

REVIEWS

Murder in Their Hearts *The Fall Creek Massacre*

By David Thomas Murphy

(Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2010. Pp. ix, 142. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. Paperbound, \$13.95.)

This slender volume re-examines the circumstances surrounding the murder of nine Shawnee and Seneca Indians on Fall Creek in Madison County, Indiana, in May 1824, as well as the subsequent arrest, trial, and punishment of the perpetrators of this crime by law enforcement officials in Indiana during the months that followed. The event, which attracted considerable attention in its time, offers a valuable gateway to our understanding of the evolution of society in frontier Indiana.

David Thomas Murphy argues that the seven white men who participated in the attack typified the first wave of frontiersmen who moved into Indiana: they or their families had either participated in the warfare that had flared between whites and Indians in Ohio or Kentucky, or they were heavily influenced by other settlers who had been scarred by such conflict. Most were small farmers who

also hunted, trapped, and harbored a distrust, if not a hatred, of Indian people, and who assumed that all Hoosiers shared in their prejudices. Moreover, like many residents on the early Indiana frontier, they readily indulged in binge drinking. Motivated by a desire to acquire furs, clothing, and trade goods, the murderers first shot two Indian men in the forest, then shot, stabbed, or bludgeoned three Indian women and four children in the Indian camp. Ironically, the slain tribespeople were relatives of Captain Lewis and Logan, tribal leaders who had repeatedly demonstrated their friendship to white frontiersmen. Following the massacre, the killers dumped the mutilated bodies of their victims in a nearby hog wallow.

News of the attack generated considerable alarm. As Murphy points out, by 1824 central Indiana had attracted many other settlers who

speculated in land and who were eager for economic growth and stability. These newer settlers believed such lawlessness would discourage further emigration (and land purchases) in the region and moved quickly to arrest and incarcerate the perpetrators. They were assisted by John Johnston, the Indian Agent to these tribes who was resident at Piqua, Ohio, and who, like other federal officials, feared that the violence might lead to isolated but retaliatory attacks against settlers and perhaps preclude the sale of additional tribal lands and the removal of the Indians from Ohio and Indiana. Indeed, if this sad series of events has a hero, it was probably Johnston, who labored mightily to maintain the peace and retain the good will of the tribespeople.

Although one of the accused murderers escaped and three others were either pardoned or granted clemency, three of the assailants were convicted of murder and were hanged at a site near Fall Creek in two separate executions. In retrospect, the use of capital punishment against white perpetrators found guilty of crimes against Indians was an anomaly in the United States during the antebellum

period. As Murphy argues, the justice meted out on Fall Creek in 1825 resulted from a rather “unique consequence of the perfect combination, in one place and one time, of specific personalities and specific conditions” (p. 115). Unfortunately, it was not a precursor of similar justice for other tribes.

Murphy’s account of the massacre builds upon Brian Doerr’s description of these events (*Indiana Magazine of History*, March 1997) but Murphy adds additional materials focusing upon tribal subsistence activities, pioneer life on the Indiana frontier, and biographical information about many of the officials involved in these circumstances who later played leading roles in Indiana politics. The volume offers some interesting insights into socioeconomic patterns on the Indiana frontier during the early nineteenth century, and provides a very readable account of this brief but interesting episode of Hoosier history. It might well serve as a reader for classes in Indiana history taught at the secondary level.

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