

Battle of Grassy Run

By Richard Crawford (Clermont County Historical Society)

It was a good time for the red man and a bad time for the white man. It was the spring of 1792. General Josiah Harmar's expedition of 1790 had been embarrassed near present Fort Wayne, IN., and General Arthur St. Clair's expedition of 1791 had been wiped out at present Fort Recovery, Mercer County, OH, on Nov. 3, 1791.

The Indians were confident; the whites were scared and demoralized. The Indians were greatly concerned and nervous, though, about more whites moving north of the Ohio River and into Indian country. Soldiers had already built Fort Washington (present Cincinnati), in 1789, less than 40 miles down the Ohio River. Little did the red man know it, but he was enjoying the last of his best days in the Ohio country.

One of the Indians' greatest needs was horses and they were determined to get them from white settlers across the river. It was easiest to get them if the Indians had a base near the Ohio. There was a well-known campsite within the boundaries of present Clermont County, OH.

Today the site of the Battle of Grassy Run is quiet and peaceful farmland bordered by Glancy Corner-Marathon and Burdsall roads and Ohio 286. The gently rolling land at 5185 Burdsall Rd. is located along the East Fork of the Little Miami River opposite the mouth of Grassy Run, just west of Lime Kiln Ford. Today the land is privately owned.

Years after, the survivors' accounts made for a lot of confusion due to their discrepancies probably caused by the passage of time.

About 100 warriors with some women and children were encamped here in early April 1792.

While many of the Indians were using the site to hunt and fish, 40 of the braves went to Limestone (present Maysville, KY.), Kenton's Station (just southwest of present Old Washington, KY.) and Mayslick, Ky., where they stole 16 horses. The horse-stealing party crossed the Ohio River at the mouth of Bullskin Creek (present end of Ohio 133 where the Clermont County village of Rural used to stand). After the successful raid the Indians left Kentucky at present Dover (west of Maysville) and reentered Ohio at or near the Bullskin. The Indians were not worried about any pursuit by white settlers because they had never been pursued before. The Indians traveled north on the Bullskin, a trail that today closely follows the route of Ohio 133 in Clermont County.

Back in the settlements, the whites had gathered a force of 19 paid rangers and about 11 others to give chase and regain the horses. The force left Kentucky just one day before an order arrived from Ohio Territorial Governor St. Clair forbidding pursuing Indians into the Ohio country.

The campsite at the Grassy Run was known to the settlers because it was frequently used by the Indians. It was believed that it was here the Indians would return with the horses.

A white man was signing his own death warrant when he crossed to the north side of the Ohio River. The Shawnee fiercely defended the area known today as Clermont County and it was they who had stolen the horses. They were led by a 24-year-old warrior named Tecumseh.

The leader of the settlers was 37-year-old Simon Kenton. His force crossed the Ohio, but on the second day, 12 of the men returned home, probably because of their fear of the Indians.

The Indians arrived back at their encampment early in the evening of April 10.

About noon on this overcast, rainy day the whites believed they were near the Indian encampment.

They heard the sound of a bell approaching. Kenton, Benjamin Whiteman, Fielding Figgans, and Jonah Davis advanced while the rest of the group remained behind to set aside belongings and baggage to prepare to close the chase and be unencumbered if there was a fight.

Figgans and Davis were in the front of the foursome and were under orders from Kenton not to fire their guns or do anything to warn the Indians of their advance and closeness.

The bell was tied around the neck of a horse that suddenly came into view. The horse was recognized as one of those that had been stolen. Riding it was a brave known as young Blue Jacket (not the chief). He was riding straight ahead unaware he had been seen by the whites. Figgans shot and killed the Shawnee. Kenton hurried forward and told Figgans to consider himself under arrest. Figgans argued and said he was unimpressed with Kenton's charge because he felt that by being sent to the front he considered himself a sacrifice to the Indians anyway. The Indian's body was rolled into the brush along the side of the trail that was not too difficult to follow because the rain created a muddy path that held the prints of the horses and the Indians' moccasins. Kenton decided to lead his men along the back trail of the dead Indian. Four more whites deserted at this time.

Despite fewer men, Kenton decided to continue the pursuit. But he halted not too far down the trail while Whiteman, Cornelius Washburn and Alexander McIntyre (also spelled McIntire) scouted ahead under Kenton's order.

The scouts had traveled a couple of miles before returning to the main body to report they had seen trees with peeled bark and a large number of horse tracks. The abundance of these signs convinced the whites they were pursuing a larger force than they had expected.

At the encampment, the Shawnee were unaware that a force of whites was so near. They spent most of the evening jerking venison.

The whites went into council after hearing the report of their scouts. The council was conducted in Indian style -- everyone was called upon for an opinion. And there was great disagreement. Some wanted to attack in various ways at different times, others wanted to set up a defense works and await attack, and others just wanted to get what horses they could and hurry back to Kentucky.

Since they knew they were within a couple of miles of the Indian camp and not discovered, the settlers decided to make a surprise attack (some accounts say at dawn, others during the darkness). The whites built small fires in hollows to hide their location while drying themselves and their guns and powder. Kenton believed that by surrounding the encampment with his thin members and by their attacking simultaneously, the concentrated fire might make the Indians overestimate their number and cause them to fire in panic.

After much discussion Kenton decided to scout the Indian camp alone. In "Simon Kenton, His Life and Period," written by Edna Kenton, a descendant, she quoted her ancestor as he shared his recollections years later with Judge John James.

"Tecumseh was stationed on an island of wood surrounded by a low prairie and swamp. In the rear of the camp, beyond and above the prairie and swamp, was a gradual one-half mile rise to a bluff." Kenton said he was certain there were no other Indian camps nearby. He returned to his men and told them the Indians were staying out of the rain. They were staying inside tents and there were three large marquee tents that had been captured at St. Clair's Defeat.

Occasionally an Indian would emerge from a tent and yell or whistle apparently trying to lead their comrade back through the darkness and rain; the brave who had been killed by Figgans. Some of the Indians would laugh thinking he had become lost, but when it became dark a large

drum was pounded to help guide him back to camp. The drumming continued until almost midnight.

Jacob Wetzel and Samuel Frazee were chosen to keep an eye on the Indian camp until the attack began. They reported the camp as “very large” with bark wigewas and a large marquee tent where Tecumseh was later believed to have occupied.

Kenton divided his men into thirds -- he took the right (east), McIntyre the middle (south), and Timothy Downing (some accounts say Luther Calvin) the left (west). Washburn was in Kenton’s group. Years after the battle he would purchase and live on land nearby.

Calvin was the owner of two of the stolen horses. While the division of the whites was being made, several men quietly approached the horses and separated Calvin’s and returned them to him. James Calvin, Luther’s son, remained with the recovered horses while the rest of the men spread out along the low ridge next to and south of the encampment. The whites decided the watchword to avoid confusion at night would be “Boone,” after the well-known frontiersman Daniel Boone.

Kenton ordered his men to remain concealed and not make a sound. When he did give the order to fire they were to “fire as one” and hopefully surprise the Shawnee and immediately send them fleeing in confusion and panic.

It was about midnight and the men were still forming their semi-circle around the Shawnee camp. The center of the line was just reaching its position when a dog barked. A curious brave awoke and moved to and stoked a fire that was only about 10 yards from the concealed whites. Seeing this the whites became anxious and the elder Calvin, hearing men around him cock their guns, fired the first shot and killed the Indian (after the battle Kenton blamed Whiteman for firing the first shot). In the dark the whites believed this was the signal to begin firing and sporadic firing began along the semi-circle.

Tecumseh, who was lying outside his tent (some accounts say he was inside a tent), jumped to his feet and ordered an assault. Hearing the sporadic firing he was not fooled into thinking he was being attacked by a large force. He immediately threw himself into the fight and killed one man with his war club (John Barr).

Many years later Kenton reported he believed the Battle of Grassy Run lasted about 3 ½ hours. Other accounts of the battle lasting 30-45 minutes seem more accurate. Hand-to-hand combat took place all along the line of the fight.

The Shawnee heard the call of “Boone” among the whites. The Indians then began to call out “Che Boone” to confuse the whites even though they pronounced the call differently.

Tecumseh ordered the women and children away from the fighting and they fled across the East Fork at Lime Kiln Ford. The crossing at this point would have been the safest since it had been raining all week and the river was higher than usual.

As the foes’ vision became used to the poor light, Whiteman, who had been just behind Barr, yelled, “Barr killed! Indians crossing the creek!” At this point the whites began to flee the battlefield, some in panic.

Few rushed to the horses that had been tied down the trail about two miles at the prearranged meeting place (near present intersection of Jackson Pike and Ohio 133). Some jumped on the first horse they saw (some accounts say most of the men were instinctive enough not to go directly back to their horses because this would be the first place the Indians would chase them. This account seems more likely).

Many of the whites blamed their retreat on the sound of the splashing water at Lime Kiln Ford saying the Shawnee were receiving reinforcements. But there were no other Indian camps nearby and no reinforcements. Kenton verified this fact when he had scouted the area before the battle. The whites retreated, mostly alone or in pairs or small groups to the east, west and south. Washburn led the largest group of 11 men that included Whiteman. They headed southwest wading in streams to elude the Shawnee. When they finally felt safe, Washburn used a gun to kill a 200-pound bear. They left some of it for Wetzel and his companion who they knew were not far behind. Kenton and his companion, Joe Lemon, later joined the Washburn group. McIntyre, one of Kenton's most trusted man, fled directly back to the horses. Kenton said "Redheaded Aleck" was "extraordinarily strong." He had been ill and depressed most of the expedition. Later a brave named Coo-na-haw related what happened to McIntyre. Coo-na-haw was actually a white man named John Coon who had been captured by the Shawnee years before.

McIntyre had shot an animal. The shot was heard by Tecumseh's pursuing party. He was captured while cooking some of the meat and Tecumseh ordered that he be returned to camp and not harmed. After his arrival in the camp McIntyre laughed at a warrior who had been wounded in the groin and who was making agonizing noises. The wounded man moved at McIntyre with his tomahawk and killed him (one account says after he was killed his arms and legs were cut off and tied dangling from the limbs and his head was stuck on a pole in the middle of the trail). Stephen Ruddell was one of several white men who fought on the Shawnee side at Grassy Run. He had been captured and adopted by the Shawnee when he was 12 years old (1780) and given the name "Sinnanatha" which meant "Big Fish".

Some historians credit Ruddell with teaching Tecumseh, who was the same age, to read and write English and to speak the language well enough that the two could safely enter white military encampments and read the orders of the day and learn of plans without ever being suspected or taken prisoner.

Sinnanatha was reported to have fired point blank at Kenton's chest, but his gun did not discharge in the rain; the two men immediately separated.

Tecumseh and some of his men remained on the battlefield while the other Shawnee headed north. Tecumseh's party remained to delay any possible renewed attack or to find any straggling whites.

Reports vary as to the number of casualties. Most reports state two whites were killed and 14 Indians were killed and 17 wounded. The Indian estimates are probably too high.

Only one Indian war party of any size came within the present borders of Clermont County after the battle. Within three years the whites would be clearing the land and building farms.

Today the site of the Battle of Grassy Run is beautiful and peaceful. There are no obvious clues that a battle fought there on April 10, 1792 would help determine the future of Clermont County.