

1929

Indian Murders

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INDIAN MURDERS

On Saturday last May 23, 1840, five men were killed by Indians, a short distance west of Fort Weadman, on the Picolata Road ; say between 7 and 8 miles from the city of St. Augustine—that city which once belonged to Spain, and many of whose inhabitants were overjoyed when it was transferred to the United States, from the belief that they would enjoy a greater degree of security in their persons and property.

It was a heart-rending sight, in view of the desolations of a fertile country, and the many tragic events that have been acted in it, for the last four years and more, to see five human beings, some of them our fellow-citizens, brought into town, awaiting the last mournful and solemn rites.

The circumstances were these:—Col. Hanson was engaged in bringing from Picolata, a company of comedians who were under the management of W. C. Forbes, from Savannah, a part of whom, including two ladies, had arrived the day before. Col. H. had a carriage drawn by two horses and a large baggage wagon employed. In these were a Mr. Miller from Brunswick,

Note--Beside the road leading westward from St. Augustine to Picolata on the St. Johns River there is a permanent marker with this inscription: THEATRICAL TROUP KILLED BY INDIANS, MAY 23, 1840. Varying accounts of this attack suggested a search for a contemporaneous narrative, and this extract from the *Florida Herald* of St. Augustine, the issue of May 29, 1840, appears to be the most trustworthy of those found. General Churchill (in *Sketch of the Life of Bvt. Brig. Gen. Sylvester Churchill*, New York, 1888, p. 45) states that he passed the party of actors shortly before they were ambushed, but was himself accompanied by a guard; also, that Coachoochee (Wild-Cat) stated to him that he with his band made that attack. In the following year when Coachoochee with professions of friendship and accompanied by seven of his warriors came into the camp of Col. Worth for a talk, the Indians were fantastically decked out in the costumes of the actors' plundered wardrobes., (See Sprague, *The Origin, Progress, and Conclusion of the Florida War*, New York, 1848, p. 259.)

Geo., Mr. Vose, from Black Creek, Mr. Lynes, Mr. Weiger, and Mr. Germon, and Mr. Hagan, and a negro man, the driver. When within 7 or 8 miles of the city, these waggons were fired upon by a party of about fifteen Indians, who suddenly rose up from a clump of palmettos, about fifty yards from the road, and killed Miller and Vose ; the others (except Hagan) abandoned the waggons and ran with the view of effecting their escape. Germon ran towards Fort Searle, pursued by an Indian for some distance, who fired his rifle, the ball of which passed within six inches of G's head. G. finding himself unhurt, and still pursued, as the only means of safety, suddenly turned round and drew a pistol, which the Indian saw and left the pursuit - G. escaped to Fort Searle. Weiger, on leaving the carriage, also ran, pursued by the Indians, but finding that they gained upon him, he stopped, turned to them and begged (in German) for his life, under the impression that, as a foreigner, they would spare him, - he was shot. Lynes ran and concealed himself in a swamp, and was enabled afterwards to get into Fort Weadman. The negro driver made his escape. Hagan, who continued in the waggon, states that when the carriages were abandoned, he was lying down in the bottom of the one he was in-that the Indians came up and threw out the dead body of Miller, and then beckoned him out-and that whilst they were plundering the waggons he was enabled to effect his escape.

Whilst the Indians were thus engaged in plundering; a waggon in the U. S. service, approached from town, in which were Messrs. Francis Medices, Nelson Buford, and A. F. Ball, and was driven by a negro man. Buford states that on discovering the Indians, he was driving, and attempted to turn his team, but failing, they all quitted the waggon with the view of reaching Fort Weadman, from which they were absent

about a mile - that they were followed by the Indians, and after running a considerable distance Medices was shot through the hand and Ball was killed. Suddenly Medices turned and ran the other way, and his body was found within a short distance of the first action. Buford continued running for Fort Weadman, pursued by an Indian, who made a grab at him, and, missing him, fell, which gave the latter such advantage, as to enable him to effect his escape, with the aid of a sergeant and four men, who came from the fort to his relief. The driver of this waggon also made his escape.

Every thing in the waggons was taken ; the trunks broken open, and clothing, dresses, and everything that could be of any value to an Indian, was carried away or destroyed.

The Indians were painted red, and in a warlike attire - were daring, and exhibited an unsubdued character. One approached Fort Weadman within two hundred yards, assumed an air of defiance, and shook his rifle as a challenge to those who were in it. There were only seven men in the fort and they could not make a sally.

On the receipt of the intelligence, expresses were sent to convey the necessary intelligence, by the commanding officer, Col. Gates, and a body of our fellow-citizens at once volunteered, and went forth to meet the *Goliath of the Philistines*. They were absent till late at night, and were only prevented by the approach of night from having a fight with the murderers.

We can moralize on this subject, but we cannot theorize. It is useless for us to complain, to find fault, or to affect wisdom above our neighbors. The fact is, those of us that remain have been pent up in this little city for the last *four and a half years*, by a few worthless outlaws. Our friends and our neighbors, one after another, have been hastened to mansions of the dead, and he who is fool-hardy enough to look beyond the

gates of the city, may be the next victim. It was most appropriately said by the good man who officiated at the entombment of these fellow mortals, "*be ye also ready.*"

It is proper to observe that when this descent was made, the Eastern section of the St. Johns, was perfectly defenseless, every ablebodied man had been withdrawn (excepting a mere guard at each post) to concentrate at Fort King, preparatory to an expedition into the principal Indian settlements, and the commanding officer here was without a man to render assistance, or to pursue the Indians.