



Story of the “Pawnee War” of 1859

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STORY OF THE "PAWNEE WAR" OF 1859

Written by J. E. North of Columbus,
State Senator 1877-1893; Democratic
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The story of the so-called "Pawnee War" of 1859 has been told and printed many times. General John M. Thayer was in command of the Nebraska white forces in that famous march up the Elkhorn Valley and in the surprise and capture of the Pawnee tribe at the Madison County stream named "Battle Creek" then and ever since.

General Thayer (at the request of the present superintendent) told his story before the Nebraska State Historical Society January 10, 1900, and it is to be found in our **Publications**.¹

Within the past few days Ed W. North of Columbus, son of J. E. North, and nephew of Major Frank and Captain Luther H. North, found among his father's papers a story of that campaign and sent it to the State Historical Society. It adds some features to the Nebraska picture of 1859 and is given below:

¹ The following articles on Battle Creek may be found in the **Publications** of the Nebraska State Historical Society:

"The Pawnee War of 1859," by General John M. Thayer; Volume V, Second Series, pages 231-246.

"The Pawnee Indian War," by Captain R. W. Hazen; Volume III, First Series, pages 279-286.

THE ELKHORN—BATTLE CREEK CAMPAIGN

By J. E. North

To a person who has spent as great a part of his life on the frontier as it has been my fortune to do, it seems much like a dream to recall the incidents connected therewith, more than fifty years after the exciting days have passed.

I came to Nebraska in May, 1856, and in the latter part of the month engaged with Edward Everett of Council Bluffs for a three months' trip with him to do some government surveying of land located in Douglas and Saunders Counties, west of Omaha, and extending across the Platte River. At this time the Pawnee Indians lived on the south bank of the Platte River, and when our company crossed the river to do the work required there our trouble began. The contractor for the work, Mr. Everett, tried to explain, as best he could without an interpreter, that we were sent by the President of the United States to survey the country, and that if we were driven away by the Indians, soldiers would be sent to punish them for interfering.

Our work was going on during the time the squaws were planting their corn, and some of the corners were located in their corn fields, to build which would destroy several hills of corn. This was resented by the Indians to the extent of tearing down the mounds and treating us roughly.

One day, while we were at work near their village, they were attacked by a war party of Sioux Indians, and in a few minutes the prairie was covered with Indians. After they had driven the Sioux away, the young men came stringing back to their village. In passing our party of surveyors, a couple of them made a charge on us and one succeeded in getting my hat off my head and ran away with it. I was compelled to go bareheaded from that time until some of the party made a trip to Omaha for supplies. This finished our work in the Pawnee ground, and we returned across the Platte River to work there.

At this time there were a few families at Fremont who did some trading with the Indians, and who continued to trade with them for the next three years without having any particular or serious trouble until about the first of July, 1859, when the Pawnee left their village and crossed the Platte to start on their annual hunt and to join with the Omaha for their better protection. They found they were very short of provisions, especially meat, and rather than starve they commenced depredations on the settlers, killing some young beef cattle, pigs, etc., notwithstanding their chiefs and head men tried to keep them under control. Most of the depredations were committed on the property of settlers at the village of Fontenelle, about ten miles northeast from Fremont on the east side of the Elkhorn River.

A messenger was sent to Omaha to call on the Governor for military help to control the Indians and protect the settlers. As the Indians were moving camp daily, they moved from that locality, starting up the Elkhorn River in a body, and as there were nearly five thousand of them, their movements were necessarily slow; yet, when the dragoons arrived from Fort Kearny and the militia was collected at Omaha, the Indians had a pretty good start.

Word was sent from Omaha along the road, up as far as Columbus, for all able-bodied men and teams that were available to come to the mouth of Maple Creek and join the command. I had a team of horses and a wagon, and three or four extra men staying at my house who wanted to go. We started, and got enough men from Columbus to make a big wagon-load. I think eleven men went from here. We all had flint-lock muskets that had been furnished to the frontier settlers by the United States Government, and it was always a question with me if the furnishing of firearms to the pioneers to protect themselves from the Indians did not cause more trouble than it prevented. Our first camp after we left home was on the bank of the Platte River between where Rogers Station is now located and the town of North Bend.

The next morning we started across the prairie on a northeast course to the Bluffs and the Maple Creek Valley, which we followed down stream until we came to the point where the command had crossed that creek and gone on north. We followed the trail, and at

evening came to the camp located on Pebble Creek. There we stopped for the night, and the next morning found many men with whom I had been acquainted in Omaha.

Among other distinguished men whom I met there were General Samuel R. Curtis, in command of the piece of artillery; General John M. Thayer, in command of the militia; Governor Samuel Black, commander-in-chief; and Lieutenant Robertson of the Regular Army with a detachment of dragoons from the army post at Fort Kearny. We had in all about three hundred men, and thus we set out in the morning, trying to catch and whip the whole Pawnee Tribe of Indians—numbering at that time nearly five thousand.

We made as good progress as possible over the natural prairie. I should think from twenty to twenty-five miles a day. After I had been with the command four days and we had crossed Union Creek, and were near where the sixth principal meridian crosses the Elkhorn River, the rations were disappearing quite rapidly when General Thayer asked for volunteers to go across the country to Columbus and get some provisions and wagons to go from here up the Loup and Beaver Rivers with a supply and meet the command. I offered to take my team and make the trip if two other men would go with me, and Frank Becher and a man named Pierce agreed to do so. We started along the Sixth meridian, following the section mounds, made by the U. S. Surveyors. These mounds were plainly visible at that time. The first day we crossed Union Creek a few miles, and next day got to Columbus. We crossed Shell Creek at Tom Lynch's, where he had a bridge.

The second day after we left, the command overtook the Indians at Battle Creek and had quite a parley. Some of the men who were mounted charged on the Indians, and one of them, through accident, shot a horse belonging to one of the Omaha Indians. In order to settle for this, the officer in command took a horse belonging to a man named Moreland and gave to the Indian.

When I arrived at Columbus I reported to John Rickley, who was the only merchant in town at that time. We loaded two wagons with provisions and started up the Loup River the next morning and met the soldiers a little way up Beaver Creek, above where Genoa is now located.

They were returning from the battle-ground on their way to Omaha, without the loss of any blood except the Indian horse killed. I have often thought that we, the whites, had a very narrow escape with our lives, owing to the fact that the head men of the Pawnee had such good control over their young men and prevented them from attacking the whites; for if this had been done, there would not have been one left to tell the tale.
