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The Hardships of John Van Cleave and Family

by McClernand B. Crawford

In 1775, Daniel Boone blazed the trail into Kentucky, built the Wilderness Road, and founded Fort Boonesborough. It was not long, that with his brothers, Ben, Billy, and Ralph; John Van Cleave was one of the early settlers of Fort Boonesborough, Kentucky, then part of the State of Virginia. By 1779, the Van Cleave's had settled in Painted Stone Station, which was established by Daniel Boone's brother, Squire Boone. Squire Boone was the husband of Jane Van Cleave who was a sister to the Brothers.

During the Revolutionary period, 1775-1782, the Indians of the Kentucky Frontier and the Old Northwest Territory sided with the British against the American Colonists. The Indians constantly harassed the settlers such as the Van Cleave's with a brand of terrorism that made settling the frontier for only the steadfast of families. Captain Bland W. Ballard of Lynn Station discovered Indian war parties approaching settlements in the region. Ballard raced from station to station alarming settlers of the impending danger. Like most of the settlers of that area, the families of Painted Stone Station decided to temporarily move to Lynn Station to unite themselves against the enemy.



For reasons of safety it was decided to split the settlers into two groups of families and move the groups one at a time. Accompanied by Capt. Ballard, the first set of families began the move on September 14th, 1781. Included in that first group was John Van Cleave and his family which was made up of his wife, Mary Shepherd and their children, Rachel 19, Leah 17, John Jr. 15, Aaron 11, Benjamin 9, Elizabeth 7 and twin girls Nancy and Sally 2. As the settlers approached the Long Run tributary they were ambushed by Miamis & Herons, Commanded by British Captain Alexander McKee. The first attack came on the front with musket fire from the Indians, which lured Capt. Ballard and the men in pursuit of the Indians and away from the main party. With the majority of the men concentrating on the front, the Savages rushed the main party of settlers from the exposed rear. Mary was carrying Nancy, with Rachel carrying Sally when the blood curdling terror began. It did not take long for the attackers to overtake the party. Mary was killed almost instantly by repeated blows from an Indian's tomahawk crushing her skull and splattering her brain matter into the bloody stream. Three of John and Mary's daughters Rachel, Sally and Nancy were captured by the Red Devils. With baby-Sally crying so, the Indians motioned to Rachel to suckle Sally, not knowing that she wasn't the mother. When Rachel was unable to calm the baby down, the Savages were about ready to kill both her and the child, when Ballard to try and rally the men in order save what was left of the settlers. This last ditch effort managed to distract the Indians long enough for the settlers scatter for cover. Aaron and Benjamin managed to escape on one of the horses, with Benjamin grabbing the horse's trail and being dragged as he got aboard. Rachel and Sally escaped with their lives. What was left of the party limped back to Painted Stone Station and into Lynn's Station. Historians disagree on how many of the settlers were killed, but as many as 60 whites lost their lives to the "Red Devils" that day. The Battle would be known as "The Long Run Massacre."

Hearing of the disaster, Col. John Floyd of Beargrass Station managed to scrape together a company of 37 men, which included John Van Cleave and others from Painted Stone and Lynn Stations. The next morning, the Company went back to the Long Run tributary to recover the dead and search for survivors. Many of the bodies that were recovered were mutilated beyond recognition. John was only able to identify Mary by the rings on her fingers. She was buried in the forest; the exact spot has been lost. John Jr., a "fleshy" boy that could not run very fast, managed to hide in a hollow tree where he stayed through the night and was discovered by the company in that morning. Unfortunately, the Indians escaped with Nancy who was never seen or heard from again.

During the recovery, a small band of five or six Indians started trading fire with the militia company. Wanting to extract justice on the murdering Indians, Col. Floyd hastily ordered pursuit. Ballard pleaded with Floyd to first send out scouts to avoid attack, but Floyd ordered full pursuit anyway. As Ballard feared, the small band of a half dozen Braves lead Floyd straight into another ambush. Historians estimate that as many as 700 Miami & Huron Warriors waited for them. Incredibly, Floyd only lost 16 men, but was forced to retreat immediately. Thus, the Indians guilty of murdering the settlers were never brought to justice. This battle would be know as "The Battle of Floyd's Defeat."

Unfortunately for John's family it would not be the last time they would experience terror on the frontier. The family was living at Bryant's Station during its famous siege of 1782. Lead by Simon Girty, other British Officers, and some 500 Indians, the Fort was besieged for two days, August 15th & 16th. It was during this siege that John's son, John Jr., at only 15 years of age shot down an Indian who was standing on a high stump overlooking the Fort. After the siege, Girty and his band of savages lead the British in victory at the Battle of Blue Licks, which is considered the last major battle of the American Revolutionary War.

After the war, John Sr. received a land grant for his bravery at Floyd's Defeat and the subsequent battles with Indians. John and his brothers, Benjamin, William and Ralph settled together on the Buckskin Creek, Kentucky. Afterward, John moved to Shelby County and in 1794 was apparently living near Benjamin on Clear Creek below Shelbyville. On October 9th, 1811 John moved with his son John Jr. and his family to Jefferson County, Indiana where he died in the spring of 1812.

Today you can visit the site of the "Long Run Massacre" & "The Battle of Floyd's Defeat" located along US 60, outside of Louisville, near the town of Eastwood. Some visitors say that on warm September days, when all is quite, you can still hear the screams of the women and children and the war cries of their savage murders.

Note 1: John's Father, Aaron bought the Daniel Boone's North Carolina Farm. Boone went Kentucky and the rest is history.

Note 2: If John & Mary's daughter, Nancy was lucky, she was probably executed by their Indian captors soon after the battle. However, it is very possible that she was immersed into the native culture and subjected to the savage Indian way of life.

Note 3: After Mary's death, John remarried Rachel Demarest-Ryker who lost her spouse, Gerardus Ryker, during the Battle of Floyd's Defeat.

Note 4: Abraham Lincoln's grandfather, also named Abraham Lincoln, was also at the Long Run Massacre.

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