and traditionally identified by Hensley's father, and found there, near a large spring, ashes, charcoal, bits of bones, broken crockery, and parts of black bottles. Not long afterward further visits were made by Aaron Brown, Judge J. W. Rogers of West Union, A. E. Metzger, and others who did some excavating. Out of the pit that evidently had served as a liquor cellar were dug human bones, a bullet mold, broken bottles, a pocket knife, a child's thimble, table utensils, fragments of dishes, buttons, pipe bowls, an ax, a tomahawk, a silver half dollar, and Indian buffing stones for dressing deerskins — in all over a hundred articles.

The three Indians were arrested at Fort Atkinson soon after the crime by Captain E. V. Sumner, and examined before P. P. Olmstead, a justice of the peace at Monona, in Clayton County.

The Clayton County grand jury on April 25, 1843, returned an indictment for the murder of "Moses" Tegarden against three Indians — "Hogaw-hee-kaw, Wau-kon-chaw-neek-kaw, and Haw-kaw-kaw". James Crawford was district attorney, and James Grant was appointed to defend the Indians when they informed the court they

were too poor to employ counsel. Their application for a change of venue to Dubuque County was granted, and so they were confined in the old log jail in Dubuque. Judge Thomas S. Wilson presided at the trials. Ho-gaw-hee-kaw, whose trial was begun August 7th, was found guilty on August 9th. Wau-kon-chaw-neek-kaw went to trial on August 15th and was found guilty the next day. Haw-kaw-kaw was found guilty on August 17th, also one day after being put on trial.

Although Judge Wilson on August 18th sentenced all three to be hanged between 10 A. M. and 3 P. M. on September 12, 1843, the sentence was not executed. Their cases were appealed to the Supreme Court of the Territory which affirmed the judgment of the District Court, but did not fix a time for execution. "Why sentence was not executed, or what final disposition was made of the Indians, cannot be definitely ascertained. It is said that one of them was killed in jail by his companions."

Atwood, Tegarden, and the baby were the first white persons known to have died in Fayette County. All who were involved in the Tegarden massacre were human driftwood, of little account while they lived. No trace of any of the survivors has existed for several decades. Yet in the century since that fatal night no chapter in the

history of Fayette County has quite the power to stir the imagination painfully as that first stark tragedy on the winter prairie.

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