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Events of the Indian War of 1878

By

Sylvester (Coon) Smith

In the spring of 1878, a two horse stage was running in Jordan Valley, Oregon. One day the stage was loaded with guns with only the driver and one passenger aboard. The two men saw the Indians coming, so they unhitched the horses from the stage, got on them, and started to flee. The driver's horse fell with him, and he was soon killed by the Indians, but the passenger got away. The Indians took the guns and burned the wagon. This was while the Bannocks and Paiutes were traveling west before they reached Barren Valley.

On June 9, 1878 Marion Harkness and I started to Happy Valley to see William Barton. As we knew nothing about the country, we took the wrong road at the sink of Rock Creek and went to Beaties Butte. There we camped for the night. Marion Harkness said a man had told him to go east from the sink of Rock Creek, so the next morning we followed the road that went east which took us to Wild Horse Creek. While we were stopped there, we saw someone in the distance a horse back. Marion rode and saw the man, and he was an Indian. He told Marion that if we continued in that direction, we would run into the Indians. So we turned back and came into Catlow Valley at Shirk's place, (now called Home Creek) and there we stayed all night.

On June 11th we went back to our camp from where we had started. On the 12th Marion and Ernest Harkness, Alford Woods, the rest of the crowd, and I went back to shirk's ranch. The rest of the boys took the horses and team and wagon, and I rode ahead of them. When I neared the Shirk ranch, I noticed an Indian on top of a small sod house which was near the cow corral. The Indian had seen me, so I stopped and watched him. I had my needle gun with me and was ready to use it if I should have to. Finally the Indian went into the house. I learned latter that he was a Paiute Indian scouting for the ranch.

On June 13th I went to the P Ranch to see Pete French. I was told that he was in Diamond Valley at one of his other ranches. I stayed all night at the P Ranch, and the next morning I went to the Diamond Ranch and had a talk with French. I told French that I thought the Indians were coming, but he didn't think so.

I went over in sight of Happy Valley (on top of what is now called Six Mile Hill) and looked down into the valley. I could see a large herd, but I couldn't make out what it was. As I watched, I could see the herd move and stop, which showed that there were men around the bunch, whatever it was. There was a large dust where they had come down into the valley from the east. I saw smoke coming out of a chimney and men walking from house to house leading their saddle horses.

I felt sure that the large herd I saw in the valley was Indians. I was afraid to go down into the valley as my horse was not climated to a high climate and was short winded coming from a low elevation. This was the first time I saw Happy Valley.

The house I saw in the valley was Rye Smyth's father's, ^{George} John Smyth. He was getting dinner so I learned latter. They were gathering horses to take to Fort Harney where they were forted up. The house was under a little rise, so the Indians came up to the fense where the Smyths had their horses tied and caught them in the house before they saw them.

I went back to the Diamond Ranch, staked my horse out, and got my dinner. I told French what I had seen and said that I was sure it was Indians. French would not listen but instead made fun of me. He asked me what big steers were worth, etc. He said what I had seen were the Smyths gathering horses. If French would have listened to me, he would have known more about it than I did as I was new to the country.

What fooled French was that worn trail. Horses traveled this trail regularly, and French thought it was just some horses coming in to water. Some men had started to Fort Harney that morning and agreed to come back if they saw any signs of Indians. This also fooled French because if there had been any Indians the men should have seen them as they were passing through there at about that time. The men did see the large dust on Riddle Mountain, east of Happy Valley, but they did not come back as they had promised.

After French and I had talked he lied down and went to sleep.

I thought that possibly I was mistaken and what I had seen were not Indians, so I decided to go back and make sure.

When I got to the Diamond Hill I caught up with two men. One was driving a wagon, and the other was driving four or five mares and colts. I afterwards learned that their names were Doc Kiger and Sam Miller. We went up the hill together. I told them that I had been over and was very sure that the Indians were in the valley. They said the neighbors were gathering horses to take to Fort Harney and that they were going to join them.

I rode ahead and left them and went to the place where I had looked down into Happy Valley before. Right below me were two Indian scouts. I rode up close enough to see what kind of guns they had. They were breech-loading Henry rifles, rim fire, sixteen shots, the old fashion gun. The two Indian scouts would get on their horses and ride a rod or two and then get off and walk making signs to other Indians in the valley.

I rode back and told the two men that I had seen some Indian scouts, so we started back. I wanted the man with the wagon to drive faster, but he said the road was too rough. The road was awful rocky. When we got

through the Diamond fence gate, two Indians rode up within about a hundred and fifty yards from us and started shooting. Judging by the whistle of the bullets they were shooting over us. I told Sam Miller to cut his horses loose from the wagon. I was trying to get a gun out of Miller's wagon, and while the Indians were shooting at both of us he unhitched his horses. Miller jumped on one of the leaders of his team, and the three of us hurried to the Diamond Ranch. On the way a tug flew up and hit Sam Miller in the head, and he thought he was shot.

The Indians burned the wagon afterwards.

When Pete French woke up he started thinking about what I had told him. He asked where Smithy was, and they told him I had gone back to make sure if the Indians were coming. French knew then that I was sincere, and he decided that possibly what I had seen were Indians. He ordered the saddle horses brought up out of the field so that they would be easy to catch if we had to run from the Indians.

Sidney Thomas and some other men were camped at the Diamond Ranch, and they were just sitting down to eat their dinner as we rode in. I said, "Sid, tell French that the Indians are coming for he might not believe me". I was acquainted with Thomas as we had come from the same place. He had driven cattle going to Happy Valley.

At this time a boy about 15 or 16 came running to the house a horse back. He was herding mares for French, and the Indians had tried to cut him off, but he out ran them. They called him Ochoco, and I afterwards learned that his real name was John Witzel.

By this time my horse was about run down, so I tried to catch one of Pete French's horses. I couldn't catch a horse by myself, and all of the other boys were so excited they wouldn't help me. I had to bridle my own horse again and ride him.

I told the Chinese cook that was working for French to hurry and saddle a horse as the Indians were coming. He said there wasn't any need to run because the Indians would get him anyway. I told him that we would have to go as long as we could, and finally I persuaded him to get a horse. The Chinaman didn't have a saddle or bridle. He got on an old Spanish horse bareback with a halter made with his rope.

The Indians were stringing along the road after us, and they came close to the Diamond Ranch house. There were about sixteen of us altogether. The bunch of boys took a charge at the Indians, but I stayed with French and the Chinese cook. I knew that French would know the best way out.

The Indians scattered when the boys charged them. Some went toward the swamp, and some went up over the point above the Diamond Ranch house.

Pete French tried to run his saddle horses out ahead of him.

The Chinaman was so scared that he literally cried before we left the ranch.

The three of us held our horses down until the Indians crowded us so close that we had to let our horses run ahead. French ran off and left us as he had the best horse. The Chinaman and I rode side by side until the Chinaman's horse stumbled with him. The Chinaman wasn't a very good rider, and as his horse stumbled he threw his arms around the horse's neck. I expect the horse kicked the Chinaman senseless because if he had hollered or even spoken loud I would have heard him.

As the Indians shot twice at me with an old copper breech Henry rifle I looked back. The dust was so thick that I couldn't see anything. I went on and as I turned to the right to cross McCoy Creek, I saw an Indian jump off of his horse, squat down, and rest his gun on his knee. Several

shots were fired at me, but all of them missed.

By this time my horse was so near give out that I couldn't beat him out of a trot. I intended to get into the willows as soon as I got across McCoy Creek. The creek was high, up to the middle of my horse's side. When I got across I was on the wrong side of the creek; there were no willows to get into. I got off of my horse as he was run down and couldn't go any further.

I decided to try to get into the rim rocks. I had my gun and powder canteen with me. I didn't think I had a chance to get away from the Indians. I intended to kill all the Indians that I could but save the last bullet for myself so that I wouldn't be tortured by the Indians.

By this time the others had gotten on top of the McCoy rim. Pete French, Bill Lambert, and John Witzel had stopped and were shooting back at the Indians. Pete French kept hollering, "run, Smithy, run".

About this time the Chinaman's horse came running past me with about twenty feet of rope dragging on the ground. I grabbed the rope and pulled in on him.

The Indians were shooting at me, and the closest bullet came to about a foot and a half from my boot. The rest went zippering past some very close.

I managed to get on the Chinaman's horse and ride up the McCoy rim. When the others saw that I was about to make it, they started on.

John Witzel had been standing holding Pete French's horse while he was shooting back at the Indians. As Witzel put his foot in the stirrup to leave, a needle bullet passed through the flesh above his hip bone, and the same bullet ranged forward into the breast of his horse. The horse ran about a hundred and fifty yards and fell dead.

John Witzel got on a horse behind one of the other boys, and we all rode to the Krumbo. On the way John Witzel cried and said that he had blood in his boot. Tom Dickson and Hickerson were camped at the Krumbo, and Witzel got a horse from them to ride. Dickson and Hickerson went with us.

We all went to the P Ranch and there we separated. Dickson, Hickerson, Hickerson's boy, and I went to Camp Creek in Catlow Valley. Pete French, John Witzel, and Joe O'Neal went to Fort Harney and latter returned to Camp Creek.

By the night of June 14, 1878 I had ridden a hundred miles that day.

The Indians did not follow us any further than to McCoy Creek in Diamond Valley. One Indian was killed there.

The Indians got my horse that I left at McCoy Creek. I heard once that he was at Fort Bidwell. Rye Smyth had some horses there and as he was going after his, I told him to bring mine back and I would pay him well. He brought his own horses back but left mine there. I never saw him again. He was a black horse and I called him Nigger. The Indians got my saddle and bridle.

We all fortified up at Camp Creek with about three hundred head of horses to herd and stand guard at night. There were about sixteen of us altogether.

In a few days John S. South and Jack Rods came back from Fort Harney. They came through Diamond Valley and passed where the Chinaman had been killed. They said the Indians had cut him up with knives and scalped him.

They came to Krumbo Creek where Dickson and Hickerson had left their wagons. They said the Indians had not touched them which they had not. The Indians had left the wagons for a trap hoping to kill some more white men.

William Shirk, Dickson, Hickerson, John South, Jack Rods, and another man all went back to Diamond to where the Chinaman had been killed. They buried the Chinaman and then separated.

John South, Jack Rods, and another man went to Fort Harney, and instead of going through Happy Valley they went by the lava beds.

John D. Clemons was an old friend to lots of Indians. He told me that the Indians on Steens Mountain had watched these parties bury the Chinaman and saw them separate. They sent Indians to ambush John South, Jack Rods, and the other man on the road that went out of Diamond to Happy Valley. But they missed them as the white men went to the left of the road that the Indians had picked out for ambushing.

Dickson, Hickerson, and William Shirk went back to Krumbo Creek to where Dickson and Hickerson had left their wagons. Dickson and Hickerson each had a wagon, and they decided to move them. William Shirk told them that they ought to leave the wagons as there were Indians close for their pony tracks were all around. But they would not listen. They hitched their horses to the wagons and headed for the P Ranch.

William Shirk rode ahead and looked back once in awhile with his field glasses and saw them coming into P Valley with their wagons.

John D. Clemons (the Indians' friend) said after all the trouble was over that Indians were sent to the ford of the Blitzen River above the P Ranch house where there were large bunches of willows on each side of the crossing to wait for and ambush Dickson and Hickerson.

When they came by, the Indians shot Hickerson. Tom Dickson jumped out of his wagon and started to run into the willows, but they shot him as he ran. The Indians killed them both.

By this time William Shirk was a long way ahead of them and on top of the hill going over into Catlow Valley. The road ran under a cleft of rocks, and Indians were sent there to ambush Shirk as he passed. The Indians missed him when they shot, and he was on a fast horse and escaped. One Indian chased him till his horse fell with him. The Indian said, "plain run you white son of a gun". Shirk knew the Indian; they called him Divine.

Shirk was the only one of the three men who turned back who got back alive.

Hickerson had a son about 16 years old. I felt sorry for him because his father was killed, but the boy did not seem to worry about it.

After this we all went to Trout Creek to another ranch of Shirk's. There we met Dave Shirk, William Shirk's brother. Dave Shirk would not stay away from the Catlow ranch and took his outfit back to Catlow.

The rest of us went to Winnemucca, Nevada. After we started John D. Clemons fell in with us. He told us about Natchez, Chief Winnemucca's son. Clemons said that Natchez told old man Croll and son of Barren Valley that they would have to leave or the Indians would kill them. So old man Croll and son struck out to go to Camp McDermitt, and Natchez went with them. The Indians gave chase, trying to kill them, but failed.

I afterwards saw Natchez. He could speak English fluently and had been all through the eastern states.

(Clemons) John D. Clemons told me that before he left his Wild Horse ranch an Indian rode up to his house with a red blanket on him. The Indian had an ivory handled pistol concealed under his blanket, and he had his hand on it. John Clemons watched his chance and shot the Indian and buried him. He kept the Indian's horse.

Marion and Ernest Harkness, Pat Healie, John Clemons, and I all went on to Winnemucca. From there Pat Healie went to Jordan Valley, Marion and Ernest Harkness went up north, and John Clemons and I went to Camp McDermitt.

I went to work in a hay field, and John Clemons began fixing pack saddles to pack wood on. I was waiting for the Indians to quiet down so I could go back to Steens Mountain.

When I went to Camp McDermitt there were about a hundred Indians in the camp. Chief Winnemucca was there all the time. I worked on the Quinn River about two miles from the camp. Indians kept passing all the time with guns, but all of them said that they didn't shoot them in the post.

These Paiutes were the renegades that were with the Bannocks that passed through the John Day country. They were cut off at the Columbia River where they were trying to cross. They were trying to get into Canada. In those days if the Indians could get into British territory, the United States could not get them under the law. The soldiers stopped them so they came scattering back to Camp McDermitt. Before I left where I was haying there were over three hundred Indians at Camp McDermitt.

When the Indians left McCoy Creek, they went back by the Diamond ranch buildings and set fire to them and then went on to Happy Valley.

It was on the night of June 14, 1878 that the Indians caught John Smyth and his father in their home. It was a juniper log house. John D. Clemons told me that the Indians came to the house and wanted John Smyth and his father to come out. They would not come out but ran upstairs. An Indian stuck his head through the upstairs window and said, "come out so the squaws can torture you". They shot the Indian in the head and killed him.

The Indians guarded them all night and built fires around the house so they could see them if they ran out. Along in the night the Indians set the house on fire so John Smith and his father had to run out. The Indians shot and crippled one of them, and the other stopped and fought back until they were both killed. After they were both dead, the Indians threw their bodies into the fire of the house where their bones were latter found. The Indian that was killed was found cashed in the crevice of a rim rock close to the house.

The same night the Smyths were killed William Barton and some of his neighbors came into Happy Valley, but they couldn't see much in the dark and went back to Fort Harney.

The Indians left Happy Valley and crossed the rock ford of the Blitzen River and went northwest past Warm Springs to Silver Creek. There, General Bernard with three hundred soldiers and fifty citizens ran in on the Indians at the break of day and ran them out of camp. The Indians took to the rocks and junipers and stnod them off. There were a thousand Indians at the Silver Creek fight. One citizen was killed by the name of Roberts.

The Indians traveled north through the John Day country. General Howard was in command of the soldiers. The Indians killed everyone they could that was in front of them including ranchers and sheep herders.

General Howard would blow the bugle when camping in the evening. The Indians would stop when they heard the bugle blow, and when the bugle was blown in the morning the Indians would move on.

Sarrah Winnemucca, old Chief Winnemucca's daughter, was with General Howard all the time while he was marching through the John Day country.

General Howard was a Christian and would stop and pray while marching after the Indians.

The killing of Dickson and Hickerson was not done by the Bannocks and Paiutes that gathered and came west from Jordan Valley, through Barren Valley, into Happy Valley, and went across the rock ford of the Blitzen River to Silver Creek. The killing of Dickson and Hickerson was done by renegade Paiutes, some belonging to the Warner or Bidwell Paiutes, and some belonged to Chief Winnemucca's Indians.

The P Ranch houses, the Roaring Spring house of Tom Wats, and Wilson's house on the east side of Warner lake were burned down after the main bunch of Indians had passed through.

John Wilson said that he kept clothes for his hired hands. He had an Indian working for him before the war and he sold him a pair of pants. After the house was burned down, the old pants were found laying to the side of where the house had stood. The Indian had replaced his old pants with new ones before he set the house on fire. John Wilson said that Indian belonged to the Warner or Bidwell Paiutes.

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STATEMENT OF JOHN H. WITZEL TAKEN 1932

A. I went through between the two lakes the 15th day of June in 1878. I rode through between the two lakes. The water was pretty near right up against us on the righthand side. And on the lefthand side on the west, Harney lakes was quite a little ways out to the water. 200 yards to the nearest water.

Q. But on the east side?

A. Well I wasn't in very good shape to pay much attention at the time. I had been shot.

Q. Who were you shot by?

A. The Indians. I had rested 20 minutes at the reef. I had rode from Diamond to the P ranch and from there to the reef.

Q. How many miles?

A. Forty or fifty miles.

Q. Tell me the story about getting shot with the Indians?

A. I was working for Mr. French on the P Ranch and Diamond Ranch. Was working as roustabout getting the saddle horses, killing beef, done a little of everything. Sometimes I would be with the buckaroos but I had no regular particular job. The Indians came in there on the 15th day of June and run us off.

Q. What were they Piuttas?

A. They were Piuttas and Bannocks.

Q. You had quite a battle did you?

A. No, not much of a battle. There was 18 or 20 on the ranch all told. There was Henry Ruby and Pete French and an Indian fighter from Jackson County down on the Rogue River by the name of Dickerson; man by the name of Sid Thomas.

Q. The Indians attacked you did they?

A. Yes, we only had one gun between us.

We had one 45-70 needle gun and 20 cartridges.

Q. How many Indians?

A. There wasn't a very big bunch of them right at us but they was as far back as we could see -- about 700 warriors all mounted in the back. If they had ever got there there would of been a bunch. They killed my horse. I rode out behind another fellow to Krumbo Creek and got another horse; rode to the P Ranch and changed horses again and rode to Fort Harney.

Q. Did all of them come with you?

A. All except the Chinaman and he fell by the road.

Q. Were you riding your horse when you got hit?

A. No, I was getting on him; the same bullet hit me that killed my horse. He carried me about a quarter of a mile after he was hit.

Q. Still got the scar?

A. Well, I sure have.

The Bannock/Paiute Indian War of 1878
by Sylvester (Coon) Smith

Introduction

Sylvester (Coon) Smith was born on January 7, 1853 to Henry and Phoebe Smith. Henry Smith owned 1800 acres of land at Wolf Creek in Josephine County, Oregon. He also owned a store and other property. Sylvester grew up at Wolf Creek. One of the first words that he spoke was "Coon" so that became his nickname and he was known as Coon Smith.

In the spring of 1878 Coon Smith with some friends started from Josephine County on horseback for eastern Oregon. Coon arrived for the first time in what is now Harney County in June, 1878 at the same time of the Indian uprising and when the warring Indians passed through the area.

The trouble began with the Bannock Indians from the Fort Hall Reservation in Idaho. The Bannocks went on the warpath and traveled west through southern Idaho. They killed several white people in the Silver City area. The Bannocks entered Oregon and were joined by renegade Paiutes. They traveled through Jordan Valley, Barren Valley, and into Harney County (then part of Grant County). It was at this time that Coon Smith suddenly found himself involved and having to fight and run for his life. The following story was written by him and tells of his experiences during that time.

After the Indian uprising had quieted down, Coon Smith returned to the Steens Mountain area and homesteaded and purchased property in Happy Valley. On September 18, 1893 he was married to Ida Browning of Placer, Oregon which is near Wolf Creek. Sylvester brought his new bride to eastern Oregon and to his home in Happy Valley. Sylvester and Ida built a large house part of which they used as a hotel for over night guests. They ran a store, livery stable, and engaged in various business ventures besides their ranching activities. For several years they ran a post office that was called Smith, Oregon. Their holdings became known as Coon Town. Sylvester also owned property at The Narrows and at Weed Lake.

Sylvester and Ida had two children, Harry and Carrie. On September 19, 1898 Ida died leaving Sylvester with two small children to raise, Carrie being only nine months old. Sylvester never remarried and raised his children by himself. Sylvester died on April 9, 1923.

In 1955 Sylvester's daughter, Carrie Kidwell, showed me the story that Sylvester had written about the Indian war. He had written it in pencil on tablet paper several years before his death. Carrie told me that before his death he was intending to write more about Harney County.

I volunteered to type up Sylvester's story. His writing had faded and was very difficult to read, but with the efforts of both Carrie and myself we were able to figure out about all of it. I typed up Sylvester's story and, of course, gave back to Carrie his original hand written pages together with a typed copy. Carrie gave me permission to use her father's account of the Indian war in any way that I wished. She also suggested that I write his life story. She said, "I don't care what you say about my dad, but just don't have him riding up in a wagon to the Diamond Ranch as most of the published books state." As of this date I have not written Sylvester's life story, but I have not ruled that out for a future time.

Ida Browning Smith, Sylvester's wife, was a sister to my grandfather. I was not privileged to know Sylvester Smith because he died before I was born. My parents told me that they never knew a more kind and honest man. His word was his bond. I believe that every event that he wrote about was the absolute truth. I am proud to present these typewritten pages of Sylvester's account of the Indian war.

Sincerely,

Mervil L. Hutchinson

Mervil L. Hutchinson

October 2, 1989