

Blackfoot Attack

Osborne Russell records the following tale of terror in on August 28, 1839 while trapping and hunting in the vicinity of Yellowstone Lake. There were four men in this party, all free trappers, These men were working out of Fort Hall, then part of the Hudson's Bay Company's chain of forts and posts.

"After visiting my traps I returned to the Camp where after stopping about an hour or two I took my rifle and sauntered down the shore of the Lake among the scattered groves of tall pines until tired of walking about (the day being very warm) I took a bath in the lake for probably half an hour and returned to camp about 4:00 pm. Two of my comrades observed "let us take a walk among the pines and kill an Elk" and started off whilst the other was laying asleep.

Sometime after they were gone I went to a bale of dried meat which had been spread in the Sun 30 or 40 feet from the place where we slept. I pulled off my powder horn and bullet pouch laid them on a log drew my butcher knife and began to cut. We were encamped about a half a mile from the Lake on a stream turning into it in a S.W. direction through a prairie bottom about a quarter of a mile wide. On each side of this valley arose a bench of land about 20 ft high running parallel with the stream and covered with pines. On this bench we were encamped on the SE side of the stream. The pines immediately behind us was thickly intermingled with logs and fallen trees. After eating a few minutes I arose and kindled a fire, filled my tobacco pipe and sat down to smoke. My comrade, whose name was, White was still sleeping.

Presently I cast my eyes towards the horses which were feeding in the Valley and discovered the heads of some Indians who were gliding round under the bench within 30 steps of me. I jumped to my rifle and aroused White and looking towards my powder horn and bullet pouch that was already in the hands of an Indian and we were completely surrounded We cocked our rifles and started through their ranks into the woods which seemed to be completely filled with Blackfeet who rent the air with their horrid yells. on presenting our rifles they opened a space about 20 ft. wide through which we plunged about the fourth jump an arrow struck White on the right hip joint. I hastily told him to pull it out and as I spoke another arrow struck me in the same place but they did not retard our progress. At length another arrow striking through my right leg above the knee benumbed the flesh so that I fell with my breast across a log. The Indian who shot me was within 8 ft and made a spring towards me with his uplifted battle axe: I made a leap and avoided the blow and kept hopping from log to log through a shower of arrows which flew around us like hail, lodging in the pines and logs.

After we had passed them about 10 paces we wheeled about and took aim at them They then began to dodge behind the trees and shoot their guns. We then ran and hopped about 50 yards further in the logs and bushes and made a stand - I was very faint from the loss of blood and we set down among the logs determined to kill the two foremost Indians when they came up and then die like men. We rested our rifles across a log, White aiming at the foremost and Myself at the second. I whispered to him that when they turned their eyes toward us to pull trigger. About 20 of them passed by us within 15 feet without casting a glance towards us. Another file came round on the opposite side within 20 or 30 paces and closing with the first a few rods beyond us and all turning to the right. The next minute they were out of our sight among the bushes. They were all well armed with guns, bows & battle axes.

We sat still until the rustling among the bushes had died away. White arose and after looking carefully around us asked in a whisper how far it was to the lake. I replied pointing to the SE about a quarter of a mile. I was nearly fainting from the loss of blood and the want of water We hobbled along 40 or 50 rods and I was obliged to sit down a few minutes then go a little further and rest again. we managed in this way until we reached the bank of the lake"

Of the four men in the party, three managed to join up in the next couple of days. One man, Elbridge Trask was missing, and presumed killed and scalped by the Indians. It wasn't until several weeks later at Fort Hall, that Elbridge Trask caught up with the others in his party.