

Oriskany and Blue Licks



GENERAL HERKIMER AT THE BATTLE OF ORISKANY
Courtesy Utica Public Library

By ELMO SCOTT WATSON

ONE hundred and fifty years ago this summer there was fought on the frontier of New York one of the most hotly contested battles of the American Revolution. This was the battle of Oriskany on August 6, 1777, where a force of New York militia led by Gen. Nicholas Herkimer, marching to the relief of Ft. Schuyler, won a victory over a force of Tories and Indians, commanded by Sir John Johnson and the great Mohawk chief, Joseph Brant. Five years later out in the wilderness of Kentucky a similar battle was fought between an army of Kentucky frontiersmen, led by Cols. John Todd, Stephen Trigg and Daniel Boone, and a force of Canadians and Indians, commanded by Maj. William Caldwell, who had with him the renegades Alexander McKee, Mathew Elliott and Simon Girty. This was the battle of Blue Licks, often referred to as "The last battle of the Revolution," fought on August 19, 1782.

Although there is no direct connection between the two engagements, they exhibit a striking parallel of the circumstances which brought them about that is worthy of more than passing notice. In both cases the headstrong folly of subordinates overruled the cooler judgment of the commanders, thereby bringing upon themselves the disaster which could have been averted.

The battle of Oriskany was a part of the campaign which centered around Ft. Schuyler on the present site of Rome, N. Y., in 1777. The stirring events of that year are to be recalled this summer in a series of sesquicentennial celebrations which will be held at various places in the Mohawk valley. Chief among these will be the Oriskany celebration where the memory of the men who fought in this dramatic and bloody engagement will be honored by their descendants and hundreds of visitors from all parts of the country. The events leading up to the battle of Oriskany were these: As a part of the British plan to score a decisive success during the summer of 1777 and to crush the Revolution, Col. Barry St. Leger had been sent to sweep through the Mohawk valley to Albany where he was to join the army of General Burgoyne who was coming down from the north. But there was one obstacle to St. Leger's success. This was Ft. Schuyler, held by a force of Continentals under the command of Col. Peter Gansevoort and Col. Marinus Willett. On August 2, St. Leger appeared before Ft. Schuyler with a force of some 1,700 British regulars, Hessians and Tories—led by Sir John Johnson, John Butler and his son, the notorious Walter Butler, and Iroquois Indians. Colonel Gansevoort had appealed to the Committee of Safety in Tryon county for help and the chairman of this committee, Nicholas Herkimer—"Old Honikol Herkimer" was the affectionate nickname for him—(who had been appointed a brigadier general the previous year) immediately raised the militia of Tryon county and set out for the relief of Ft. Schuyler. Herkimer's army, a force of about eight hundred men, was divided into four regiments. The first was led by Col. Ebenezer Cox and was from the district of Canajoharie. The second from Palatine was commanded by Col. Jacob Klock, the third from Mohawk was under Col. Frederick Visscher, and the fourth, from German Flats and Kingsland, was commanded by Col. Peter Bellingier. This force assembled at Ft. Dayton near the mouth of West Canada creek, and on August 4 started out, crossed the Mohawk near the present site of the city of Utica and reached Whitestown on August 5.

At this point Herkimer sent an express to Colonel Gansevoort to arrange for co-operation in moving against the enemy. Gansevoort was to fire three cannon shots as a signal that a force from the fort was ready to make a sortie, whereupon Herkimer was to advance with his army. He was then about eight miles from Ft. Schuyler and it would be easy to hear the report of the big guns at that distance. But his messengers were delayed in getting through the enemy to the fort and Herkimer's men waited impatiently for the sound of the cannon. Finally, chafing at the delay, they demanded to be led against the enemy. Herkimer steadfastly refused. Then some of his officers, notably Colonels Cox and Paris, began to reproach him and even went so far as to accuse him of being a coward and a Tory. But the wise old commander resisted their urgings until they became unbearable. Finally, stung to madness by their unjust accusations, he gave the command to advance.

It was more of a disorderly mob than an army that streamed out of the encampment. At Oriskany creek the road led across a narrow causeway of logs over a marsh with thick woods on



DANIEL BOONE From Bust by Albin Polasek

either side. St. Leger had sent a large body of Tories, many of them neighbors of Herkimer's men in Tryon county, the noted "Johnson's Greens," under Major Watts, accompanied by a body of Mohawk Indians led by the famous Joseph Brant, who prepared the ambush for Herkimer's men. Just as the head of the column marched onto the causeway the Indians impetuously opened fire. Herkimer's rear guard retreated almost immediately, but the rest stood their ground and returned the enemy's fire. They at once sought shelter behind trees and immediately there took place one of the fiercest battles in American history. For the most part it was a hand-to-hand fight. Colonels Cox and Paris, whose rashness had precipitated the fight, were among the first to be killed. Herkimer was disabled early in the fight by a bullet which shattered his knee. His officers urged him to retire to safety, but his reply has become a historic byword in the Mohawk valley—"I will face the enemy."

During the battle, Herkimer's messengers reached Gansevoort, who had been wondering what the distant firing meant and who fired the three signal cannon. Herkimer's men heard them, but they could not advance now. They were fighting for their lives. So great was the slaughter in both armies that the Indians finally raised the cry of retreat—"Oonah, Oonah!" and left the field. The Tories, seeing this and being alarmed at the sound of the firing made during the sortie from the fort which had been led by Col. Marinus Willett, also retreated. Herkimer and his men held the field on which they had won their dearly bought victory. The losses inflicted upon the enemy and Willett's sortie which had fallen upon St. Leger's camp stampeded a portion of the British force and captured a great store of supplies, resulted in St. Leger's giving up the siege of Ft. Schuyler. So victory came out of defeat after all, for Ft. Schuyler was saved and the threat of St. Leger's invasion of the Mohawk valley collapsed. Herkimer died a few days after the battle.

Five years later occurred the other battle in which the foolhardiness of headstrong men brought about another disaster equal to that of Oriskany. On August 16, 1782, a mounted messenger dashed up to Boone's Station, a small frontier fort which this famous pioneer had built across the Kentucky river a short distance from Boonesborough—with the news that Bryan's Station, an important point further west, about five miles from the present city of Lexington, had been attacked by an overwhelming force of Indians and Canadians. The men of Boone's Station immediately galloped to the aid of their brethren, and the next day found Boone, who happened to be at Boonesborough at the time, on the way to Bryan's Station, with all the men of the vicinity that he could collect. When they arrived, they found that the enemy had already retreated, but since, by the evening of August 17, the Kentuckians assembled at Bryan's Station numbered more than 180, and as many more under Col. Benjamin Logan were expected hourly, they determined to observe the principle of border warfare—that no savage foray should go unpunished. So, without waiting for Logan, they decided to pursue the enemy at once, even though they realized that the enemy, composed of fierce Wyandottes and accompanied by the renegades McKee, Elliott, and the infamous Simon Girty, greatly outnumbered them. Early the next morning the party, commanded by Cols. Todd, Trigg and Boone, set forth. They found that the enemy had left a plain trail, but heedless of this indication that the allies invited pursuit, the Kentuckians dashed on rapidly. On the morning of August 18 they came to the Licking river at a place called Blue Licks. A few Indians were seen on the ridges



NICHOLAS HERKIMER

across the river. Boone was certain the Indians were lying in ambush and advised his men to select a strong position on their side of the river and wait there until Logan and his men arrived.

But this wise counsel was disregarded by the impatient Kentuckians who were anxious to strike a blow at the enemy who had besieged their stations. Boone then proposed that a party be detached, march up the river and fall upon the rear of the enemy at a prearranged signal, while the main attack was being delivered in front. While the proposition was being discussed, a decision was forced by a Major McGary, who had supported Boone in the proposal to await the arrival of Logan and had been taunted with cowardice by some of his fellows for doing so. McGary suddenly broke up the council by spurring his horse to the ford and dashing across it, shouting "Let all who are not cowards follow me!"

It was just the sort of an appeal which would influence such rashly courageous men as most of these Kentuckians were. They streamed across the river in disorderly fashion and there was nothing for Boone, Todd and Trigg to do but to follow, and to try to restore some order in the straggling mob. They crossed the river safely and advanced up a buffalo trail to the top of the ridge beyond. By this time some semblance of order had been restored, with McGary leading an advance party of twenty-five. As they approached the top of the ridge a rifle shot rang out as a signal for the crashing volley which then followed. Twenty-three of McGary's twenty-five men went down at this first fire. The headstrong McGary who had precipitated the fight was one of the two who escaped. After this first volley, the Canadians showed themselves on the ridge and from the ravine on either flank, the Indians opened a deadly fire. The Kentuckians stood their ground and returned the fire. Instantly the Wyandottes, always noted as reckless and desperate fighters, came bursting through the smoke with poisoned tomahawks. There was a short hand-to-hand conflict until the Kentuckians, greatly outnumbered, almost surrounded and in imminent danger of being slaughtered where they stood, broke and fled back toward the river. Nearly every officer of rank was killed. Boone escaped across the river.

The Kentuckians, hotly pursued, streamed back across the river. There Major Netherland rallied his men and offered resistance, ending the pursuit and preventing a massacre.

Of a force of approximately one hundred eighty men, sixty-seven had been killed outright or were murdered as they lay wounded on the field of battle, and seven had been captured, four of whom died at the torture stake. Nearly every man who escaped was wounded in some way. Half-way back to Bryan's Station, the survivors met Colonel Logan with 400 men, coming to their support. How bitter must have been their regret when they realized how different the result might have been if they had heeded Boone's advice and awaited Logan's coming, and had not been swept into action by McGary's rash appeal. Blue Licks was perhaps the greatest defeat ever suffered by the pioneers of the Blue Grass state, but it was also a high-water mark in her history. For the Indians came no more to Kentucky and Blue Licks marked the end of the frontier period.

Oriskany and Blue Licks—two names which afford a striking illustration of the injury which a body of undisciplined men may do to themselves and those dependent upon them. But in the memory of the desperate valor of the men who fought these battles, history forgives them their indiscretion and in these sesquicentennial years remembers only a nation's gratitude to the men who helped in the winning of the West.

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