

The Capture of Jenny Wiley

By Luther F. Addington

From the unpublished manuscript, *Indian Atrocities Along the Clinch, Powell and Holston Rivers*, pages 183-196.

Jenny Wiley that rainy day October 1, 1789, (1) was busy at her loom in a big, two-story log house situated in Upper Clinch River valley. When John Borders, a brother-in-law, on his return from hunting lost sheep, told her that he had heard in the woods what sounded like owls hooting.

But Jenny, I never heard owls hooting around here in the day time, even though it's rainy and foggy. I believe its Indians doing the hooting and I think they're planning an attack on this house. Better take the youngins and go with me.

In the house with Jenny were five youngsters. Four of them were her own children, the youngest of which was fifteen months old. Her brother often stayed with her while her husband, Thomas, was away from home. On this particular day he had set out for the trading post on New River with a load of ginseng. He'd be gone for several days, Jenny knew.

Jenny showed to Borders no great fear. She said, As soon as I get this piece of cloth made I'll do up the chores and go.

John Borders left the house and Jenny continued with her weaving, believing that the Indians would not dare strike until nightfall, if at all.

Jenny was not easily stirred to fright; she was the daughter of Hezekiah Sellards, who, together with some families of Harmans and Wileys, had come from Strausburg, VA, to settle on the Virginia frontier, in a region where they knew hardships and dangers would be their lot.

The piece of cloth finished, Jenny went about feeding the chickens and livestock, although it was not later than four o'clock. She got the children ready to travel and concluded she'd go to the house of Matthias Harman because his house was but a half mile distant. Matthias, she knew, was an old Indian fighter and because of his exploits the savages had named him "Skygusty", (2) which meant to say he was a dangerous man.

Jenny and the youngsters, however, had not yet left the house when the Indians burst their way inside, yelling and beating the little ones with tomahawks. Although a gun lay cradled in a rack at a joist, she couldn't reach it with the baby in her arms.

Within a moment her brother and all her children, save the one in her arms, lay bleeding on the floor, dead. Some of the savages lunged at the baby in her arms, bent upon killing it also, but a Shawnee Chief grabbed her and claimed her as his captive; he told the attackers not to harm her or the baby.

The Chief was an old man with a grave countenance. A string of silver brooches hung about his neck. Rings adorned his fingers. He had ornamental bands around his arms and ankles. Rings hung to his nose and ears.

When the Shawnee Chief seized her, a Cherokee chief who was also in the party, showed he was jealous. He gave signs to indicate that he wanted Jenny for his squaw. This Cherokee chief (so Jenny described him later) was about fifty years old. He wore buckskin leggins, and beaded moccasins. His shirt was red. In his belt he wore a long, sharp knife. From a shoulder hung a shot pouch and powder horn. He carried a rifle. A fierce mien was on his wrinkled face.

The two chiefs quarreled over her. She surmised from their talk that they thought they were at the home of Skygusty Matthias Harman, whom they greatly feared, for she could understand the name Matthias. She knew that these Indians despised old Matthias, who had hunted some of their tribe down and killed them. So, she explained that it was not the home of Matthias Harman, but the home of Thomas Wiley.

The attackers scalped Jenny's dead children and her dead brother. The Shawnee chief said something which led her to believe that he was fearful that Matthias might soon be after them, and that they'd better flee. To this the Cherokee chief agreed, but let it be known that they'd not be able to escape with prisoners. Yet, she could see that the Shawnee was determined to take her captive. He explained in a few words of English that he had saved her life and that she should take the place of his daughter who had recently died.

After leaving the house, the Indians set it on fire but rain was falling so hard the blaze was slow in consuming the building. Leaving it ablaze, the party started out in the rain and the fog. Jenny's dog followed and the Indians did not try to kill it or drive it back.

The savages traveled to the head of Walker's Creek, crossed Brushy Mountain to the source of Wolf Creek, where, after night was well along, they camped at a rockhouse. A rockhouse was nothing more than a shelter under a projecting ledge on a cliff. Many of these are found in the Alleghany Mountains. Not only Indians used them as dwelling, but many first white settlers also temporarily occupied such places.

At this overhanging rock the savages made a fire and broiled some venison which one of the number was carrying by means of thongs fastened to his shoulders.

After the meal they set out again, ever fearful that a pursuing party of settlers might overtake them. By daylight they were at the headwaters of Bluestone River. The tributaries of this river were swollen by rain; however, the travelers waded them and discontinued at a steady pace northward. Soon Jenny became quite fatigued because she had to carry her baby, but when she'd falter she was scolded by her captors and told that she must keep up or be killed.

Crossing the Great Flat Top Mountain, they came out on a long ridge which extended between the Guyandotte and Tug River. At the end of this day they camped again under a large shelving rock and once more ate from the supply of venison that was being carried along.

Jenny was tired and hungry. Already she had been walking continuously for twenty-four hours. The baby had become ill and fretful, which annoyed the Indians for they knew that a crying child could reveal their hiding place to whites who might be following them.

This camping place became a scene of terror for Jenny: what she saw take place there aroused in her a deeper state of despair. She saw the Indians make hoops of green boughs and over them stretch the scalps of her dead children and brother, and hang them up to dry.

When it was time for the Indians to lie down and rest, they bound Jenny's hands and feet with strips of raw deer hide. She could not sleep, but she dozed into a state of nervous delirium; now and then she would scream out. It seemed to her she could still see her children being tomahawked and scalped.

Her cries so disturbed the old Shawnee chief, who claimed her as his captive, that he got up, went into the woods and brought back some leaves which he crushed in a small vessel and made some tea; this he had her drink. She didn't know whether the concoction was from a poisonous plant or not, but she drank it nevertheless. It did put her to sleep, although it was a restless sleep.

Next morning after a scanty meal of venison and some parched corn, the party set forth once more. Rain still fell and it was necessary to continued walking along the Indian Ridge, which ran away toward the Ohio River.

Jenny was yet so sore from walking and fatigued from carrying the child, that she found difficulty in keeping up. But when the savages would threaten to kill the child in order to relieve her of her load, she summed up all her energy into use and doggedly plodded onward, foot past foot.

This day the Indians sent out back spies, fearing that they were still being pursued, although the heavy rain had washed out all traces of their tracks. Had it not been for the Shawnee chief, the Cherokee chief, who was in great fear of Matthias Harman's catching up with them, would have killed the child. The Shawnee chief seemed to have a little more compassion than the Cherokee chief and so far he had defended Jenny's wish to save the child. A slow march continued all through the wet day and at nightfall the party went into camp again; as usual a great rock shelf under a cliff was chosen. On the way one of the hunters had killed a fat bear and every one, save Jenny, was ready for feasting.

Jenny had no appetite; her suffering and fear that the child, now very ill, might die, affected her emotionally and physically. The Shawnee chief again showed interest in the child and told Jenny to grease it with bear fat, and, also, to have it swallow some. This she did and the child soon seemed to improve.

Upon seeing that Jenny's feet were blistered, the Shawnee chief made a concoction from white oak bark and had her bathe them; next morning she repeated the application. A night's rest and the lotion helped, and she felt more able to set out on another day's journey.

Now the bedraggled Jenny was not the beautiful, vivacious woman she had been before starting. A description of her left by her son, ran as follows: She had coal black hair, she was strong and capable of great exertion and endurance. She was of fine form and her movements were quick. Her eyes were black with heavy overhanging brows. She was above medium height. Her face was pleasant and indicated superior intelligence. She was persistent and determined in any matter she decided to accomplish. She was familiar with woodcraft and was a splendid shot with a rifle.
(3)

When night came on they camped as usual under a cliff. The back scouts came in and reported that they'd seen no whites pursuing them.

Yet the whites were pursuing; they just hadn't come into sight yet. Back at the headwaters of the Clinch River, John Borders had become very uneasy about Jenny when she didn't come to his house by nightfall, got a neighbor and went to see what had happened to her. He found the dead bodies but he saw nothing of the Indians.

Next morning a company of men, among them Skygusty Matthias Harman, had gathered at the Wiley home and made plans for following the savages. Thomas Wiley, Jenny's husband, had not yet returned from New River; however under Skygusty's leadership the party set out on horseback in pursuit of the savages.

Skygusty was so confident of the direction the Indians had gone that he took near cuts across the ridges and came out at the headwaters of Tug River. There they found signs of the Indian party and the men continued on the trail.

On the morning after the evening when the back scouts reported no white men following them, the Indians started out once more. This day Jenny began to lag more noticeably than on any previous day. Noticing her lagging the Shawnee chief warned her that the Cherokee chief was complaining about her inability to keep up and that something must be done about it.

At the end of the day, scouts were again sent back; soon they returned to camp, saying they had sighted a large party of white men on horseback following them. This brought the Indians into a huddle. They talked about the best course to take. Some wanted to waylay the white men and kill them. The Cherokee chief proposed they immediately slay the child so the woman could keep up. Jenny cried out that she'd keep up and the Shawnee chief demanded that they let her try it again. So, they continued their journey. In an attempt to throw the pursuing white men off the trail, the Indians turned westward toward the Tug River, intending to cross it, and blot out their trail. Jenny exerted all the energy she had in an effort to keep up and thereby save the life of her baby, but soon she began to falter again. Meanwhile she prayed that the pursuing white men might overtake her and rescue her and the child.

Coming to a small stream, the file of Indians plunged into it and followed it down, wading. Jenny was hindermost in the line, save the Shawnee chief who was behind her. She couldn't carry the child and keep up; it was utterly impossible. And when she saw the Cherokee chief stop and move back toward her, she felt she knew it would be the end of the child's life and maybe hers

also. Desperate to save herself and the child, she waded from the stream and ran back up the bank.

The old Shawnee chief hurried after her and caught her just as the Cherokee chief came back. The Cherokee chief grabbed the child's legs, dashed its brains out against a tree, drew his knife and took the youngsters scalp, while Jenny looked on in despair.

Grief was no help to the young mother. The cruel Cherokee chief shoved her back into the river and motioned her to go on. So, on she went, her feet dragging on the rugged bottom, while the swift, cold water beat against her. She'd heard someone say that the Big Tug River lay at the mouth of this creek and that they must cross it also.

Night was laying its inky shadows over the valley when they reached Tug River, which was swollen out of its banks from the incessant rain. But, the Indians knew, their getting across this stream was their only way to elude their white pursuers.

Jenny was shocked with fear when she was told that she must swim this river along with the Indians. It was madly rushing onward, carrying logs and brush. Above hung a rain cloud from which lightening flashed now and then. The pursuing party came upon the body of Jenny's child, which, with new fury in their hearts, they buried. They then set out on the trail, following the small stream since, they assumed, the advance party had gone down it. Just a short distance ahead of the pursuers, Jenny still stood on the bank of the wild Tug River, screaming in terror because her captors yet insisted she must swim it.

In spite of her protests, two of her captors caught her by the arms and dragged her into the water. Within a moment they were out in the stream. A savage on either side of her held to her arms, and drifted with the current, treading water in an almost upright position. After being carried downstream a considerable distance, they were washed into the mouth of a stream where the water was eddy.

Now they waded up the creek into the higher mountain which was covered with dense laurel. At the headwaters of this creek they topped the mountain and turned down the western slope.

Before nightfall the fleeing Indians found another big rockhouse and made a camp fire under it. At dawn they left this camp and continued toward the Levisa River, larger than the Tug, but like the Tug, a tributary of the lower Big Sandy. This was the largest stream they had yet encountered, but they swam it as they had the Tug and continued on toward the Ohio River. Back at the Tug river the party of pursuers led by Skygusty Harman crossed on a raft. They made their horses swim.

On the west bank of the Tug river they picked up the Indian trail, but they found traveling in the rough mountain difficult for their horses and little by little they fell further behind the Indians.

Upon reaching the Levisa, also swollen from the heavy rain, they could see that the savages had already crossed. After a council was held the party decided that further pursuit would be futile,

and, discouraged, they turned upriver. They traveled to the mouth of John's Creek where Skygusty had built a hunting lodge several years before. Here they went into camp. (4)

After crossing the Levisa the Indians, believing they had eluded their pursuers, traveled more leisurely. On the ninth day after Jenny's capture they reached the Ohio River, but it was so flooded they dared not try swimming it as they had the Tug and the Levisa.

So, hoping they could sooner or later find a way to cross, they traveled down the river and eventually came to the mouth of Little Sandy, which some of the Indians swam; the rest started up its bank, headed into the mountain again for they yet saw no way to cross the Ohio.

From the headwaters of the Little Sandy they crossed the divide to the Cherokee Fork of Big Blaine Creek. On the way down this creek Jenny became very ill. It being impossible for her to go further, the Indians went into camp and put Jenny in a small rockhouse a short distance away and left her. At this rockhouse a son was born to her prematurely. For some time she was near death. The Indians, though, were considerate enough to bring her food and keep a fire going. But as soon as she recovered they left her alone most of the time for now they felt she would not try to escape.

The Indians went into winter camp at the mouth of Cherokee Creek. For three months Jenny hardly knew one day from another, and all the while she was uneasy about the newborn babe lest the Indians destroy it also.

Then one day the Shawnee chief came to the rockhouse, said that the baby was three months old and that it was time to give it the test a boy was supposed to have. Without explaining what he meant the chief left.

But soon the chief returned, told her to pick up the baby and follow him. With fear tearing at her nerves, she picked it up and followed. She was led to a creek where all the Indians were gathered. Then the Shawnee chief tied the baby to a dry piece of bark and set it adrift in the water.

As soon as the cold water struck the helpless infant it began to cry, which condemned it in the opinion of the savages. They shook their tomahawks and grunted, looking at each other. In desperation Jenny dashed into the stream, recovered the child and returned in the rockhouse with it.

She had no more than arrived when one of the savages came with a tomahawk, killed the baby and scalped it. Then, carrying the scalp, he turned away, not bothering Jenny. And there, alone, the weeping Jenny buried her child at the edge of the rockhouse.

Soon after the atrocious event, the Indians put Jenny on the trail again. They crossed into the present bounds of Johnson Co., KY, and wandered about until they settled at the mouth of Mud Creek, selecting once more a great shelving cliff for a temporary home.

Soon the savages went out to hunt. When they brought animals in it was Jenny who had to cook them. Also she had to gather wood to use in cooking.

By this time Jenny had learned enough of the Shawnee language to converse in it with the Indians; also she had learned a few Cherokee words and phrases. Now she began to plan running away and trying to get back to her homeplace on the upper Clinch River, but always she decided that she might not be able to find the way. But one day when she was told that sometime during the next summer, when the rivers were low, she'd be taken to the Indian towns north of the Ohio River, she began to think more strongly about trying to escape no matter what the consequences.

NOTE: In his recital of the Jenny Wiley story told to him many years later by a son of Jenny, Mr. Connelly says that Jenny remained at the last mention rockhouse until sometime in October, 1790. But this point is disproved by a statement of J. D. Daniel, then County Lieutenant of Montgomery Co., (which then embraced the present Tazewell Co., VA) to Governor Randolph of Virginia. In an appeal to the Governor to send more militia out onto the Virginia frontier, he said, "I doubt not but your Excellency has been informed of Mrs. Wiley's oath, who was taken prisoner last fall and run away from the Indians late in the winter. I am credibly informed her deposition was taken in Montgomery Co., and reports the Indians informed her they would bring four hundred Indians against the Clinch and Bluestone Rivers this summer." The letter was dated July 4, 1790. (5)

While at the Mud Creek rockhouse the Shawnee and Cherokee chiefs had some sort of a pow-wow with their band of savages on top of the cliff. When Jenny ventured atop the cliff herself, she learned that another band of Indians had brought in a prisoner, a young man.

Seeing her, the Cherokee chief told her to go back to the rockhouse and cook a pot of meat. Fearful not to obey, she silently and hastily returned and filled a pot with bear meat, and put it to cooking.

Later the party that had captured her brought the strange band of Indians to the rockhouse. They ate from the pot, danced and then threatened to kill her. However, they returned to the cliff top without harming her.

But after dark they came back, built a bonfire and again became boisterous. They grabbed her and tied her with rawhide to a tree. Now she learned that the prisoner whom they'd brought to the cliff top had been burned at the stake. And it appeared that her fate would be the same. She appealed to the once considerate Shawnee chief to save her, but this time he ignored her.

Her courage appealed to the savages and they didn't build a fire about her. But there was perhaps another reason for not burning her; they went into council and she could see the Cherokee chief gesturing, and talking and the Shawnee chief listening.

Upon termination of the pow-wow the Cherokee chief approached her and told her that he had bought her from the Shawnee chief, and that right away he would start with her to the Cherokee towns on the Little Tennessee River where she could teach his wives how to write and weave

cloth. He counted out from a buckskin bag many brooches and gave them to the Shawnee chief. Then her new owner loosed her from the tree and followed the others to the cliff top.

One night early in 1790, Jenny, still planning to try to escape, dreamed that the prisoner, burned at the stake atop the cliff came to her with a sheep skull filled with tallow, in which was a burning wick. She thought that he made signs for her to follow to safety. She set out. On the way the wick flamed so bright and high that she could see the whole country below. She asked the man holding the lamp in her dreams who lived there. No answer came but the light flickered and went out.

Next day the Cherokee chief told Jenny that in a few days he would be starting out with her. On the following night the Cherokee chief bound her, seeming to fear she might try to leave him. Then the whole band of savages left the rockhouse.

Soon a rain came up, and as it fell she definitely made up her mind to escape.

Jenny Escapes

So, she rolled out to where the rain would drip from the cliff onto her bound wrists and ankles. Soon the rawhide, soaked with water, was easy to stretch. Eventually she slipped herself free.

Grabbing up a tomahawk and scalping knife and she set out in the dark down the hollow through which Little Mud Lick flowed. It was so dark that she had to go slowly and feel her way along, but foot past foot she kept making the distance between her and the rockhouse longer.

Next day she came to Big Paint Creek but found she could not cross it. Night was coming on again but she kept walking. At the mouth of a creek, alter named Jenny's Creek for her, she crossed Paint Creek and then started walking up Jenny's Creek. Leaving the creek, she crossed over ridges, and next came out upon the Levisa River.

Looking out across the river, she saw a Blockhouse, or fort. She hallowed and waved her arms until she was seen. Then Henry Skaggs, a man whom she'd seen in her home settlement, came down to the river bank opposite her.

There was no canoes on the river bank since hunters had taken them down stream, but Skaggs went to work and made a raft, which he paddled across.

Jenny had no more than set foot to earth on the side of the fort, when a band of Indians appeared on the bank she had just left. They had probably known about the fort and had got the idea she'd heard of it also and they had come to look for her. Among the Indians was the Cherokee chief who had been planning to take her to Tennessee; also over there was her dog, but she could do nothing about it; it would have to go back with the Indians.

Henry Skaggs (6) shot a gun to warn the men who were down the river. Soon they came running, their guns in their hands; the Indians, seeing them, slunk back into the forest and disappeared.

Jenny stayed in the blockhouse a few days, recuperating from her ordeal. Then a company of men, led by Skygusty Harman, for whom the fort (7) had been named, escorted her back to her home at the headwaters of the Clinch River.

After being united with her husband, Thomas, they settled down to making a living there on Walkers Creek. But in 1800, ten years after her return home, they moved to the Levisa Fork of the Big Sandy River and built a cabin about fifteen miles from the blockhouse. Here they lived out the remainder of their lives.

Thomas died in 1810, but Jenny came to a long widowhood. During the time she often visited her brother John, a resident of Buffalo Fork of Johns Creek in the present Floyd Co., KY. She died in 1831. Both she and her husband were buried in the present Johnson Co., KY, not far from their last abode. (8)

The descendants of Thomas and Jenny Wiley are many, and today their homes are scattered throughout the Big Sandy Valley. They are upstanding and respected citizens. Now and then reunion of the Wileys of the valley are held in memory of the courageous pioneer woman. And thus the story will always be kept fresh in the hearts of the people

(1) Virginia State Papers, Vol. V, page 42.

(2) The title of Skygusty had been applied to both Matthias, and his older brother, Henry Harman. That they were both great hunters and Indian fighters is unquestioned, but it is the belief of the author that Henry, who was ten years the senior of Matthias was really the one so branded by the Indians. In an old land suit in 1804, Henry Harman stated that he was in the habit of collecting the men and fighting the Indians.

(3) Connelly, William E., The Wiley Captivity.

(4) NOTE: Connelly states that on this site the Harman Fort was built in the winter of 1788-89. However, the correct date was the winter of 1789-90 for Jenny Wiley had been captured in the fall of 1789 as proved by the Virginia State Papers; therefore there could not have been a fort here when Skygusty and his party reached the place after pursuing the captors of Jenny - only a hut.

(5) Virginia State Papers, Vol. V, page 181.

(6) Henry Skaggs was one of the Long Hunters

(7) Harman's Station in Kentucky.

(8) Scalf, Henry, History of Floyd County, Kentucky, page 24.

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