

Uncle Tom's Indian Raid

by
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Do I remember the Indian raid? I certainly do. I remember it well. Let's see; it occurred a way back in 1884, and, sir, it come mighty night de-populating the whole western half of Kansas. Not because of the people who was killed but because of the people who left and never come back.

In them days most of us settlers was in the same boat; we were tenderfoots; we were poor; and we had come out from the East in the hopes of building homes for ourselves. To hold down a claim which yet hadn't yielded no revenue and, at the same time make a living, was about all that one able bodied man cared to tackle. Then add to that the danger of massacre, and it made the proposition a pretty stiff one. We all was willing to take a chance on death at slow starvation, but when it come to death quick and sudden like, at the hands of an Indian, with scalping and burning, and all the attending fixings and trimmings throwed in, we balked.

Most of us had never seen an Indian, and what was more we didn't want to. They was kept down on their reservation in the Cherokee Strip and in the Comanche and Arapahoe country, which was a long ways from us, and we didn't think nothing about them. It was the direct rustle for grub that worried us.

Well, sir, my neighbor, Dyke, and me had made a little money breaking sod and we decided to invest it in lumber. A dugout is all right in case you can't have any better place to live in, but when you have seventy dollars laying idle, what's the matter with having a real sure enough house, even if it is only one room? We concluded that life in a dugout wasn't worth the living, so Dyke and me started for Kingman after the lumber. As we couldn't make the round trip in one day, Miss Dyke come over to keep my wife company while we was gone.

Dyke and me put up that night in a wagon yard at Kingman, where we hob-nobbed with freighters, cowboys, homesteaders, boomers and sich like—the kind of crowd usually found around a wagon yard in the early days. Some of these people had come a mighty long ways after their supplies. I talked with a little sawed-off man who had a four-wagon outfit. He had come after some casing for a well that he was going to put down in Ochletree County, Texas. I asked him how deep it was to water where he was putting in the well and he told me it was two hundred and ninety feet.

The next morning, soon after breakfast, Dyke and I started for home. In them days I lived over in Pratt Couny, about four miles south of the

old Sun City trail. It was a good thirty-four miles from Kingman to my place and as our loads was heavy, and as the roads was rather sandy in places, we didn't expect to reach home until after dark.

Along about half past ten o'clock we'd covered about seven miles. We had just reached that point where we had quit thinking about where we'd been, and had begin to think about where we was going, when we met a horseman. He was covered with dust, the horse was in a lather of sweat and they was sure hitting the high places toward Kingman. Pretty soon we met another horseman, and then another, and then we met a bunch of them, and then another bunch. Until that time I had no idea of the number of horses in our part of the country. In them days there was scarcely any fencing, and on both sides of the road, as far as the eye could see, there was horsemen—single horsemen, double horsemen, horsemen in groups of three, four or a dozen, some riding saddles, some riding on blankets and quilts, some riding bareback, sometimes two on one horse; horsewomen, too, some riding bareback and astraddle—all of them going at the same time, in the same direction as fast as they could make their beasts go, a-whipping, a-lashing, a-kicking, and a-spurring and never saying a word, never looking to right or left, but just seemingly possessed of the desire to go forward.

Them, that we met in the road never paid no attention to us although they seemed a trifle irritated when they had to pull out around us.

Of course, all this was very mystifying to Dyke and me. We couldn't account for such numbers and we couldn't account for such conduct. People we met on the road was in the habit of giving us a friendly nod at least when they passed.

The last horseman had hardly disappeared, and we hadn't nearly recovered from our surprise, when here come the light brigade.

There was buggies this time, and two-wheeled carts, and other light vehicles. They didn't last long, for at that time there wasn't many light vehicles in the country. Them that was in the country, however, was getting along towards Kingman at a fair rate of speed.

They was loaded to the guards with men, women and children. The horses hitched to these vehicles was doing the best they could, and the drivers was doing the best they could to make the horses do better. They seemed to be put out wonderful bad when they had to pull around us, but not a diddle-dod-danged one of them could we get to stop and talk with us. Some of the wimmen was crying and wringing their hands. And all of them seemed to have on their work-a-day clothes like as if they'd left home in a hurry.

"What do you spose is the matter?" I called to Dyke, when the main bunch'd got past.

"Ain't I been trying for the last five minutes to make the durned cusses tell me," answered Dyke. He stopped his team and got off the

wagon. "I just can't make it out. There's too many of 'em to be called to the bedside of a rich, dying relative; they ain't dressed right and they're in too big a hurry to be going to a picnic, and they're too mournful to be going to a circus. I'm going to make some of them talk if I have to do it with a gun."

The light brigade wasn't all passed us when we caught sight of the main army. It was heavy wagons this time—wagons of all kinds and sizes with all kinds of wagon boxes—single sideboards, double sideboards, hay racks, barges, and some with no boxes at all, the people riding on the running gears. They weren't in bunches but were scattered all over the prairie. The men was wild-eyed and white faced and most of them was bareheaded; they spent most of the time whipping their teams, but they would look back over their shoulders occasionally. The horses were galloping and the dust was flying and the wagons was jolting and some of the women was crying and some looking kinda startled, and the kids were squalling and clinging to their mothers. Taking them altogether, they were about the plum scardest bunch you ever saw.

They were for giving us the road all right; they'd begin to pull out when they were two hundred yards away. Dyke and me yelled at 'em and made signs, but they wouldn't stop. Some of them tried to say something as they passed, but the noise made by the wagons was so loud that we couldn't make no sense out of what they said. We pulled up to the top of a long sand hill and stopped to let our teams blow. Dyke come back to our wagon.

"Did my ears deceive me, or did them durned cusses say something about Indians?"

"That was the one word I heard out of all they said," I answered.

"But there can't be any Indians here," said Dyke. "I'll bet there ain't a real bonny fide Indian within two hundred miles of here."

"Maybe there ain't; but I'll bet you there's a whole raft of people around here who believes there is."

This seemed to stump Dyke. He turned away from my wagon, then he yelled: "Great Scott! Lookee there a-coming."

Well, sir, I pretty nigh fainted. I looked but my impulse was to jump and run. My mind being on Indians, I naturally expected Indians was what Dyke saw. However, instead of seeing Indians, I saw an old mule and cow pulling a sled—a drag they call it. The whole family was on the sled; the woman was sitting with her arms full of babies and there was five or six other children scattered around her. She wasn't crying but she was mighty pale and peeked and she sure was clinging tight to the babies. The old man was standing on the front end of the sled driving the mule and cow. Every few seconds he would jump off and run along side the cow and belt her with his whip. And that whip was some whip, too. A broom stick for a whip stock and a piece of barbed wire for a lash.

Every time he hit the cow he'd make it a sort of raking blow by pulling the whip backwards and the barbs in the wire would do the rest; every time the cow was hit she'd flinch her rump away from the whip and go sideways a few steps.

The man tried to pull around us but the point of his sled runner caught in a tuft of sod at the road's edge and he stuck. He yelled to us to let him pass and all the time he was working on the cow with the barbed wire.

"Now lookee here, my bold cow puncher," said Dyke, "you don't get past this outfit until you tell us what's up. You're about the thirteenth hundredth man we've seen this morning and you all act alike. What's wrong anyway?"

"Great Godelmity! ain't you heard the news?" demanded the old man.

"I sure ain't," said Dyke.

"They say the Injuns are on the warpath. They've burnt Sun City, and Pratt, and Saratoga and they're comin' this way—Gaddap, Julip!"

He fetched the cow a powerful, raking blow. The cow and the mule both lunged forward at the same time. The tuft of sod gave away and the sled started with a jerk that upset the whole family. The last we saw of them the old man was still working on the cow with the barbed wire.

That was a nice package to hand us. The Indians were to the west of us. We were a good twenty-seven miles from our wives and our homes which were between us and the Indians—unless the Indians were already there—and we had heavy wagons and heavy loads of lumber. Dyke looked me straight in the eye for a minute, then he took out his plug and cut himself a chew of tobacco. When he had cleaned the knife carefully and put it and the plug away, he turned again to me.

"Well, what do you say?" he asked.

"What was the amount you wanted to bet that there ain't a real bonny fide Indian within two hundred miles of us?" I couldn't help but ask. As Dyke looked away he said something that I didn't exactly understand, but it was something relating to or concerning a damn fool. I'm afraid I snickered.

"The question is," said Dyke, very patient like, "whether we pull this lumber home or whether we leave it, or whether we leave the wagons and go horseback."

You will notice that any one of the answers to Dyke's questions meant that we were going towards the Indians. Now, Dyke was a belligerent cuss. He wasn't a physical coward by any means. I sometimes think that he was not adverse to taking on a little scrap. On the other hand, I am not a fighting man. I am, in fact, rather inclined to be timid, and the prospect of running into a scalping party was not at all enticing to me. Still, a man just naturally can't cut loose and desert his wife when she is in danger. It was not bravery that caused me to say to Dyke; "We'd

better get there as quick as we can and I suppose the quickest way is by horseback."

"I hate all-fired bad to give up this lumber," said Dyke, "I sure broke a good many miles of sod to get it and I feel sure if we leave it some whelp will steal the whole batch before we get back."

"Yes, but what use will we have for lumber if ten millions of Indians are after us?" I asked.

"They ain't got us yet; and I don't propose to run no chances of coming back and not finding my lumber and wagon," declared Dyke. "I tell you, we'll pull into some farm and leave it there."

We drove down the road about a mile and came to a farm house. We pulled in the stable yard and I went to the house to ask permission to leave our wagons. There wasn't a soul in or about the house. The dinner was on the stove cooking, but chairs were overturned, drawers pulled out, things scattered about the floor, and doors were thrown open. No question but that these people had heard the news; that they had gone and that they hadn't stood upon the order of their going.

On the way back to the barn I passed a calf which was tied to a fence post. I'll always feel mean and ashamed because I didn't turn that critter loose so that it could get to water. But I wasn't actuated by any such humane ideas. I hurried on and when I reached the barn I found that Dyke had the teams unhitched.

Dyke's team was a pair of big horses; mine was a span of half wild four-year-old mules. Neither one of them mules had ever been rode.

Ordinarily, you couldn't have hired me to get on the back of either one of them. However I tied up the lines good and tight on the mare mule and turned her loose. Dyke gave her a cut with his big whip and that mare mule started for home like a streak. I led the hoss mule up beside the wagon and climbed on the wheel.

"Are you ready?" says Dyke.

"Let her go!" says I.

I gave a jump and landed on that hoss mule's back and at the same time Dyke gave him an awful cut with the whip. Say, that mule started so quick he purty nigh unjointed my neck. He took out after that mare mule as hard as he could go. I never knowed a fool mule could run so fast. He went so fast he couldn't follow the meanderings of the wagon path—he cut straight across. When we'd reach the top of one sand knoll we'd be just in time to see the mare mule disappearing over the next.

For a while I could hear Dyke's heavy horses pounding along behind and then we passed out of hearing. We made the best time ever made on the Sun City trail before the days of automobiles.

I didn't have much time to think about the Indians as I rode west that day. I didn't figger out what I'd do if I met 'em and what plan of

escape I would make; my time was too much taken up with riding that cussed mule, and I sure rode him from the hames of his collar to the root of his tail. However, I did take time to figger out a lie to tell my wife and Miss Dyke to keep 'em from getting scared.

When I reached home I found that mare mule had jumped the com gate and was up in the pasture. The horse mule stopped at the gate and began to pitch. I tried my best to stick on, but off I went and over the gate he went.

Of course, it was my luck to have my wife and Miss Dyke see it all. When I recovered so that I could set up and take notice, what do you suppose them wimmen was doing? They was laughing. Gad! but it made me mad. My wife came up and asked me if I was hurt and then she snickered. She wanted to know what brought me home so early; then she giggled; she said not to mind her laughing; that she was sorry but couldn't help it; then she set down and wrapped her face in her apron and rocked herself to and fro and giggled and snickered and sputtered until the tears come. And ole Miss Dyke wasn't a bit better. I suppose I didn't cut a very dignified figger when I sailed off that mule's back and lit on my ear. But to have my wife laugh at me made me so cussed mad that the next time she asked what brought me home so early I cut out the lie I had figgered on telling her and told her the truth.

I draw the line at telling you what happened for the next few minutes. I suppose it was a mean way of getting even, but it stopped the laughing.

Living so far off the road they hadn't heard a word about the Indians. It was curious the way the news struck them. That is, when they'd got over their first scare and calmed down a bit. My wife seemed to think it was durned foolhardy in me to leave Dyke and come on in the face of danger alone. On the other hand, Miss Dyke kinder figgered that I had acted the part of a coward and that I had no business to leave Dyke and that if I'd had any nerve I wouldn't a done it. I tried to tell 'em it was all on account of that fool mule but they wouldn't see it.

Nearly an hour later Dyke came pounding in, his big horses in a bad way from their long run. We held a council of war. We all wanted to go to Kingman, but didn't have no vehicle of any sort to go in. When the women mentioned horseback, Dyke, and me, for reasons of our own, told 'em nix on the horseback. Walking was out of the question. We finally concluded to stay right where we was.

It wasn't likely the Indians would get so far off the main road, and if they did we thought maybe we could hide in the tall blue stem grass. It was agreed that we'd light no fire and that we'd sleep out that night.

About four o'clock in the afternoon I began to get restless. I concluded I'd reconnoiter a bit, as the feller says in the story book. I started south from my place. After going some considerable distance, I come on a man

breaking sod with a span of oxen. He was a new settler and I didn't know his name.

Ain't it curious how a man delights in telling bad news? I wouldn't have missed the opportunity of telling that feller about the Indians for any money.

"Say, mister, ain't you heard the news," I begun. "They say the Indians are on the warpath; and they've burnt Pratt and Saratoga and they're acoming this way aburning and ascalping as they come."

The man didn't say a word; he didn't ask a question; he didn't even unyoke his oxen. He just turned and lit out down the furrow and he made the dirt fly.

They tell many stories about what people done on that day. They say the Perkins boys had a saddle pony picketed out close to their house. When ole man Barnes, him we called ole Tickle-dad, was told the news, he run and jumped on the pony. He lashed it into a run and made three complete circles before he remembered to pull up the picket pin. Then Perkins got his rifle and was going to shoot the ole cuss for trying to steal the pony. They say ole Matthews run all over his place looking for a neck-yoke and all the time was carrying it in his hand. Frank Clemens, the schoolteacher, walked out of the country and never did come back. Ole Switzer drove into Bross, a little town about ten miles east, and swore he'd seen the Indians kill and scalp his wife; about four hours later ole Miss Switzer followed in afoot and said that Switzer was a dirty lying pup. They say that Miss Carrehan threw a feather bed in the wagon and drove off and left her nursing baby. Ole Sheldon tried to hide by climbing down his well and when they fished him out he was nearly froze. Miss Boulden walked barefooted six miles and carried her baby and Dale run off and left his old mother alone on the farm; the ole lady rode a horse to Kingman abare back and a straddle. Tom Airs shot his best horse, mistakin' it for an Indian.

Speaking of Tom Airs reminds me. Tom had been a hunter and a frontiersman. He was supposed to have had experience in Indian fighting. Some fifteen or twenty families pulled into his place thinking, no doubt, that Tom could protect them. This didn't suit Tom at all. He evidently thought that so many would attract the attention of any passing Indians and besides, if the gang stayed all night they would eat up his store of grub. Tom concluded to get rid of 'em. They say he climbed his windmill tower with a pair of glasses. He leveled his glasses.

"I gad, here they come," he bawled, "and they ain't very durned fur off, either."

They say fifteen or twenty wagons left Tom's place so close together that the wagon wheels locked in each other. And much to Tom's disgust, his wife went in one of the wagons.

When I got back home the folks were mighty uneasy about my long

absence. Miss Dyke shot it at me that I was trying to quit them, same as I had quit Dyke earlier in the day. My wife didn't like this and relations was somewhat strained during the cold supper that followed. After supper we got our blankets and took to the tall blue stem.

Well, sir, I want to say to you that that was the longest night I ever put in, and the most horrible one, too, I heard thousands of horses galloping across the prairie. In my imaginations I saw thousands of Indians and I was burned at the stake at least twenty times. Every time a coyote yelped I had a nervous chill.

I waited hours and hours. Then I began to count to know what time it was. I knew it must be nearly day light, altho' I couldn't see any signs of breaking day. At last, I couldn't stand it any longer. I crawled back to the house and looked at the clock. It was half past eleven. I sneaked back and told my wife that the blamed clock had stopped. I spent hours cussing the fool government for not protecting us settlers by standing soldiers up and down the Kansas line, and keeping the Indians on their reservations. I pictured myself at the head of a company of soldiers and we wiped out whole tribes of Indians, root and branch. Just then a coyote yelped and I had another chill.

I got to considering what a blooming fool I was for trying to live in such a cussed country. When I got to thinking about my wife, and how I had brought her away from her father's comfortable home to be massacred by a lot of dirty whelps, I got so mad I whipped a tribe of Indians by myself.

But after a while the sick feeling got back to the pit of my stomach again. I couldn't understand why day didn't come. I chewed blue stem grass in my nervousness. I didn't even try to sleep. The desire to know the exact time got the best of me again and I crawled back to the house. I struck a match. The clock showed a quarter past one. I got mad again and had a notion to bust the clock.

I tell you the rustle of the blue stem grass was mighty lonesome that night. Away off to the southwest there was a red blur on the horizon. I afterwards found out it was a prairie fire but that night I was sure it was a burning farm house, and in my mind's eye I could see dead women and children lying about, and a lot of greasy devils dancing around them. I ain't ashamed to tell you what I prayed that night. My prayer might have been a little bit selfish. It related chiefly to my wife and me getting out of the country with a whole hide; but considering it from the standpoint of downright earnest feeling it was a powerful prayer.

Don't you know that after such a night as that I can understand why some of them old pagan fellers what lived around in caves worshipped the sun. My experience that night taught me to appreciate the blessings of sunlight.

When the sun rose that morning, I looked around and was surprised to find that the country looked very much the same as when I had last seen it. There was my dugout, and there was Dyke's windmill still standing. Off there was the barnyard of the Perkins boys. The meadow larks were singing and the prairie dogs were barking just the same as though nothing had happened.

I had fretted and worried to the extent that I was about all in. Without waiting to cook breakfast, we hitched up and started for Kingman—now don't get excited—I know I said we didn't have no vehicle but the cold and clammy fact remains that we went to Kingman. We went on a drag, sir,—the same kind of a thing the ole feller had the cow hitched to.

What about Indians! Pshaw! There warn't no Indians. More than a hundred miles west of us—at Comanche Pool—the cattlemen and cowboys started the scare to check the influx of settlers; and sir, as I said before, they come mighty nigh depopulating the western half of Kansas.

NOTES

Reference material indicated by footnotes 1 through 5 all is drawn from Mary Frances White, *Strange Tales From Kansas* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Dept. of English, University of Denver, 1955, *passim*). The material appears in White as follows: footnote 1, pp. 297, 298; footnote 2, p. 298; footnote 3, pp. 299, 300; footnote 4, pp. 263-268; footnote 5, pp. 258-263. The notes below indicate the White citations, plus the sources for the other selections.

¹*The Kansas Free State*, April 7, 1855.

²*The Smoky Hill and Republican Union*, September 3, 1864.

³"The Noble Red Man," *Coolidge Border Ruffian*, November 13, 1866.

⁴*Kansas Magazine*, III (April, 1873), 300-303.

⁵*A Journey Though Kansas* (Cincinnati: Moore, Wilstach, Keys and Company, 1855), pp. 165-173.

⁶*Salina Journal*, March 14, 1934.

⁷*Kansas Magazine*, VI (October, 1911), 60-65.

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