

THE PALIMPSEST

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The Milton Lott Tragedy

Sometime in the summer of 1846, while surveyors were busy locating section lines in the Iowa River Valley and Congress was preparing to admit Iowa into the Union, a trapper and trader named Henry Lott settled with his family on the north bank of the Boone River near its junction with the Des Moines. There they built a rude cabin nearly thirty miles from the nearest settlement at Pea's Point down the Des Moines River. To this outpost near the Indian country Henry Lott brought a supply of bad whisky, a few cattle, and some horses.

It was not long before he had customers. Roving bands of Indians liked his liquor, though they resented his intrusion upon their hunting grounds. After a few drinks the braves were willing to trade their ponies and other possessions for more whisky. Later they claimed that Lott had stolen their horses.

Among the most frequent visitors at the Lott

cabin was a band of renegade Sisseton Sioux under the leadership of Sidominadota. They were outcasts whose mutual ostracism united them. Sometimes there were as many as five hundred members of the band, but usually they divided into small groups of less than fifteen braves. The favorite haunts of these marauding bands, feared by white men and Indians alike, were the headwaters of the Des Moines and Little Sioux rivers. Sidominadota, or Two Fingers as he was called, was unusually savage and treacherous.

During the fall of 1846 the Sioux lost several horses which were traced to Henry Lott. When the Indians came to claim their ponies Lott denied that he had stolen them. The anger of the Indians blazed. Sidominadota accused Lott of being a horse thief as well as an intruder upon Indian territory and ordered him to get out of the country. Lott refused. His cabin was located within the region ceded to the government by the Sauk and Fox Indians in 1842 and several miles below the Neutral Ground. If there was any trespass, the Sioux were guilty of that offense. Nevertheless, they resented the westward extension of settlement and probably had a particular grievance against Lott.

It was December when the Indians came to reclaim their ponies. Winter had already begun.

The river was frozen and the snow was deep. Obtaining no satisfaction from Lott they stayed in the neighborhood. Occasionally they shot at the cattle and helped themselves to honey in Lott's bee hives. No doubt they came often to the cabin begging and bartering for whisky.

One day when Lott and his sixteen-year-old stepson were away, leaving Mrs. Lott and Milton, aged twelve, alone, the Indians became unusually surly. They ordered the boy to find all his father's horses and fetch them to the cabin. If he did not do as he was told they threatened to kill him. Without sufficient clothing the boy was thrust out into the cold and trudged away into the woods. Frightened as he was, he realized that he had a chance to escape and bring help to rescue his mother. As soon as he was out of sight he made for the river, which afforded a clear trail to the settlements downstream. Though the snow was deep in the woods it had blown off the ice on the river, so the going was relatively easy.

Meanwhile, unknown to Milton, his father and half-brother had returned. Seeing that the Indians were making trouble at the cabin, and supposing that they would be overpowered and perhaps killed if they should intervene, the white men hid in the brush across the river and watched. Against so many war-painted braves they were

helpless. At last they decided to leave Mrs. Lott and Milton to their fate and go for help. Stealthily they left their hiding place and started for Pea's Point, following the trail through the woods on the east side of the river.

At about the same time Milton set out on the same errand. Mile after mile he trotted along on the ice, keeping as much as possible in the shelter of the hills on the right bank of the river. The northwest wind urged him along. Cold and tired he hurried on, cutting across the land wherever the river made a sharp bend. His heart pounded from fatigue and anxiety and he gasped for breath. Doubt and fear must have occupied his thoughts. Hours passed. The sun went down.

Surely, he thought, it could not be much farther to his friends at Pea's Point. He was nearly exhausted, and his hands and feet were numb with cold. A short distance below a creek that came into the river from the west he decided to climb the bluff. Perhaps he wanted to see if he could discern a familiar landmark. Perhaps he was looking for a sheltered spot where he could rest and get warm. As he toiled slowly up the steep hillside, grasping small branches and searching for a firm foothold, he slipped and fell back into the snow. A feeling of infinite repose crept over him. The snow was as soft as a feather bed and

the wind no longer cut his face. He closed his eyes and relaxed, forgetful of his mission.

Henry Lott and his stepson reached the settlement at Pea's Point a little below the present site of Boone. Aroused by their tale of Indian hostilities, John Pea and his son John, Jacob Pea, Thomas Sparks, John M. Crooks, and William Crooks volunteered to help rescue Mrs. Lott and punish the Indians. A messenger was sent down the river to Elk Rapids, near the present site of Madrid, where Johnny Green and a band of Pottawatomis were spending the winter. The friendly half-breed chief and twenty-six of his braves, glad to harass the hated Sioux, joined the relief party. But when they reached the mouth of the Boone River, they found that Sidominadota and his band had gone, after ransacking the cabin, stealing the table silver, killing and wounding some of Lott's cattle, and taking all the horses they could find.

Mrs. Lott was alone in the cabin, half crazy with fright and worry. For three days she had remained there wondering what dreadful fate had befallen her family. As the long hours passed the fear that her husband and sons had been killed became a conviction. Why had the Indians spared her life? Perhaps they would return at any moment and finish their awful design. The weight of her grief was too much to bear. Weak and dis-

tracted she was more dead than alive when help arrived. The knowledge that her husband and oldest son were unharmed could not efface the memory of those terrible days and nights. And what had become of Milton?

As soon as the circumstances of the boy's departure were known, Henry Lott and some of the rescue party started a search for him. His tracks in the snow were soon discovered. Obviously he had escaped from the Indians, and presently his purpose became apparent. It was not difficult to follow his trail down the river. As the men went on and on they must have marvelled at the boy's endurance, for he was only twelve years old and they knew he was not warmly clad. For twenty miles they traced the route of the heroic boy. Hope that he had safely reached his destination must have revived as the trail approached the nearest settler's cabin along the river. But suddenly the trail ended. They found his frozen body in the snow where he had fallen.

The searching party had no equipment for digging a grave in the frozen ground or any means of conveying the body to Pea's Point, eight miles away, so they placed it in a hollow log and closed the entrance with heavy timbers to keep out prowling animals. In the following January, when the cold weather had moderated, Lott and his friends

returned and buried Milton on a hill overlooking the Des Moines River. No scripture was read and no prayer was uttered but there were tears in the eyes of the men as they paid their last tribute to the courageous boy — the first white person to die in Boone County. On a nearby tree they cut a sign to mark the spot.

Mrs. Lott lived only a few weeks. Suffering from exposure, grief, and mistreatment by the Indians, she could not regain her strength or emotional composure. Henry Lott laid her to rest near the mouth of the Boone River, gathered up his remaining livestock and household goods, and moved down the Des Moines River to a more settled locality southwest of Elk Rapids. To his friends he vowed to take revenge upon Sidominadota and his band. The bloody sequel of the Lott tragedy culminated in the murder of Sidominadota and his family, which probably contributed to the Spirit Lake Massacre.

More than half a century passed. The hardships of the frontier were forgotten and most of the early settlers were gone. The grave of Milton Lott was neglected. In October, 1903, C. L. Lucas of Madrid, with the guidance of John Pea and Thomas Sparks, who had assisted at the burial, located the spot and marked it with a stake. Two years later the Madrid Historical Society

resolved to place a monument at the grave to commemorate the heroic death of the pioneer boy. The grave itself was marked by an iron slab but the monument was erected on higher ground about thirty feet away. Nearly a hundred people attended the ceremony.

As time went on this spot, too, was neglected. Weeds and willows hid the monument. Again the Madrid Historical Society acted. The monument was moved to a grassy level beside the gravelled highway where it stood gray and lonely for another decade or more. At last, in 1930, the Boone post of Veterans of Foreign Wars placed a white fence about the monument. Any one who passes by may read: "Milton Lott died December 18, 1846, from freezing while escaping from the Sioux Indians. Aged 12 years. This was the first death in Boone County."

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