

Context of Captivity:

Mary Ingles at Big Bone Lick

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The Context of Captivity:

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James Duvall, M. A.

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Capture and captivity were facts of life in early America. Terrorism was employed in the attempt to control the North American continent. The major contenders were the Indians, French, and English. Homesteads, and even entire villages, were destroyed, and the inhabitants killed. The French and English attacked each others forts and military posts, and encouraged the Indians to participate in these attacks, and in guerilla warfare against civilians. Fear of attacks resulting in death or capture were constantly present on the early frontier.

Fear shapes people's responses to the situation in which they live. It is an important factor in saving lives, but it also molds character, and influences the habits people develop in dealing with the world. The pioneers of the American frontier tended to be cautious and hardy, occasionally fool-hardy, but not much inclined to sympathize with the people on whose territories they were encroaching. There were many contacts between the whites and the Indians, and some of them were positive. Many of these came about when white people were captured and adopted into Indian tribes.

The French and the English were both determined to control the North American continent, most of which was called New France, or New England, according to the origin of the speaker. In this struggle the Indians tried to maintain their independence, and control of their territory. Though the weaker

in many respects Indian tribes could tip the balance of power by favouring one side or the other, and they played the French and English against each other whenever they had occasion to do so. This struggle involved constant raids, battles, the building and taking of forts, and many treaties. While the Indians could never gain the decisive advantage in this process they were an important part of the action, and often determined the results.

When the English and French fought each other they would take captives, and there were often prisoner of war exchanges between them. There is no instance known to me in which the English took Indian prisoners. The Indians regularly took captives among the English, and either traded them to the French, or adopted them into their own families.

Adopting an enemy captive may seem strange to us, but it sprang naturally from the Indian view of the world. Just as forces in nature tend to balance out, the Indians expected actions in the social arena to be equalized.¹

If an Indian warrior was killed in battle the family demanded vengeance. Often they would be satisfied with receiving a scalp of the enemy, since a scalp represents a life. If the enemy were still living, they could avenge themselves upon him, perhaps by burning or mutilation. This made some people happy, but there was another way, especially if the grief of the family had been somewhat mitigated by the passage of time. They might also choose to adopt a captured enemy to take the place of the lost family member. That person could eventually become a full member of the tribe. In this case the same effect is

¹ This is a very ancient idea we still have with us today, expressed in terms such as *an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth*, the so-called *lex talonis*, or “law of the claw”. We see it in the Kentucky feud, where the loss of one life lead to the demand for another. People literally want to be even.

even more fully achieved: In replacing the missing family member the situation has been balanced.

Societies need useful and productive members to maintain themselves. The invasion from Europe put great pressure on Indian populations. The original peoples had to cope with strange and deadly diseases, as well as the loss of agricultural lands and hunting grounds. The demands of trade depopulated their territory of fur bearing animals, such as beaver, that were often their source of food as well. Trade also increased Indian dependence on foreign goods.

Traditional native warfare, as practised between the various tribes, often consisted of raids, rather than extended wars and sieges. The emphasis was on personal bravery and skill as a warrior in single combat. The object of many raids was valuable goods, and to exact vengeance for former loss of life, through scalping or capture. The death toll may have been significant, but it was low by European standards, which had a tendency towards total warfare, and concentrated on destroying crops and food stores, and escalating the body count.

Indian societies had not developed the means of sustaining such a mortality rate. Of the traditional methods which maintained the balance of population needed to sustain society, adoption was the most practical. There is reason to think it became more important as the struggle for the continent continued. It was the quickest method by which Indian families could acquire valuable members, and make up for their many losses.

The relationship between the societies in conflict was often dominated by hate and fear, but the situation was much more complex than it might

appear. There were many cases in which captives were returned. Some were ransomed by family and friends, or sometimes by local and state governments. Many of the English people who were sold to the French were later purchased, or traded for prisoners of war. Sometimes captives escaped and returned home. Treaties with the Indians often stipulated that all white captives must be returned. This happened in the Bouquet Affair of 1764, when more than two hundred white captives who had been adopted were returned to their original families. There were no exchanges of prisoners with the Indians, because the English generally did not take Indian captives.

Captivity and adoption blurred the boundaries between the two sides. Over time ties of blood, language, and kinship developed which allowed some individuals to move in both societies. In many cases family bonds, cemented by adoption, were so strong that white captives refused to return to the society of their birth. Such relationships, though often tragic, moved beyond the fear and hatred that often motivated the two sides, for love, too, was a significant factor shaping life on the frontier.

Grey Eyes

Grey Eyes was captured as a baby girl by Shawnee warriors. She was brought to the wife of the Chief, who had no children, and was adopted, living among the Shawnee. Grey Eyes, or *We.pay.que.lee.qua*, as she was called by the Shawnee, never knew her English parents until she was fourteen years old. A treaty with the United States government at that time forced the Shawnee to return all white captives, and Grey Eyes was sent to live with people she had never known.

Grey Eyes was not happy to be separated from her Indian mother, and longed for her. At last she made up her mind to return, and so she made careful plans. An extended visit was arranged with relations who lived a

distance away; then, upon arriving, she made some excuse for returning home. This was thought to be a whim due to her years among the Indians. But she did not go home: She took flight to Indian country, travelling at night, and avoiding white settlements. When she reached an Indian village she was hidden and helped to return to her Indian parents.

In the meantime, the wife of the chief was grieving deeply over the loss of her daughter. She became ill and refused to eat. She soon took to her bed, and it was considered that she would not live.

Then one day there was excitement in the village. *We.pay.que.lee.qua* had returned. Grey Eyes was reunited with her mother, who soon recovered, and lived to old age. Grey Eyes was hidden so that her presence would not be reported to the white people. She grew up and married Chief *Kik.us.kaw.lo.wa*, by whom she had eight sons.

We do not know the year in which Grey Eyes was captured. Her grandson “Lying-Spotted-in-the-Grass”, or Wildcat, who was also the grandson of the famous Shawnee chief, Tecumtha, was born in 1825. The tradition was recorded by her great-grandson, Thomas Wildcat Alford, a Shawnee historian who was educated at the Hampton Institute in Virginia, and there is no reason to doubt its authenticity. This incident reveals the human dimension of captivity. Bound by ties of love and family, captives often did not want to be returned to their original homes. This adds a depth of complexity to the situation which destroys the stereotypes of white captives longing to return home: *some did, some did not.*

There were many possible responses to captivity. Each captivity was as different as the individuals involved, and there were any number of possible outcomes. Captives who were forced to return to white society often made the same choice as Grey Eyes. The English could never get over their surprise and

consternation when this happened. They often assumed that returned captives were glad to be home, which increased their chances of slipping away.

There was an important age factor in many of these decisions. Those who had been captured under the age of fourteen would invariably choose to stay with the Indians, if given a choice. If they were returned to their families they would try to run away, and often they had to be locked up for years, once they were recovered, to prevent their escape. People captured after the age of fourteen had more varied responses. Warriors tended to capture children and younger women as there was a much higher success rate in acculturating people of a younger age. Whites who were in their twenties or older when they were captured would almost always return, if given a chance. This was especially true of men. Women, particularly those who had married among the Indians, usually preferred to remain where they were. They were highly likely to attempt escape if recovered by their white families. There is some predictability of response, but much depended on circumstances. The responses of individuals varied even within families who were captured together, and lead to much of the complexity that existed. There are no general statements which can account for every case.

Mary Ingles at Big Bone Lick

The capture of Mary Ingles and her family at Draper's Meadows, Virginia, in 1755, resulted in different outcomes for each of the individuals involved. Mary's mother, Mrs. Draper, was killed instantly, her sister-in-law, Bettie Draper was shot in the arm, which was broken, and her baby was killed. Mary and her two sons, along with Bettie and some neighbors, were taken prisoners to Sonnentio, a town at the mouth of the Scioto on the Ohio River. Here they were separated, and the two boys were adopted by Shawnee families.

Mary and Bettie were both born in 1732, and were over twenty. It was probably expected that they would resist adoption. We do not know their status as prisoners, perhaps the Shawnee hoped to exchange them for ransom. In the meantime they could use the labour. Mary's skills as a seamstress were employed in making shirts. After several months she was brought to Big Bone Lick to boil salt. This area was such a distance from the frontier that she was probably considered secure, and she was not kept constantly under watch: This made her escape possible.

Big Bone Lick is about five hundred miles from Draper's Meadows, by way of the rivers. We do not know all the factors in her decision to escape. Mary did not know whether her husband, William, had survived the attack. It is likely that she was not happy carrying wood and boiling salt in the hot summer sun. This may have had something to do with her decision. She was in danger if she were recaptured. There was danger from wild animals. The presence of a German woman in camp who agreed to escape with her, was probably the determining factor in her decision.

Most of what we know about Mary Ingles and her escape was recorded in the pages of the family Narrative written by her son, Col. John Ingles, about 1824. He does not record many details of the journey. He says that the escape was made at a period of low water, which made crossing streams easier. The actual distance Mary walked along the streams and rivers must remain uncertain. The most significant fact related about this journey is that it took forty two and a half days. John Ingles estimated the journey as “not less than from seven to nine hundred miles”, and there have been several similar estimates.

I have concluded from my research, and computations, based on the river navigation charts and other maps, that the total distance Mary and the German woman travelled is probably closer to five or six hundred miles. I have since spoken with Eleanor Lahr, who retraced Mary’s journey in 1987, and she has written an account which she hopes to publish soon. Eleanor told me that she did not see how the journey could be much more than five hundred miles under any circumstances.

When Mary Ingles arrived at home about 1 December 1755 she found her husband and brother had just returned from an attempt to get the Cherokee to convince the Shawnee to return their families. Already there had been several attempts made to ransom the family. The war with the French made further negotiations impossible for several years. Bettie Draper lived among the Shawnee for five or six years before she was ransomed in 1761. William continued his efforts to recover his family, and it was reported to him that George, who had been captured at age two, had died among the Indians while still an infant.

Thomas Ingles, Mary's oldest son, was captured when he was about four years old, and was successfully ransomed in 1768, when he was almost seventeen. His brother, John, commented in the Narrative, that he was "as Indian as the rest of them". Thomas no longer spoke English, and had become fully integrated into Shawnee society. The family actually paid for his ransom twice. The first time he was being brought home, he escaped in the night, and returned to his Indian family. When he was secured again, several years later, it was only with great effort that they could convince him to stay.

The individuals captured within this single family had quite different experiences, such as escape, adoption, ransom, and emotional trauma over the loss of adopted family. There were hundreds of such cases over more than two centuries, which led to the complex relationships between individuals and societies co-existing in frontier America.

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