

# The Ft. Bissell Indian Scare of 1872

By **KIRBY ROSS**  
*Review Staff Writer*

## PART TWO

The *Phillips County Post* reported the following account of the 1872 Indian scare during which a stockade was put up on the Bissell Ranch near Phillipsburg and subsequently became known as Fort Bissell. The story was provided to the *Post* in 1906 by one of Phillipsburg's earliest settlers, Henry McDowell, as well as an unnamed "soldier" who sought shelter there during the scare.

### THE FORT BISSELL INDIAN SCARE--1872

The troubles, trials and hardships of pioneer life were now at hand: A false alarm started by Charley Fredericks, who claimed to be acting on authority of military scouts sent out from Ft. Hays, notified the settlers that the Apache Indians were on the war path and might be expected at any time. Upon this information the settlers gathered at the Bissell Ranch and at once threw up a log fort. The Phillipsburg Town Company and a few others who had just arrived from Doniphan county and were camping on the homestead of Jacob Close, adjoining the site of the future capitol of our county, came over and enlisted to serve during the "Indian War" and helped to build the fort.

With this Doniphan county company came two strangers, one a very eccentric old German, Louis Noper, whom nature had endowed with a most wonderful whistle with which he could imitate any

instrument in a German brass band, or the song of the mockingbird or nightingale.

The other was Irish, though he claimed to be French, and said his name was Pat. Whether he had any other name was never known. This Dutchman and Irishman could never agree and there was more danger of a war between them than an Apache War.

They all stayed in this fort more than a week and no Indians appeared. One morning when all were feeling blue and looking green and wondering if they had not been the victims of a huge joke they thoroughly discussed the probabilities and possibilities of a war and decided to abandon the fort. The next morning, long before the rising sun had gilt the top of Bread-bowl Mound, these deluded people were homeward bound, bidding adieu to Ft. Bissell, while old Louie played on his wonderful whistle.

#### The Midnight Alarm

In relating some of the strange haps that befell some of the refugees who had gathered at Fort Bissell for protection from the Apaches, we will commence by giving the report of the guard stationed out where the stock were picketed.

The inexplicable, unaccountable contingent and chance quote from Ireland, alias Pat, was on guard there, and here is his report in his Irish sailor phrases:

"Two of Mr. Plotner's mules, a couple of piratical old crafts, were cruising about the camp and ran foul

of a little colt which they captured and took in tow as a prize. While disputing over the division of this simultaneous discovery which each coveted and claimed with equal desire and determination, the true mother came upon the scene and raised her loud shrill voice against this unlawful kidnapping.

The mules answered back in their own donkey brogue and peculiar style of rhetoric. At this the old dam squared for action; and wheeling about fired a broad side of horse shoes into the flanks of those old mules who got under headway without further ceremony and sailed away on a foraging expedition and never hove to till they had crossed Deer Creek and brought up in Jap McIlvain's corn field. At all this comical proceeding the horses all set up a loud horse laugh, set back in the rigging, tore away the moorings and with their flags flying scud away full sail before the gale across the boundless prairie."

What wonder that with all this braying, neighing, stamping, tramping, stampeding and wild commotion that those not used to Indian warfare should imagine the whole Apache tribe were charging on the fortifications. Earth trembled to the tread of the stampeding herd; tumultuous panic shook the midnight air.

There was hurrying and scurrying here and there in search of arms and ammunition mislaid. Young America in his headlong haste impatient to attack and taste Apache blood, in deadly fight

upset the lamp and put out the light and pandemonium reigned in darkness for the space of thirty minutes. By this time the true cause of the alarm had been ascertained and Fort Bissell was quiet during the remainder of the night.

No one would have been hurt and no blood shed had not two comely dames of ample form and weight met in head-on collision in the darkness. When lights were restored they were found sitting on the ground about eight feet apart facing each other--nursing a pair of bloody noses and declaring they had been struck with Indian war clubs.

### **The Fatted Calf**

To guard against false alarm, the guards were now instructed not to fire on duty unless they were quite positive they saw Indians. Sam Rooney, on guard, was quite positive he saw an Indian moving about in a thicket of wild plum bushes near his beat and very promptly shot him on first sight.

Some ex-drummer of the late war beat the long roll on

a tin pan, and the guards all fell into line and at the command of forward! double quick, marched away across the creek to ascertain the cause of the alarm. Rooney explained that he had one good Indian lying there in the thicket and as there might be several more bad ones it would be safe to keep a sharp watch till daylight. The guard was now changed and Sam went to the fort.

At last when day light came and the guards went to look at Sam's good Indian, there lay one of Mr. Bissell's fatted calves, with a bullet hole in the center of its head. That morning there was fresh veal for breakfast. A young lady, superintending the cooking of the morning meal by the camp fire, her cheeks glowing from the ardent kisses of the blaze, her lips rivaling the glowing embers in brightness, and eyes outshining the twinkling orbs so beautifully set in the azure vault above, (which furnished the only roof of the fort), looked up with a mischievous smile.

"Why Sammie," said she,

"you are indeed a brave soldier, and have earned the proud distinction of being the first to kill an Indian in this war. We are proud of you and I shall take pride in recommending you for a promotion and also a pension. But Sammie, are you very sure it was an Indian that you shot?"

"Very sure, I am, Miss, for didn't I hear him groan like a dying calf after I fired?"

"No doubt you did, Sammie, for you have shot one of our calves."

Down fell poor Rooney's eyes, and he kept them there for a while, but looking up at last, between a frown and smile he said: "Well, that goes to prove that I don't allow any blame blankety black calf to creep up in the dark and bite me, no matter whose brand he wears. Nor any red skinned Apache to steal up with his scalping knife and filch my wig."

*PART ONE: The Kirwin Indian Scare of 1871*

*PART THREE: The Fort Bissell Indian Scare of 1872, cont.*