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The Minute Boys of the Mohawk Valley

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Foreword

It seems not only proper, but necessary, that I should explain how the material for this story was obtained, and why it happens that I can thus set down exactly what Noel Campbell thought and did, during certain times while he was serving the patriot cause in the Mohawk Valley as few other boys could have done.

At some time in Noel's life--most likely after he was grown to be a man with children, and, perhaps, grandchildren of his own--he wrote many letters to relatives of his in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, wherein he told with considerable of detail that which he did during the War of the Revolution, and more particularly while he and his friends were fighting against that wily Indian sachem, Thayendanega. These letters, together with many others concerning the struggles of our people for independence, came into my keeping a long while ago, and from the lines written by Noel Campbell I have put together the following story after much the same fashion as he himself set it down.

When the work was begun I doubted if Thayendanega could have been frightened by a party of boys who were playing at being soldiers, and refused to make such statement until, quite by chance, I found the following in Lossing's "Field-Book of the Revolution":

"It was a sunny morning toward the close of May, when Brant and his warriors cautiously moved up to the brow of the lofty hill on the east side of the town (Cherry Valley) to reconnoitre the settlement at their feet. He was astonished and chagrined on seeing a fortification where he supposed all was weak and defenceless, and greater was his disappointment when quite a large and well-armed garrison appeared upon the esplanade in front of Colonel Campbell's house.

"These soldiers were not as formidable as the sachem supposed, for they were only half-grown boys, who, full of the martial spirit of the times, had formed themselves into companies, and, armed with wooden guns and swords, held regular drills each day.... He mistook the boys for full-grown soldiers, and, considering an attack

dangerous, moved his party to a hiding-place in a deep ravine north of the village."

Then again I questioned if General Herkimer would have sent two boys as messengers, even though an old and experienced soldier went with them, when he must have had under his command many men grown who were thoroughly familiar with Indian warfare. As if to combat this doubt, I found the following statement by one who has written much concerning the struggles of the colonists for freedom:

"As soon as St. Leger's approach up Oneida Lake was known to General Herkimer, he summoned the militia of Tryon County to the succor of the garrison at Fort Schuyler. They rendezvoused at Fort Dayton, on the German Flats, and, on the day when the Indians encircled the fort, Herkimer was near Oriskany with more than eight hundred men, eager to face the enemy. He sent as messengers to Gansevoort two boys and a man, informing him of his approach, and requesting him to apprise him of the arrival of the couriers by discharging three guns in rapid succession, which he knew would be heard at Oriskany."

Having thus proven, at least to my own satisfaction, that so much of Noel's story was true, I set about verifying the other portions, and in no single instance did I find that he had drawn upon his imagination, therefore I resolved to write it down as the lad himself would have spoken, being able, because of the letters, to put myself very nearly in his place.

I would it had been possible to say more concerning Thayendanege and Sir John Johnson, for they played important parts in the making of Mohawk Valley history; but Noel's own account was of such length that I did not feel warranted in adding to it.

To the best of my knowledge and belief, the tale of the "Minute Boys of the Mohawk Valley" is no more than a narration of facts, as can be verified by reference to any of our standard histories of the beginnings of this nation.

If the reader can find in the reading one-half the pleasure I have had in interpreting Noel Campbell's odd speech, and smoothing

down his too vigorous language, then will he be richly repaid for the perusal.

JAMES OTIS.

List of Illustrations

"An Indian strode gravely into the encampment"

"You have done well to get back alive"

"Sergeant Corney waved the bit of fringe slowly to and fro"

"Tire 'em out, lads!" the General shouted"

"Three or four hundred Indians were dancing wildly around a huge fire"

"With upraised hands, stepped out from amid the screen of foliage"

"The painted villain sank down upon the ground"

"Keep a-movin' unless you're achin' to have a bullet through the back"

Chapter I.

Young Soldiers.

It sounds like an unreasonable tale, or something after the style of a fairy-story, to say that a party of lads, drilling with wooden guns, were able, without being conscious of the fact, to frighten from his bloody work such a murderous, powerful sachem as Thayendane-ga, or Joseph Brant, to use his English name, but such is the undisputed fact.

It was the month of May in the year of our Lord 1777, when we of Cherry Valley, in the Province of New York, learned that this same Thayendane-ga, a pure-blooded Mohawk Indian, whose father was chief of the Onondaga nation, had come into the Mohawk Valley from Canada with a large force of Indians, who, under the wicked tutoring of Sir John Johnson, were ripe for mischief.

Col. Samuel Campbell, my uncle, was one of the leading patriots in that section of the province, and it was well known that the John-sons,--Sir John and Guy,--the Butlers, Daniel Claus, and, in fact, all the Tories nearabout, would direct that the first blow be struck at Cherry Valley, in order that my uncle might be killed or made prisoner; therefore, at the time when we lads frightened Joseph Brant without our own knowledge, we were in daily fear of being set upon by our enemies.

Among the boys of the settlement I, Noel Campbell, was looked upon as a leader simply because my uncle was the most influential Whig in the vicinity, and my particular friend and comrade was Jacob Sitz, son of Peter, a lad who could easily best us all in trials of strength or of woodcraft.

We had heard of the Minute Men of Lexington and of the Green Mountains, and when the day came that all the able-bodied men of our valley banded themselves together for the protection of their homes against our neighbors, the Tories, who thirsted for patriot blood, we lads decided that we were old enough to do our share in whatsoever might be afoot.

Therefore it was that two score of us formed a league to help defend the settlements, and gave ourselves the name of "Minute Boys of the Mohawk Valley."

There was then living in Cherry Valley an old Prussian soldier by name Cornelius Braun, who, in his native land, had won the rank of sergeant; but, having grown too old for very active military duty, came to this country with the idea of making a home for himself. Sergeant Corney, as nearly every one called him, was not so old, however, but that he could strike a blow, and a heavy one, in his own defence, and when he learned what we lads proposed to do, he offered to drill us in the manual of arms.

We were not overly well equipped in the way of weapons, although it is safe to say that each of us had a firearm of some sort; but it seemed to give Sergeant Corney the fidgets to see us carrying such a motley collection of guns, and he insisted on making a quantity of wooden muskets to be used in the drill, to the end that we might present a more soldierly appearance when lined up before him.

Therefore it was that, when we came each day on the green in front of my uncle's house to go through such manoeuvres as our instructor thought necessary, we had in our hands only those harmless wooden guns.

I was the captain of the company; Jacob Sitz acted as lieutenant, and all the others were privates. Sergeant Corney, as a matter of course, was the commander-in-chief.

On a certain day during the last week in May--the exact date I have forgotten--we were drilling as usual, with Sergeant Corney finding more fault than ever, when we frightened the famous Thayendanega away from an attack on the settlement, although, as I have said, we knew nothing about it until many months afterward.

It seems, as we learned later, that the villainous Brant had made all his plans for an attack upon Cherry Valley, and had secretly gained a position on the hill to the eastward of the place, counting on waiting there until nightfall, when he might surprise us; but, much to his astonishment, he saw what appeared from the distance

to be a large body of well-equipped soldiers evidently making ready for serious work.

The scoundrelly redskin was not so brave that he was willing to make an attack where it seemed that the Whigs were prepared to receive him, and, like the cur that he was, he marched his force to a hiding-place in a deep ravine north of the settlement, near the road leading to the Mohawk River, about a mile and a half from where we were drilling.

Now hardly more than an hour before it is probable that the Indians got their first glimpse of us Minute Boys, Lieutenant Wormwood had arrived from Fort Plain with information to my uncle that a force of patriot soldiers was on the way to check Sir John's plans for killing all who did not quite agree with him in politics, and to request that arrangements be made to care for the men during such time as they might remain in that vicinity.

When, late in the afternoon, the lieutenant was ready to return to Fort Plain, Jacob's father, Peter Sitz, was ordered to accompany him as bearer of a message from my uncle to the leader of the patriot force, and the two men set off on horseback, we lads envying them because it seemed a fine thing to ride to and fro over the country summoning this man or that to his duty.

It was the last time Jacob saw his father until after many days had passed, and what happened to the two horsemen we could only guess when the lieutenant's lifeless body was found next day; but we learned the particulars later.

It seems that when the messengers arrived near Brant's hiding-place, being forced to pass by where the Indians were concealed in order to get to Fort Plain, they were hailed by some one in the thicket; but instead of replying, the men put spurs to their horses.

The savages in ambush fired a volley; Lieutenant Wormwood was killed instantly, while Jacob's father was so seriously wounded that he fell from his horse, and, a few seconds later, found himself a prisoner among Brant's wolves.

When the tidings of this tragedy was brought into the settlement, Jacob was overwhelmed with grief, as might have been expected, and even my uncle had great difficulty in preventing the distressed

lad from rushing into the wilderness with the poor hope that he might be able, single-handed, to effect his father's rescue.

He was only sixteen years of age--two months older than I; but within an hour after we knew beyond a peradventure that Peter Sitz was a prisoner, it seemed as if the lad had grown to be a man.

It was this first blow against the settlement of Cherry Valley by the murderous Brant, which brought us Minute Boys of the Mohawk Valley into active service, for from that day we saw as much of warfare as did our elders, and I am proud to be able to set down the fact that we performed good work, although we failed, as did the men of the settlement, in preventing it from being destroyed a year and a half later, while the fighting force of the population was absent.

The murder of Lieutenant Wormwood was sufficient evidence that the Tories and their savage allies were prepared to harry us, and within a very few minutes after the body of the officer had been brought in, the men made ready to defend their homes.

A council of war was immediately called, and while it was in session Sergeant Corney made a proposition which was like to take away the breath from those who looked upon us of the Minute Boys as mere children, for he said in the tone of one who knows whereof he speaks:

"I've been drillin' a force that can do good work in what's before us, if they're given a show, an' I'll answer for half a dozen of 'em, guaranteein' they'll show themselves to be men."

"Are you speaking of the lads?" my uncle asked in surprise, and the old man replied promptly;

"Ay, that I am, sir, an', unless all signs fail, there's never one of 'em who'll bring reproach upon the settlement."

"What is your plan, Sergeant Braun?" Master Dunlap, the preacher, asked, for so great did all believe the danger which threatened, that every man, whether able-bodied or crippled, had been summoned to the council.

"It ain't what you might rightly call a plan, sir," Sergeant Corney replied. "It's only an idee, brought out by the fact that from this time

we've got to keep a close watch on what's happenin' in this 'ere valley, unless we're willin' to be murdered in our beds. There are boys enough in the settlement to do the scoutin', leavin' the elders to stand by for defence, an' I see no good reason why they shouldn't perform full share of military duty."

"Think you a lad like my nephew Noel could render any valuable assistance at such a time as this?" my uncle asked, with a smile, as if believing he had put an end to the old man's proposition, and my cheeks reddened with excitement and fear lest Sergeant Corney should allow himself to be backed down, as I listened intently for the answer.

It was not long in coming, and I could have kissed the old soldier for speaking as he did.

"Give me him an' Jacob Sitz, sir, an' I'll guarantee to follow Thayendanega an' his precious scoundrels till we know what deviltry they've got in mind."

"You shall have full charge of all the boys in the settlement, and we will see if you can make good your boast," my uncle, who held command of our fighting force, said after a brief pause, and in a twinkling Sergeant Corney left the building, beckoning us lads to follow, for our company had gathered with the men to learn what was to be done.

The old soldier did not need very much time in which to lay his plans; in fact, I believe he had mapped out the whole course before having spoken.

He divided our company into squads of six, not reckoning in either Jacob or me, and these he gave stations at different points within a mile of the settlement, cautioning every one to be on the alert, for now had come the time when it was possible for them to prove the value of the Minute Boys as soldiers. It was to be their duty, by night as well as by day, to keep careful watch lest the Indians creep up unawares, and I could well understand that never one would shirk his duty, since upon their vigilance depended the lives or liberty of all the dwellers nearabout.

Then, when some one asked why neither Jacob nor I had been assigned to sentinel duty, Sergeant Corney replied, gravely:

"I promised that with two lads I would follow Thayendanega's gang until we found out what the villains were about, as all of you well know, an' within the hour we three will set off."

Several of the more venturesome lads pleaded their right to take part in the dangerous service, claiming that they should not be left at home when it was possible to make names for themselves among men; but to all these entreaties Sergeant Corney made but one reply.

"It was Colonel Campbell himself who mentioned Noel's name, an' of a surety he has the right to say who shall go or stay. As for Jacob, have any of you a better claim than he to follow the murderers?"

This silenced the eager ones; but I would have been glad indeed had any member of the company shown that he had a better right to accompany the old soldier than I, for of a verity I was not itching to hug the heels of those savages who were doing the bidding of the Tories. However faint-hearted I might have been, however, I would have bitten the end of my tongue off before saying that which should show to my comrades that I was more than willing to remain behind, for if the captain of the Minute Boys showed the white feather, what might not have been excused in the rank and file?

Never one of all that company raised his voice against my right to follow Sergeant Corney, however, and I did my best at making it appear that the work in hand was exactly to my liking.

Even the dullest among us understood that we three might be absent from the settlement many days, and yet our preparations for the dangerous journey were most simple.

I ran home to acquaint my mother with what was afoot, and while she was trying to keep back her tears lest I might be unnerved for the duty to which I had been assigned, I armed myself with rifle and hunting-knife, making certain each weapon was in proper order.

From my father's store of powder and balls I took as much as could be conveniently carried, and this, with such small supply of corn bread and salt pork as filled my hunting-bag, made up an outfit for a journey from which it was reasonable to believe I might never return.

Mother did no more than kiss me again and again in silence, when I was ready to set off, and I now understand that she did not dare trust herself to speak, which, I venture to say, saved me from much sorrow.

On arriving at the green in front of my uncle's house, where we three had agreed to meet, I found that Jacob's outfit was even less than mine. In his grief because of his father's fate, he had thought only of his weapons and ammunition, and by the expression on his face I knew full well he would use them manfully if we came within striking distance of Lieutenant Wormwood's murderers.

Sergeant Corney was equipped in much the same fashion as was I, and immediately after my arrival he said, impatiently:

"There is no reason why we should remain here many minutes, as if tryin' to show ourselves. It stands us in hand to strike the trail while it is yet warm, an' by dallyin' the people will come to believe our only idee is to look bigger'n we really are."

"It is for you to say when we shall set out," I replied, envying those of my comrades who stood near at hand to witness the departure, and the words had hardly more than been spoken before the old man started off at a smart pace in the direction of the thicket where Lieutenant Wormwood's body had so lately been found.

As a matter of course we two lads followed, I making every effort to keep pace with him, lest those who were watching should suspect I was not as brave as I looked, and in a few moments we had shut out from view the houses of the settlement.

We were not long in traversing the short distance which led us to the tree at the foot of which the officer came to his death; it can well be understood that we did not linger many seconds in that gruesome locality.

Jacob was eager to push on, hoping even against hope that it might be possible for him to rescue his father. Sergeant Corney had no desire to delay, lest we find it difficult to follow the trail later in the day, and there was no reason why I should care to remain in that place where were such evidences as might soon be found of our own fate.

Thayendanega had apparently given no heed as to whether his movements were known, for never an effort had been made to cover the trail, and we followed it as readily as if it had been blazed.

When we had travelled rapidly in silence for two full hours, Sergeant Corney called a halt, saying as he did so:

"There's no reason why we should push on so fast, an' much need to husband our strength, for no one can tell how soon we may be forced to take part in a hand-to-hand scrimmage. We'll have a bite to eat, for I didn't overload my stomach this mornin', an' be all the better for a breathin'-spell."

"We didn't come out to spend our time in eatin'," Jacob said, moodily, and I understood full well what was in his mind. "We can loiter when we have come up with the savages."

"It ain't in the plan that we shall get too close at their heels," Sergeant Corney replied, as he drew from his hunting-bag a generous supply of corn bread, and laid a good half of it in front of my comrade.

"It may not be in your plan, but it is in mine," Jacob said, sharply, giving no heed to the food. "We shall be doin' our duty by those we have left behind if we hug as close to the villains as is possible, while there's no chance I can serve my father by hangin' back at a coward's distance."

"An' it's in your mind, lad, that we might do him a good turn?" Sergeant Corney said, as if talking to himself.

"Why not? It wouldn't be the first time the murderin' redskins had lost a prisoner."

"True for you, lad, an' I know full well how you're feelin'; but the question is whether we can hope for anythin' while there's sich a crowd of 'em?"

"I'm not expectin' you an' Noel will run your heads into too much danger," Jacob said, passionately. "I know you would help father if the chance came your way; but it's my duty to take every risk, an' I count on doin' so even though we part company within the hour! Do you suppose I can loiter at a safe distance from the painted dev-

ils when my father is expectin' to see some sign that I'm doin' all I may to help him?"

"I question if Peter Sitz expects that any one from Cherry Valley will follow Thayendanega's snakes. He knows their strength, an' is man enough to understand what might be the price of an attempt to rescue him."

Although Sergeant Corney spoke calmly, as if he had no vital interest in the matter, I knew him well enough to feel certain he was even then trying to settle in his own mind how a rescue might be effected; but Jacob was so blinded by his grief that at the moment I believe he really thought we would let him push ahead alone, therefore I said in as hearty a tone as was possible:

"You should know, Jacob, that both of us stand ready to do all men may to aid your father, an' you may be certain we'll not let you go on alone; but just now Sergeant Corney must be our leader, since he knows better than you an' I put together what ought to be done."

"But will he do his best?" Jacob cried, in a passion. "Will he help me, or does he think the work is done when we have learned where Joseph Brant has gone on his work of bloodshed?"

I waited for the old soldier to make reply to this demand, and he hesitated so long that I began to fear I had been mistaken as to that which I had supposed was in his mind. At last, when it seemed as if Jacob could no longer restrain his impatience, Sergeant Corney said, speaking slowly, as if weighing well each word:

"I will do my best, heedin' not my own safety, givin' no thought to the labor or difficulties, if it so be you lads are minded to do as I shall say, without questionin' when it seems as if I might be goin' wrong--"

I would have interrupted him with an assurance that we were willing to serve him faithfully; but he checked me with a gesture, and added:

"As Peter Sitz would were he in my place, so will I. He was my friend; I know if it was a question of savin' the lives of those at Cherry Valley, or turnin' his back on me, what he would do, an' even so shall I."

"Meanin' what?" Jacob demanded, fiercely.

"Meanin' that while we can do our duty by those who sent us, we will strain every nerve in his behalf; but if it should so chance that their safety depended upon us, we would give service to the greatest number."

Jacob stared as if not understanding what the old man had said, and I made haste to add:

"He means that if, while followin' Brant with the hope of aidin' your father, we found out that danger threatened the settlement, it would be our duty to warn them rather than hold on for him."

The old soldier nodded in token that I had but given different words to his idea, and Jacob replied in a tone of satisfaction:

"I can ask for nothin' more. If it so happens that you must turn back, I can keep on, for two would aid the settlement as much as three."

"Ay, lad, you shall then do as seems best to you," Sergeant Corney said, solemnly, and thus it was settled that, while it did not interfere with our duty as Minute Boys of the Mohawk Valley, all our efforts should be for the relief of the unfortunate prisoner, although at the time I had little hope the savages would allow him to live many days.

Having thus pledged himself to Jacob, Sergeant Corney showed no further disposition to "husband his strength," but led us on the march once more, and this time at a pace which we lads found difficult to maintain without actually running.

Now it is not my purpose to set down all we did and said during this long chase. It would be of no interest to a stranger, since one hour was much like another until we were come near to the Indian town of Oghkwaga, where Brant usually made his headquarters while bent on such cruel work as that of harrying the settlers who favored the rebellion against the king, and it is not necessary I should write down here the well-known fact that Thayendanega was in the pay of the British.

It seemed much as if the Indians had no care as to whether they were being followed, for, instead of sending back scouts along the