

MIDVALE CENTENNIAL

Middle Valley and the Indian Wars

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When Middle Valley settlers awoke early that morning in 1878 it was just too quiet. Not a sound came from the little Bannock village down by the river bottom. No barking of dogs, no neighing of horses, no happy babble of voices.

Gradually, it dawned on the whites that something was wrong. Not only were the usual village noises absent, but when somebody piled on a horse and galloped down to investigate, he found the clearing as bare as if it had been swept with a broom.

Sometime during the night the Indians had left without any warning whatsoever.

And never again did they come back to live in Middle Valley.

Panic spread among valley residents about as rapidly as did the news.

Did this mean war? Were they all going to be massacred?

During the years of early settlement, Idaho had seen its share of bloody Indian wars. Massacres and scalpings, skirmishes and ambushes enlivened the annals of the 50's and 60's.

But during the early Middle Valley years, Indians and white appeared to live compatibly enough. White children mingled in play with

Indian youngsters of the village by the river, and white men often sat for hours in the councils of the village elders, to smoke

Mrs. Linder's housework must have suffered that day, as she peeked through the curtains to see if he was still there.

Finally she decided to feed him, and after cooking a huge meal, she served it up to him in a dishpan, hoping this is what he wanted.

the ancient, long-stemmed medicine pipe, with full ceremony and total silence.

To their credit the white men were apparently able to tolerate the dreadful-smelling weed used in the pipe, without becoming too queasy - until perhaps later.

So far I can find no source of identification for the nauseous substance. Does anyone know?

The chief in the little village was called Bannock Joe. Villagers bartered back and forth with the settlers, exchanging moccasins and hides, food and flour.

As long as a white family respected Indian codes of ethics, gave a gift for a gift, had respect for the land and its wildlife, and maintained the honor of one's word, the Indians were loyal friends.

When John McRoberts left his family on their isolated Middle Valley homestead for several months to work in Boise, Indian women came every day to stand guard over Mrs. McRoberts and the children. This was one of their ways of returning a favor.

H.P. Linder made friends with his Indian neighbors. One day while he was away, his wife was startled to see a big Indian hurrying up the path to the house. He urgently tried to tell her something, but she couldn't understand. Finally he shrugged, and went out to the woodpile. There he sat for hours.

It wasn't, although he enjoyed the meal.

He stayed all day until Mr. Linder returned. He told Mr. Linder that a grass fire was burning out of control and coming toward the Linder home. He had stayed there to protect Mrs. Linder in case the fire came too close.

As more and more whites poured into Idaho territory in the 1870's, some of them considered an Indian no better than a wild animal. Class-conscious settlers perpetrated some terrible things upon Indians as well as immigrant Chinese, who came to work in the mines. White supremacy died hard in the hearts of many, in spite of the Civil War.

The apparently limitless abundance of game and forage led to wanton killing of anything that moved. The land was over utilized. The vast fields of camas and couse, staples of the Indian diet, were plowed under, or otherwise plundered and destroyed. The hills, waving head-high with bunch grass, were soon bare and trampled by vast herds of cattle. Only the sagebrush and a few other herbs survived, simply because they weren't edible.

And how much did the whites care? "Let them raise a garden, like we do - take off that heathenish beadwork and dress like white folks, and go to church."

How could the whites understand the deep respect in Indian hearts for Earth Mother, who had furnished them for thousands of years with what they needed? Their very religion forbade them to violate the earth with a plow, to kill an animal without need.

To most white men in those days such a concept was heathenish, and should be uprooted.

A few far-seeing, discerning men who had studied the westward wave of destruction as the emigrations increased, killed and one wounded, after they trailed a band of Indian horse thieves across the mountains to Long Valley that summer. This was about as close as Middle Valley ever got to real strife with Indians. Their attempts at peaceful co-existence had apparently paid off. But this meant nothing to them. The scare was on. They made hasty, galloping trips to Salubria's "Fort Growler" at a moment's notice.

At times when they felt there was

began to understand the principles of ecology, the balance of nature, and gave warning. But not many really cared. What mattered were roads and farms and good clapboard houses, fruit trees, gardens and irrigation ditches, hay fields and good stout barbed wire fences.

In 1877 resentment among even Indians who had tried to co-exist with settlers encroaching on their ancestral lands, erupted hotly all over the Pacific Northwest, and for 3 years, Idaho territory settlers took to forts as rumors of massacres spread from village to farm. Indians were herded into reservations. But Indians knew no boundaries. Had not the whole land been theirs for thousand of years? Small bands of them tried to maintain their summer wanderings for many years.

Others took matters into their own hands, and fought back. Settlers fled to hastily built log forts as they heard talks of skirmishes, pillage and murder along the Salmon River from White Bird to Mt. Idaho.

There followed the Nez Perce, the Bannock, and finally the Sheepeater wars. Indians who had set out to reclaim their camas fields and hunting grounds were themselves very nearly exterminated.

At Indian Springs that summer of 1878, H.P. Linder, James Sutton and several others flushed out a thieving band of Indians bent on stealing horses.

Three Indian Valley men were

no time to reach the fort, families would hide in the willows along the river.

Elizabeth Wiggins, the third white child born in the valley, recalled that her family went to the fort at Mann's Creek, before Fort Growler was built. But during the summer of 1878 the family slipped out after dark and waded to an island in the Weiser River and slept in a big hole. Elizabeth learned to walk, there on the island, by holding on to the brush.

The Keithleys, Levi and John, hid bedrolls for their families in the willows by the creek. After dark they carried their beds to a low-lying meadow, where no one could sneak up on them, and there they slept, with guns and dogs.

By 1880 the scare was over, and within a few years the Indians had reluctantly accepted a new way of life, at least outwardly.

And settlers, without a twinge of conscience, accepted a good night's sleep as their due.