1978

The Massacre in Thistle Valley

Albert Winkler
Brigham Young University - Provo, albert_winkler@byu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub

Part of the United States History Commons

Original Publication Citation

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/1982

This Peer-Reviewed Article is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
In the spring of 1865 tensions were mounting between Mormon settlers of the central and southern sections of Utah Territory, and the Ute Indians. The trickle of white settlers into these lands in the early 1850s had steadily increased until by the mid-1860s most of the tillable soil was under the white man's plow. This invasion was of such speed that within the living memory of even young men the fertile valleys of Utah had been changed from a wilderness into small towns surrounded by large areas of cultivated fields. Where once the Indians had found thickets of berries and a rich supply of deer and small game, they were unable to find food for their families. Increasingly, it was necessary to turn to the whites for food and sustenance.

The Mormons had come to these areas with the concept of the inherent nobility of the American Indian as a fundamental belief of their religion. Consequently, they took care to deal fairly with their red brethren. Missions were established to teach the Indians to farm, they were welcome in Mormon homes, and many Mormon families were willing to take orphaned Indian children and raise them as their own. "It is better to feed the Indians than fight them" was a catch phrase from the church hierarchy that was fundamental when dealing with the Indians.

But no matter how generous the Mormons were in providing creature comforts there were many Indians who longed for the world as it had been before the coming of the whites. The old chiefs had accepted colonization of their lands with minor animosity, but Indians who

Too many whites couldn't get it through their heads that their Indian neighbors no longer felt neighborly. So the Utes gave them an object lesson—

The Massacre

Frontier Times
were scarcely older than the papoose when the whites arrived felt so antagonistic that war became inevitable.

Black Hawk was one of a group of young braves who would wage war for three years in Utah Territory. Tall, handsome, and outspoken, Black Hawk commanded obedience from his followers, and his genius in war earned him grudging respect from his enemies as well. As a youth he had played with white children, acquiring a good command of English and many insights into the white man's ways. He would be joined by energetic young braves who, though rarely his equal in knowledge, shared his animosity toward the whites.

In the years 1863-64 many Indians harassed the settlers by theft and raids often more calculated to cause fear than do damage. When the raids became increasingly directed toward the theft of horses and cattle, however, many whites began to meet force with force. Indians had been always welcome in Mormon Church meetings where announcements on the location and timing of the moving of the congregation's cattle were often discussed in the course of business. Now it was feared that these announcements were giving the Indians a valuable assist in their thefts of cattle. In this atmosphere of fear and mistrust the rate of violent incidents steadily increased.

April 9, 1865. From the first, it was evident that many Utes were in no mood to reason. Yene-wood, a young chief whose father had died of smallpox the winter before, was continuously making demonstrations, trying to persuade the other Indians not to make peace. John (Continued on page 40)

ALARMD Mormon leaders called a parley in the town of Manti for

Right: The site of the tragedy as it appeared May 1975. Location of the Given hut was at the bottom of the photo. The willows where Leah and Brown hid are in the center. Above: Close-up of Spanish Fork Creek in the area, swollen by the spring run-off.

Above: The narrowness of Thistle Valley is evident in this photo. In the foreground is the marker erected by the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers, shown close-up (inset).
Sixty-seven years later the author and her husband on either side of Stanley who is standing on the doorstep of the cabin which was his first home.

fied when out of sight of our familiar little cabin. Never in my short life had I been a part of so much nothingness.

Stanley pulled from his pocket an old picture of the cabin and the surrounding line of hills, and showed it to Mrs. Hancock.

"See," she remarked triumphantly, "that line of hills in the picture are those over there on the other side of the creek. You can see that."

Still unconvinced I asked, "Where is that line here on this side?"

Rather ruefully she looked around. "Well, I guess they could be this side too," she admitted.

I looked up the valley, down the valley, and along the creek. "The cabin was right about here," I said.

With that I started down the hill and gingerly entered a thick patch of sagebrush. I was constantly mindful of rattlesnakes since I had such a vivid memory of the size and quantity of those that infested the area.

Stanley followed skeptically until he stumbled against something hidden in the brush. It was a large flat stone. Looking at the picture again, he realized that it matched the stone that I had been standing beside when the picture was taken. We had discovered the very doorstep that had led up to the cabin door. Of course we memorialized the spot with our camera and then, with lingering looks, we started up the hill again.

Near the top I turned and let the others go on. I saw the mountain at the head of the little valley, up which a thousand sheep had been driven one spring. And it was the mountain I had ridden up one day in a lumbering wagon and wandered happily for hours among the most beautiful clumps of trees and grassy spaces. At the foot of the valley lay the gorgeous scarlet bluffs. Up a trail on those bluffs Rob's brother had ridden to bring the doctor from Lander, fifteen miles away, to attend the birth of the man atop the hill.

There was the cabin and nearby a little girl astride a balking white horse, so frustrated because the animal would not move with her weak kicks in his fat sides. And again I saw the same little girl, seated on the doorstep with a Bible memorizing a Psalm on Sunday morning. Her sister thought this a proper Sunday occupation since there was no church to attend. There was the dug-out cellar beside the cabin, and the little ditch that brought water handily from the spring at the head of the valley. At least it brought water if roaming cattle did not walk in it and break the sides of the ditch.

Again I felt her fright when she had to go to the spring for the water, fearful that one of those monsters might yet be around the waterhole. Then I saw the little girl sitting on that doorstep when she heard the faint wail of a newborn baby. It was all there, but only in memory.

I turned, climbed the hill and slipped silently into the car where the others were waiting.

Bar W & Block Ranches

(Continued from page 31)

Not a foot of the 600-foot rope was without a knot in it when the cowboys finished the job. They came in with 300 head and never said a word.

"When Pridemore came back from Mexico with the cattle and horse herds not one of the mares had ever been roped. Over a thousand head of stock horses at ten dollars around, and not one of them had ever been ridden! There were over a hundred young studs, too. Had to catch every damn one of them.

"Five men bought new Porter saddles. Those were the strongest we could get. We worked from the crack of day as long as we could see, seven days a week, for a dollar a day.

"For years cowboys on that trail wanted to see the Block hands. They'd heard that they were the toughest bunch of waddies on earth. They were a wild, tough bunch, all right.

"I still have a piece of furniture from the Block. It was taken there in 1869, probably by Andrew Richardson. It is a secretary; it stood in the hall at the headquarters when I was a little boy." Truman, Jr., concluded, "I got a lot of my information from my grandfather and dad. But I inherited the old ledgers, and have studied them. Reading them is tedious, but it is rewarding. They contain a lot of still unwritten history."

Author's Note: Bert Judia, who was a cowhand for the Blocks, recalled others who had been employed by them. "At that time [when he worked there] Lloyd Taylor was general manager. John and Pat Carillo were brothers, and good hands. Jim Lafferty was in charge of the horse wagon. There were the Meadows brothers, John and Will. Shorty Dockery and John Wineengar worked for them. There was another fellow—not an Indian—called Medicine John. We never knew his last name; nor did anybody know who the one called Red Stallion was. I recall George McFarlane, too. He was wagon cook. He worked in the headquarters when the wagon wasn’t out. Another fellow stayed at the Arroyo Seco most of the time. It was a stock tank east of the headquarters that caught water in summer.

"When I went to the Blocks," Judia continued, "they had a saddle shop and a stock of hardware and harness. That was in 1897. They had a range 200 miles square. Used the Mescalero Reservation till the Government fenced it; grazed cattle on the Feliz and about anywhere else the grass was good. It was all open country, no fences."

Massacre

(Continued from page 13)

Lowry, who had obviously been drinking, tried to shout down the Indian telling him to let others speak. When Yene-wood was seen fitting an arrow on his bow, Lowry dragged him from his horse but was restrained from abusing the brave by other whites.

The meeting broke up in anger and Yene-wood left immediately to find Black Hawk. Yene-wood found him that Sunday afternoon just sitting down to supper in a Mormon’s home. Black Hawk was called to the door and the situation was briefly explained to him. Leaving his (Continued on page 42)
food untouched, Black Hawk got his horse and disappeared into the foothills with his friends to rally support for war at the Indian camp at Shumway Springs.

Two families of whites lived near the springs, the McKees and Maxwells. They were unaware of the incident in Manti close by. Huddled in the McKee cabin the families spent an anxious night watching a herd of cattle were attacked. The whites had no idea that the Indians were at war and refused to take the idea seriously until Peter Ludvigsen was shot through the neck. Leaving their friend, the men fled to Manti. The first blood had been drawn.

Black Hawk moved his band south where it joined forces with other warriors in the mountains above Salina. There in Salina Canyon they found their next two victims, Barney Ward and James P. Andersen. Also unaware of the hostilities, they were easily captured and killed. Their bodies were recovered the following day. Evidence showed that the men had been tortured. Before retreating up the canyon the Indians stole the cattle.

The deaths of Ward and Andersen brought the first military intervention. The Utah Militia, called up to take action, more closely resembled a posse than a cavalry troop, but Colonel Redick N. Allred led this force of eighty-four men in pursuit of Black Hawk's braves.

The Indian trail was easy to follow and Allred's command pressed forward to overtake what they thought were fleeing hostiles. Allred had not had the area scouted and he marched without the usual military caution of sending men to ride point at the head of the column. When the last of his men rode through a narrow canyon, a shot was heard that signalled a volley of fire from the enemy. Allred's troopers had been ambushed. Under heavy fire and with no cover readily available, the Colonel made the only decision possible. He ordered an immediate retreat to "flank" the Indians.

A DISASTER was avoided only by the inaccuracy of the Indian fire. Not allowing for the fact that it is unnecessary to aim high when shooting a long distance downhill, many of the shots went harmlessly overhead. The Utes did aim low enough, however, to shoot the mounts out from under nine men. These men were rescued by riding double with others, and one man escaped by holding onto a mule's tail.

Two troopers were lost to the Indian fire. William Kearns was shot from his horse while riding beside his brother Austin. In the confusion Jens Sorensen was thrown from his mule. Separated from the others, Sorensen tried a short cut to rejoin his comrades. He lost his desperate chase with death. Before he could reach safety he was surrounded and killed.

The trap had been so cleverly set that the Indians fired all but completely unseen by the whites. One Ute chief made the mistake of exposing his position to encourage his braves. This target was too tempting for the fleeing Andreas Jensen to pass up. Dismounting, he carefully aimed his rifle and fired.

Jensen inflicted the only casualty on the Indians that day. Twice Colonel Allred tried to make a stand and offer effective resistance, but each time was caught in a cross-fire and forced to retreat from the canyon.

That night Chief Sanpitch sought out the father of William Kearns, telling him that it was safe to retrieve the body of his son. The Indians recognized William as an old friend with whom they had often played and hunted. Remorseful for having killed him in the confusion of battle, the Indians made an effort to respect the corpse. His body was found the next day leaning against a rock with willows woven all around it to keep away birds and wolves. Sorensen's body was found nearby horribly mutilated.

The Indian victory at the battle of Salina Canyon encouraged the Utes to raid far and wide in central Utah. War was soon to spill over into the south as well. The first targets were those families who were too foolish to take the reports of hostilities seriously and who remained on their farms when isolated settlers were being urged to gather into defendable towns for protection.

In the evening of May 25, Jens Larson was herding his sheep near the town of Fairview when he was shot and killed by a group of Indians who rapidly disappeared into the hills. Fairview was immediately put on edge and extra precautions were taken. However, since the hour was late, there had been no time to send the alarm to the small settlements and lone cabins in the area.

Thirteen miles north of Fairview, John Given and his family had recently settled in the small mountain valley of Thistle. John Given was a new convert to the Mormon Church and had only recently arrived in Utah. In the little valley he chose there was water and good soil, but there were lingering frosts that would force him to plant late. Unaware of his danger, John Given was busy plowing, planting, and laying the foundation for a log cabin. A temporary structure of willows housed the family which included Mrs. Given; John Jr., aged 19; and Mary, Annie, and Martha, aged nine, five, and three respectively. With the family were two young men, Charles Brown and Charles W. Leah, who had accompanied them to help with starting the farm.

Early in the morning of May 26 the Given family was sleeping in the willow shanty with Leah and Brown occupying a wagon box at one end of it. Leah was roused from sleep by the sound of cattle being stampeded. Not yet fully alert, Leah had no idea what had startled the cattle until he saw rifle muzzles forced through the willow walls of the shanty. John Given was shot in the chest before he could get up and Mrs. Given was shot in the cheek as she attempted to arise. Their son John jumped to his feet crying, "You damned s-o-b's," but was shot down as he bolted for the door.

Leah and Brown, in the relative safety of the wagon box, drew no fire and had time to react. Leah grabbed a rifle and ran through the door while Brown tugged on some clothing and quickly...
followed. Each raced wildly for Spanish Fork Creek nearly a hundred yards away. One shot was fired but passed harmlessly between them and struck the ground a short distance beyond. Brown sought to save his life by splashing into the creek where he hoped the water and willows would conceal him. But both men certainly owed their escape to the fact that the Indians showed no interest in pursuit. Brown followed the creek downstream, remaining in the freezing water and willows would conceal him.

But both men certainly owed their escape to the fact that the Indians showed no interest in pursuit. Brown followed the creek downstream, remaining in the freezing water and willows would conceal him.

Leah took the more difficult escape route; he made straight for Fairview. Keepig check of his rifle he ran over jagged rocks and through heavy brush. After crossing a number of hills, the exhausted Leah was able to reach some men watching cattle a few miles from the town.

EARLY that morning Andrew Larson had left the Joseph Wing settlement to return to his home near Fairview by way of Thistle Valley. As he approached the Given farm he noticed riders driving cattle into the hills to the east. He was too far distant to identify the riders and continued to drive his wagon. He planned to drive past the Given hut on the far side of the narrow valley to avoid waking the family he thought would still be asleep. He did think it was strange, however, to hear a number of calves crying noisily.

Leah's report reached Fairview early in the morning and the alarm was sent to nearby communities. Twenty men of the Utah Militia rapidly assembled and rode to Thistle Valley. They arrived at the scene of the grisly massacre before noon. The bodies of John and his son lay where they had fallen, but Mrs. Given had been dragged from the shanty. Her corpse was found lying naked in the sun. The three girls were found in the wagon box, stripped of all clothing but their small waists. They had been killed with tomahawks. The shanty had been ransacked, and a pillow had been torn open and its feathers scattered over the bodies.

Everything of value had been taken, including clothing, tools, and food. A dozen or more young calves were crying pitifully nearby and were found with their backs broken, dragging their hind legs. The calves were soon put out of their misery. It was thought the Utes believed the calves a hindrance and decided to render them immobile and useless at the same time.

There was no time to make coffins for a proper burial. The Given family was loaded into the wagon box for a hasty interment in a common grave in the Fairview cemetery. Brown and Leah were present at the funeral, but they soon left the area to give formal reports of the incident to the nearest Indian Agent.

The people of Fairview had to witness another funeral of a man killed by the Indians when David H. Jones was shot outside the town on May 29. Jones was an experienced soldier who had served in the Mexican War with the Mormon Battalion.

Fairview soon became so hard-pressed by the Indians that it was under virtual siege. Within a year it became one of the twenty-seven communities that would have to be abandoned during the course of the war. Most of these sites were not resettled until the end of hostilities, and some of them were never reoccupied.

More than any other single event the massacre at Thistle Valley convinced the Mormons that a state of war existed. Fear and anguish was so widespread that there was concern that the whites would retaliate by indiscriminately killing any Indian on sight. Mormon leaders went from town to town urging people to punish only the individuals who were to blame for the killings and not Indians as a whole. It is largely due to them that the situation did not become a bloodier affair than it was.

The "Black Hawk War" lasted until 1868 when three years of fighting finally ended in the Indians' defeat. Seventy whites were killed and uncounted scores of Utes died. The tide turned against the Indians when the Utah Militia became a more viable military force. However, it was the large resources in numbers and equipment that ultimately spelled the end for the Utes. Black Hawk's group was worn down and its members removed to a reservation in eastern Utah.

Black Hawk surrendered in 1868, a shadow of the man who had gone to war three years earlier. Wounded and exhausted he set about asking forgiveness from those communities he had harassed so long and cleverly. In fluent English he addressed church meetings filled with his old enemies, asking their understanding and expressing sorrow for the tribulations he had brought upon them.