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Recollections on Encounters with Indians, 1786

by John Filson

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John Filson

John Filson's Narrative of his Defeat
at Moberg, June 2^d 1786 — Indians among the
Americans at Vincennes: Capt. Hardin &
Patterson carry on an Expedition & defeat
Indians — 450 besiege Vincennes &c. —
Clark's Campaign on foot.

In the

In the night of the first of June 1706 left Port
St Vincent, in a pirogue with three men; the
night was gloomy, clouds and double darkness
veil'd the Skies, the descending moisture appeared
to mourn our approaching fate. Two of my men
were much disposed to sleep, having taken too
freely of the noxious juices; nor was it in my
power to awake them, either to a sense of their
duty or their danger. Their writhing sleep
silenced the oars, amity added diligence to mine.
I toiled incessantly during the night, with one
of my men, who was Robert, and sensible of our
situation; but ere we advanced within two
leagues of the place where adversity assailed us,
the unwelcome day began to dawn. I blamed my
men for their conduct, attributing our tardy sailing
to their stupidity, endeavouring to convince them that
danger might probably be but transitory. Being desirous
near the mouth of White River we were apprehensive of
danger; it is 12 leagues below the Port.

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of refreshment, we floating with the stream, not
thinking it safe to go ^{to land} ~~to land~~, had scarcely
time to finish our repast, when we espied
some canoes fastened to shore, and a large
wigwam* near, under the spreading foliage of
the trees. I told my men there was Indians, and
immediately about fifteen guns were fired at
us, accompanied with ^{that} infernal yell, which ever
carries the idea of horror with the sound.*
Being too far distant from shore to receive much
damage, though several bullets lodged in our boat,
we steered across the river, but was immediately
pursued by a pirouge, crowded with savages, firing
upon us, and yelling* to discourage flight; my
place being in the steering they directed their balls
at me, numbers struck the boat, but although
they came like hail, yet we gained the shore
without, my boat only received damages. It is
impossible to paint the manner of our flight &
* An indian cabin made of small poles & bark.
* The scalp hollow. * The war whoop.

the pursuit; no human warriors more violently
 pursue the ~~unhappy~~ objects of their rage, than
 savages. Our arms consisted only of the pike and
 one sword; the savages being advanced within sixty
 yards of shore, I desired my men to stand, fight them
 they being advanced a few steps to flee, turned to me
 with a melancholy look, and saw cruel death ~~approaching~~
 approaching; self preservation determined their answer
 for escape, I then told them with speediest flight to
 save themselves, if possible. As I advanced to land took
 up two small trunks, containing some valuable
 articles; then I cast under the nettle, a little distance
 from shore, and entered the woods in a different direction
 from my men, like the unhappy mariner ready to sink
 with his ~~small~~ vessel in the passing surge, used prayer
 and a vigorous flight for safety. The last hope of relief.
 These were not ineffectual; a wonderful deliverance indeed.
 Sure some guardian angel averted the impending danger.
 Who can reflect upon the circumstances without wonder?
 The shore red with bloody savages, I may say just at my

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beels, who, that have ^{not} experienced such a situation can
possibly conceive the distress? In flight I oft turned
my eyes from behind some ~~small~~ ^{ancient}
friendly tree, to view some blood thirsty savage,
in full chase, with his terrible right hand, to lodge
me in the land of silence. Sometimes I ^{lay} concealed
in thickets of ~~barberry~~ ^{nettles}, but immediately quitted
the insecure covering, for to the sagacious savage my
track must be obvious, as the herbage yielded to every
step; and being wet did not recover their rectitude.
Concluding that a crafty flight was the only possible
means to ensure safety, I used many turnings and
windings by crossing my track and walking back
~~along the river~~ and on logs & ~~and~~ spaces clear
of herbage. Wandering about two hours through
the woods, I asayed to return to the spot where
we were obliged to fly, and finding that the savages
were gone over with their prize, I came near where
I left my trunks, and seeing them safe, took
them up, and departed, bending my course toward
Post St Vincent, which was 30 miles distant on a N E course.

* a plant exceeding plenty in many parts of the
country. ~~in the~~ ^{American Journeys} ~~the~~ ^{www.americanjourneys.org} grass tall & much in common

two of ~~my~~ my men had directed their course up
 white river, and about half a mile from wabash
 was cruelly massacred: My third man had
 concealed himself under a large fallen tree, a
 little distance from the river, that was slowly
 fenced on either side by sutler: there trembling
 and pale, he saw the savages returning with the
 bleaching and scalps of his companions.

Whether these blood hounds, concluded me out of reach,
 or passed my footsteps unobserved, or attended more to
 the plunder, is a mystery: but as we had some
 liquor ^{liquor} heard that probably might be the
 spirituous ^{on}

Let ⁱⁿ my power. With hasty steps I left
 the dangerous ~~place~~ place, bearing the trunks, the
 reliques of my property: In passing a few miles
 up white river, I saw many late indian camps,
 which induced me to cross it the first opportunity:
 and having found some drift wood, by fastening
 a ^{few} logs with bark I formed a raft, on which I
 committed my body to the full flowing stream; my

- * A river figured by the poets, the water of forgetfulness.
- * to amount of 500 dollars in that country.
- * composed of logs and generally used in crossing rivers
 in ~~the~~ uninhabited countries.

trunks I had fastened on part of an old plank
separately. Having advanced a little distance from
shore, my raft parted, and rendered my situation
desperate; When I escaped the savages I thought the
bitterness of death was past, but now concluded my
time must be near a period. A gleam of hope was
yet left, in this dilemma I fastened upon one
of the logs, which being small, scarcely supported
me from total immersion; with my left hand
I held the little plank & with my right towed
a cross the river. * Thus I escaped again, and continuing
my course through the shadow of death; for although
I met no savages, there was the greatest probability I
should. The day began to decline, and heavy showers
fell; the briars and thorn tore my clothes, & my flesh
experienced the most excruciating pain, from
their repeated assaults, and the indomitable moccasins.
Thirst now began to rage, I felt languid and my
* About 400 yards wide.

burthen increased with wet. Thore lines in former
 came lively; " Oh friends a thousand ways fail unstable
 " To the cold tomb, and dreadful all to tread;
 " But dreadful most, when by a slow decay
 " Pale hunger wastes the manly strength away.

Late in the evening I advanced to river Desha^{*} and attempt-
 ing to ford it, was near being drowned; but recovering
 the shore again ~~was~~ I made a small raft
 and went over, being soon overtaken by night, the
 moon shone clear, I continued to travel by its
 light, though a disagreeable walk. At length worn
 down with fatigues, I sat down, and attempted to
 strike fire, but my powder being damp, it was
 impracticable. Myriads of Hissatoes surrounded me,
 turning the unwelcome time to my distressed body;
 and though in a very uncomfortable state, & under
 the power of these tormentors, sunk into sleep, and
 awoke not until day appeared again; when

* A river on the east side of Wabash Clagues below
 the Post.

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rising up, I continued my course, and arrived
about noon at the grand Savary,* being there
about six miles from town, it being visible along
this extensive tract, which is exceeding level & fertile,
where ~~with~~ scarcely a tree or shrub is seen, but
variegated with pastures, meadows, fields of corn, &
other fruits, and not the smallest enclosure with
a fence or hedge throughout. The different plantations^(ns)
were conspicuous, with numbers of the inhabitants
cultivating the corn-fields; had I beheld this in a
day of prosperity, it must have afforded me pleasure;
but all these laborious people were in dread of the
savages, for Savary, imprudently fired a gun, with
trembling hearts they all prepared for flight. The
French laboured without guards, being left the object
of Indian aversion than the Americans, who at this
time could not turn up the earth with a plow,
unless guarded by armed men. To one of these military
* Containing about 10,000 acres.

occupants I first advanced, who scarcely believed their eyes, so greatly was my condition altered; such is the difference between prosperity & adversity. Here I met the warmest & most unfeigned sympathy for in a land of suffering, the unfortunate have that consolation. The humane people flocked around me to hear the melancholy tale, and gave me some wholesome provisions to refresh my emaciated spirits. Immediately quitting their village, conducted me to town in a carriage. I took my lodging at the house of Col. Small, and after having related the consequences of my adventure to the alarmed inhabitants, I advised to send a party to destroy the robbers, and retake the property, which then was easily practicable; many professed a willingness to proceed, but the Major part ^{however} considered that it would weaken their number in town, the Indians by taking advantage of their absence,

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might make themselves masters of their fort,
and destroy the women & children; it was
therefore thought prudent to omit so interesting
design. Much distressed in body and mind,
for some days, I was an object of pity; but recovering
a little of the fatigue, was advised to use some
sportive exercises to prevent a malady; the good
effects of this I soon experienced, by which I am
satisfied, that a some & diligent exercise of body
and mind, is essential to overcome the bad
consequences that often result from a capital
misfortune. Two principal ~~was~~ causes moved
me to expose myself at this time to danger
on Wabash, one was the unhappy contentions
existing between the french and american
inhabitants of the fort, on account of the
unavoidable disputes daily multiplied between
the latter and the savages; the former opposing
* Two indians at different times, was seen to examine
the fort.

every measure to which they were impelled by necessity to defend themselves from savage hostilities. So much influence has ~~an~~ interesting commerce with mankind, that in effect ~~it~~ causes social & civilized beings to look at the calamity of others, though unjustly, and barbarians the cause. ~~Secondly~~ a desire to see my friends, and native soil. * Being now unhappily convinced that a passage by water was impossible, I determined to go by land. It was then thought impossible to leave the fort either by land or water, without imminent danger, the savages being insidiously ambuscaded round the parry. My friends earnestly desired me to stay, representing the danger consequent upon such an undertaking. I thanked them for their advice, adding that

* Chester County in Pennsylvania.

^{from} The late interposition of heaven in my favour
 it was plain that ~~my fate~~ I was not
^{not} reserved for a severer fate, but some valuable
 purposes. Being well refreshed in ten days, and
 finding a good hardy woodman intending
 the journey also, we agreed to leave the Port in
 the night of the twelfth of June. The moon
 shone with an agreeable lustre, and accompanied
 a small distance by some of our most valuable
 friends, we directed our course for the falls of
 Ohio; and during the nocturnal hours ~~we~~^{they}
 traveled about fifteen miles. Although very ^{was}
 disagreeable through brushy woods, & swampy
 grounds, yet safety from savages, afforded us
 some pleasure. Next day rafted over White river
 A.M. Continuing our course one and one half
~~from~~ point South of east. Concluding ourselves
 out of reach of the savages lurking round the Port.

The country lying between the Post and Louisville
 or Clarksville ~~that a~~ ^{the} ~~variety~~ of soil and timber
 and this being my second tour, suppose myself
 able to form a good judgment thereof; which, for
 the information, and satisfaction of my gentle
 reader for whose sake I write; have delineated my
 two journeys on my map of that country
 which from my own and ^{other} ~~other's~~ observation
 I rest assured, is the best that can be given at this
 day. The explanation thereof, with the place
~~and~~ ^{and} ~~points~~ ^{points} out the particulars respecting the same
 I concluded the journey, in seven painful days, &
 arrived. Sailed at the falls of Ohio, in the interior
 a number of boats were departing for the Post;
 being ignorant of the inevitable danger on
 Wabash; our intelligence called them back to the
 * Sailed in a Barge to the Post, from the falls of
 Ohio, ~~at which~~ in July 1785, which time
 I truly took the mounds of Ohio & Wabash
 with my compass, and returned through the woods
 with three Indians for my guides, and having the
 prospect of a publication, made the best observations
 possible

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Port, and excited a number of Volunteers,
who had for some time projected the plan to
expedite their march against the Wabash Indians
and save their countrymen, late emigrants
to the Port, from distress, and total destruction,
which appeared ^{more} evident, by an express from
thence a few days after my departure. As it is
indisputable, I mention the particulars that
every day the inhabitants experienced some
recent mischiefs, & was obliged to retire into their
fort with all their property; could neither labour
in their corn fields, nor gardens in town; that
about 25 were employed in a field a little distance
from town, and attacked by a like number of
savages, who wounded one with several bullets
and took his scalp, but being repulsed, carried off
* Capt. Patton of Louisville, and Capt. Haden
of Severns Valley, were the gentlemen whose
influence excited this expedition.

The wounded man, who, though dangerously wounded through the body, was expected to recover. This brought on something extraordinary. Capt. Sullivan dragged an indian out of the house of a french man, where he lay concealed; and brought him to the fort, where the wife of the wounded man shot & scalped him immediately. The french inhabitants were exasperated by this, to the highest degree, collected a party of men and guarded the indians in town during the night, and conducted them safely to the woods the ensuing day. They also in council determined to order all the americans residing there, to depart their supposed territory, * immediately, upon their own risque & expense, or ~~that~~ they would oblige them. This was drawn up in form, * and signed

* Supposed they held by ancient right 12 leagues square, including the Port.

* a magisterial mandate.

by the late Commandant and Magistrate.*
 The American officers were summoned to attend,
 when Col. Legras impolitely ~~threw~~ the writing
 to Col. Small, the first American officer in the
 Post; informing him, that for satisfaction, he
 might have it translated into English, but the
 substance was, what they now were to expect.

This alarmed the Americans, openly avowing
 the French to be their enemies; not only taking
 pleasure in seeing them daily murdered by
 savages, but determined to expel them in case
 of disobedience, turning out their women and
 children naked & destitute to the wide world.

From the commencement of the disputes at the
 Post, the American officers had ~~for~~ frequently &
 truly communicated every occurrence to his Excellency
 Genl. Clarke at the falls of Ohio, and also to
 Captn. Patton, his Excellency sensible of the hostile

* Being hurried in supporting the dignity
 of their stations, the inhabitants treated their
 authority with contempt for which reasons they
 had some months before actually declared their ^{separation} ~~separation~~
 but now appears to arrogate to themselves the authority.

disposition of the Wabash Indians, sympathizing with his suffering countrymen; had about the first of June made a tour through the interior and settled parts of Kentucky, to excite the inhabitants to carry a grand expedition against the Indians. In the mean time, Capt. Patton and Capt. Hardin by their influence, had raised two companies of Volunteers, and went on an expedition. The first of July; his Excellency returned to the falls of Ohio the day following, with accounts that fifteen hundred men would march the first of August; at this juncture the express from the Post arrived; the intelligence ~~from~~ carrying the idea of real suffering, every generous breast was filled with pity and resentment against such barbarous, and inhumane treatment. His Excellency immediately sent the same express after the two Capt. Patton & Hardin, with particular

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 instructions to direct their course from the
 mouth of Pigeon Creek to Port St Vincent and assist
 the suffering inhabitants: This was the volunteers
 intention, but previously to this had designed
 a different route, by sailing down Ohio river a
 small distance below the mouth of Wabash
 and marching up on the western side of that
 river, destroying several indian villages situate on
 Little Wabash & Fox rivers and then proceed to the
 Post. The Gen^l directions never reached the
 volunteers for the express had not sailed twenty
 leagues below the falls of Ohio until they were
 pursued by savages and obliged to quit their
 canoe and escape through the woods to the
 Post. The Capt^{ns} with their volunteers soon
 after landing had a smart engagement.

with indians on Saline Creek, about 25 miles
 from Ohio, where they obtained a complete
 Victory Carrying off five scalps, some horses &
 rifle guns With the loss of one man killed and
 four slightly wounded, the brave Capt. Starden
 was one of the unfortunate, his men being
 discouraged by the fall of their Chief. The weather
 intolerably hot and provisions scarce, therefore
 unanimously resolved to return. Their retreat
 was successful under the prudent conduct of
 Capt. Patton. During this time the savages
 determined to revenge their loss, by destroying
 the American inhabitants of the Post, and assembled
 450 ~~warriors~~ warriors besieging their fort three
 days, with all the band of horrors that usually
 accompany indian Camps on such occasions.

but finding every effort in vain (the fort being
 bravely defended, sustaining no loss by the
 savages, except their horses, cows, & swine, few of
 them escaping) was prevailed upon by the french
 inhabitants, who are yet in peace with the
 indians ~~and~~ to raise the siege and depart the
 village; being excited thereto for their own safety
 for it evidently appeared at this time, that a
 few days would terminate with the destruction
 of the town. To suppose that self preservation
 was the inducing motive of the french at
 this time, although the most natural
 conclusion, from their late domestic broils
 with the americans, ^{in that place} would be exceedingly
 injurious to that humane & generous
 principle so obvious and characteristic of that
 people so often exemplified, by their

2nd
interposition a day of Calamity, and
affords one of the most striking instances
of true greatness of soul, and Sympathy with
suffering mortals, that any age or history
produces, for it is acknowledged that the narrow
existence of a few days must finally terminate
with the destruction of the Americans, if the
savages had not raised the siege; the French
gentlemen being the true cause thereof, must
be acknowledged the saviors of about 70 families
men women & Children. Thus to triumph
over former domestic broils, and be a united
people, was an act of virtue in the French
~~with them~~ and the natural consequence of
fellow sufferers, in consideration of mutual safety.

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 two express were immediately dispatched
 by land & water each with ^{an express} the same acct.
 lest one should ~~be lost~~ ^{miscarry}, to Gen. Clark at
 the falls of Ohio, to inform them of their distress
 the Gen. dispatched acct by the ~~same~~ ^{last} express
 that they might soon expect relief; that
 orders were actually arrived from government, to
 require ~~these~~ people of Kentucky to carry an
 expedition against the Wabash indians, which
 they voluntarily were entering upon their side,
 thereby giving a sanction to their laudable
 proceedings, and expediting the campaign.