

SKETCH OF JOHN TANNER, KNOWN AS THE "WHITE  
INDIAN."

---

BY JUDGE JOSEPH H. STEERE.

---

The legislature of this commonwealth did some strange things in the days long since gone by; in fact, even now we find those who, actuated, perhaps, by partisan prejudice, are ready to insinuate that wisdom has not altogether died with the legislatures of these latter days.

On July 30, A. D. 1830, the legislative council of the territory of Michigan, after mature deliberation and discussion, passed a law entitled, "An act authorizing the sheriff of Chippewa county to perform certain duties therein mentioned."

The constitutional lawyers throughout the State who are not criticising, with technical zeal, the enactments of the legislature which recently adjourned, would no doubt take delight in urging that the object of the law was not clearly expressed in its title. This would

seem to be true even to the casual reader; but the modest obscurity of the title is compensated by the specific provisions of the act itself.

The law authorized the sheriff of Chippewa county to remove Martha Tanner, daughter of John Tanner, of Sault Ste. Marie, to some missionary establishment, or such other place of safety as he may deem expedient, provided said Martha should consent; and in the second paragraph of the act, the said John Tanner was honored by what is probably the only law ever passed in America attaching criminal consequences to injuries to a single private person in the following language:

"Sec. 2. That any threats of the said John Tanner to injure the said Martha Tanner, or any person or persons with whom she may be placed \* \* shall be deemed a misdemeanor, punishable by fine and imprisonment, at the discretion of the court."

And so it came to pass, pursuant to the provisions of the statute in such case made and provided and in spite of any constitutional objections which John may have argued, that Martha was taken by the sheriff to a certain missionary establishment, where she was cared for and educated. A half breed herself, she became a teacher in the Indian schools of northern Michigan, lived a long and useful life, dying but a few years ago on Mackinaw Island, honored and respected; but, as Rudyard Kipling delights to interject, that is another story.

I propose to tell you a little of John Tanner, her father, and but a little of that which might be told.

His story, more than once written, is fraught with all the fascinating details of captivity among the Indians, of savage warfare, of hunting and trapping, of long and adventurous journeys into the then far and unknown wilderness. You will find it in many books and parts of books, closely identified with the early history of Michigan, now mostly old, out of print and seldom read.

Men, then of national reputation, who yet live in history, interested themselves in the strange career of this strange man.

In this locality where he long lived and from which he mysteriously disappeared, many traditions of him yet linger with the older inhabitants.

Let me give you the first and last chapters in his life, as they come to us through written history or from the lips of aged men who yet delight to dwell upon the exciting incidents of his story as known to them.

It was shortly after the birth of this nation, over one hundred years ago, at a settlers' clearing on the then frontier in Kentucky, near the mouth of the Big Miami on the Ohio river, that a little boy, left at the

irksome task of tending the baby, stole away from his parents' cabin to gather walnuts under a tree which stood in the edge of the woods at the side of the field.

Indians were troublesome to the settlers in those times and some had been seen lurking around the clearings. The child had been instructed not to leave the house, but the sun was bright outside, the day warm and pleasant, the baby was cross, he wanted the walnuts and did not know that the Indians wanted him. He had partly filled his straw hat with the nuts he was gathering, when he was suddenly seized from behind by strong, savage hands, terrified into silence, and swiftly borne away into the thicket. His captors made rapid marches to the north and safely eluding pursuit, returned with the child to their own country. His absence was soon discovered, the little pile of nuts which fell from his hat under the tree were found, with moccasin tracks near by; it was readily understood that he was kidnapped by the Indians. The alarm was given, frontiersmen gathered, and the abductors were followed through the forest for several days, but all in vain. The parents of the boy never saw or heard of him again. The woods had swallowed him up and there the matter ended. Their distress was said to have been great. They long mourned him as one dead, and died sorrowing over the uncertainty of his taking off.

The child was John Tanner, the subject of this sketch, son of the Rev. John Tanner, a clergyman from Virginia, who, under the impulse of western emigration, which followed the close of the revolutionary war, had crossed the mountains and settled in the fertile valley of the Ohio.

Over half a century later, on the 5th of July, 1846, the quiet little outpost of Sault Ste. Marie, situated at the outlet of Lake Superior, at the beautiful falls of the St. Mary's river, was thrown into a state of unusual excitement by the cold blooded murder of one of its leading citizens, named James Schoolcraft, a brother of the well known author, Henry R. Schoolcraft.

He was walking from his residence down a path towards a field he had been clearing near by. Bushes fringed the way and the assassin fired from an ambush at close range, inflicting upon his victim a mortal wound in the side, close below the shoulder. An ounce ball and three buckshot passed nearly through his body. Schoolcraft was a strong, athletic man in the prime of life. He made one great leap forward and fell dead on his face. So violent was his last dying spring, made on receiving the unexpected shot, that a pair of light slippers which he wore were cleared from his feet and left sitting side by side

where he stood when the shot was fired. No one witnessed the deed, but the gun had been heard and the body was shortly after discovered.

Among others who gathered on the spot was Omer D. Conger, late senator from Michigan, then a young man connected with a surveying party on the lakes. He exercised his engineering skill by making a diagram of the scene of the murder.

It was known that a bitter enmity existed between Schoolcraft and a Lieutenant Tilden, then serving at Fort Brady. They had been involved in jealousies over some woman. The buck and ball cartridge was then used in the army and it appeared that the killing was done by a government cartridge fired from an army musket. At first in the minds of some a slight suspicion rested on the officer.

But it was also known that a former government interpreter, named John Tanner, called the "White Indian," bore some grudge against the Schoolcraft family. Suspicion was easily diverted to him.

He was a strange, mysterious, unsocial character, who had lived in and around the place for many years. Though a white man he shunned the whites. His habits and characteristics were those of an Indian. He spoke their tongue fluently, possessed all the arts of hunting, fishing, camping, and general woodcraft belonging to the most skillful savage and excelled them in their own pursuits. Yet he despised Indians and would not associate with them. He then had no family and lived alone in a small house below the town, near the little rapids. An investigation disclosed that his house had been burned the day before and he could not be found. This was taken as conclusive proof that he had committed the murder. A vigorous search was at once instituted for him. Everyone armed and went out; the country was scoured in search of him; the soldiers from Fort Brady were turned out under Lieutenant Tilden, who enthusiastically led in the hunt. Some western Indians returning to their own country from Georgian Bay, where they had been visiting, were then passing. They were known as skillful hunters and great warriors; their services were enlisted in the pursuit. The search carried on by skillful hunters both white and red, is said to have been far reaching and long continued, but in vain. From that day to this no man ever saw John Tanner. Where he went, or where, or when, or how he died, or his final resting place no man knows of a certainty.

His last disappearance was, to those who knew him here, as profound a mystery as was his first to his sorrowing parents, when as a child he left them in their cabin home in Kentucky.

It is true that many rumors were in the air of his having been seen and heard.

A squaw gathering moss in the thicket near the town a few days after the murder came home in terror and reported seeing him skulking away with dead grass and bushes tied around him, in a manner he often practiced when hunting, so that he was scarcely to be discerned from the surrounding vegetation.

Some belated Indians coming along the shore from Lake Superior in their canoes after night, reported seeing his camp fire shine through the trees and hearing him singing Indian songs. Rumors came that he had made his way back to the northwest and been seen among the Indians in the Hudson Bay territory; but all attempts to follow up and verify those clews resulted in nothing.

Many years later a Frenchman named Gurnoe, while searching in the woods above the town for a lost pony, found a skeleton with two gun barrels, some coins, a flint and steel, and other trinkets near it. Fire had long ago passed over the spot, destroying the gun stocks and other articles which would burn.

Some parties claimed to identify the effects found as those of Tanner. Others maintain to the contrary and the mystery yet remains without definite solution.

Strangest of all, Lieutenant Tilden, shortly after ordered to the southwest to join in the Mexican war, confessed upon his death-bed that it was he who assassinated Schoolcraft.

Such are the first and last chapters in the career of one of the most peculiar characters ever identified with the history of Michigan.

The Indians who stole Tanner were Michigan Chippewas, from the Saginaw river. The leader of the party desired to secure a white child for his wife, to take the place of a son who had recently died. They fled with him back to Michigan and he was adopted by the woman, who seemed delighted to receive a boy so near the same age as the one she had lost. She endeavored to treat him kindly, but he was starved, beaten, overworked, and otherwise cruelly treated by the male members of the family. At one time the man, who had stolen him, cut him down with his tomahawk in a fit of anger and left him for dead. To the treatment he received while with those Indians has been ascribed the suspicious, sullen and morose temperament which he at times manifested.

With those people he wandered up and down through Michigan for several years, learning their language and mode of life. He was finally purchased from them by a prominent Ottawa woman, who lived near

where Petoskey now stands. She paid for him a ten gallon keg of rum and some other small articles of barter. She treated him kindly and he remained with her as long as she lived. With her and some of her people of the Traverse region, he emigrated to the Red River country. He married an Indian girl and had several children, one of whom was the Martha already mentioned. He had at least two sons; one became a missionary among the Red River Indians, and one, also named John Tanner, enlisted at Sault Ste. Marie during the late rebellion and was killed in the second battle of Bull Run.

One of the Indians he met and with whom he hunted in the Northwest was a chief named Pe-shaw-ba, from Traverse Bay. His name yet lives in that region.

In 1816 he rendered valuable services to Lord Selkirk in guiding reinforcements through the wilderness to the Red River settlements and in recapturing Fort Douglass, then held by the Northwestern Fur company, with which Selkirk was at war. Selkirk became interested in him and obtained sufficient data from which to institute a search for Tanner's people.

Selkirk visited Kentucky, published a circular in western papers, discovered the living members of the family and sent Tanner to them. He was then so thorough an Indian and so enured to savage life that he was not long content to stay with his people. He soon returned to the Indian country in the wild regions of northern Michigan.

General Cass and other prominent men, became interested in him. He was at different times in the service of the government as an interpreter, and also acted in that capacity for various missionaries. He was at times employed by the fur companies and Indian traders. He made his home at Sault Ste. Marie and while there married a white wife, with whom he lived but a short time.

Much interest was taken in his story and he became a fruitful topic for the paragraphers of the day.

In 1830 Dr. Edward James, post surgeon at Fort Mackinac, published a "Narrative of the captivity and adventures of John Tanner," as related to him by Tanner. The work contains Tanner's portrait, and the incidents of his life, together with lengthy disquisitions upon the history, habits, traditions, languages, political organizations, etc., of the various Indian tribes.

In 1883, this work was re-written by Dr. James McCauley, modernized and popularized, into a genuine Indian story of the day for boys. It was put forth in a flaming binding of green and gold, under the taking title of, "Grey Hawk; Life and Adventures among the Red Indians."

It is a source of congratulation that the author kindly informs the reader what color the Indians were. It was evidently his design to work as much crimson into the book as possible.

Among those who met and wrote of Tanner, a great diversity of opinion prevails as to his character. Some regarded him as a treacherous, dishonest, dangerous savage of the basest sort; others ascribe to him every noble and generous quality.

The first writer who seems to have noticed and mentioned him was Daniel W. Harmon, a fur trader, who lived many years in the Northwest, and made many extensive journeys to distant tribes, in pursuit of his calling. His journal was published in 1820. He met Tanner on the upper Assiniboine river in 1801, and recorded in his diary as follows:

"This day, there came here an American, that, when a small child, was taken from his parents, who then resided in the Illinois country. He was kidnapped by the Santeaux with whom he has resided ever since, he speaks no other language except theirs. He is now about twenty years of age, and is regarded as chief among the tribe. He dislikes to hear people speak to him respecting his white relations, and in every respect but color he resembles the savages with whom he resides. He is said to be an excellent hunter. He remains with an old woman, who, soon after he was taken from his relations adopted him into her family; and they appear to be mutually as fond of each other, as if they were actually mother and son."

In 1824 Professor Keating published a narrative of the second expedition of Major Long (made the year previous by order of John C. Calhoun, secretary of war), to the source of the St. Peters river, Lake Winnepeek, Lake of the Woods, etc.

The party met Tanner at Rainy Lake, where he was recovering from a gun shot wound, inflicted in his arm by an Indian, said to have been instigated by Tanner's wife. The author devotes considerable space to a sketch of his life. He says: "At Rainy Lake we met with a man whose interesting adventures deserve to be made known to the public. We had heard at various places of a citizen of the United States who had been at an early age taken prisoner by a party of Indians, and who, having been educated among them, had acquired their language, habits and manners to the exclusion of those of his own country."

Professor Keating seems to have formed a high opinion of his character, he says:

"He never had been seen to taste of ardent spirits, or to smoke a pipe. Instead of purchasing trifles and gewgaws as is customary with

Indians, he devoted the products of his hunts, which were always successful, to the acquisition of articles of clothing useful to himself, to his adopted mother and to his relations. In his intercourse with traders he appears to have been honorable, and this reflects more credit upon him as it was at a time when an active competition between rival traders frequently induced them to stimulate the Indians to frauds which affected their opponents. Of his attachment to his children he gave strong proof. There is a feature in his character which we have not alluded to, and as it is honorable to him we should be loath to omit it. We allude to his warm gratitude for all those who have at various times manifested kindness to him. His affection for his Indian mother and for her family was great. Of Lord Selkirk he always spoke with much feeling. To Dr. McLaughlin he appeared sincerely attached."

And so that author goes on, ascribing to him all the cardinal virtues. Dr. James and other authors have written of him in the same vein.

But it so happens that the opinions of the critics waver somewhat upon that point, and plenty of authority can be found to the contrary.

Henry R. Schoolcraft, the Indian historian, died in the belief that Tanner killed his brother. He naturally entertained great bitterness towards him, and in his book of personal memoirs, entitled "Thirty Years With the Indian Tribes," he thus takes the romance out of Tanner's history: "He is now a grey-headed, hard featured, old man, whose feelings are at war with everyone on earth, white or red. Every attempt to meliorate his manners and Indian notions has failed. He has invariably misapprehended them, and is more suspicious, revengeful and bad tempered than any Indian I ever knew. Dr. James, who made, by the way, a mere pack horse of Indian opinions of him, did not suspect his fidelity, and put many things in his narrative which made the whites about St. Mary's call him an old liar. This enraged him against the doctor, whom he threatened to kill. He had served me awhile as an interpreter, and while thus employed he went to Detroit, and was pleased with a country girl, who was a chamber maid at old Ben. Woodworth's hotel. He married her, but after having one child, and living with him a year she was glad to escape with life, and under plea of a visit, made some arrangement with the ladies of Fort Brady to slip off on board of a vessel and so eluded him. The legislature afterwards granted her a divorce. He blamed me for the escape though I was entirely ignorant of its execution. Eight years afterwards, in July, 1846, this lawless vagabond waylaid and shot my brother James, having concealed himself in a cedar thicket."



This view of the case seems to be presented with a tincture of acrimony, but if it was not true, Tanner certainly had an invincible case of libel for heavy damages, for defamation of character, against the renowned author.

The weight of oral tradition in this locality seems, though not unanimous, to rather sustain Schoolcraft's theory. It may perhaps be illustrated, if not summed up, in the answer, more pointed than polite, given me by a back-woods philosopher, who knew Tanner personally. "Tanner," he said, after some reflection, "was a regular Injun; more of an Injun than any of the Injuus, and a d—d mean Injun too."

This same philosopher, I regret to state, did not take an optimistic view of the Indian question. He concluded his reminiscences of Tanner with a generality, worthy of the consideration of those who have to do with the Indian problem, and which, shorn of certain improper adjectives, was to the effect, that it is a very easy, short job to make an Indian of a white man; but when you try to make a white man of an Indian that is a different thing.

The many interesting details and incidents of adventure in Tanner's story, are beyond the scope of this article. Those curious enough to inquire further, will find them in abundance in the works already referred to, in "Neil's History of Minnesota," "Campbell's Political History of Michigan," "The History of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan," Vols. 2 and 4 of the "Michigan Pioneer Collections," Dr. Bryce's "Sketch of Tanner," Lanman's "In the Wilderness," "Life on the Lakes" by the author of "Legends of a Log Cabin," and in the secular press of July, 1846.

As the stories run, I take it, Tanner's last days were his worst days. He viewed the issues of life from the Indian standpoint. A veritable savage in all his thoughts and habits, association with the border whites, after he had grown to manhood, worked in him those results we so often see in like cases. He lost many of the virtues of the race with which he was reared and, unfortunately, acquired only the vices of the whites. Measured by the standard of the savage he excelled in the qualities they admired. To civilized and refined sensibilities there was little of the noble or heroic in him.

To the curious, seeking but entertainment in the marvelous, the striking and unusual incidents of his life are well fitted to "adorn a tale;" to the thoughtful and studious they "point a moral" in many ways.