

THE STORY OF JOHN TANNER¹BY MRS. ANGIE BINGHAM GILBERT²

I am more than pleased to bring you my greeting tonight, and I am more pleased because I feel that I represent one of the oldest and best friends of this Society, my husband, Thomas D. Gilbert of Grand Rapids. He was constantly in attendance and felt very great interest in this and in our own Society of Grand Rapids. The last time we came here together to a meeting the Society seemed to be in a decline. It had not been able to get the recognition from the State that it had hoped, and many of the most prominent and most active of its members had recently died, and many of the others thought that it would be the last time they would ever meet together, and there was a sadness over the entire meeting. But I am pleased to find that it has revived and so many others have become interested in it, and that such a large number are present.

Some months ago I was asked to prepare a historical paper for this meeting, but I was unable to do so on account of my health. I came here on very short notice with no expectation of having anything to say and am entirely unprepared. This incident I shall speak of was a very remarkable story of the old time Michigan. A tragedy on account of the many peculiar characters who were connected with it. Mr. Peter White asked me to write the story of Tanner. I did so and it can be found in Ralph Williams' work on the Honorable Peter White, page ninety-two. I am very glad, since I was born at all, that I was born in Michigan and in that historic part of Michigan in the Upper Peninsula on the banks of the St. Mary's River, one of the most beautiful rivers in the world. I am glad that I was a child of pioneers, not only people who were trying to help the white people of America, but also trying to be a benefit to the people who were here before us, the dark men whose homes we have taken; and that I was a child of pioneers who have given their lives to the betterment of these people.

I have often wondered at my great interest in the pioneer and the Indian, but it suddenly seemed to come over me at the last meeting of this Society on hearing one of the papers read, the occult reason why I was so interested and when the speaker mentioned the Sault Ste. Marie and the establishment of the first Jesuit Mission. I happened to think that I was born on almost the identical spot where historians and those who have looked into the matter tell us Marquette and the Jesuit

¹Told at the annual meeting, June 5, 1908.

²See *Memoirs of the Soo*, Vol. XXX, pp. 623-633, this series. Mrs. Gilbert died Nov. 7, 1910, at Grand Rapids. cf. *supra*, memoir.

priests had the ceremony of what is called "planting the cross," and in the house where the treaty³ was made where so many so narrowly escaped massacre by the Indians. Some time ago I was given a tomahawk that was found under the foundation stones of the mission house which my father built. The tomahawk is of iron, rusty and old, showing that it was buried a long time, long before this mission house was built because it was even under the foundation stones. My sister was born in the mission house and we two were brought up over this tomahawk.

St. Mary's River, from Lake Huron to Lake Superior, is full of historic interest. I know the history of almost every spot from the source of the river to its mouth. Many years ago my mother and an Indian girl whom she had brought up were wrecked near the mouth of the river. No lives were lost. All the way up the river are spots connected with the Indians making stories of very great interest indeed. As you reach Sault Ste. Marie on the American bank of the river just below the old Indian agency, stood a beautiful old house which was always painted white. It was built under the old elms and was a most picturesque spot. This was the home of John Tanner,⁴ commonly known as "Old Tanner." He was born in Ohio, I do not remember just where. He had a very strange and terrible personality and was the "bogie man" to children and a source of worry to nearly every one. He was an old man when I was a little girl. The Indians came and massacred all his people and the people in his town. His family were all killed but himself.⁵ He saw them take little children by the feet and dash their brains out. He was taken prisoner and carried to the north and brought up among the Indians. He became practically one of them, and was known as the "white Indian." He married an Indian woman, and had a large family. He was a very remarkable man, and was really very intelligent. I do not know much of his history. In middle life he found out about his people and went to Ohio where he found out all about himself. After that he became quite well educated. He was also very religious. His life was written many years ago, and is in the State library here in this city. It did not give the latter part of his life. He came with his

³On June 16, 1826, Gov. Cass made a treaty with the Chippeway Indians. Schoolcraft describes the scene in his *Narrative Journal of the Travels from Detroit, northwest through the American lakes in 1820, etc.*, and states that the Indians were at first much opposed to the treaty, showing a threatening attitude. In *Sketches of a tour of the Lakes, of the character and customs of the Chippeway Indians, etc.*, by T. L. McKenney, pp. 183-4, he attributes Mr. Cass' final success and the diverting of an Indian attack upon the Americans, to the wise council and intervention of Mrs. Johnson, the Indian wife of the interpreter.

⁴See *Sketch of John Tanner*, by Judge Joseph H. Steere, Vol. XXII, p. 246, this series.

⁵*Tanner's Life, A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner During Thirty Years' Residence Among the Indians in the Interior of North America*, prepared by Edwin James, London, 1830.

Indian family to the Soo and settled there before I was born. He was a man with a very violent temper which he never controlled. Outside of that he would have been a very interesting man, but when enraged he was almost insane. I do not know whether his Indian wife left him or died, but his children left him and he lived alone in this little house. After a while he was anxious to marry a white woman.⁶ He had been below, (we called it going "below" and "above" when we went south or north) and the people became interested in him at Detroit and recommended a widow there whose name was, I believe, Mrs. Duncan, although I am not certain. He probably did not give any exhibition of temper while there, and she finally consented to marry him and came back to the Soo. He became very cruel to her, and wanted her to live as his Indian wife had done. In his violent rages he had threatened to kill her and she became afraid of him and determined to leave him. At that time it was considered a terrible thing to have a divorce, and she was at a loss to know what to do.

About this time John Tanner went away for a little time, and while he was gone she came to my father, of whom she thought a great deal, and he told her he could not advise her to leave her husband, but that if he had threatened her life he should not say anything about her going. He and many others became interested in her case and a collection was taken up and enough money was raised to send her away while Mr. Tanner was out of town. When he came back and found her gone he was in a terrible rage. He was very angry at these people for helping his wife to go away, and determined at some time or other to kill every one who had helped in anyway to get his wife away from him. He went to Detroit to see her, but she refused to come back. This was before my birth.

Henry and James Schoolcraft were brothers. Henry was then Indian agent at the Soo. He was called at that time, "Uncle Sam's pet." Marie Schoolcraft was the sister of Henry and James, and married Judge John Hulbert, of an old Detroit family. The Rev. Abel Bingham⁷ was my father. An officer of the United States army, Major Kingsbury, was commandant at the fort which could be seen from my home.

The years went on, and this old man lived alone in his beautiful picturesque old house on the bank of St. Mary's River. He had a great many beautiful ideas, but his anger increased. He had spells of rage but was at times very reasonable. For many years he interpreted for my father who was a missionary, and very a excellent one. He was a

⁶Schoolcraft in his *Thirty Years With the Indian Tribes*, p. 601, states that Tanner went to Detroit where he became pleased with a country girl who was a chambermaid at Ben Woodworth's hotel. They were married and had one child and when she had lived with him one year she made her escape.

⁷Rev. Abel Bingham. See sketch, Vol. II, pp. 146-157, this series. Mr. Bingham wrote a paper on *Early Missions at the Sault Ste. Marie*, which is published in Vol. XXVIII, p. 520, this series.

very strange and in some ways a noble looking man. He was tall and spare, with long white hair which he wore parted in the middle and drawn back behind his ears like a woman's. He had a fierce eye, and his countenance was most forbidding. When he was not angry he was very pleasant and gentlemanly. He was very much like a white man, excepting for this terrible temper.

After I became quite a girl I remember him. When he was pleasant we were interested in seeing him but when angry, we were very much afraid of him. He used to sit in his door at sunset. When my sister and I were little and had to pass his house, and saw Tanner sitting on his doorstep we took hold of hands and ran past the house. Like an Indian, he nourished his feeling of revenge and hatred. Very often they were obliged to shut him up in jail until he got over these spells. He was however very lonely and about two weeks before the tragedy he came to my father's house and told father he could not endure this life any longer and that he must make some change. He made a proposition to father that he should come and live at the mission house of which father was in charge. He said if he could only eat at table with the family he would stay in his room and not disturb anybody. Father knew what a terrible thing his temper was, and refused to have him. He came down from the study, I remember, and passed through the sitting room where Mrs. Hulbert was sitting with several other persons. He was very angry but seemed only grieved at father's refusal. About two weeks after that time he began to be very crazy, acting as he did when he was in his frenzies. Father went over to the garrison to talk to Major Kingsbury about having Tanner shut up in jail. While he was talking to him an orderly told him that Mr. James Schoolcraft had been shot by Tanner. Father was the first one that arrived at the spot. Mr. James Schoolcraft was a sutler at the garrison. He was rather a gay man and very handsome. Saturday was the 4th of July, and he had gone over to the Canadian side to have a good time with the officers on that side. I do not know at what time he got back to his home. He was sleeping off his good time on the Monday after the 4th, and got up from his bed in the afternoon, put on his dressing sack and slippers, and took a walk in his beautiful garden across what is now Porter avenue where he had a vegetable garden. Just as he got to a clump of bushes in the garden some one fired a shot which struck him in the heart. There was a very great commotion. When father arrived upon looking about the place he found a wad of paper which he supposed was in the gun. He unrolled it and found this paper was part of a mission hymn book that was used in the chapel. There was very great excitement in town that afternoon. This was Mr. Peter White's first visit to this Lake Superior region. He was a boy of fifteen, a young roustabout looking for work. Everybody took guns to hunt Tanner, who was a very skillful marks-

man. The men didn't go very far into the woods and didn't find Tanner. From that day to this John Tanner has never been heard of. The town hunted for him knowing that he had threatened to kill every one who had helped to get his wife away. Particularly did he try to kill Henry Schoolcraft, but he had gone away and only his brother James was at home. He said if he couldn't get Henry, he would get Jim. Mr. Hulbert and wife had gone to Detroit for a visit and Mrs. James Schoolcraft had gone with them. He also threatened to kill father and several other persons who had given money toward getting Mrs. Tanner away.

On Saturday night the Fourth of July this little house of Mr. Tanner was burned to the ground. When the people went there to try and put out the fire they could not get near as powder had been placed around it and every little while it would explode. Some thought Mr. Tanner was burned with his house, but afterwards when they looked they never found any part of him. It is thought he went away and hid in the woods.

They had a guard around my father's house for two months and nobody went out of the house in the evening because they were afraid of John Tanner. Whatever happened, John Tanner did it. It was called the "Tanner summer." A great many stories about his having been seen here and there were told, and father who was much interested investigated all these stories and never found but one he thought had any claim to truth. It was supposed that he had gone to the north with which he was familiar. I went with a small party of girls down to Schoolcraft's home and saw him as he laid there. I was old enough to know all about it and remember it well indeed. An officer in the army named Lieut. Tilden had had difficulty with Mr. James Schoolcraft, and had been heard to say that "cold lead would fix it." Nobody thought anything about it at the time however. Lieut. Tilden while serving in the Mexican War had gotten into some difficulty and was courtmartialled during which he wrote a letter to my father telling him that during the court-martial he had been charged with Schoolcraft's murder instead of Tanner. He asked for a letter saying he had not done the deed, but when father, who was sure that Tanner had murdered Mr. Schoolcraft, went out with a letter for signers, there was one man who said he would not sign it as he was afraid Tilden had done the deed. Some thought he had sent two soldiers out who did it. About a month after the murder these two soldiers came in, and the barrel of one of the guns was empty. But what had become of Tanner?²⁵ No one knew. Then they said that

²⁵Tanner's family always hoped to find him. There is a story of his brother James finding him, told by Elizabeth T. Baird, *Wisconsin Hist. Colls.*, Vol. XIV, pp. 47-55.

Tilden had hired these two men to go into the woods and shoot James Schoolcraft.

A very remarkable thing happened about a month after this murder. These two soldiers were on guard. A sentinel was standing there and the men were standing about when a terrible thunder storm came up. I think I have never seen a storm come up so quickly, and it proved the most terrible shower ever witnessed. I was looking out of the window and saw a great commotion in the garrison. These two soldiers who had been supposed to have been hired to kill James Schoolcraft, were both struck with lightning and instantly killed. They were taken past my father's house with military honors to the cemetery. One thing I remember, they played the dead march on the way out and on the way back played "Yankee Doodle." This of course made it impossible to find out anything about the murder from these soldiers, but I don't know how the courtmartial came out.

A number of years ago, about forty years after the murder, I was visiting at Mackinac, and came across the oldest daughter of John Tanner. She was a half-breed named Martha and lived to a very great age. She told me a very strange story. She said she had had a letter from Mrs. Tilden that it was her husband who had shot James Schoolcraft. But she didn't want her to say anything about it until her husband was dead. I didn't believe it. She herself was a Roman Catholic and had shown the letter to the Bishop and he had told her it had better be destroyed. He took care of it, and put it in the grate. Mrs. Hulbert, Mrs. Schoolcraft and Mr. Peter White had believed that James Schoolcraft was shot by Tilden, but father investigated the thing very thoroughly, and he did not think the thing possible. A United States soldier would not have had a leaf from a mission hymn book as wadding for his gun, and Mr. Tilden would not have known about Mr. Schoolcraft sleeping off his 4th of July celebration.

Nobody knows who burned the house or who killed James Schoolcraft.