A Battle with the Indians in Pioneer Days

The Pioneers to Parowan, now the county seat of Iron county, Utah, arrived at this place on the thirteenth day of January, 1851, under the leadership of George A. Smith, grandfather of Pres. George Albert Smith. They were two hundred-fifty miles, as the road then ran, from Salt Lake City, and about one hundred eighty-five miles from their nearest white neighbors at Payson, then called Petetneet Creek.

In this comparatively isolated condition, being the first settlement in southern Utah, it is probable that the Indians felt a little more bold in making depredations on the property, especially the cattle and horses belonging to the settlers; and, while these pioneers had followed the admonition given by Pres. Brigham Young to feed and not fight the Indians, yet they had met with some little trouble and difficulties thru the inherent nature of the Red Man to appropriate the property of others to his own use.

A wall twelve feet high, four and a half feet thick at the base and two and one-half feet thick at the top had been constructed around the town, and guards were placed on this wall at night so that the settlers could retire in comparative safety and without the worry and anxiety they had formerly experienced thru fear of nocturnal Indian attacks. This wall proved to be a wonderful protection to the settlers themselves, and each night for some time, all their live stock was secured within its confines, also; but when the number of their cattle and horses passed the one thousandth mark, it became a herculean task to gather them every night from so many miles around, to say nothing of the disadvantages from a sanitary standpoint.

The Parowan, or little Salt Lake Valley, being quite large, offered pasturage for a goodly number of livestock so that it became a bonanza for the polfering tribes--probably for the most part, Utes and Navahoes from Arizona and New Mexico.

The settlers continued to 1ose their animals from periodic, nocturnal raids until they became desperate and decided to take some action that would curb if not put a stop to these all too frequent depredations with the resultant severe losses they had been sustaining for some years. Accordingly a meeting was held where this question was considered. Some thot that all their animals should be herded and corralled at night. Others thot this plan was not feasible but that the stock should be left to run at large and a· picket guard be selected whose duty it would be to move thru the valley and. keep a constant lookout. The latter plan was adopted and Joseph Fish (the writer's uncle), John Lowder, James Butler and William Lefever were chosen to act as this guard, with Silas S. Smith (father of Stella Smith and Edith Dibble of Salt Lake City) as captain. They began their 1abors on the third day of July, 1867, and continued to ride the range, keeping within sight of the animals as much as possible and keeping a constant lookout for Indians. Every night, after dark, they changed their camp and were careful to make no noise or start a fire that might betray their whereabouts.

Things went along quite smoothly for over two weeks, when, on the afternoon of July twenty-first, Horace Calvin Smith (the writer's brother) while riding the range noticed a large number of cattle and horses gathered together but not a soul in sight. He immediately surmised that it was the work of Indians and hurried back to Parowan, some six or seven miles, to give the alarm. It seems that this collecting or herding of the stock together had escaped the notice of the picket guard during the daylight hours.

John Lowder and James Butler had gone to town to replenish their stock of provisions, while Fish and Lafever were just preparing to change camp at about nine o'clock p.m., when some horses passed near them on the full run. At first they thot that the horses were loose but soon found they were ridden by Indians. They hastened down to where some of the stock was and found that the Indians were gathering it.

As it was very dark, they went close so they could bear what the latter were saying. Joseph Fish says, "I rode into the herd within a few feet of some of them and found their number to be about thirty and learned the direction they were going."

It seems to us quite a fearless act to go: right among these desperate, bloodthirsty savages in the darkness, assuming the risk and great danger of being apprehended and their lives taken. When we think of the a1ertness of these Red Men, their uncanny powers of sight and hearing, we can only conclude that their failure to detect these members of the guard was due to the intervention of providence.

The boys then made their way to Red Creek (now Paragonah) to give the alarm. Here they found eleven of the Red Creek boys preparing to go right out, having been appraised of the situation by Lowder and Butler, who, on their return with provisions were unable to find their fellow guardsmen and encountered a number of Indians driving a small herd of cattle. They fired at the thieves and, supposing their companions, Fish and Lafever, had been killed, hurried on to Red Creek where they bad given the alarm.

Soon eleven of the Red Creek boys, led by 8ilas S. Smith, were on their way and started to head off the raiders before they reached the mouth of Little Creek Canyon, which is on the east side of the valley just a short distance from the latter town, and for which place Fish had learned they were headed. As the boys neared this point they were joined by the picket guard who had remained behind long enough to get their suppers. They now heard the Indians coming and immediately charged the herd at full speed firing whenever they could hear or see anyone. Fish, lying down on his white horse, moved on with the herd and getting ahead, stopped them from going into the canyon. The other boys then gave a terrific yell which stampeded the herd and the Indians took to the hills on both sides of the canyon's mouth, hardly stopping to return the fire from the guns of the white men. The boys then drove the herd, which consisted of about 700 head, northwest into the valley for about three miles at break-neck speed. Here they stopped to appraise their loss and were indeed thankful to learn that all the boys were there and no one hurt.

They now began looking for other bands of Indians whom they knew were in the valley, later returning to Red Creek where they met a party from Parowan who had come to assist them. We presume that the Parowan people were appraised of the Indian raid from the report here-to-fore mentioned made by Horace Calvin Smith, and also from a messenger, George Taylor, who had been sent from Red Creek to Parowan for help.

Many years ago Mr. Taylor told the writer about this ride. There were a number of small bands of Indians in the valley at the time he said and one party east of the road began yelping, imitating the coyote and another party west of the road answered in the same language. The little half-broke mare he was riding then stopped and began bucking. He said he could feel his hair standing and wondered just how long it would be before he lost his scalp. After being admitted thru the gate in the Parowan wall he began shouting, "Fight is on with Indiana at mouth of Little Creek and Joe Fish has been killed." Mrs. Lowder, wife of the guard, John, came to the door and said, "It's that damn white horse as done it.

With the help from Parowan they returned to guard the mouth of Little Creek. It was now midnight and the Redskins had gathered a number of herds and were trying to get them into the east mountains, especially thru the Little Creek and Cottonwood Canyons, but their efforts were generally thwarted. Many of the enemy, as before stated, had secured favorable positions behind trees on the hill sides at the mouth of the canyon while our boys were behind a large boulder just out of the canyon. Although only about nine or ten years old at the time, the writer wel1 remembers having passed here with some of his folk, his uncle, Joseph Fish, being with them and the latter showing just where the Indians were entrenched behind the trees on the hill sides and where the whites were stationed behind the boulder, which was perhaps twelve to

fourteen feet long and seven or eight feet high. The fire from their guns could p1ainly be seen on this dark night by the people at Parowan, many of whom got on the roofs of their houses in order to get a better view of the fight. However, just before daylight the Indians ceased firing and withdrew.

At the dawn of the day the tracks of cattle that had got by them during the night were plainly visible but they had only gone a short distance into the canyon and were soon recovered and driven back into the valley.

Silas S. Smith, Ebenezer Hanks and Joseph Fish were the first to cross the creek and proceed up the canyon. Others soon followed and they rode up to a level spot between two perpendicular ledges of rock where they halted for the purpose of throwing out an advance guard, as they were expecting to find the Indians in ambush a short distance ahead; but they had hardly halted when the Redskins, who were on both sides of the canyon in ambush and only about forty yards distant, opened fire on them. They were above our boys, protected by rock, crags and trees, with every advantage as the leaden balls came pelting down among them like hai1 before the pursuers could make a hasty get-a-way. After getting out of rifle range they paused to survey their losses and, as once before, they were overjoyed to find that no one was missing and no one hurt, although two horses and three saddles had been struck by rifle balls and there were many hair breadth escapes. Allen Miller (the writer's brother-in-law) was saved from at least severe injury if not death by his revolver serving as a shield, which was struck by a ball and left him with only a black and blue side. Joseph Fish says that several bullets seemed to have singed his hair they came so close; and Heber Benson, who was only eighteen years old at the time, said that a ball grazed his head, and lodged in his horse's a hip behind the saddle.

There were fifteen of the boys in this company and when we think of the large number of Indians shooting at them from both sides and above at short range in broad daylight and they being fully exposed without one man being injured, it appears nothing short of miraculous; and would parallel the hair-breadth escapes experienced by George Washington at the battle of Braddock's Defeat, where he had two horses shot from under him and many holes in his uniform. An old Indian Chief who visited Washington after the war, said he had ordered his men to direct their fire at Washington and their rifles were leveled at him--rifles that knew not how to miss until that time--but a power greater than theirs, even the Great Spirit, protected him and he could not be killed.

Reaching open ground four boys left their horses and, ascending the south side of the canyon as rapidly as possible, charged the Redskins, who were forced to retreat back to the next mountain. At this time another party arrived from Parowan and a part of this company went up the north side of the canyon and soon drove the savages from that part, but it was about noon before all the enemy had withdrawn and the firing ceased.

Prior to this time, it being shortly after midnight, Edward Dalton arrived with ten men from Parowan and went on north to Cottonwood Canyon for the purpose of intercepting any Indians who might have eluded their vigilance and got by with stock into the canyon during the darkness. On their way up the canyon they suddenly came onto an Indian camp and immediately charged them, irrespective of numbers. It appears that the savages were so thoroughly surprised that they made pell-mell for the bush and the mountains, not stopping to get their saddles, horses, blankets, lariats or other equipment which all fell into the hands of the whites besides recovering all the animals that had been driven there, some fifty in number. It is probable that there were several times as many Redskins as whites and yet, with this sudden surprise attack, the former scurried away like frightened rabbits.

Shakespeare surely uttered a truism when he said, "The wicked flee when no man pursueth."

After Dalton and his men returned with their booty, the whole company followed the Indians thru the Little Creek and Bear Valley country, but only one Redskin was seen who, in the great rush of his fellows had been left behind. He immediately sat down and began firing at them with a Colt's cap and ball revolver. They had no thot of injuring him and were loathe to shed blood unnecessarily, but in this case were forced to in order to protect their own lives.

The fight was now over and the Indians had been driven off, not only without getting a single animal, but had lost a goodly number together with equipment of considerable value and several of their warriors.

Pres. Brigham Young and associates, on learning the details of this skirmish, seemed very much pleased and extended their thanks and congratulations to those who were actively engaged in it.

While cattle rustling continued on a limited scale, it was done by the whites. So far as we are able to learn, this fight put a definite end to the heretofore periodic raids made by the Indians.

This story was given to Bertha M. T. Butler by Uncle Joseph McGregor.