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Death of Tecumseh*

By Rev. Alfred Brunson, of Prairie du Chien

Hon. L. C. Draper:

At your request, I will give my recollections of the death of this distinguished chief. But in doing so, I must necessarily touch upon a delicate subject, for the reason that so many different and conflicting accounts of it have already been published to the world. All of those accounts, however, that have met my eye, have been based upon rumor, or second or third *hearsay,* except one or two which came from Kentucky some years since, which agreed so well with my own idea of the affair, that I concluded that the writers derived their information from a correct source, if not from actual observation. As well as I can recollect, the names of Davidson and King, that I shall use hereafter, were mentioned in the accounts.

I have no disposition to pluck a single sprig of the well earned laurels from the brow of the brave Col. R. M. Johnson; and I have no doubt, from his general character, as well as what I saw of him myself, that he *would* have killed Tecumseh and a dozen or twenty others of like character, if he could have had the opportunity. But from the facts which fell under my own observation, which have since been confirmed by a distinguished citizen of our State, I cannot award to him that honor in this case, and would correct the statement only for the sake of truth in history.

To give a distinct idea of the affair, I must introduce the case of Col. Whitley. It was said by the Kentuckians, that he had been an old Indian warrior, and could have had command of a regiment of volunteers under Gov. Shelby, but

*At the battle of the Thames in 1813.

refused, choosing rather, like the man at Yorktown, to "fight upon his own hook."

I first saw him when on the march up the Thames in pursuit of Proctor and his Indian minions. He was mounted on a bright bay horse, about sixteen hands high, of the racer build, and looked as if he could give a deer a hard chase. He was clad in Kentucky jeans, pants and hunting shirt, with an old Revolutionary three-cocked hat on his head. Around his waist was a belt, I think of leather, to which was attached a scalping-knife and tomahawk. Over his left shoulder, and coming together under his right arm, to which were attached his powder-horn and bullet-pouch, was a belt of bead wampum, about six inches wide; the beads were mostly, if not all, white, and being upon a dark ground work, showed to a great distance. His rifle, which hung in a graceful hunter's style on his right shoulder, was long and highly mounted with silver, and looked like a perfect specimen of that kind of weapon, of that day. His dress and equipments were so singular, and so unlike anything else in the army, that he was easily distinguished from any and every other person in it; and this distinction, as will be seen in the sequel, was the cause of both him and Tecumseh falling as they did.

Not being attached to any command, and having full liberty, as was understood, from Gen. Harrison and Gov. Shelby, as well as by common consent, to go when and where he pleased, he was constantly on the alert. If he heard a gun, whether in front, rear, or on the flank, his swift charger could be seen, as if on the wing, bearing his rider in that direction.

Before the army had crossed the river, while moving up on its left bank, scattering Indians could occasionally be seen on its right or opposite bank, in the woods: two of these the Colonel shot across the river, and then swam his horse over, and climbing the hill bank, forty or fifty feet nearly perpendicular, he scalped them and returned. I saw him just after one of these feats, the water dripping from him and his horse,

and as he passed, an officer asked him if he got it, to which he made no reply, but took out the scalp and shook it at him.

Another thing that I must mention, is, that of all the regulars who crossed the lake, only about one hundred and sixty of the 27th regiment of Infantry received their baggage from the boats and vessels, in time to march with the volunteers. Of this number I was one, and after the battle the prisoners were placed for the night in our care. This incident brought me to the position I occupied, as hereafter narrated.

The next morning after the battle, I noticed a half-breed Indian lying at the root of a tree, but a few steps from the head of my company, and around him several British and American surgeons. They had come to examine, and, if necessary, to dress his wounds. The attentions paid to him showed that he had some distinction with the British. As his blanket was thrown off, I saw that his body and limbs were bandaged in a number of places; and I heard a British surgeon say that he had *fifteen* balls or buck-shot in him. (Our musket cartridges had a ball and three buck-shot, or fifteen buck-shot in them.)

Tecumseh was a Brigadier-General in the British army, and as such was entitled to an aide-de-camp, and interpreter, and I learned that the half-breed before me filled those two offices for the Indian general.

The surgeons deeming the case hopeless, did nothing for the dying man. But knowing his relation to Tecumseh, the conversation turned upon the question of his death. The Americans thought he was dead, it being so reported by those who professed to know him; but the British thought he was not dead. They said he was a wily old dog, and they presumed that he was safe in the woods somewhere.

At this, the dying aide-de-camp of the great chief, who himself appeared to have been an educated man, and was probably the son of some wealthy British fur-trader, spoke and said:

"He is dead: he fell when I did. Tecumseh said, when going into the battle, that if Gen. Harrison was in it, he would kill him or lose his own life, having an old grudge

against him since the battle of Tippecanoe; and seeing an officer who was distinguished by his hat, dress, and equipments from all others, he concluded that he must be Harrison, and advanced towards him to get a fair shot. As he moved out, the Indians as well as myself drew out after him, in the form of a triangle, with Tecumseh at the point.

"At the same time, the distinguished white chief, seeing Tecumseh's move, drew out, in like form, to meet him. The two leveled their rifles at each other at the same instant, but Tecumseh got the first fire, and the white chief fell from his horse to the ground. At this Tecumseh rushed up to get the scalp of his victim, followed by myself and other braves, when a volley from the mounted men, who accompanied the white chief, brought him and me, with many others to the ground.

"Tecumseh, though badly wounded, made another effort to secure the scalp of the fallen chief; but at that moment a youth or young man on horseback, who had discharged his musket, drew a pistol from his belt, and shot Tecumseh dead. I was lying where I fell, within a few feet of my chief, and I know that he is dead."

This man died in about half an hour after this conversation.

The British surgeons, on hearing this from the dying aide of Tecumseh, gave it up that he was dead. This story, confirming the death of Tecumseh, was soon spread through the camp, and as it identified the place where he lay, by that of Col. Whitley, the Kentuckians rushed to the spot and completely skinned his head in small pieces, some not larger than a cent, so that a tuft of hair was on it; and when the head could furnish no more trophies, they skinned his body and limbs in strips, which they called "razor straps."*

This apparent barabarism may be excused, perhaps, on the

*Black Hawk, who was under Tecumseh at the battle of the Thames, stated, that Tecumseh was not scalped nor skinned; but that "lying near him was a fine looking Pottawattamie, who had been killed, decked off in his plumes and war-paint, whom the Americans no doubt had taken for Tecumseh, for he was scalped, and every particle of skin flayed from his body; that Tecumseh himself had no ornaments about his person, save a British medal." See Drake's *Tecumseh*.—L. C. D.

ground that many, if not all, who participated in it, had brothers, fathers, relatives or neighbors most barbarously murdered at the River Raisin, after being made prisoners of war, in the preceding January, and Tecumseh was the leading spirit in the butchery; and as they and their fathers, from the time of Braddock's defeat, if not before, had been taught to fight Indians in their own style, they took this opportunity to pay him off in his own coin.

As Tecumseh had been a great terror on the North-West frontier, his death, and manner of it, were, very naturally, topics of conversation in the army, during the return march, and after we reached Detroit; and some anxiety began to be manifested as to who was the fortunate individual—the youth or young man—who had done the deed. But we were taken all aback, when the papers from the States brought the General's report of the battle, in which he gave the credit of killing Tecumseh to Col. Johnson. I think he gave it as a rumor, but he seemed to favor the idea, and it went over the world as a fact. It was said, and probably correctly, that Col. Johnson did kill an Indian, who was supposed to be a chief, and some one *guessed* it was Tecumseh. But Whitley and Johnson were not so close together as to make the latter the *youth* who killed the daring chief.

Gen. Harrison was, as he truly ought to have been, very much gratified at the aid and assistance he had received from Col. Johnson, and it was thought that he adopted the rumor, and gave it currency, to *flatter* his friend, without due examination into its truth. I have been told by those who have heard Col. Johnson speak of it, that he never claimed to have killed Tecumseh. He claimed to have killed an Indian, in that battle, and supposed, from his daring, that he was a chief, but did not know. But this fact was well known and understood. Whitley and Johnson were in different parts of the battle. Tecumseh fell by or near Whitley, therefore the Indian whom Johnson killed could not have been Tecumseh.

In 1847 or 1848, I was at Col. James Gentry's, in Belmont, Wisconsin. The conversation turned upon Tecumseh's death, when I related the incidents above stated. Col. Gentry said he believed it, and gave as the reason for his faith, the following facts and circumstances. He was a boy in 1813, too young to enter the army, or he should have done so. His father served under Col. Whitley, in the Indian wars. He was acquainted with Whitley himself, knew when he left with the volunteers for the campaign, and heard officers and soldiers tell, on their return, of the death of the brave Colonel, and of Tecumseh, at the same time and place, in substance, as I have stated it. He spoke of the Adjutant of Col. Johnson's Regiment, as living in the same county with him, in Kentucky, and that he heard the Adjutant, and all of Capt. Davidson's company, say, that Capt. George Davidson first shot Tecumseh and wounded him, and that a young man by the name of King, after discharging his musket, drew his pistol and shot Tecumseh dead; and this they stated, and continued to state, notwithstanding Gen. Harrison's intimation that *probably* Col. Johnson did it.*

Prairie du Chien, June 16th, 1859.

*Capt. James Davidson, long the State Treasurer of Kentucky, I know personally; I believe he still survives, at a venerable age. Capt. Davidson furnished a statement, in 1841, relative to the death of Tecumseh, and claimed the honor of the chieftain's death for David King, a private in his company, who picked up Col. Whitley's gun, after the Colonel had fallen, and with it shot the chief. But the critical author of the *Life of Tecumseh*, says this could not have been Tecumseh that King killed, as the Indian shot by King wore fanciful leggins, and a parti-colored sash, while all agree that Tecumseh was dressed in simple deer-skin. "Now," says Drake's *Life of Tecumseh*, "if there be any one fact connected with the fall of Tecumseh, which is fully and fairly established upon unimpeachable authority, it is, that he entered the battle of the Thames, dressed in the ordinary deer-skinned garb of his tribe. There was nothing in his clothes, arms or ornaments, indicating him to have been a chief. On this point, the testimony of Anthony Shane [who commanded the friendly Indians under Harrison, at the Thames, and long Government interpreter] is explicit; and his statement is confirmed by Col. Baubee, of the British Army, who was familiarly acquainted with Tecumseh. This officer, the morning after the action, stated to one of the aids of Gen. Harrison, that he saw Tecumseh just before the battle commenced, and that he was clothed in his usual plain deer-skin dress, and in that garb took his position in the Indian line, where he heroically met his fate. The testimony in favor of King's claim, while it proves very satisfactorily that he killed an Indian, is equally conclusive, we think, in establishing the fact, that the Indian was not the renowned Tecumseh."—L. C. D.

Letter by the Hon. John T. Kingston, of Necedah

While at Ottawa, Illinois, in the year 1832, during the Sauk war, I remember hearing Sha-bo-nis, a chief of the Pottawatamies, narrate to my father and others then present, the particular circumstances relating to the death of Tecumseh; and he also informed them that he saw, at Washington (from which place he had but recently returned), the man "who killed Tecumseh." Sha-bo-nis was one of Tecumseh's favorite warriors, and held a station under him, corresponding to that of aide-de-camp in our service, and was consequently by his side during the greater part of the day, and was with him when he fell.

This statement was as follows: Tecumseh, and several other Indians, including Sha-bo-nis were concealed in the top of a fallen tree. The first Sha-bo-nis noticed of the "white man" was, when he came around the root of the same tree—in falling, the roots of the tree had turned up considerable earth, enough to conceal both horse and rider from view, when coming in the direction the tree was lying. The horse was white, and both horse and rider appeared to be wounded; the man in particular appeared to be faint, hardly able to keep the saddle. When they came in sight, but a few feet from the Indians, Tecumseh quickly rose to his feet and fired; his aim was too low, however, the ball striking the horse. He then sprang forward with uplifted tomahawk. The white man, at that instant drew a pistol, and fired, exclaiming, at the same time, "you d——d Indian." The ball took effect, killing Tecumseh instantly; both horse and rider also fell to the ground. During the battle the voice of Tecumseh was heard commanding and cheering

his warriors in the fight; but now that voice was heard no more. "And then," said Sha-bo-nis, in peculiar Indian style, "I saw all the other Indians run, and thought it was time for Sha-bo-nis to run too." "That white man," continued he, "is now a great chief at Washington,"—meaning Col. R. M. Johnson, who was then a member of Congress, and since Vice President of the United States. "I knew him," said he, "the moment I saw him." "Sha-bo-nis never told a lie," was the proud boast of that good Indian, and no one that knew him, ever doubted his word.*

*The *Western Christian Advocate*, of this week, says the Indiana *State Journal*, of Sept. 20th, 1859, contains an obituary notice, by Rev. A. Wright, of the Indiana M. E. Church, of Isaac Hamblin, Sr., who died at his residence, near Bloomfield, Indiana, a few months since, aged about eighty-six years. Mr. Hamblin was a man of deep piety, and unquestionable veracity. He was in the battle of the Thames, and the writer gives the following as his statement in regard to the manner in which Tecumseh was killed:

He says he was standing but a few feet from Col. Johnson when he fell, and in full view, and saw the whole of that part of the battle. He was well acquainted with Tecumseh, having seen him before the war, and having been a prisoner seventeen days, and received many a cursing from him. He thinks that Tecumseh thought Johnson was Harrison, as he often heard the chief swear that he would have Harrison's scalp, and seemed to have a special hatred towards him. Johnson's horse fell under him, he himself being also deeply wounded; in the fall, he lost his sword, his large pistols were empty, and he was entangled with his horse on the ground. Tecumseh had fired his rifle at him, and when he saw him fall, he threw down his gun and bounded forward like a tiger, sure of his prey. Johnson had only a side pistol ready for use. He aimed at the chief, over the head of his horse, and shot near the centre of his forehead. When the ball struck, it seemed to him that the Indian jumped with his head full fifteen feet into the air; as soon as he struck the ground, a little Frenchman ran his bayonet into him, and pinned him fast to the ground.—L. C. D.

First Grave in Watertown

By D. W. Ballou, Jr.

The first white man's grave, ever made within the limits of the present city of Watertown, Wisconsin, has just been broken in upon, destroyed and obliterated by the steady march and ceaseless changes of time, and its almost forgotten tenant, after peacefully resting in it more than twenty-two years—heedless of the life and activity surging above and around him—removed to a spot, where his wasting form will be disturbed no more forever, by the thoughtless intrusions of the living, who, in the calm hour, when, sooner or later, they meet the "common lot," will desire the dreamless repose of the dead. I have indulged the hope, that a slight sketch of this pioneer incident, in the early history of one of the most prominent and prosperous of the many places in the interior of the State, drawn from the fresh and vivid recollections of some who were witnesses of the whole scene, might be interesting, not only to such as will now first learn them, but also to those who retain a clear and distinct remembrance of what happened at that primitive day, in the history of a city, whose foundations they were about to commence, and yet survive to behold the wonderful results of their youthful foresight, perseverance, and enterprise. And as we give a brief account of the first death, curious fancies more than half arise in the mind as it casts a hurried glance along the long line, and suggest the question, as to whose hand shall record the last one, and when shall it be done?

In the spring of 1837, aside from the red men, the entire population of Watertown did not exceed fifteen—men, women