

Indian Warfare.

Recollections of an old Settler

During the first half of the present century there existed, between different Indian Tribes, of the North and West, a succession of sanguinary wars. The conflicts between the contending parties were marked with the characteristic traits of cruelty and ferocity of a barbarous race. The Tribes engaged in these hostilities were the Sioux, Chippewas, Winnebagoes and Sacs and Foxes; their battles were not always fought on their own country, or on their own soil. Whenever and wherever hostile parties met, a battle was sure to be the result, and many incidents connected with that warfare were witnessed by the early settlers of Wisconsin, one of which I witnessed and will relate.

In the month of May 1830, with my family, I visited Prairie du Chien on the Mississippi River: we were the guests of the late Joseph Bolette, then a trader and agent of the American Fur Company. One evening, a few days after our arrival we were startled by hearing continual & successive reports of firearms, apparently on the Mississippi, below and not very distant from the Town. The firing continued for an hour or more, and was succeeded by sound of Indian drums and savage yells, with an occasional discharge of guns. The family having retired at the usual time, were aroused from their slumbers about midnight, by hearing heavy footsteps on the piazzas, conversation in the Indian language, and finally by knocking on doors & window shutters. Mr Bolette immediately arose and went out to ascertain the cause of the disturbance, when he was informed that a great battle had been fought, ~~and~~ the visitors were the victors and had called up their traders to inform him of their victory and obtain the necessary quantity of spirit water, to enable them to celebrate the glorious event in regular savage style. Their wants were supplied, of course, when they took their leave, but not to sleep, neither could we sleep, as the warriors kept up, through the night a most horrible howl - we were enlivened by savage yells. In the morning we heard the particulars of the battle, and during the day witnessed one of the most disgusting and revolting exhibitions that human beings could invent.

On the day of the battle, or more properly the massacre, a war party of some 20 or 25 Sioux, encamped on an Island opposite Prairie du Chien; the party was here joined by a few Menomonees, who volunteered to assist their friends the Sioux. It appears that the latter had previously received information that on that day, a party of Sauks & Foxes, their inveterate enemies would leave their village, situated on the Mississippi, some distance below the Prairie, intending to visit the latter place, and that they would encamp for the night at a regular camping ground about 6 miles below the town & near the mouth of the Wisconsin River.

In the afternoon of that day the war-party embarked in several canoes and descended the River. Arriving near the spot where they knew their intended victims would encamp, they drew their canoes on land and carefully hid them in the thick woods, and then selected a spot covered with a dense growth of bushes, and within short gunshot of the landing place on the camping ground. Here with two Indian canoes they lay in ambush, awaiting the arrival of the unsuspecting Sacs & Foxes. No fire was made, and the stillness of death reigned in the deep forests. Nor had they long to wait for the arrival of their foes. Between sunset & dark, the party, in three or four canoes, arrived at the fatal landing place, and disembarked; it consisted of 18 persons - One old chief, one squaw, one boy about 14 years old and 15 warriors - Upon landing the party commenced unloading their canoes. The concealed party remained perfectly quiet, scarcely breathing, so that their victims might be completely surprised. After all had landed, and while engaged, carrying their effects on shore, leaving their guns & weapons of defence in the canoes, the party in ambush bounded to their feet, and with a horrible war-hoop, poured a murderous volley upon the surprised party, by which all fell except one man and the boy. The former reached a canoe, seized a loaded gun & discharged it, mortally wounding one of the scows, but the poor sac was soon despatched, and the only one of the party of 18 who survived was the boy, who happened to be in a canoe; he seized a paddle, pushed into the stream and made his escape down the swift current of the river. After the massacre, all who yet breathed were despatched & horribly mutilated. Hands, feet, ears, & scalps were cut off, and more horrible still, the heart of the aged chief was taken from his breast, and all taken by the victors, as trophies of the murderous conflict. On the day succeeding the murder, the victorious party assembled, and accompanied by a few squaws, paraded the streets of the village, with the monotonous sounding drum & rattle, displaying on poles, the scalps and members taken from the bodies of the slain. The warriors were all painted in various colors, decorated with feathers, and armed with their tomahawks, war-clubs, & scalping knives; stopping in front of the principal houses, and dancing the war-dance and scalp-dance, ending with hideous yells, characteristic of incarnate Devils. The mangled limbs were still fresh & bleeding: One old hag, carried on a pole the entire hand, with a long strip of skin from the arm of the murdered man attached, elevated above her head, the blood trickling down upon her head & face, while she kept up the death song, and joined in the scalp dance. After this appalling exhibition, which lasted two or three hours, the warriors went to a small mound about 200 yards from Mr. R. & B. residence

and in plain sight, made a fire and roasted the heart of the old murdered chief, then cut it up & divided it into small pieces, among the warriors, who devoured it, to inspire them with courage and "make their hearts bold"!! The whole scene was shocking and disgusting in the extreme, and such a one, we hope, never again to be witnessed in a civilized community. The incident, just narrated occurred in a town containing a civilized (?) population of 6 or 800 inhabitants, under the wall, of the U.S. Garrison, and within gunshot of the Fort. Neither civil or military authorities made any effort to prevent the exhibition of the savage trophies of the sanguinary battle. In the afternoon the party of Sioux warriors embarked in their canoes and ascended the Mississippi on their return to their own village, leaving on the minds & memories of those who witnessed their horrible & frantic orgies, recollections, not soon to be forgotten.

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H. S. Baird