

HENRY LOTT

One of the greatest difficulties the compiler of history has to contend with is to get it straight. Especially is this true of Polk County. The first seven years after its settlement, release from military control, and organization, its public records were so carelessly kept or neglected as to be of little or no value to the histographer. As a rule, the people were more interested in securing homes and bread and butter than in making history. The facts and incidents of the community must therefore be gathered largely from, and depend upon, the memory of the pioneers, who themselves often disagree concerning some important event or incident which they were participants in, or were observant of. Of events occurring in the settlement of the valley of Des Moines River, those respecting the doings of Henry Lott were pregnant with horrors and conflicts with settlers and the Indians, culminating in the Spirit Lake Massacre; yet it is difficult to give, at the present time, the facts respecting them, so conflicting are the statements of those presumed to be familiar with them.

Periodically, appear in the public press stories of him so at variance in detail as to render them of little value, especially respecting his trouble with the Indians, the causes leading to it, and the killing of Si-dom-in-a-do-tah, a noted chief of a large band of Sisseton Sioux Indians.

Little was ever known of Lott's early life, but it is probably true that he was born in Pennsylvania, where he grew to manhood and married a widow having a son about sixteen years old, who figured largely in the subsequent tragedies. He first came to notice in this section in 1843, as an Indian trader, at Red Rock, then in Keokuk County. His stock in trade was generally understood to be whiskey and trinkets, which he disposed of to the Sauks and Foxes, but the tales told by the first settlers in the country thereabouts, and in Polk County, disclose that he was a horse thief. Mrs. Jehu P. Saylor,

who was then about seventeen years old, says she frequently heard the men of her family talk about Lott and his stealings, and what they would do with him if they caught him.

Tom Saylor, who is now living in Saylor Township, on the same farm he has cultivated for more than fifty years, says that in 1844, his father, John B., lived on a farm in Van Buren County, and had a contract to furnish beef and flour to the Sauk and Fox Indians, and beef and hay to the garrison at Fort Des Moines; that Lott roamed over the country south of the Fort, stole the ponies of the Indians and horses of the settlers, and that his father and several settlers once caught him and gave him a severe flogging. Polk County then had no legal existence; there were no courts accessible, and the few settlers scattered over the country became their own court and jury, and enforced the unwritten law of Justice and Right.

Guy Ayers, who was a small boy then, at The Fort, says he knew Lott when he was living down at Red Rock, in 1844. He hunted bee trees, gathered honey, and sold it to settlers all around. He once came up to the east side of the river and sold some honey to his father and others around The Fort.

In 1845, Guy says his father had a mare, a pony and some mules, which one day were missing, and he and his father went in search of them. They kept going until they reached Lott's cabin, on the riverside, opposite Red Rock. They stopped with him over night. The next day, they found the animals, not far from Lott's place, and brought them home, concluding they had simply strayed away, but from subsequent disclosures of Lott's doings, Guy now thinks they were led astray.

Early in the Spring of 1846, Lott came to Fort Des Moines, and pitched a large tent near 'Coon River, on one of the terraces or "benches" as they were called. The weather was cold and very bad. He built a big log fire in it and remained several days. One day, Guy was sent to collect pay for something Lott had purchased, and he refused to pay, whereupon Guy pitched into him and had a regular tilt with him, but he got the money, and said to his father: "Lott is a mean man." Lott had with him two boys, one about sixteen and the other about twelve. He next went north, and the first night stopped at

McDivitt's Grove, six miles distant. There he found a big tree well stocked with bees and honey. He came down and asked Guy to go up and get the bees, and he went. The tree was cut down, Lott took the honey, Guy scooped in the bees and brought them home. He saw no more of Lott.

The Sauks and Foxes had been removed to Kansas. Polk County and the county south of it were rapidly filling up with settlers. To keep in advance of civilization and to better work out his depredations, Lott moved up to Pea's Point, so called from John Pea, the settler, near the mouth of Boone River, where he resumed his traffic with the Indians in whiskey and trinkets. His customers were the Sioux, a very different class from the Sauks and Foxes. He evidently did a very good business, for Mr. Smalley, a pioneer of Dallas County, says he passed his place when going to Oskaloosa to get a supply of whiskey. On going north at one time, he and his oldest son stopped with him over night. Behind his wagon was a cream-colored horse. The next morning, Lott went on, and the day following, the cream-colored horse returned. A few days later, Lott came, got the horse, mounted it, and rode off, saying he was going to Red Rock. A few days after, he returned with one arm in a sling, looking as though a cyclone had struck him. He was badly bruised, stopped a couple of days for repairs, and then went on. Two days after, a man came from the south, looking for a cream-colored horse. Smalley told him Lott had gone north with one answering the description given. He went north, and three days later returned with the horse.

During the Winter of 1846-1847, Si-dom-in-a-do-tah, a Sioux chief, with six braves, who were hunting along the river, came to Lott's place and ordered him to clear out, as he was on their hunting ground, and gave him five suns (days) to get out. At the expiration of the time, Si-dom-in-a-do-tah returned. At this point in the tragedies that followed, there are so many conflicting stories and traditions, some of them evidently greatly exaggerated by repetition, it is impossible to decide which is correct.

The Union Historical Company, publisher of several histories of counties in the state, in 1880, says:

"Si-dom-in-a-do-tah, finding Lott still there, commenced an indiscriminate destruction of property, robbed his beehives, shot his horses, cattle and hogs

full of arrows, so that many died, threatened and abused his family, drove him and his son from the house. Two small daughters fled to the timber, and a small child, which the mother covered under a bed, was not discovered. After contending with the savages until her strength was exhausted, she was compelled to submit to all the indignities they chose to heap upon her."

In fact, there were no children there but the two sons of Mrs. Lott by her first marriage.

Ex-Governor Gue's "History of Iowa" says:

"In 1848, Lott's marauders stole a number of ponies from the Sioux Indians. Si-dom-in-a-do-tah tracked the ponies to Lott's settlement, found them concealed in the woods, recovered them, and the chief ordered his men to burn the cabin and kill his cattle. Lott, alarmed, fled down the river with a stepson, abandoning his wife and small children."

Mr. Smalley, a pioneer, who knew Lott well, says the raid on Lott's cabin was made in December, 1846, thus disagreeing with Gue.

No authentic statement has been made as to how the attack was commenced, but it was doubtless in Indian style, with a whoop and dash, at which Lott fled. He once told Mr. Eslick that he went across the river, hid in the brush, and watched the destruction, as he could do nothing.

So soon as it was over, he went down to Pea's Point, and told Mr. Pea that the Indians had murdered his family, burned his cabin, and he wanted help. Che-me-use, a Pottawattamie chief, with several hundred of his tribe, were camped at Elk Rapids, near the north line of Polk County. He was very friendly with the settlers, who called him Johnny Greene. He was appealed to, and, with twenty-six of his men, joined with John and Jacob Pea, James and William Hull, John and William Crookes, and Doctor Spears, settlers in that vicinity, went to Lott's place, arriving three days after the raid. They found Mrs. Lott had not been murdered, assaulted, nor the cabin burned.

C. L. Lucas, the well-known old-timer of Boone County, in an effort to harmonize the many stories told of the affair, after consulting old settlers and others who were of the rescue party, says Mrs. Lott was not assaulted

by the Indians, but was completely overcome by the shock to her nervous system, and exposure. She told Doctor Spear that the Indians told her boy, Milton, twelve years old, to get all the horses on the place for them or they would shoot him, but instead, he went away, without coat or hat, probably to follow his father, and she did not know what had become of him. The Indians tried to kill the cattle by shooting them with arrows, and some did die. They took three horses, but one broke through the ice when crossing the river, and, unable to get it to shore, they shot it and left it. They also took all the household goods of value, a set of silver knives and forks and spoons which had been given her by her first husband, and went away.

The rescue party having done what they could, with the exception of John Pea, returned to Elk Rapids. Pea remained to assist in caring for Mrs. Lott and finding the missing boy. In the snow, on the ice, Lott and Pea tracked the boy down the river about twenty miles and found his body frozen stiff, with his two dogs watching it. The date was December Eighteenth, 1846. Having no means for carrying it back, or for digging a grave, it was placed in a hollow log. On January Fourteenth, following, a number of settlers at Pea's Point went with Lott and gave the lad a Christian burial near the spot where the body was found.

In September, 1893, Mr. Lucas inaugurated a movement to further commemorate the sad event, but to find the spot where the interment was made was the problem. Though it had been blazed on surrounding trees, a lapse of fifty-seven years had changed the whole valley of Des Moines River. Old landmarks had been swept away, but, with the aid of John Pea, the grave was located, and in November, 1905, a fitting tablet was erected on the spot under the auspices of the Madrid Historical Society, the dedication address being given by Mr. Lucas.

Mrs. Lott did not long survive the terrible scenes she had passed through. She was buried on the high bluff of the river, not far from her cabin. Lott then gathered together his cattle and what property the Indians had left, and moved down to Mr. Smalley's cabin, now in Des Moines Township, Dallas County, I think it is, and built a cabin, where he and his stepson lived during

the Spring and Summer of 1847. In the Fall, he sold his cattle for beef, and in the carcasses of some were found Indian arrow-heads. He then came to Fort Des Moines, where he remained until the Spring of 1849. What he was doing during that time, I have been unable to learn, but he secured another wife, a daughter of a man named McGuire, living on a land claim on the south side of 'Coon River, opposite the Murrow Farm, in Valley Township.

With his new wife, he went back to his former place and the old, deserted cabin at the mouth of Boone River, where he speculated in land claims and traded with the Indians. Three children were born to them there, two daughters and a son. Immediately after parturition of the son, the mother died, and Lott was again without a home.

Gue says Lott left one of his children at T. S. White's, six miles below Fort Dodge, and the two girls with Doctor Hull, in Boone County. Lucas says the infant son was adopted by Mr. White, and the two daughters were raised by a family named Dickerson. They lived to adult age, were married, and, I think, are still living in Boone or its vicinity.

Lott having disposed of his three children, determined to avenge himself against Si-dom-in-a-do-tah, "the old he-devil," as he called him. The stories of his further movement and his manner of doing it are conflicting. Andreas' Historical Atlas (1875) says:

"In 1852, Lott and his stepson went up from Webster County and squatted on the west side of what is now Lott's Creek, and cleared up an acre or two of ground in the timber. A short distance below the mouth of the creek, on the west bank of the east fork of Des Moines River, Si-dom-in-a-do-tah and his family of nine (?) persons had their lodge. Lott conceived and carried into execution the horrible project of murdering the chief and his entire family. The chief was shot a short distance from his lodge, and two squaws and four children [seven] were murdered at the lodge. A boy and a girl made their escape to tell of the perpetrators." Gue's "History of Iowa" says:

"In the Fall of 1853, Lott and a son passed though Fort Dodge with an ox team, loaded with provisions and three barrels of whiskey, went into Humboldt County and built a cabin on a creek, since named Lott's Creek,

where he opened a trade with the Indians in goods and whiskey. In January, 1854, he learned that Si-dom-in-a-do-tah was camped on another creek, since named Bloody Run. With his son, he went to the camp and made profession of warm friendship for the Indians. He told the chief there was a large herd of elk on the river bottom, and induced him to set off to find them. So soon as the chief was out of sight, they skulked in the grass, and as the chief returned shot him dead as he rode on his pony. They then waited until night, when, returning to the tepees, they gave the war whoop, and as the women and children came out, butchered them one by one, the aged mother, wife and two children of the chief, and two orphans living with them [seven]. One little girl hid in the grass and escaped. One little boy, terribly wounded and left for dead, recovered. They plundered the camp of every article of value, burned their own cabin, loaded a wagon with plunder, fled down the river, struck westward, crossed the Missouri north of Council Bluffs, and disappeared on the plains."

A writer of the "History of Humboldt County" (1880) says: "In the Winter of 1853-1854, Si-dom-in-a-do-tah was camped on the east bank of Des Moines River, with his wife, two children, a young squaw, and her two children [seven]. Lott, loading up his valuables on his wagon, told his stepson to go to the settlements south. He then struck off across the river, and on arriving at the tepee of the Indian, informed him that buffalo were grazing on high ground beyond, and proposed to go and shoot them. They started off, and soon after Lott stepped behind the old chief and shot him dead. He then returned to the camp and slew all the women and children [eight] except one little boy about twelve years of age, who hid from him and escaped. Lott then followed the track of his stepson, soon joined him, stopping that night with Simon Hinton."

Another report says Lott came south, stopped at the places of Joseph Smalley, Dickerson and others, showed them the silverware stolen from his cabin, and said: "That old Sioux devil will never rob any more women of silverware."

Another report is that Lott, after the killing, took some furs and the pony Si-dom-in-a-do-tah rode, fled south, and was traced as far as Tom Saylor's.

Tom recently told me that Lott and his stepson came to his house for breakfast, and said they had ridden all night. They immediately left, saying they were going to Red Rock. They advised the settlers to look out, as there was going to be trouble with the Indians.

A recent report says:

"The Indians caught and bound Lott; then they took three target shots at Mrs. Lott, none striking her. One of the boys escaped down the river and was frozen to death. Worry over the boy's fate and scare caused the death of Mrs. Lott. The husband bided his time, plied the Indians with whiskey, and while they were in drunken stupor, waded in upon them with a sharp axe, making the old chief his first victim. He spared neither buck, squaw nor papoose."

Ink-pa-du-a-tah, who figured in the Spirit Lake Massacre, was a brother of Si-dom-in-a-do-tah, and was camped not far away from him. The slaughter was soon discovered. The Indians were enraged, and the settlers greatly alarmed for their safety.

Ink-pa-du-a-tah, who had always been friendly with the settlers, went to Major Williams, who had been an officer at Fort Dodge, but remained after the military was removed to Fort Ridgley, and was appointed by Governor Grimes to protect the settlers on the frontier, to investigate and ascertain who did the killing. He ordered the holding of an inquest. The bones of the old chief were brought before the jury, and his skull was later taken to Homer, then the county seat of Webster County, and nailed up on a house. "Charley" Aldrich has a vivid recollection of it, and says it was fractured in several places, as though done with some blunt instrument, and portions of flesh were still adhering. The Coroner's Jury disagreed, some of them contending that the killing was done by Indians who disliked old "Si," and nothing came of it. Suspicion pointed to Lott. Major Williams made further investigation and reported that he and several Indians had traced Lott down the river on the ice to the mouth of Boone River, where he sold the pony, gun, furs, and stuff taken from Si-dom-in-a-do-tah's camp, but, having so much the start, he could not be found.

The settlers, however, demanded that something be done to protect them from the vengeance of the Indians. A presentment was made to the Grand

Jury at Des Moines, the Polk County District Court then having jurisdiction of all that section, and an indictment for murder was returned against Lott, who must have been known to be in the vicinity, for the evening of the day the indictment was returned, the horse of one of the jurors, who resided in Boone County, was in a stable a short distance southwest of the Court House, and the next morning was in a stable in Boone County. When Sheriff D. B. Spalding went up the next day to arrest Lott, he could not be found. Several months later, his stepson sent word to Fort Dodge that his father had been killed in some kind of an affray in California.

I have searched the records of the District Court, but can find no record of the proceedings in the case, and the Clerk says there are no records of the doings of that court prior to 1857, a fact of some importance and singularity.

The Indians were greatly angered because Lott was not captured, and made raids on settlers along the river. Ink-pa-du-a-tah, who had always been friendly with the whites, incensed by the murder of his mother and brother, joined in the spirit of vengeance, which, it is claimed, resulted in the massacre at Spirit Lake.

It is evident Lott was a "mean man," as Guy Ayers told his father, for children and fools are said to instinctively tell the truth. Though there was some palliation for avenging the assault against his family at Pea's Point, which was within the neutral strip, open to settlement, and on which old "Si," an ugly Indian, under a treaty made with the Government, had no right to go, yet there was no justification for killing the chief's innocent family.

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