

All along the western border, lonely cabins made easy targets for roving bands of Indians. Many a pioneer family fell victim to a deadly attack.

Jenny Wiley Struggled To Remain Alive While A Captive Among The Indians

Noted Pioneer Woman's Story Well-Known Today

By James Clell Neace & Virgil W. Preston - 1993

Along about the year 1949, when author Neace was a teacher at the Paintsville High School (PHS), a radio station at Paintsville was created and financed by Howsie Meade, a local businessman. When the radio station opened, author Neace took the PHS physics class on a field trip to see the new station in operation. The class was given a guided tour in which the engineers explained such technicalities as the special acoustics of the rooms and other intricacies involved in radio broadcasting.

There was a flurry of civic pride at Paintsville, with the coming of the new radio station, and many of the local

people participated in the premier broadcast programs. Author Neace especially remembers one program in which a local historian named Welles told the story of Jenny Wiley (1760-1831). Jenny was an early, albeit involuntary, visitor at Paintsville.

The area that in now Paintsville was of special significance to the Indians. At the point where Paint Creek flows into the Big Sandy River, there were once numerous colorful Indian drawings on smooth-barked trees such as sycamore and beech. These paintings gave rise to the present name for both Paint Creek and Paintsville.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, the lush Shenandoah Valley of Virginia was rapidly filling with white settlers, mainly Anglo-Saxons from coastal Virginia

The famous Sanders Tavern in Taylor Co. was operated by Henry Sanders along the old Lexington & Nashville Road.



A new stone monument has recently been placed on Jenny Wiley's grave in Johnson County.

and Germans from Pennsylvania. Soon some of these settlers began to venture farther westward into the wilds of southwestern Virginia, then a hunting preserve for various Indian tribes. The Indians, realizing that their way of life was threatened and that indeed their very existence was under assault, began to resist these incursions made by invading white people. The resulting slaughter, on both sides, was terrific.

About the year 1760, Hezekiah Sellards, of Scotch-Irish ancestry, led a band of settlers from the Shenandoah Valley to Walkers Creek, near the headwaters of the Clinch River in southwestern Virginia. There he raised his four children, Thomas, John, Jenny (the heroine of our story), and Elizabeth. This settlement on Walkers Creek also included some German families named Harman who played an important role in our story.

At the age of eighteen years, Jenny Sellards married an Irish immigrant named Thomas Wiley. Tom and Jenny built a log-cabin home on Walkers Creek and proceeded to raise a family. To support his family, Tom farmed and dug ginseng which he took to a trading post,

twenty miles away, to barter for merchandise.

On a cold rainy day, in October of 1789, Jenny, now twenty-nine years old, was home with her four children and her fifteen-year-old half-brother, Andrew. Her youngest child, a boy, was fifteen months old and she was seven-months pregnant. Tom was away on a trip to the trading post. Jenny was weaving on a loom her mother had brought from the Shenandoah Valley.

Unknown to Jenny, a mixed band of fourteen Indians were in the neighborhood, seeking revenge for the death of a Cherokee prince who was slain the year before by the Harmans during a chance meeting in the forest between two hunting parties, one white and one Cherokee. The band of fourteen vengeful Indians, looking for Harmans, included Shawnees led by a medicine-man named Black Wolf, Wyandots, Delawares, and Cherokees led by Chief Dull Knife, father of the slain prince.

Unfortunately for Jenny and her little family, the Indi-

ans mistook her home for the home of Mathias ("Tice") Harman a noted backwoodsman and veteran of many fights with Indians. (Note: Actually, Tice Harman was not along when Dull Knife's son was slain. Tice stayed home that day.)

The first person to detect the presence of the Indians was John Borders, husband of Jenny's sister, Elizabeth. He heard the Indians communicating by owl calls and bird calls. He immediately went from his home to Jenny's home across the hill. He told Jenny about the sounds he had heard and advised her to immediately take her family to his home across the hill. Jenny told John she would wait until she had finished her weaving then she would bring her family to his home. She waited too long!

Suddenly the door of the Wiley cabin was broken open and in rushed the Indians with upraised tomahawks. Andrew and the three oldest of Jenny's children were immediately slain and their scalps taken. When the Indians lunged for Jenny, who was holding her baby, Black Wolf intercepted with upraised arms. He had seen

Jenny's loom and the cloth she made. He wanted to capture Jenny and have her teach weaving to the women of his tribe.

As Jenny was being led away she became fearful that she could not keep up with the scurrying Indians. She knew that if she fell behind both she and her baby would be slain. Although the Indians never offered to carry the baby, they sometimes helped Jenny over rough places when she was about to fall behind.

At daybreak the next day the Indians stopped to prepare a meal. Jenny was so weak and feverish from her sorrow and the forced march that she could not eat. Medicine-man Black Wolf hunted some herbs and made her a tea. After drinking the tea, Jenny regained some of her strength.

Back on Walkers Creek John Borders grew uneasy about Jenny and her little brood at nightfall. He wet back over the hill to check on them. He thus became the first person to see the horrifying spectacle on the blood-spattered floor of the Wiley home. Later that night John went out and met Tom Wiley, who was returning home, and informed him of what had happened. Tom's grief was almost more than he could bear and for a long time he sat speechless in the saddle on his mule.

At daybreak Tom somehow found the strength to organize a search party and set off down the New River in search of Jenny and her captors. Tice Harman and the Skaggs brothers were away on a hunting trip at the time of the massacre. When they returned to Walkers Creek they too organized a band of woodsmen and set out in pursuit of the Indians.

Wise in the ways of the Indians, Tice soon detected some indications that the Indians were headed for the Shawnee settlements in Ohio, by way of the Big Sandy River. He and his party were actually able to gain on the Indians who were slowed somewhat by the presence of their captives.

The Indians placed a swift-footed sentry in the rear to watch for any pursuing parties. One day the breathless sentry ran into camp saying that Harman's band was behind them and coming on fast. This information spelled the doom for Jenny's baby boy. Dull Knife tore the child from the arms of a terrified Jenny and bashed his head against a large beech tree. As Jenny watched in horror, the baby's little scalp was removed. The Indians then told Jenny to keep up—or else!

The Big Sandy was in flood, due to recent rains. To get across the Tug Fork, the Indians plunged right in and swam to the other side. Jenny was helped to swim across by two Indians, one on each side of her. Soon the Indians reached the site of present-day Paintsville. They then continued on down the Levisa Fork of the Big Sandy toward the Ohio River.

Tice Harman and his party of frontiersmen pursued the Indians past present-day Louisa then gave up the

chase, believing that the Indians, by this time, had crossed the Ohio. They knew that the Indians had reinforcements in the area and decided that further trailing was too risky.

As it turned out, the Ohio River was flooded and the canoes the Indians had concealed in a canebreak, for use in recrossing the river, were gone—washed away by the flood. Having no way to proceed across the river, the Indians turned south and made their way to the Little Sandy River which they ascended. At Big Blaine Creek, in



The name Jenny Wiley remains a popular one in many sections of Floyd and Johnson counties. A state park is named in her honor near Prestonsburg.

what is now Lawrence County, they made a base camp. Jenny, now near term, was given a little cave. Black Wolf prepared herbal medicine for Jenny, but no one was attending Jenny when she gave birth to her little baby boy.

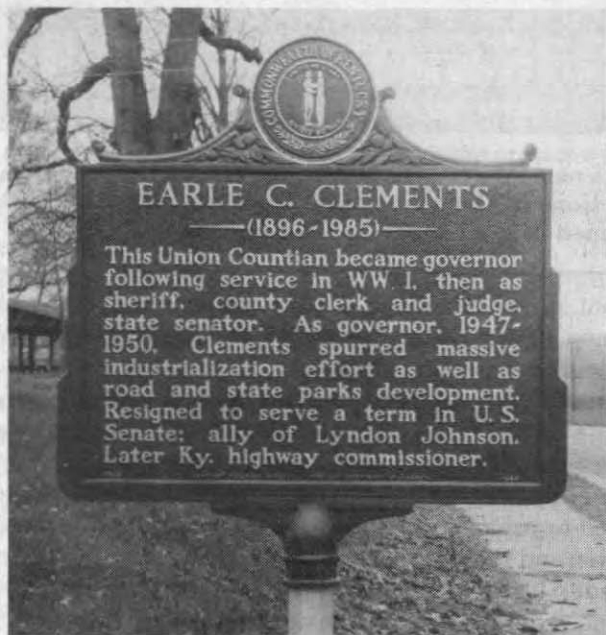
One day when the new baby was three months old, the terror-stricken Jenny saw Dull Knife striding purposefully toward her and the baby. Jenny screamed and tried to run away with her baby but she was soon overtaken and the baby was torn from her grasp. The Indians made a little wooden raft, placed the baby on the raft, and pushed the raft out into the swirling stream. The Indians stated that this was a test of courage to determine if the boy was suitable for becoming a warrior. Should the baby cry, he would be killed.

Kentucky's Roadside Markers

They Tell The Story Of Our State



Marker in Clinton County tells of home of Governor Preston H. Leslie.



Earle Clements, Kentucky Governor, was born in Morganfield, Union County, in 1896.

A little cry of protest came from the baby. Jenny made a ferocious attempt to save her last remaining child but strong arms grabbed the baby boy and dashed out his brains against a tree. The Indians then added the baby's tiny scalp to their growing collection.

Soon afterwards, the Indians moved to Johnson County and made their base camp on Little Mud Lick. Visiting bands of Indians frequently came and went from this camp. Jenny was required to spend about all of her waking hours preparing food for the various Indians.

One day a young white man was brought in by visiting Indians and cruelly slow-tortured to death by fire. After the boy's blackened body was consumed by the flames, the crazed Indians, who had worked themselves into a frenzy, came for Jenny. She was captured and tied to a tree. Firewood was gathered. Through it all, Jenny remained remarkably calm. Suddenly Dull Knife threw up his hands and said, "This woman is too brave and too strong to die!" Dull Knife proceeded to purchase Jenny from Black Wolf. He stated his intention to take Jenny to the Cherokee settlements in Tennessee as one of his squaws.

Unknown to Jenny (and Tice Harman), the base camp where she was now staying in Johnson County was only about twenty miles from a fort Tice Harman had built where Johns Creek flows into the Big Sandy, near the present junction of Johnson and Floyd Counties.

In her girlhood days, Jenny had learned some rudiments of Indian languages from friendly Indians and now, having lived in Indian captivity for a year, she had picked up other Indian words from her captors. One day some strange Indians came to the camp. Jenny caught enough of their conversation to learn the electrifying news of the existence of the large blockhouse that Tice Harman and a band of settlers had built at the mouth of Johns Creek, near present-day Auxier, Kentucky. She immediately began planning an escape.

The visiting Indians departed and the remaining Indians left camp on a hunting trip to replenish their larder. Before leaving, the Indians securely tied Jenny's arms around a tree by means of rawhide thongs placed around her wrists. A heavy rain came, thoroughly soaking both Jenny and the rawhide. Straining against her bonds, Jenny began to feel the wet rawhide stretching a little. She continued pulling and finally the rawhide slipped from her wrists. She was free at last!

Employing an old trick used by foxes to escape pursuing hounds, Jenny began wading various Johnson County streams in the general direction of where she perceived the Harman blockhouse to be located. First came Little Mud Lick, then Big Mud Lick, then Big Paint Lick, then Paint Creek. Finally she reached the Big Sandy. Walking along the bank of the Big Sandy, she came to the point opposite the Harman blockhouse. In the yard of the fort she saw an elderly man she

recognized as Henry Skaggs who had been a neighbor of hers on Walkers Creek.

Jenny began yelling for Henry to help her get across the flood-swollen Big Sandy. Her voice was drowned by the roaring of the river. Seeing Jenny dressed as an Indian squaw, the old man became scared. Thinking an Indian raid was imminent, he ran for his gun. Finally Jenny was able to convince Henry that she was indeed Jenny Wiley; that she was alone; and that she was in impending danger of recapture by pursuing Indians.

Unfortunately, at that time, all the able-bodied men of the fort were either on a hunting expedition or on a boating trip down the river. They had taken all boats. Henry yelled for Jenny to try to swim the river if the Indians came. He then began building a raft from a dead mulberry tree which he chopped down with his ax. The raft was soon completed and Henry successfully ferried Jenny across the swollen stream. What a tale Jenny had to tell the other women at the fort!

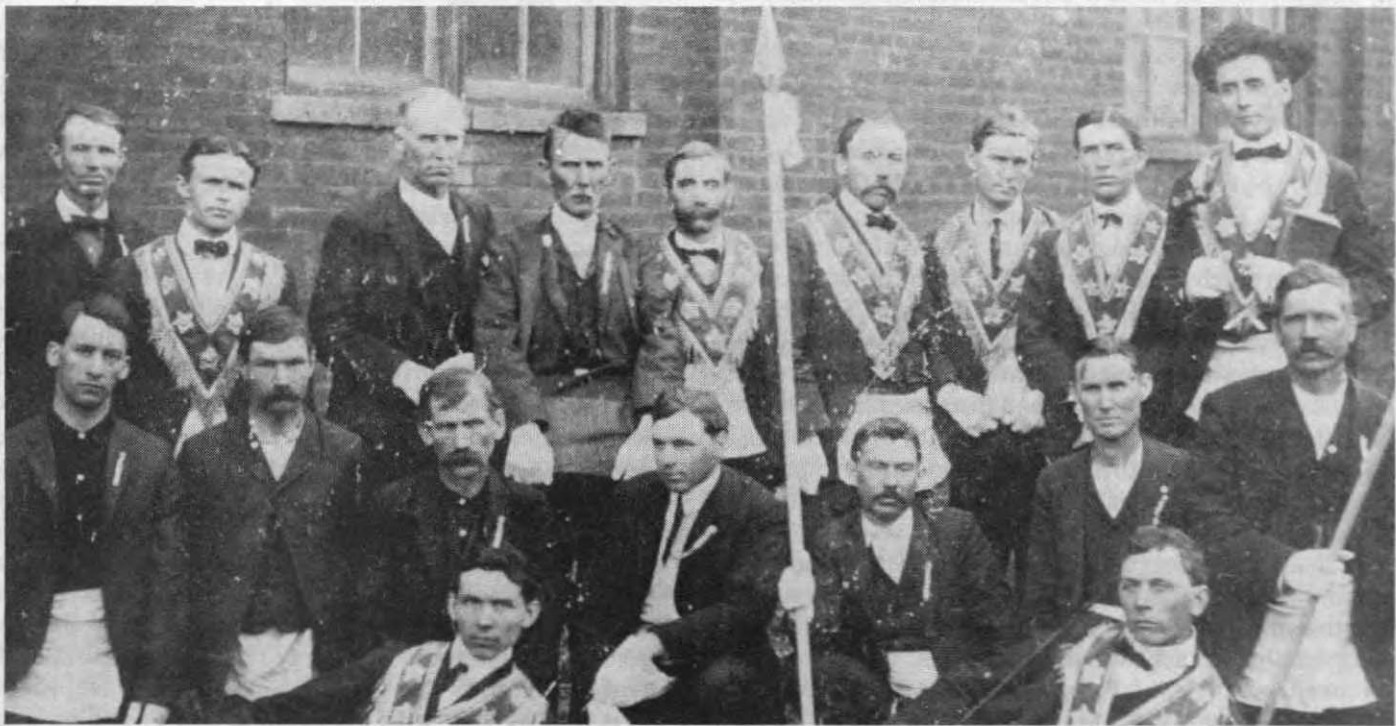
After Tice Harman returned, plans were made to take Jenny back to Walkers Creek for a reunion with Tom who had been pining for the entire year that Jenny had been away. So as not to divide the group, and thus weaken their defenses, the entire population of the fort accompanied Jenny back to Virginia for an emotional reunion with Tom.

Jenny, now thirty years old, bore Tom six more

children there in Virginia. In the year 1800, Tom, Jenny, and their children moved to Johnson County near Paintsville, at a little place now called River, Kentucky. There Tom and Jenny lived out the remainder of their lives. Tom died in 1810 and Jenny died in 1831. They now lie buried side by side at River, at a point overlooking the Big Sandy.

Today, the Jenny Wiley State Resort Park, located at Prestonsburg, encompasses the entire 1,100-acre Dewey Lake. The park offers much in the way of recreation and entertainment. On Dewey Lake, besides boating and water-skiing, there is fishing for largemouth-bass, small-mouth, and rock-bass; bluegill, catfish, crappie, and muskie. Nearby facilities provide lodging, camping, dining, golf, picnicking, swimming, playgrounds, a conference center, a ski-lift, nature trails, and the famed Jenny Wiley Theater, now in its twenty-ninth season. Open from early June through late August, the Jenny Wiley Theater offers musicals or comedies, seven nights a week, including a new hit called "Foxfire", an Appalachian musical comedy based on the "Foxfire" books. The theater's feature attraction is "The Jenny Wiley Story." This saga is performed biannually, with the next showing scheduled for 1994.

James Clell Neace and Virgil Preston contribute often to the Kentucky Explorer's columns.



Members of the Hindman (Knott County) Masonic Lodge posed for this picture some 75 years ago. Pictured are (not in order): John Martin, Hillard Smith, Bill Sturgill, Bill Baker, Jim Perkins, Bob Amburgy, Dan Sturidvent, Troy Perkins, Ken Day, Will Craft, Arch Craft, Dave Wallen, Levi Little, Bill Roberts, Bill Jones, John M. Baker, and Jim Sturidvent.

(Photo courtesy Margo Gibson, Campton, Kentucky)

Capt. John Craig, a defender of Bryan's Station, built a fort on Clear Creek in early 1783 in present-day Woodford County.