

History of San Juan County
Chapter XI-XV, 1881 - 1882
By Albert R. Lyman, 1918

CHAPTER XI

In the spring of 1881, John H. Thurman was tending a herd of fine horses near Piute Spring, east of Blue Mountain. Herds of cattle had also been located in that region, and west of there to Recapture Creek. About the last of April, Richard May took Byron Smith out to Thurman's camp to buy horses. One of the men, perhaps Smith, carried with him considerable money, which may or may not have helped to bring the fate which overtook them.

No white man knows how it came about, but they were killed by the Utes, their bodies were robbed and mutilated, and the Thurman cabin burned. Friends from Mancos buried two of the men, but Smith's body was not found.

The Utes ran with their plunder to the south, and on the fifth of May were discovered by Joseph Nielson among the horses on Bluff Bench. When they shot at him, he rode to town, entering the little fort with his alarm while a fast meeting was in session. A number of men counted post haste, and started up Cottonwood Wash. Among them were Kumen Jones, L. H. Redd Jr., Joseph Nielson, James B. Decker, Amasa Barton, Jess Smith, Hyrum Perkins, George Ipson and Johnny Gower.

At Boiling Springs, in the Butler they found thirty Indians, sixty squaws and papooses, a herd of sheep and goats, and a band of 150 head of horses. The Utes came stringing down from the rocks, and the Bluff men with L. H. Redd in lead, met them in the middle of the valley.

Eleven of the horses had been stolen from Bluff, and two of them had been gone a year. When the Indians saw the intention of the white men to claim these horses, they sent up a yell, and guns flashed quickly into sight. Old Baldy poked a great triggerless rifle into Joe Nielson's face, preparing to discharge it with a stone he held in his hand. This lumbering process gave L. H. Redd ample time to cover the old Ute with his revolver, and when all was noise and uproar, with guns drawn on both sides, another Ute appeared on the rock at Boiling Spring and called out loud and shrill in the Ute tongue, "They're Mormons, let them go."

Everything changed in a minute. The Utes gave up the Bluff horses and started up the canyon. Then L. H. Redd saw a squaw on a little blue mare, which had long been a pet in the Redd family. He ordered her off, uncinched the saddle, removed the bridle, and left her afoot. The squaw lifted her voice and wept, in fact she lifted it as high as possible, hoping by her lofty notes to bring the retreating warriors of her people; her husband ordered to cry more and louder. It was no use. Haskel's solemn words and piercing eye, or something else, had stirred in the Ute heart a superstitious fear of shedding Mormon blood when it could be avoided. She could have wept herself hoarse, they wouldn't stop.

It is notable in this connection, that no Ute has killed a Mormon in the thirty seven years of San Juan's history, though thirty non-Mormons have been slain in the county during that time by the Indians.

Next day the Mormons followed the Utes to the head of the Butler to prevent further depredation, and to take more careful account of the huge outfit, in which they found others of their own horses. The recovering of those animals brought about another quick flourish of guns, all of which went back into their scabbards without firing a shot.

The Utes had about forty horses branded quarter-circle JB, some of them very superior animals. "They also had plenty of greenbacks, to which they attached very little value." They had harness, lines, blind bridles and halters, and they claimed to have just been buying these things with the money given them by the government. Jess Smith and Amasa Barton each sold his hat, one receiving \$25.00 and the other \$50.00.

On their return from up the Butler, the Bluff men found many cows the Utes had killed, only to cut off the bag, and leave the carcass to rot. Besides this, they had caught and mutilated a number of calves.

In salting down in our memory the account of this affair in Butler, and others like it, we must not forget the defenseless little fort where women and children waited in anxiety and suspense. They watched the horsemen forms of their loved ones disappear over the sand hills, and they watched still for them to return in safety from the perils of the wide solitude all around. "How long and lonely were those nights when we waited," with the doleful murmur of the river echoing ever back from the cavernous cliffs. "How sweet the relief when they returned," and the gates of the fort closed behind them.

That Ute band traveled leisurely from the head of the Butler on to Elk Mountain--on down to Indian Creek, hunting and camping at will to start some time in June across Dry Valley for the LaSal Mountain.

In the meantime a band of sixty or more cowboys accompanied by soldiers, started in pursuit from Mancos. Near the Blue Mountain they disagreed, and the soldiers turned back. The cowboys found the trail of the Utes in Dry Valley, and followed into the LaSal Mountains, surprised and surrounded them, leaving the Indians afoot with their guns to hunt the shelter of the rocks.

Not content with this fine advantage, the white men rushed on with their gain to get the Utes themselves. It was a rash move. The Indians led them into a trap, got all their horses and most of their outfit, killed twelve men and wounded four others. But one Indian is reported killed in that fight.

The wounded men were taken to Moab, and when the posse returned to the place of the killing, they found their dead comrades laid in a row, with their heads in one direction. And besides these twelve, the Utes had discovered and killed two innocent prospectors, making a total of seventeen white men for this raid.

No Indian has ever been made to answer for the lives of these seventeen men. Poke boasts that he killed three of them, and his years of insolent safety since that time, have no doubt convinced him that it was a good business. Hatch, one of his kinsmen, fled to the Uncomphagre tribe, who gave him up to a camp of soldiers; he was seen by two Bluff men in a chain gang at Gunnison, Colorado, but after being held six months, he was liberated to return afoot to San Juan.

CHAPTER XII

The spring of 1881 on the San Juan brought those dismal sand-storms which give you the blues if you're inclined that way, and make your eyes look and feel like kidney sores of a cayuse, inclination or not. About this time the people were startled to find their horses going blind, and did not learn until years later that it was due to their eating the weed known as "pig" which comes out earlier than grass on Big Bench.

When that thieving gang of Utes disappeared from the head of Butler Wash, and everything seemed normally quiet, a number of men from the fort, some of them with their families, went to freight between the railroad and mining camps in Colorado, to obtain food and supplies for the season. The railroad had reached as far as Arboles, at the junction of the San Juan and the Piedra, and was building westward.

This company of freighters left Bluff on the 9th day of May, and the few who staye[d] to hold the fort, preserve the ditch, and keep their animals out of the hands of the Indians, have a story whose particulars may not be included in this or in any other account. They had as yet no mail service, no store, not even a wagon road worthy of the name, to modify the stern features of their isolation. The Indians could have made a bloody smoking heap of them and their improvements, and had been a hundred miles away in their safest retreats, before the outside world heard the first inkling of anything wrong.

The day those freighters started for Colorado, Joe Nielson left to meet his father who was retuning to the settlements with four other families, among them, Nephi Bailey. These folks had a wagon load of grape-cuttings and young apple trees, which had leaved out and blossomed before they reached Bluff, but the precious plants were promptly and carefully set out, and are said to be still bearing fruit.

At least two of the new comers found it necessary to follow the freighters to the camps in Colorado, and Bluff realized small increase from their coming until fall. How that reduced company succeeded with the ditch, which may be guessed

from the fact that in December they "voted unanimously to throw out all credits for work on the ditch, which is an entire failure." Bluff was still a "dry camp" only, with nothing in or around it to supply its people.

When Erastus Snow and his companions advised to build a fort, they included Montezuma in the requirement, and the upper town had her fort finished and were occupying in by June, in fact they may have been it in months before that so far as this history is informed. And in the spring of '81, though they may have felt no rivalry with the lower town, they had several reasons for hoping to excel her. They had no mail service, but they were fifteen miles closer to the post office at Mancos, they had a store, their merchant, William Hyde, was probate judge of the county. They had a greater population than before, numbering now ten families, and more important still, they had fooled the old San Juan into lifting thousands of buckets of water up into their ditch.

William Hyde's water wheel looked like a happy solution to the ditch question, and Harrison Harriman, Jos. L. Davis and John Allan, each proceeded to build a wheel for himself. They were all fairly successful on a small scale, and William Adams put a wheel in the river by one of the bottoms near Bluff. About the only successful farming done that year without a wheel, was carried on at the mouth of Recaptur[e] creek, by Hanson Bayles and the Decker brothers.

How soon after the fight at La Sal in June, the Utes found their way back to the river, is not known, but the settlers seldom lacked for some little affair with the Indians, to relieve the monotony of other things. About this time, Sanop's boy served notice on William Hyde that he desired to marry one of Mr. Hyde's daughters, and when Hyde objected, the young Ute became ugly and threatened to kill him. The Ute's idea seemed to be that the girl had no voice in the matter, the would-be bride-groom must get her father's consent, or in place of it his scalp, and the coast would be clear for the marriage.

As if the continual annoyance of Utes and Navajos were not enough to make life sufficiently interesting, there came also, every now and then, one or two white men adding their efforts to the sum of its interests. In September, two young fellows between twenty and thirty years old, one of them giving the name of Bob Paxton, rode into the fort at Bluff, and offered to trade horses. They bore a bad appearance being heavily armed, and no one accepted the offer to trade, though someone unthinkingly, as an excuse for not talking it over, said their horses were ten miles away in Butler Wash. This bit of information was more welcome to the strangers than a horse trade, and they soon left the fort, disappearing in the devious ways of the wilderness from which they came.

After a few days, during which fall showers had obliterated all tracks on the hills, it was reported that the horses had gone from Butler Wash. Long hours of hunting failed to discover their hiding place, but amule had gone with them, and

faint traces of a mule's hoofs were found on the road leading westward from Comb Wash, at what is known as the Twist.

A council was held and of the few men in town, Bishop Nielson selected L.H. Redd, Hyrum Perkins and Joseph A. Lyman to follow the tracks of the stolen horses. A few miles beyond the Twist they became sure they were on the right scent, but they determined to give the thieves time to reach the settlements before overtaking them. By this means they hoped to find sufficient help to recover the stolen horses without bloodshed.

The thieves on the other hand, wished the meeting to be in the wilds of San Juan County, and were traveling slowly, halting in every favorable place for the ambush, and hoping each day to make out the forms of someone coming on the road behind them. In this slow race, the Bluff men first sighted Paxton and his companion, as the young fellows and their horses drove away from the west bank of the Colorado river at Hall's crossing, with the river between them, pursued and pursuers, formed plans for other action.

(Anyone having further information on the history of San Juan County, or any correction on the part already published, will confer a favor to the editor by sending it in.)

1881

CHAPTER XIII

Still holding to their plan of allowing Paxton and his accessory to reach the settlements before interfering with them, the Bluff men took plenty of time in crossing the river, and purposely let hours slip by before taking the road up the west side. A little way out from the river the wagon road makes a horse-shoe bend around the point of a gravelly bench, across which there is a dim cut-off trail. Up over this cut-off road the men from Bluff came, and still eager to giv[e] the thieves plenty of time, they let their weary horses nibble the dry grass while they played jacks.

The outlaws knew nothing of this cut-off, but finding a good place for an ambush at the point of the bench, they took their outfit up on the road, tied solid to brush and rocks, and walking back, hid themselves in the broken rim, ready to shoot their pursuers when they rode up.

But while they waited, their pursuers concluded that game of jacks, bridled their animals, and riding into the road found the whole outfit of thieves, horses, packs, saddles, coats and vests, in fact everything but the men themselves and their guns. Puzzled to know what it all meant, they climbed out afoot over the hill, and cocking their rifles, crept carefully down to the outfit, loosed them from the brush and the rocks, and started full drive with everything back for the ferry.

It is supposed the thieves heard in their ambush the clatter of hoofs, but whether by that or some other way, they soon discovered what had happened, and came striding along over the sand after the outfit towards the river.

At the crossing the horses were turned over to the Hall brothers and Hyrum Perkins to ferry over to the east side, while L. H. Redd and J. A. Lyman guarded the road below on the river. The two men had no sooner taken their places on guard, than they saw a disturbance among the willows on the river bank below them. They could not make out just what was moving, but they shot at the disturbance as it traveled along and continued to shoot til everything became quiet.

In a few minutes the horses came stringing back down the road from where they had been cornered to go on the boat rounding them up, the two guards left the place they had been watching, and drive them back to find out what had gone wrong. The shooting had created a panic at the ferry, and nothing had been accomplished towards crossing the first load.

"It may be we killed them", said L. H. Redd, "but if we haven't, they'll soon be on the cliff straight above us, and we better get this outfit across as soon as possible."

They rushed the first load on the boat, crossed over and came back in safety. The second and last load pushed out from the bank with no hostile sound to break the river's peaceful murmur among its echoing walls. When they reached the middl[e] of the stream, still watching that gray cliff-brow, the lowering sun, two heads rose into view, and two white puffs of smoke sent two bullets singing peg into the boat.

The returned the fire. Two of the five men stood ready to shoot at the heads whenever they appeared, and between twenty and thirty shots left echoes rumbling after echoes in a continuous. Most of the bullets from above struck in the water, but one of them crashed into the seat so near an oarsman that he jumped from his place, and before things could be righted, the great flat beat had turned once around, and drifted towards the lower end of the bar, below which the river swept the base of the smooth wall.

While the boat returned their fire the thieves took no deliberate aim, shooting in haste and more or less at random. But when it reached the shore, and the little crew were too much occupied to respond, the men on the cliff made bold to draw a finer bead on their target.

The horses had been drawn out, and Joseph A. Lyman was pulling the boar up on the sand, when a bullet struck him in the leg above the knee, shattering the bone into a hundred splinters. L. H. Redd ran to his assistance, and proceeded to drag him up the sandy bank to safety. "I had to drag him three or four rods up

that sand-bank, he says, "with them pegging at us all the time, and they kept up the fire til we reached the brush. It was the hardest work I ever did in my life."

"O boys!" yelled one of the thieves exultingly.

But the wounded man and his companions lay still among the brush and willows, until the sun dropped down behind the cliff and darkness covered the scene. The thieves came down to the opposite bank and shouted their desire to make som[e] sort of compromise. The five men made neither answer nor light, but gathered their horses and prepared to move.

When they lifted Lyman on a horse, he fainted with pain. They tied his danglin[g] leg to the cinch to keep it still, and moved quietly away to the winding road which leads up the cliffs from the river. The slowest gait brought torture to his shattered limb, and when they had moved six miles along through the darknes[s] he begged them to stop. Around them lay a dry bench covered with black shadsca[le] and the nearest water they had any knowledge of was in Lake Gulch, five or six miles away. They camped all the same, and the Hall brothers rode off in the darkness to find the lake and bring some water.

Though they had left the ferry boat on the east side of the river a light skiff[f] remained still on the west side, in which the two desperadoes could come over and continue the fight if they chose to do so. To anticipate this movement, L. H. Redd rode back on the road from their dry camp and drove up a stake, on which he put a note saying, "If you follow us, don't shoot, but come into camp. We have a wounded man."

Then breaking a dry stalk from an ooce plant, he put it in Lymans hands saying "if you need anything, and I'm asleep, just poke me with this stick." How ofte[n] that stick was employed in that long night of torture, may only be guessed.

When the Hall brothers returned, they brought a short log which they hollowed out like a trough, open at both ends, and in it they placed the mutilated limb that it might be held straight and protected from the painful jolting.

It was impossible to go on the next day. Hyrum Perkins started alone to bring help from Bluff, a hundred miles distant, and the dry camp prepared to make the best of a barren solitude until that help should arrive. They made a trip to the lake every day for water, and did what they could to allay the pain of thei[r] wounded comrade. "But we couldn't keep the maggots out of the wound", says L. H. Redd, "they seemed to develop in one night, and we washed them out every morning."

On to that shadscale bench where Joseph A. Lyman and his three attendants counted the weary hours, came Pahlilly the Navajo, and some of his friends. They inquired the wherefore of the sick man, and listened to the story of the fight and the journey in the darkness to that desolate place.

"You go clear to the lake for water?" asked the Navajo, and when they assured him that they did, he took up a bucket and started away on a run. In a few minutes he returned with a bucket full of the precious liquid, having gone to some little tanks in the solid rock of a draw near by. No more trips were made to the lake, and the strange little water holes are still known as Jody's Tanks

The Navajo next inquired sympathetically, what they were doing for the wound; nothing, they didn't know what to do. He directed them to poultice it with mashed prickly-pear leaves, the virtue of which was apparent from the very first application.

As Hyrum Perkins urged his weary horses on towards Bluff, he met Mrs. Thales Haskel, George Hobbs and others, going back in a light wagon to the settlements. After hearing his message they hurried along to the shadscale bench, arriving there October 5th. The wounded man had lain three nights on his blankets without his wound having been dressed. Mrs. Haskel being an excellent nurse, proceeded at once to attend this matter, after which he was placed in the wagon, his leg in the wooded trough they had made, and they started slowly away for Bluff.

At Clay Hill they met Bishop Nielson, Mrs. Annie M. Lyman, and the sick man's mother. The journey down Clay Hill over the unmerciful places between there and home, was a slow prolonged nightmare, followed in the little fort by another nightmare which reached indefinitely into the winter. Numerous splinters of bone were dug out of the ugly wound, and they continued to give painful annoyance, and to require removal for twenty-five years. Joseph A. Lyman has been a hopeless cripple since that unfortunate second of October, when he became a living martyr to the cause of law and order in San Juan County.

On the 3rd of that October, when Paxton and his accessory had spent the night without a bed, and had it brought forcibly home to their consciousness that they had neither horses nor saddles, blankets nor food, not even their coats and vests, in the pockets of which were their note books of obscene poetry, they began to prospect the bank for something to relieve the situation, and found the skiff in the willows.

Whatever their reason for not crossing to the east side and continuing to fight, they made no such effort, but pushed out into the current, floated off down the river. At Lee's Ferry the little skiff came to the bank with but one man, carrying his own arms and the arms of the other man as well. What became of that other

man we can only guess, being guided by the probability that he would cling to his guns as long as he had life.

The surviving man met there at Lee's Ferry, and enjoyed the hospitality of Amasa Lyman, brother to J. A. Lyman. Going into Parowan he was entertained by another brother and in northern Utah, so subsequent events prove, he met still another brother of the man shot at Hall's Ferry.

As nearly as can be learned, he is the man who was afterwards shot dead in a restaurant in Idaho, just as he deposited in his face a spoonful of hot potatoes. The wherefore of the shot is not known, someone in the killing business seems to have discovered that he needed killing, and attended promptly to his needs.

The fall of 1881 found the Bluff ditch little better than no ditch at all. It had but a few inches of fall in its entire length, and it became a long settling pool for silt-laden water, until it filled up level between the banks. This resulted in break after break besides the sand washes which opened up their old channels across it, or buried it under sand with every shower of rain. Every head they put on that canal was whittled promptly away by the old San Juan, until the canal in general, and its head in particular, was "without form and void." The place of the first head was converted into a quick sand bed for the river, where the leaping waves fell back on themselves in noisy exultation over their victory.

The length of the ditch and its amount of fall had been determined by the junctio[n] of the cliff and the river immediately above the first head. A new canal must be built to tap the river at a point higher up, a canal with enough fall to carry at least a part of its sediment out into the fields. To do this, a place must be made for it along the 100 rods of smooth rock swept by the river. It would cost from \$12.00 to \$50.00 a rod, an enormous amount for the poverty stricken little colony to raise.

All the same that ditch had to be built, or Bluff had to be abandoned. They began on the huge task November 1st, not realizing even then, that all the toil and pain of the first ditch stood for nothing, that before there could be any such thing as valid stock in a canal company, the canal would have to be made a foot at a time.

1[8]81-1882

CHAPTER XV

To prepare for the ditch along that one-hundred rods of smooth rock swept by the river's current, they began hauling logs and brush. They extended the bar between the cliff and the stream, by building from the end of it out into the water, a square of logs like a house, then filling its walls with brush and stone, and covering it over with earth. Walking out over this first house, or crib, they built a second crib, filled it up and built a third, holding close to the rock, from which they turned the river, crib at a time.

The distance to be covered by this slow laborous process, would have bred despair in a community that had not learned to work as ants work on their hill, taking it as a matter of course that they must begin at once to repair or rebuild the demolished precincts of their homes.

Figuring a crib no more than a rod in length, there was a hundred of them to be built, which called for thousands of logs. Not pine logs, with any inclination to be straight or uniform, but logs from the ramshorn trunks or limbs of the gnarled old cottonwood.

Putting them together in the cribs was no doubt a heavy tax on the men assigned to that task. It is not improbable they united by main strength to hold some of these most crooked stocks still, while the brush and stones were jammed in around them. Even then these tortuous members lay ready, with a little help from their kinsmen the river, to come writhing from their prison, and go twisting and rolling in glad somersets down the streams.

Orrin Kelsey is still known as the man with a wonderful knack for fitting cottonwood logs together, and he must have been a bright and shining light from the first of that November, until in the spring of 1882, when those cribs were finishe[d.] Departing a little right here from the story, Kelsey still has a warm place in the hearts of those who shared with him the hardships and weariness of those early days.

From the gravel bench above the cribs, those ant-like toilers slid down thousands of tons of earth and stone, to fill in the rude house, and form a foundation for the ditch which was to make Bluff a possible place of human habitation for at least another year.

On December 3rd, Edward Dalton of Parowan arrived in Bluff as a special missionary, sent by President John Taylor to visit the little colonies, "and counsel with them relating to their labors and prospects on the river". He visited Montezuma also, but the main problem was the Bluff ditch, which was shown him from its proposed head to town.

He was made acquainted not only with the tremendous undertaking of building the cribs, but with the unsettled question of stock in the ditch. Men who had toiled there from the first, figured that surely their hard labors were represented in ditch stock, but those coming could not, for the life of them see any ditch to represent the claimed stock. Nothing was visible in that line, but the canal surveyed November 1st.

After hearing the pros and cons of this difficulty, Edward Dalton met the people of Bluff December 10th in the log meeting house and pointed out that the first ditch was a dead horse, in which no one could afford to buy stock. "At his suggestion the settlers vote unanimously to throw out all credits for work on the old ditch,

which is an entire failure, and count as valid only that done after November 1st on the new ditch."

This understanding brought satisfaction and good feelings to all concerned. Some of the men were rebaptized that afternoon as a pledge of their renewed efforts, and Brother Dalton started home that same day, having accomplished the purpose of his long journey.

Just how many men were in the crew to begin the cribs, is not certain, but on December 6th, after five wagons had returned from Utah, and a number of freighter[s] had reached home from Colorado, the men in the fort numbered twenty-five, close count, But they could not go all at once to work, the cribs were more than two miles away, the ditch headed four miles from town, the women and children could not be left alone, and there was a horse herd demanding continuous attention.

Exempting the last week in December, which was spent mostly in hauling wood and looking after cattle, the work at the cribs went on without interruption, being taken up without delay in January.

The last of the freighters returned about holiday time from Arizona, making a total of thirty-two men in the fort. Christmas and the New Year were duly celebrated with meetings and dancing, the ground was dry and bare, and the weather very pleasant.

When Bishop Nielson made up his annual tithing report, it was found that Bluff had paid \$760.00 for the year. This, divided among the thirty-two men of the Ward, would represent an income for the year of about \$237.50 each. But when we recall that Montezuma was a branch of the Bluff ward, to whose Bishop they paid their tithing, the annual income is found to be still smaller to the man. It is possible too that some of them put a more narrow interpretation on the law of tithing than the people who have since made Bluff famous for the huge sums representing a tenth of its annual increase.

On February 2nd, J. H. Mahoney, special U. S. Mail Agent, arrived in Bluff from Utah, to investigate the necessity of mail service from Mancos. He was favorably impressed with the situation and promised to recommend that the service be installed at once. Platte Lyman accompanied him to Montezuma, from which place he went on to Mancos with John Allan Jr.

On the 20th, Kumen Jones and L. H. Redd accompanied Thales Haskel over the river and into the Navajo country to recover stolen cattle. They spent five days hunting and inquiring, but found only three ponies belonging to Bluff.

These trips after stolen animals were very common, though it is difficult to get them lined up with dates, and distinguish them, one from another. However, a

similar journey was undertaken by a number of men on the 2nd of March, to recover a bunch of horses supposed to have been stolen by Navajo Frank. They located the old thief, and took from him one pony. No trace of the other horses could be found, though they neglected the ditch seven days to continue the hunt.

On March 10th, when John Gower was found to be nearly dead with consumption, he was started off for Cedar City with Hyrum Perkins. The hundred and seventy-five miles of wilderness through which they had to go, might suggest that a better way could have been found. Possibly so, Their intuitions and instincts were more keenly whitted to the occasion than ours may possibly be at this late date. The trip was made successfully, and we shall attempt to frame no argument against success.