

THE INDIANS ON THE MISSISSINEWA

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[In view of the interest now taken in marking historic sites in Indiana, it has been thought worth while to publish the following facts concerning the Indians on the Mississinewa, and the battle fought between them and a detachment of General Harrison's forces on the banks of that river, in Grant county, at the close of the year 1812.]

ACCORDING to Indian tradition, the Miamis came to the Mississinewa from the Big Miami near Piqua, Ohio. Previous to this their chief had accompanied a white man to Philadelphia, and while there George Washington, President of the United States, had given him some presents and a parchment on which there was writing. This made the other tribes jealous. Soon the chief sickened and died, and his people believed he was poisoned. Fearing the Pottawattomies, the Miamis came to the most beautiful river in Indiana, the Mississinewa.¹

Its high cliffs alternating from side to side, its winding bed composed of gravel and stone, were favorite haunts of the Miamis. The adjoining lands were the red man's ideal. They were overshadowed with one unbroken forest of black walnut, hard maple, hickory, elm, sycamore, and great thickets of undergrowth. The wild plum trees yielded their fruit in season. The wild grape, the black and white walnut, the beech, the oak, and mulberry also yielded their store. The luxuriant vines and grasses furnished pasture. All the various animals common to the country were here, together with flocks of wild geese in countless numbers, ducks, and turkey, affording food of the most delicious character.

The beautiful river with its many tributaries afforded easy access to these lands. This stream was well stocked with numerous varieties of fish; while its clear waters made them an easy prey to the agile Indian, skilled with the bow and arrow. The springs, gushing from the banks, furnished an abundance of excellent water for man and beast.

It was this paradise of nature that so attracted Frances Slocum, a little girl who was captured by an Indian in the Wyoming Valley, Pennsylvania, and carried here in Revolutionary times. Many years later Frances was found here in Indian garb, leading an Indian life.

¹*Historical Atlas of Grant County*, p. 16.

She loved the Mississinewa too much to go back to her relatives, and was buried with Indian rites in their burying ground on its banks.²

But with all this loveliness of nature the Indian found himself constantly disturbed by the white man. The whites were increasing rapidly in number, and were very eager for this land. The Miamis became alarmed for fear they should be overpowered. When Little Turtle, who was born about the year 1747, became chief, he expressed himself as anxious to do all in his power to preserve peaceful relations between the white and red people. Little Turtle, or Me-chi-quin-no-quah, distinguished himself as a warrior above all rivals. He was the acknowledged war chief at the time of St. Clair's expedition against the Wabash Indians. He directed the movement of his dusky army which resulted in the defeat of the Americans. In 1792 he commanded a body of Indians who made a violent attack on a detachment of Kentucky volunteers, under the walls of Fort St. Clair near Eaton, Ohio, but the savages were repulsed with considerable loss. He was also at the action of Fort Recovery in June, 1794. However, the campaign of General Wayne proved too skillful for the Turtle, and he was defeated at Fallen Timbers. Prior to this battle a council of Indian chiefs was held in which Little Turtle showed his sagacity by refusing to attack the forces of General Wayne. At his death, which occurred July 14, 1812, he was succeeded by Pecon, an Indian with one large eye and one small one. Pecon listened to the warlike eloquence of Tecumseh, and sanctioned the hostile acts of the Miamis.³

Previous to this, General Hopkins organized a military force to operate in the Indian country. His troops were divided into three regiments of Kentucky militia, commanded by Colonels Barbour, Miller, and Wilcox. Also a small company of regulars under Captain Zachary Taylor, a company of rangers under Captain Benjamin V. Beckes, of Vincennes, and a company of scouts commanded by Captain Washburn. They started from Vincennes, and moved northward very slowly until they reached the east bank of the Wabash opposite the Prophet's town, where they encamped. They had been expected for a long time by the Indians, and this made it necessary for the white men to guard their troops well. Accordingly, a party of ten or twelve mounted men was sent out in different directions as scouts to reconnoitre the country. A portion of these, John La Plante, Dr. Gist, and a man named Dunn, when

²*Indiana Magazine of History*, I, p. 119.

³*History of Wabash County*, p. 25.

about six miles from camp, discovered a small party of Indians. La Plante, who was formerly an Indian trader, soon saw that the Indians meant to cut them off from their camp. He urged his comrades to make their escape with him. However, Gist and Dunn wanted to get the number of the enemy. They watched their movements until the Indians were upon them. La Plante put spurs to his horse and made his escape without difficulty. Gist finally escaped, but Dunn was shot down and killed.

The Indians, consisting of Miamis, Winnebagoes, Kickapoos, and Pottawatomies, numbering about seven hundred, had not been idle. They were strongly encamped on the bank of the Wild Cat. Their scouting party of warriors who had killed Dunn cut off his head and set it up on a stake at the spot where his body lay, the face in the direction of their camp. The Indians rightly inferred that some portion of the troop, on the next day, would visit the spot where the scout fell, to bury his body and to search the country for their enemy. Thus the dusky warriors determined to prepare an ambushade for them. They posted themselves in a long and deep ravine heavily shaded with forest trees, leading to Wild Cat creek, about a mile and a quarter from the spot where Dunn's body lay, with directions to one of their braves to post himself there and upon the arrival of the white troops to entice them into the fatal ravine.

When our troops approached, Colonel Miller discovered an Indian, who put spurs to his horse as if to make his escape. Miller immediately raised the yell and the troops hastily followed in pursuit of the Indian. They could have shot him several times, but it seems to have been their purpose to capture him alive. The Indian uttered loud yells, probably as a signal to his concealed comrades. Thus the white men rushed into the ambushade. Thirteen of them were shot dead at the first fire. Defense was hopeless. The survivors put spurs to their horses and fled as rapidly as they could. For this reason the ambushade was called "Spurs Defeat." General Hopkins said, "I have no doubt but their grounds were the strongest I have ever seen." The Indians, it is said, peeled the bark from several trees and painted them black and red, significant of defiance. Immediately after this victory they began planning a more aggressive campaign against the whites.⁴

Soon the Miamis, with some Delawares from the site of the present city of Muncie, on the White river, assembled in the towns on the Mississinewa, fifteen or twenty miles from its confluence with

⁴*History of Wabash County*, pp. 53-55.

the Wabash and near the boundary line between the present counties of Wabash and Grant. As they were there for hostile purposes, Harrison resolved to disperse or destroy them. Harrison was commander of the army of the Northwest at this time, with his headquarters at Dayton, Ohio. He selected a strong detachment of his army to accomplish his purpose. This detachment consisted of about six hundred mounted riflemen, under the command of Colonel John B. Campbell, of the Nineteenth regiment of Kentucky dragoons (commanded by Major James V. Ball); a corps of infantry, consisting of Captain Elliot's company of the Nineteenth regiment; Butler's Pittsburg Blues; and Alexander's Pennsylvania Riflemen. Harrison advised that they inform themselves as minutely as possible about the nature of the country, and the situation of the Indians along the Mississinewa, from David Conner, an old pioneer, whose business was to trade with the Indians.⁵

According to his relatives, David Conner was one of the first white men to visit the Mississinewa and the Indian villages along it in Grant and Wabash counties. For years he ran a kind of skiff or flatboat on the river, and had stated places to stop, where he would blow a horn and all the Indians in hearing who wished to buy or sell would meet him for the purpose of trade. He continued in this trade until the 19th day of October, 1825, when he bought of the government a fraction of the northeast quarter of section twenty-four in Pleasant township. At the same time he purchased of Goldsmith Gilbert a small store located on this parcel of land, and at once established a trading post. This place became the scene of the wildest and most barbarous acts. The Indians would assemble there after their hunting expeditions and trade their furs for whiskey, and when drunk, their savage natures knew no restraint. They would engage in bloody hand to hand encounters. The stronger, after overcoming the weaker, has been known to cast his victim on a burning pile of logs and keep him there until roasted alive.

Mr. Conner is buried in the field just a short distance west of where his store stood. The original tombstone has been replaced with a respectable monument containing the following inscription: "David Conner—Aug. 9, 1844; Aug. 8, 1771." His grave is enclosed with a heavy stone wall twenty-four feet long, twelve feet wide, three and one-half feet high.

Following closely their general's advice, Colonel Campbell and

⁵Lossing, *Field Book of War of 1812*, p. 346.

his men left Dayton, Ohio, in the middle of December, 1812, on an eighty-mile march to the Mississinewa towns. There had been quite a delay in procuring horses. Each soldier was required to carry twelve days' rations and a bushel of corn. The weather was severely cold, nevertheless they marched forty miles the first two days. On the third day they made a forced march and covered forty miles during the day and night, reaching the battleground on the Mississinewa.⁶ This spot overlooks a beautiful bend and stretch of the river, about a mile from the site of the little town of Jalapa, Pleasant township, Grant county. They had come by way of Springfield, Xenia, Dayton, Eaton, and Greenville. This route was more distant from the Delaware towns, which they wished to avoid because of friendly relations existing between that tribe and the United States. They feared that the march of an armed force through the Indian country might excite them and drive them over to the British.⁷

On the eve of December 16, 1812, Campbell's army reached the mouth of the Me-to-cin-iah creek, as stated above, and went into camp. About 8 o'clock on the next morning, December 17, before they had been discovered, they made an attack upon the Indian towns lying on the west bank of the creek. Many Indians fled across the river, others surrendered. Those who fled made resistance, after crossing the river, by firing back across the stream at the whites. Eight Indians were killed and forty-two men, women, and children were taken prisoners. The entire village was burned, with the exception of a house or two in which prisoners were kept. Cattle and other stock were shot. Leaving the infantry to guard the prisoners, Campbell moved farther west, and burned three other villages, killed many more cattle, and took several horses. Then, the troops retraced their journey, reaching the mouth of the Me-to-cin-iah creek on the eve of December 17, and went into camp.

This time their encampment was in the form of a hollow square, with Captain Young and Captain Hopkins on the north, Major Ball's squadron on the west, the Nineteenth United States infantry, Pittsburg Blues, and the Pennsylvania riflemen on the south, and Colonel Simrall's regiment on the east. The prisoners were in the center, where the horses were also tied to the trees. Also a small company of scouts and guides were placed in the center as a reserve.

The encampment was surrounded by practically level ground, very

⁶Lossing, *Field Book of War of 1812*, p. 346.

⁷*Indiana Magazine of History*, III, p. 38.

heavily timbered except for about forty feet down toward the river, where the trees were not so large and the undergrowth much heavier. There was a steep bluff adjacent to the river bank—a stone ledge fifteen feet high. From this point the Indians made their attack.

There is a love story in connection with this last attack. When Joseph Richardville, the proud son of a chief, learned that his sweetheart had been taken prisoner and carried away, he determined to seek revenge and secure his mate at the peril of his life. He secured the help and service of John Godfrey, a warrior of royal blood. Immediately they assembled a council on the night of the 17th, and gathering together their warriors proceeded to attack Colonel Campbell before daybreak on the following morning. It is said that many of the best Indian warriors were away on a hunting trip, and could not be summoned home in time for this attack.

As soon as Colonel Campbell heard the savage yell he gave the order "To arms," and a most desperate conflict commenced, the Indians leading the attack from the undergrowth near the ledge along the river. The exact number of the Indian warriors is unknown, but it has been estimated at between two hundred and three hundred. In any case their force was far inferior to that of the white men. Lieutenant Pierce met his death gallantly. Lieutenant Waltz was shot through the arm, but being unwilling to leave the fight he endeavored to mount his horse, and while making the effort was shot through the head. Lieutenants Basey and Hickman were slightly wounded. The battle raged furiously for about an hour, when the Indians became demoralized and soon, panic-stricken, leaped over the fifteen foot bluff into the river, crossed over, and followed a ravine south about a mile where it emerged from a dismal swamp overgrown with willows and flag. Here they secreted themselves until nightfall, leaving fifteen of their number dead on the field and forty wounded.⁸ The whites lost eight killed and thirty wounded. The horses suffered most severely—the number killed being estimated at from seventy-two to one hundred and forty. Their white bones lay bleaching on the field for many years. As to the soldiers who were slain, it has been said the Indians disinterred their bodies, scalped them and then burned them. This is probably true.

The Indians who were taken prisoners were nearly all Mumsies, and were included in those who composed Silver Heel's band. Col-

⁸*Niles' Register*, III, p. 200.

onel Campbell sent two messengers to the Delawares who lived on White river, and who had been directed to abandon their towns and remove into Ohio. He repeatedly expressed his regret at having killed some of their people, and urged them to move to the Shawanoe settlement on the Auglaize river. Soon the Delawares with a small number of Miamis moved to Ohio, and came under protection of the United States Government.⁹

Colonel Campbell heard that Tecumseh with five hundred warriors was on the Mississinewa a few miles below. Without calling a council, the commander ordered a retreat for Greenville. He sent a messenger, Captain Hite, for re-enforcements and supplies, for he expected to be attacked on the way. The savages did not pursue. It was a dreadful journey for the sick and wounded, as the weather was bitterly cold. They moved slowly, for seventeen men had to be conveyed on litters. Every night the camp was fortified by a breastwork. At last they met provisions, with an escort of ninety men under Major Adams. All moved forward together, and on December 25, with three hundred men so frostbitten as to be unfit for duty, the little army arrived at Greenville. More than one-half of the corps that a month before had set out on the expedition into the wilderness were now lost to the service for a while. They had accomplished their errand, but at a great cost.¹⁰

This battle had a decisive influence, because it cut off the aid and supplies furnished by the Miamis to the other Indians. It closed forever the war record of that powerful people. The Miamis' warlike spirit was crushed by the experience of that eventful day on the Mississinewa.

By the second article of the treaty of November 6, 1830, the Me-to-cin-iah reservation was established. It began at a point where the Mississinewa river crosses the eastern boundary line of the Big Reserve, thence down this river with its meanderings to Forked Branch, thence north two miles, thence east in a direct line to a point on the eastern boundary line two miles north of the place of beginning, thence south to the place of beginning. It was supposed to contain ten square miles. On November 28, 1840, the government conveyed this land by patent to Meshingomesia and his band.¹¹

Meshingomesia, the last chief of the Miamis, was born near the place where Metociniah creek empties into the Mississinewa river,

⁹Lossing, *Field Book of War of 1812*, p. 348.

¹⁰Lossing, *Field Book of War of 1812*, p. 347.

¹¹*Indian Land Cessions*, p. 774.

and at the place where Colonel Campbell destroyed the first Indian village. He was naturally of a reserved, quiet, and inoffensive nature, and possessed many estimable, moral, and intellectual qualities. After his conversion to the Christian religion he became a steadfast adherent. On Sunday morning it was a common occurrence to see him leading his decrepit wife to his favorite church-house to worship. His body was buried in the rear of the village church, and a marble shaft erected to his memory, containing the following inscription: "Me-Shing-O-Me-Sia, died Dec. 16, 1879, aged about 98 years." He united with the Baptist church, and was baptized the second Sunday in June, 1861, and lived a consistent Christian.

The other Indians relinquished all their lands in Indiana, not held by patent, for the sum of \$550,000. They agreed to leave in five years, but their removal was delayed until 1847.

Thomas Richardville, a Miami, advised the Indians to petition Congress for a division of the land. In reply to this, Chief Meshingomesia told his band the sad result with as much precision as if his words had been prophetic. By Act of Congress approved June 1, 1872, the reserve was partitioned among the bands and patents issued in severalty. The lands were exempted from taxation and were not subject to sale by the owner. As soon as they had gained possession of their land in severalty, they proceeded to contract debts, borrow money, and secure its payment by mortgages.¹² Others contracted marriage with whites who were worthless spend-thrifts. Legal proceedings were instituted against them,¹³ judgments rendered, their lands sold, and they vanished away with even greater rapidity than their forest trees. They became poorer than the least successful white farmers. For example, ten sections of land were reserved to the Peconga band. Few of their descendants now have anything left, and William Teconya, a grandson, recently asked an old acquaintance for a dime to pay his car-fare to see his brother. All their former lands now belong to white men, with the exception of seventy-five acres.

It will be but a few years until the battleground will be the property of the State and thrown open to the public as a park. In this way the once bloody spot will be a continual reminder of those days when the white men and the red men fought for supremacy in our fair State of Indiana.

¹²*Land Cessions*, p. 775.

¹³*Indiana Magazine of History*, III, p. 36.