

## **Old Indian John and the Murder of Ezekiel Crane**

(from J.O. Noyes, *The Lakes & Legends of Central New-York: A Virtually Unknown Rambling Account of Life and Times in Upstate, New York, 1857*: Ovid, NY: W.E. Morrison & Co., 1973, pp 53ff.)

For several years afterward [after the 1794 treaty at Cayuga Ferry] there were frequent disturbances with the natives. Among the Indians who were permitted to roam freely through the settlements was one known as old Indian John, or John Delaware. The latter name would seem to indicate the he belonged to the Delawares, and there is a vague tradition of his having been almost the only survivor of that once powerful tribe. He was tolerated on account of his age and his experience as a hunter, but at the same time feared in consequence of his ungovernable passions when excited by anger or rum. Indian John retained the embroidered moccasins and fringed hunting-shirt, as well as the prejudices and traditions peculiar to his race.

With pain the aged man had witnessed the encroachments upon the hunting grounds of his people, and their council fires gradually extinguished. As the early settlers derived no small part of their subsistence from hunting, the rifle and the knife of the old Indian were worthy of close observation, and his skill of imitation.

When the autumnal frosts stripped the forests of their gay attire, the Indian, and the white man prepared alike for the chase, in order to lay in their store before the game should be driven away by the deep snows of winter. In the autumn of 1803 John Delaware and a settler by the name of George Phadoc agreed to share with each other the season's hunt. Well prepared, they erected a bark cabin on Black Brook, a few miles west of the foot of Cayuga Lake.

The white man and the Indian were successful in their hunting for several days, when "good luck" seemed to desert the latter. He lost his usual steadiness of aim; his rifle refused to give its sharp, quick report. The sight of the game laid low by the unerring weapon of Phadoc excited the superstitious passions of the savage. The ideas of necromancy took possession of his brain; he eye grew fierce with anger; jealousy was roused to hatred, and hatred to revenge. He went to Colonel Harris, and asked him to remove the spell which Phadoc had put upon his rifle. His friend, aware of the superstition of the Indian, muttered a few cabalistic words over the gun, and bade the witches depart. Old John, supposing the spell to have been removed, returned to the chase with Phadoc, but with the same result as before.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of December, after an unsuccessful hunt on the part of the Indian, they returned to their cabin for rest, leaving the game killed by Phadoc to be brought in the next morning. The wily savage was thwarted that night in his purpose of revenge upon his companion, but disappointment added torture to his maddened brain. At an early hour the following morning Phadoc left the cabin to bring in a deer which he had shot the evening before: when stooping to unburden himself at the cabin door on his return, a ball from John Delaware's rifle just grazed his side and lodged in the animal. Phadoc instantly drew his tomahawk to dispatch the Indian, but a second thought induced him to seize the rifle and hasten to the white man's abode for relief. The nearest families were greatly alarmed, well knowing the ungovernable temper of the old Indian. In their fearful apprehension every tree seemed to shelter

the lurking foe, but Indian John did not leave the cabin; he reloaded his rifle, and awaited in patience an opportunity to gratify his desire for revenge, which, unfortunately, soon occurred.

The earliest settler in the township of Tyre, now Galen, was Ezekiel Crane, who arrived there in 1794.... Thus happy in the increase of wealth, Mr. Crane determined to enlarge his real estate, and on the morning of Phadoc's disaster, accompanied by Ezra Degarmo, he set out to examine the country a few miles westward, and select such portions as might afterward prove valuable. Well acquainted with Phadoc and Old Indian John, he determined to stop at their cabin and procure a quarter of venison. Having reached Black Brook, they approached the cabin; Crane tapped at the door, and in an instant a rifle ball penetrated the left side of his chest and lodged in the shoulder. He fell, to all appearance, dead. Young Degarmo, unable to remove his companion, and fearing that delay would jeopard his own life, hastened at once to arouse the neighborhood and inform the family of Mr. Crane of the sad event. In the mean time the latter, though mortally wounded, reached the dwelling of Asa Smith, where he lingered for five days, when death released him from his sufferings.

Toward the evening of the day on which Mr. Crane was shot, the hardy woodsmen assembled to capture the Indian. They determined that he should be punished by the laws of the land, rightly judging that a penalty thus inflicted carried with it a terror far greater and more abiding in its consequences than ever flows from hasty illegal acts on the part of individuals. Waiting until darkness should conceal their movements, they carefully approached the cabin. The old Indian was standing at the door. Anticipating an attack, his keen eye, with characteristic sagacity, quickly discovered the movement of dark objects among the trees, and instantly he made the forest ring with the war whoop and shouts of defiance. Impressed with the danger of taking him alive, without the sacrifice of one or more of the assailing party, it was difficult to restrain the younger men from shooting him as he stood in front of the cabin.

With a better knowledge of Indian character, the older men procured the assistance of three friendly Indians, by whom the Delaware was first brought to a parley, and finally seized and bound. He was carried to Smith's dwelling, and there met Phadoc. The old man's rage rose to a pitch of fury at the sight of his intended victim. Impotent for harm, a reaction took place, and though he maintained a deadly hatred against Phadoc, he expressed unfeigned sorrow for the death of Mr. Crane.

Old John was temporarily confined in the lower room of the gate house at the east end of Cayuga bridge. The winter was of unusual severity, and there being no jail in Aurora, the prisoner was kept at Canandaigua during the cold months. In the spring, or early in the summer, he was brought back to Cayuga for trial. The company, only seven in number, traveled on horseback, and somewhat secretly, for it was feared that the Indians would undertake to rescue their companion. The red men claimed that they were not under the jurisdiction of the whites, but the latter insisted upon taking cognizance of all cases, at least, in which their brethren were concerned, while, in fact, they extended their jurisdiction over the Indians themselves.

The escort met several bands of Indians, who, however, appeared to take but little interest in the fate of the Delaware.

In the tavern in Geneva, where the company remained overnight, some one inquired of old John why he had murdered Crane.

“Me want to shoot,” replied the Indian.

“But they’re going to hang you, John!”

“Me no care,” responded the old Indian, not sensible in his heart of having wronged any one, (for the savage claims the right of revenge,” and in no wise comprehending his own situation.

The trial was held before D. D. Tompkins, judge of the Circuit Court, in the old Academy of Aurora, being the first capital case in the county. I have not seen the records of the court, but several persons who were present have informed me that the trial lasted but a single day.

The Delaware was surly, and took but little notice of what was going on. When asked by the court if he had killed Crane, he raised his honest, familiar face and replied, as if answering the most trivial question.

“Yes, me kill him; me want to shoot!”

The old Indian acknowledged that he had unconsciously taken the life of his friend, but, like an Indian, was not disturbed by any sense of guilt. It was a curious spectacle to see him there, before lawyers and jurors, silent, moody, and childishly ignorant of the strange proceedings around him. What a mockery to him the latter, comprehending neither their nature nor their importance! When, under such circumstances, was justice ever granted to an Indian? Alas, after we have exterminated them by our violence and cruelty we ask, “Who were they?” When their council fires are put out, and they are gone, all gone, to the land of the hereafter, we inquire after their virtues and come to admire the noble race. In our day old Indian John would have suffered imprisonment for a term of years or for the remainder of his life, but the jury convicted him of murder, and he was sentenced to be executed on the 17<sup>th</sup> of August following. One of the Indians who had assisted in capturing John was at Aurora during the trial. When they led the prisoner into the court-room, he supposed that they were going to kill him. The Delaware had sworn to be revenged upon his enemy, and as the latter saw the old man brought out again in the evening, he rushed upon with a knife, and could with difficulty be restrained from plunging it into his breast.

During the remainder of his confinement Indian John was sullen and gloomy. Mr. Woodruff, the village pastor, and Elder Whipple, both godly men, often visited him to converse about religion, but appear to have had no influence upon the untutored mind of the savage. How vain the hope that he would receive the God of the pale faces, after they had driven his brethren from the earth and condemned himself to die like a dog! Had the Great White Father, indeed, forgotten his Indian children? Old John had no knowledge of God and the redemption, but to the good men who came to talk to him of Jesus, he one day conveyed in a simply and effective

manner his idea of life and the future world. The old Indian was, in fact, a man of strong mind and great sagacity. Pointing with a stick to the first of three cracks in the floor, he remarked, "So far me knows as good as you," meaning that by the light of Nature the white man and the Indian wandered in equal ignorance. "So far you knows better than me," he continued, drawing his stick to the second line, and indicating thereby that civilization renders the white man superior to the Indian. "But here me knows again as good as you," he added, after a short pause, giving his companions to understand that they were all alike unacquainted with the secrets of the grave and the mysteries of the future world.

Indian John expressed a wish to be shot, in order that he might die like a warrior, with his rifle in his hands, but that being denied him, he submitted to his fate with social indifference. A gallows was erected in the shade of a venerable oak, near Paine's Creek, a little south of Aurora. The event drew together, for that time, an immense concourse of people. They came in boats and wagons, and by following Indian trails, afoot or on horseback, from settlements many miles distant, bringing their own provisions and prepared to camp by the way. Even many women and children were present to witness the execution. In accordance with the custom of those times, Mr. Woodruff preached a sermon before the assembled multitude, portion of which was directed to the prisoner. The good pastor said:

"When you were arraigned at the bar o justice you confessed your murderous purpose, and asserted your impenitence; nay, that your designs extended still further; to take the life of every white brother, until your own should be sacrificed. This is the hour of your execution. In a few moments you must die and be arraigned at the bar of God, and there be tried for this and all your other offenses. Although you have not lived under the light of the Gospel, yet such have been the advantages of the light of Nature, and such your intercourse with Christian people, that you never can be justified nor expect to escape eternal condemnation. Jesus Christ came into the world to save just such miserable, ignorant, dying sinners as thou art. Now loop up to him; he will bring you unto that great and good Spirit where all the good are gone. It is not now too late, but a few minutes' delay will put it forever beyond a possibility to obtain pardon."

The old Indian listened with stolid indifference. As the sheriff Richmond fastened the rope around the neck of the culprit, he observed in his belt a pipe and a piece of tobacco, put there, the latter declared, to smoke the pipe of peace with his friend Crane in the world of spirits. When the ox cart upon which old John stood was drawn away, he feet were observed to cling to it as long as possible. Being a large and powerful man, he struggled violently for a few moments, and then all was over. It is said that not less than thirty physicians were present to experiment upon the body of the unfortunate man. His skeleton is still in the possession of Dr. Thompson. A few of the natives appear to have been present at the execution. A great panic was caused by the report that the Indians had entered into a plot to massacre the wives and children of the settlers during the absence of the men. No attempt of the kind, however, was made. The execution appeared to have a salutary influence upon the remaining savages, and to this day the mothers of Cayuga often relate to their wondering little ones the story of old Indian John.