

The Kirwin Indian Scare of 1871

By KIRBY ROSS
Review Staff Writer

Last fall the *Review* profiled the Battle of Prairie Dog Creek, which occurred in 1867 and was the only major skirmish to occur in Phillips County between Native Americans and the oncoming tide of white Americans (soon to be reprinted at www.phillipscountyreview.com).

There undoubtedly were a number of Indian scares in the county after that date which have been lost to history, including one in 1873 that had the residents of Truesdell reaching for their guns (Truesdell was located a short distance east of present-day U.S. Hwy 183 at the Deer Creek bridge just south of Phillipsburg). Little is known about this affair other than the following brief account which was published in the *Phillips County Post* in 1906:

“In the early spring of 1873, when rumors of Indian War Dances were floating up and down Deer Creek, there congregated at Truesdell about twenty of the surrounding settlers who discussed the situation pro and con. It was decided that the ability to stop one Indian every time a shot was fired at a distance of four hundred yards was the most essential, so, accordingly an old buffalo head was placed at the desired distance and all kinds of guns and pistols that had ever been manufactured were produced and the day spent in practice.”

However, there were three accounts of Indian scares which were large enough to make it into the historical

record in a more significant way. Over the course of four weeks those major incidents will be profiled on these pages in the order of their occurrence.

The first involves a siege of 500 warriors against the town of Kirwin in 1871; the second will detail, in two parts, the events during which Phillipsburg-area residents put up the stockade that came to be referred to as Fort Bissell and retreated into it for a week during 1872; and the third concerns the massacre of several dozen homesteaders now known as “the Last Indian Raid in Kansas” which occurred in Decatur and Rawlins counties, but was set into motion, at least in part, by two Phillips County buffalo hunters and resulted in widespread panic among settlers throughout southwest Nebraska and northwest Kansas, including Phillips County.

The following edited account of the Kirwin Indian Scare of 1871 was written by Thomas Cox, Jr., and appeared in the 1906 edition of the *Phillips County Post*. The *Post* was owned by the Boyd family at the time and was a precursor newspaper to the *Phillips County Review*.

The Indian Scare in Kirwin--1871

In August 1871, Thomas Cox, Sr., had just put up the first house that was built on the townsite of Kirwin. It was of hewed logs and chalk roof, with the space between the logs still open when he moved into it.

The families of Thomas

Cox, Sr.; his son-in-law John Butler, and brother-in-law Allen Ward, were living there when seven or eight men came rushing in from up Deer Creek with most of them in a wagon and team while two were riding partially harnessed horses.

They stated that they had been chased by a squad of Indians, and there being no roads along the streams at that time they had struck from point to point for the shortest route. In crossing a gulch they were unable to get one of their wagons out, so they cut the horses loose and hurried to tell us that there were about five hundred Indians coming down the divide between Deer Creek and the Solomon.

As the scare spread fast, men began coming from all quarters, and soon there were about thirty-five gathered in town. Men were sent up Bow Creek and a family was brought in that was camping on a claim.

The men commenced coralling the horses, piling up logs and digging a ditch, making a solid breastwork. While this was going on fully 500 Indians came in sight and halted on the hill just west of Kirwin.

Gil Hoover, being there and understanding something of the Indian tactics, said he would take four men, five including himself, and go up and try and see if they could find out what the Indians were up to. When Hoover got about half way up the hill, he made some signs to them, which they understood to mean a council.

Five of their warriors or chiefs came out to about half the intervening distance. Our five men then advanced to within speaking distance and demanded to know what they were doing here, to which they replied that they owned the river down to the Great Spirit Spring, which is just east of Cawker City, and that we must get out before "sun low," or fight.

During the parley the men at the house had drawn the table out in the middle of the room and placed all the cartridges and ammunition thereon. There was also an understanding that if an attack was made, that some men were to fire from the cracks in the house and others from the breastworks, and the women were to hand them the ammunition.

When the five men returned to report they found the party well prepared with all kinds of repeating guns that could fire from eight to sixteen shots without reloading, and in shape to give the Indians a warm reception.

The Indians must have come to that conclusion too, for, after standing there about two hours and discussing the situation, they moved south and went into camp on the

Solomon.

In the evening five of the chiefs were seen coming up to the house and five of our men went out and met them, and asked them what they wanted. The Indians said they would "no fight" and they wanted to come up and tell the women to be "no 'fraid." It was thought they wanted to see how we were prepared, but the men commanded them to return to their camp. They were as naked as the day they were born.

Guards were placed and watched all night and the next day at about ten o'clock the Indians moved on south. They left spies that could be seen for a week afterward on all the high points around Kirwin, to see if they could catch us off our guard. To prevent being caught asleep, the horses were taken out and herded in the open in the day time and guards watched at night.

At the first report of the oncoming Indians John Butler, of Kirwin, and Johnathan Cox, now of Boise City, Idaho, started to Hays City after the soldiers, riding all night. The soldiers came as far as Alton, then called Bull City, on the South

Solomon, and went into camp, taking good care not to run into any smoke. They sent word to Kirwin that if there was no further danger they would go on to Cawker City, which they did.

At that time the Kirwin men then went to work chopping and hauling logs from the river, stood them on end, buried two feet in the ground, making a solid wall eight feet high around about one fourth acre of ground. This enclosed the house and corralled everything inside, making them feel perfectly safe from any attack by the hostile tribes.

Note: The hill to the west of Kirwin that the Indians originally stopped on and where the first parley was held is now the location of the Kirwin water tower and is known as Standpipe Hill. The site of the Cox home where the settlers holed up and where the stockade was built after the siege was over is known as the Old Ewing Place, and is now an empty lot. It is situated on the northeast corner of the intersection of East Main and East 4th Street.