

SEVIER COUNTY SETTLERS VERSUS CHEROKEE INDIANS,

1783-1800

By J.A. Sharp

No settlers on the Tennessee frontier suffered more from Indian attacks than those who settled in the country South of the French Broad river, of which the present Sevier County was a part. When the first settlers crossed this river and staked out land claims in the Boyd's Creek valley about 1783, the Cherokee Indians had not relinquished their rights to the land. Therefore, the first residents of Sevier County were merely "squatters" on lands to which they had no titles.

Small wonder then that early Sevier County gave strong support to the newly formed State of Franklin, which created the County in March, 1785, and whose governor, John Sevier, in June, 1785, made a treaty with the Cherokee that permitted white settlements here. This treaty was negotiated on Sevier County soil at Henry's Station, "North of the River," near the mouth of Dumplin Creek, in the present Kokak section.

However, the majority faction of the Cherokee, not present at the signing of the Treaty of Dumplin, soon repudiated the agreement, and were upheld by the Confederation Congress in the Treaty of Hopewell, signed with the Cherokee in November, 1785. The latter treaty did not permit white settlement south of a line in the region of Greeneville, and all settlers in the present Sevier and Blount counties and part of Knox County were ordered to leave within six months. Also, the Indians were authorized to drive them out if they did not move. Needless to say they did not move, and more people continued to cross the French Broad and settle here.

Throughout its brief existence the State of Franklin continued its efforts to extinguish the Cherokee claim to Sevier County. And in 1786 Colonel Samuel Wear, perhaps Sevier County's most prominent early citizen, was one of the Franklin agents that negotiated with the Cherokee the Treaty of Coyattee, that confirmed the Treaty of Dumplin and extended the area for white settlement as far south as the Little Tennessee river, where the main "Overhill" Cherokee towns were located.

After the downfall of the State of Franklin in 1788, support of the separatist movement was confined largely to Sevier County, or the country South of the French Broad. The people here realized that only the Franklin government recognized their land claims titles, and that both North Carolina and the Confederation government supported the Cherokee claim. This led to the formation of a "Lesser Franklin" government, with an "Articles of Association," similar to the earlier Watauga Association. In 1789 these "Articles" were adopted at Newell's Station, the county seat of Sevier County under the Franklin government, and which now served as the seat of government for the wider area of "Lesser Franklin," of all the settled country South of the French Broad.

The "Lesser Franklin" government ended in 1791 when Governor William Blount, of the newly formed Southwest Territory, met the Cherokee chieftains on the site of the future Knoxville, and signed with them the Treaty of Holston. The Indians now acknowledged the authority of the United States government, and ceded to the United States all of their lands South of the French Broad, almost as far as the Little Tennessee river.



Despite the above cessions of their South of French Broad lands to the Franklin government and the Southwest Territory, the Cherokee continued their raids on the frontier settlers of Sevier County from the first settlements in 1783 until the end of the century. The Indians had little understanding of treaties, contracts, or deeds. Too, lacking any central government, the signatures or marks of a few head warriors did not obligate other chieftains who failed to sign the treaties. Least of all did such agreements constrain young and restless braves, who saw themselves rapidly being dispossessed of a rich heritage by a more energetic race.

Tennessee's second historian, Dr. J.G.M. Ramsey, has described the Indian perils and dangers faced by the pioneer settlers in the South of French Broad area in the following apt words:

"could a diagram be drawn, accurately designating every spot signalized by an Indian massacre, surprise or depredation, or courageous attack, defence, pursuit or victory by the whites, or station, or fort, or battlefield, or personal encounter, the whole of that section of country would be studded over by delineations of such incidents. Every spring, every fort, every path, every farm, every trail, every house, nearly, in its first settlement, was once the scene of danger, exposure, attack, exploit, achievement, death."

For several years innumerable accounts of such Indian atrocities on the Tennessee frontier filled the pages of the Knoxville Gazette, Tennessee's first newspaper, which started publication in 1791. Thus we are furnished with the best contemporary record of Indian depredations, and the Sevier County Indian stories recounted here were taken from the files of this old newspaper.

One of the first of such stories, the murder of the Richardson family, for whom Richardson's Cove was named, appeared in the Gazette of December 29, 1792. This full story is quoted as follows:

"On Saturday the 22nd instant, a party of Indians went to the home of Mr. Richardson, ... on Little Pigeon, twenty-five miles from this place, and killed Mrs. Richardson, Mrs. Foster, Miss Schult and two children with tomahawks and a war club; the latter of which they left in the house and went off. It appears that they had laid in wait, upon a hill which overlooked Richardson's door, many hours and took the opportunity of his absence, of only half a hour to massacre his family.

On the next day, John Barkin, in the same neighborhood, in search of his horses, saw two Indians attempting to catch them; on which he fired upon one who dropped his arms, but it is feared he did not kill him."

A similar story, appearing in the Gazette of March 23, 1793, is quoted:

"On Saturday the 9th instant, James Nelson and Thompson Nelson (brothers) were killed and scalped by Indians, on Little Pigeon, about twenty-five miles from this place. The Indians had formed an ambuscade on a path near Mrs. Nelson's house. These young men were struck by eight balls; from which it is conjectured that there were that number of Indians;



and were headed by a fellow called Towahka, who also headed the party that killed Richardson's family. By this barbarous and bloody deed, an aged mother is bereaved of her only support, in her declining years."

Also, in the same issue of the old paper: "On Wednesday the 20th instant, on Pigeon, ... thirty miles from this place, \_\_\_\_\_ Taylor was fired on and killed, by a party of Indians, who had formed an ambuscade on a path he was travelling, near a station. The number of guns fired by the Indians, at that time, was such as to induce the people out of the station to believe it was attacked by a considerable party."

The exact site of the Richardson home is unknown to this writer, but it was undoubtedly in Richardson's Cove. The Nelson brothers and their mother ~~may~~ also may have lived in the same "East Fork" section. Since Taylor was killed near a "station," this could have been near Wear's Fort at the mouth of Walden's Creek on the "West Fork" of Little Pigeon, where Colonel Samuel Wear settled between 1783 and 1785, and built his log house which became the fort or "station." Later, "stations" or blockhouses, for the protection of the settlers, were erected in both Richardson's Cove and Jones' Cove, but it is not believed any were there in 1793.

On June 19, 1793, Wear's Fort was the scene of a major Indian attack, and the Gazette of June 29, 1793 recorded that "in the night, a large party of Indians came into Wear's Cove, on Little Pigeon, ... and cut down much corn, stole ten horses, and killed another, killed two cows and three hogs, which they skinned, for provisions, took seven bags of meal out of Wear's mill and broke sundry parts of it."

Thus it would appear that the first "Wear's Cove" was the lower part of Walden's Creek and the valley of the "West Fork" near the mouth of this Creek. In 1808 Samuel Wear obtained a Tennessee grant on an "improvement and occupancy" claim for almost 500 acres of fertile level land which extended from the mouth of Walden's Creek up the river almost to the present Pigeon Forge, but if Colonel Wear owned land or lived in the present Wear's Valley no proof of it has been found. Perhaps the first people in Wear's Valley were the Crowsons, and the place was first called "Crowson's Cove."

On June 21, two days after the attack on Wear's mill, a small force of regular militia under one "Lieutenant Henderson," followed these Indians and "retook the horses and meal and three of the enemy's guns, killed two ... and wounded a third." Apparently, the Indians resisted when they saw the small force of whites, and nine of the latter were wounded.

Not satisfied with this result, sixty of the aroused and angered Sevier County settlers met, probably at Wear's Fort, and chose Colonel Wear to command them. This was the beginning of the Tallassee campaign, one of the major Indian expeditions of the period, and composed entirely of Sevier County men. The use of such volunteers in offensive operations against the Indians had been forbidden by the territorial governor, William Blount, who had received his orders from the War Department of the newly established United States government. Only the regular militia could be



used, and, if used at all, only in defensive operations. Nevertheless, "Lieutenant Henderson" and his militiamen joined the angry and defiant volunteers under Colonel Wear, who, in the words of the Gazette of July 13, 1793, "lamented the too long neglect of succour from the general government of the United States." Continuing from the Gazette, this entire force:

"marched to the mountains, where they discovered several trails, winding various ways, which at last terminated in one plain beaten path, leading to Tallassee, a town situated in the mountains boasted of by the Indians, as inaccessible to the white people. Near this town they overtook a number of Indians on the North bank of the Tennessee, when a heavy fire began on both sides; but the Indians soon leaped into the river, on which the white men ran to the bank, killed fifteen fellows, and took four squaws prisoners, which they have brought in with them, and wish to exchange for the property taken from them. During the engagement on the North, a sharp fire was kept up by the Indians from the South side of the river. It is to be regretted that a squaw was by accident killed in the water."

Colonel Wear's Tallassee expedition doubtless followed the branch of the Indian War Path from the French Broad that "went up the west fork of Little Pigeon, and crossed some small mountains, to the Tuckaleeche towns, and so on to the Over-hill villages of the Cherokees." Tallassee was an "Over-hill" town on the Little Tennessee river just below the present Calderwood. To reach Tallassee from Wear's Fort the logical route was through the present Wear's Valley, Tuckaleechee Cove, and Cade's Cove. This was probably the route of the War Path as well as Colonel Wear's men in 1793.

Indian depredations in Sevier County continued after the Tallassee expedition. The Gazette of May 23, 1794 contained this brief announcement: "On Tuesday the 5th instant Peter Pearcefield was killed by the Indians near Wear's Cove...." Then in the issue of June 5, this sequel appeared:

"On the 14th of last May, Joseph Evans, Thomas Sellers, and James Hubbard, junior, set out in pursuit of a party of Indians, who had murdered Pearcefield to take satisfaction; but not falling in upon their trail, they made towards Big Tellico town, where they discovered a large encampment of Indian warriors; in the night they went into their camp, and killed four fellows, asleep on the ground, and immediately retreated, and got safe into the settlement on the 21st- Evans and his party were dressed and painted like Indians."

For 157 years this story of the murder of Pearcefield has been a tradition in the Crowson family of Wear's Valley. Mrs. R.W. Crowson, age 90, who has lived in Wear's Valley all of her life, remembers a slightly different version of this story, as told to her by Richard Crowson, her father-in-law. Recently she stated to this writer that Aaron Crowson, father of Richard Crowson, and a man named Pearcefield came from North Carolina to Wear's Valley to select homesteads, and that they, riding on their horses, were attacked by the Indians in the gap of the mountain on the old Walden's Creek road. Pearcefield was shot, but Crowson escaped on his horse down Walden's Creek to Wear's Fort. Later he and other men returned and found Pearcefield's body which was buried on the Crowson land



in Wear's Valley. Today an uninscribed stone and a tree marks the site of this first grave in the Crowson family cemetery.

Very few Indian attacks in Sevier County, or elsewhere on the Tennessee frontier, were reported in the Gazette after 1795. Sevier's expedition against the Lower Cherokee towns in 1793, and Major Ore's destruction of Nickajack and Running Water almost broke the warlike spirit of the Cherokee. Yet, the issue of March 6, 1797 contained the following: "Just as this paper was going to the press, we received information, that on the 4th instant, Thomas Shields was killed by the Indians, in Sevier County, as appears by the deposition of Arnet Shields. They cut his head nearly off, took out his bowels, and otherwise shockingly cut and mangled him." Thomas Shields was a youth who lived with his parents, Robert Shields and Nancy Stockton Shields, early settlers in the upper Middle Creek section of the County.

Perhaps the last Indian murder in Sevier County was in 1800. Sometime in that year an Indian killed a boy named Tannevor Runyan, who is believed to have been the son of Barfoot Runyan and Margaret Rambo Runyan, early settlers on the West Fork of Little Pigeon. Mr. R.M. Runyan remembers the family tradition that the boy was killed in a field while searching for the family's horses. Again, as in 1793, when Colonel Wear led his unauthorized expedition against Tallassee, the aroused and indignant Sevier County settlers were on the verge of independent hostile action. The presence of Governor Archibald Roane, Tennessee's second chief executive, was required to quieten the people.

In 1798 peace was consummated at Tellico Block-house, where Governor Sevier and United States Commissioners met the Cherokee head men. The Treaty of Tellico extended the Tennessee area for white settlement almost to the junction of the Tennessee and Clinch rivers. After this Sevier County no longer occupied such an exposed position on the frontier, and the people were enabled to lead a more peaceful life.