

A TORY IN THE NORTHWEST

By WALTER R. HOBERG, A.B., M.A.

When large parties of Tories or Loyalists left the United States for Canada and the Northwest during the Revolutionary period, they forfeited extensive tracts of land which were declared confiscated by the Federal government. In many cases law suits developed over the disposition of these estates.

When Colonel Alexander McKee and some other Loyalists left hurriedly for Detroit on March 28, 1778, McKee left behind three estates which soon became centers of much litigation. He and his brother, James, had jointly inherited 380 acres located along the Susquehanna river. James, who remained loyal to the colonies, fought for this property in court and finally obtained a right to it after some delay.¹ James was also fortunate in getting a claim to the property that Alexander left along the Chartiers Creek at the present site of McKees Rocks. Many of the descendants of James still live in the Pittsburgh district while those of Alexander live in Canada.²

Alexander and Captain John Connolly each owned 2000 acres at the headwaters of the South branch of Elkhorn river in Kentucky. An inquest of escheat was held at Lexington by the sheriff of Kentucky county on July 1, 1780, regarding these holdings. They were declared forfeited and were sold for \$30,000 at a sher-

¹ *Pennsylvania Archives: Selected and Arranged from Original Documents in the Office of the Secretary of the Commonwealth Conformably to Acts of the General Assembly, Sixth Series, XIII. 503.*

² Reuben G. Thwaites, *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846, A Series of Annotated Reprints of Some of the Best and Rarest Contemporary Volumes of Travel, Descriptive of the Aborigines and Social and Economic Conditions in the Middle and Far West During the Period of Early American Settlement*, IV. 94, footnote.

iff's sale. The money was used in the establishment of the Transylvania University.³

It was a serious blow to McKee's ambitions when General Hamilton, British governor of the Northwest, was captured by General George Rogers Clark at Vincennes in February, 1779.⁴ He had expected to work hand in glove with Hamilton for the British cause. His position might have become desperate had Clark been given men and supplies for his proposed expedition against Detroit.

As it was McKee lost interest in the fighting and requested a leave of absence to go to England. Major S. Arent De Peyster, Hamilton's successor, did his best to dissuade him from this purpose.⁵ McKee pointed out that he had no official rank to protect him from insults and abuse if he were taken by the Americans. De Peyster referred McKee's complaint to General Haldimand and recommended a promotion.⁶ At this time McKee was a captain but that apparently did not mean much. To keep him occupied De Peyster sent him with a party of Indians against several small forts in southern Ohio. After these forts were taken they were to proceed against Fort Pitt but the savages dispersed to plunder and the offensive stopped short of Fort Pitt.⁷

The Delaware Indians were among the victims of McKee and his bands of Shawanese. The Delawares knew that the white leaders were much to blame as the following excerpt from a chieftain's letter to a frontier scout testifies:

³ Lewis Collins, *History of Kentucky*, II. 183.

⁴ *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections or Pioneer Collections and Reports of the Pioneer Society of the State of Michigan Together with the Reports of County, Town and District Pioneer Societies*, IX. 417.

⁵ *Ibid.*, X. 373, 377.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 380.

⁷ *Ibid.*, XIX. 541.

Brother: I will pay 60 Bucks to your men that bring McKee and 20 Bucks for any of the Girtys.⁸

The sporadic raids led by McKee and the Girtys aroused the border people and it wasn't long before General Clark was able to raise a force and invade the Indian country. However, a detachment of his troops walked into an ambush and in a moment were surrounded by the howling, painted demons. The whites suffered a loss of 36 killed and 70 were taken prisoners.⁹ McKee tried to follow up this victory in August, 1781, with a major military drive but the warriors were content to plunder.

When the news of the surrender of Cornwallis reached McKee in April, 1782, he was living near the Shawanese village of Wapatomica. His control over the supplies which the British distributed among the tribes helped to make him an influential figure in the Indian country. He was dissatisfied with such a life, however, and again applied for leave to settle his affairs which could not be done in "this remote part of the world". He requested General Haldimand to defray his outstanding expenses at Detroit which were debts incurred in government service.¹⁰

Major De Peyster took steps at once to purchase a house and lot at Malden, Ontario, near Detroit, and presented it to McKee. Repairs were made to the house which cost an additional 150 pounds but the government paid the bill.¹¹ Thus far, however, he had received but a sorry compensation for the large estates he had forfeited out of his loyalty to England.

He did nothing more about it at the time but led 300

⁸ Louise Phelps Kellogg, "Frontier Retreat on the Upper Ohio, 1779-81", *Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin*, XXIV. 299, Draper Series, V.

⁹ *Collections of the Vermont Historical Society*, II. 342.

¹⁰ *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, X. 581.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 598.

braves to Kentucky where they had the better of the skirmishing around Bryant's Station and at Blue Lick.¹² General Clark retaliated with a punitive expedition that frightened the Indians into hiding. He burned Standing Stone, near Piqua, and destroyed corn and other supplies. McKee tried to oppose Clark but was forced to flee.¹³

With the advent of the year, 1783, fresh rumors came that the war had ended. Major De Peyster reduced his staff and ordered McKee to follow suit.¹⁴ The Indians were truculent and eager to avenge the destruction of Standing Stone. Clark, wise to the ways of the redmen, was in no hurry to demobilize his forces. McKee had difficulty in redeeming prisoners in the face of tribal opposition.¹⁵ The tribes had had many victories and hated to end the war with a defeat.

McKee's thoughts were diverted into more pleasant channels by tidings from Pittsburgh. He learned that his brother, James, had prospered during the war and was doing well. Alexander sent a friendly letter to his brother suggesting that he retain an attorney to clear up the confusion about his abandoned estates.¹⁶

Now that peace seemed assured he went to Malden to live. Late in 1783, he journeyed through the Indian country and found the tribes extremely resentful of being classed as conquered allies of the British. They angrily asserted they had not asked for peace; in fact they thought the Americans had wanted it.¹⁷ The Cher-

¹² *Calendar of Virginia State Papers and Other Manuscripts from January 1, 1782 to December 31, 1784, Preserved in the Capitol at Richmond*, III. 300, 301.

¹³ Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West—An Account of the Exploration and Settlement of Our Country from the Alleghanies to the Pacific*, II. 209.

¹⁴ *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, XI. 340.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 359.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 375. Several of his debtors were believed dishonest.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 457.

okees, Wabash, and Mingoes scorned the peace treaty and went on the warpath.

For several years McKee kept fairly well clear from the quarrels of the tribes. He tried to "mend his own fences". When Sir John Johnson held a treaty council for the Six Nations in Canada in June 1786, the three British scouts, Elliott, McKee, and Simon Girty, dickered for Canadian lands as payment for services rendered.¹⁸

The border war which was pressed by tribes ignoring the peace treaty of 1783, forced the Americans to take measures to suppress Indian attacks. Three small armies invaded the Indian lands burning towns and crops. McKee's old Indian home was reduced to ashes.¹⁹ After the Americans had gone the Indians assembled in a council (December, 1786), and asked the British to join them in the war against the United States. Major Ancrim and McKee promised to present the appeal to the British commander.²⁰

In the next major engagement the fortunes of war changed. General Harmar led a thousand light-horsemen straight into a cleverly-arranged ambush in the Shawanese country in October, 1790. His troops were so surprised that they fled headlong after a brief resistance. Harmar lost 300 men according to McKee's figures.²¹ Another American force tried to revenge this defeat with a night raid destroying several Wabash towns and killing 40 braves. McKee laid this setback to drunkenness among the Indians.²²

Then came General St. Clair's ill-starred expedition which moved so slowly and noisily through the forest

¹⁸ William H. Smith, *The St. Clair Papers—The Life and Public Services of Arthur St. Clair, Soldier of the Revolutionary War; President of the Continental Congress; and Governor of the North-Western Territory with his Correspondence and Other Papers*, II. 13.

¹⁹ *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, XXIV. 34.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, XL. 470.

²¹ *Ibid.*, XXIV. 140.

²² *Ibid.*, 262.

that the redmen had ample time to gather in large numbers from all directions. The decisive triumph of the Indians left the frontier open again to their attacks. St. Clair lost his official dispatches in his retreat and these came into McKee's possession. The latter believed it an opportune time to arrange a peace with the United States.²³ The tribes, however, scented plunder in the air and prepared to gather the fruits of victory. English leaders quickly declared they were neutral but at the same time sent ammunition to McKee to distribute among the Shawanese and Wyandots during September and October in 1792.²⁴ Washington offered compensation for land lost to white settlers but the tribes demanded restitution. British officers in Canada expected to resume the war against United States but this faded when France declared war against England. A distorted report reached McKee that a member of the French assembly cut off his king's head (Louis XVI.) with a penknife!²⁵

In an effort to arrange a peace, a council was called at Sandusky, Ohio, June 1793, between representatives of the United States and the tribes. Benjamin Lincoln, Beverly Randolph, and Timothy Pickering were the American commissioners. McKee and John Butler attended upon invitation of the Americans. They did not greet the Americans cordially, however, lest the Indians would become suspicious. An American army was encamped along the border much to the resentment of the Indians. No agreement could be reached about a boundary line and the palavering came to a fruitless close in August, 1793.²⁶

²³ *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, XXIV. 335.

²⁴ *Memoirs of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania*, II. 122.

²⁵ *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, XII. 50.

²⁶ *American State Papers: Documents, Legislative and Executive of the Congress of the United States from the First Session of the First to the Third Session of the Thirtieth Congress Inclusive: Commencing March 3, 1789, and Ending March 3, 1815*, IV. 359.

General Anthony Wayne went into winter quarters in the wilderness and to McKee's annoyance made peace overtures to the tribes which were accepted by the Delawares.²⁷ In the summer of 1794 the Indians learned through a deserter that Wayne planned to attack when the corn was high enough to burn. McKee still expected an open war between the states and England. He learned that Wayne had 18 scouts disguised as savages lurking in the forest. They received a dollar a day and four dollars more for every Indian scalp they took. Their principal purpose was to end the careers of the white leaders of the redmen.²⁸

After a preliminary skirmish the memorable fight occurred on August 20, 1794, at Fallen Timbers where a hurricane had leveled the trees years before. Wayne's advance guard was driven back to the main body of troops but the soldiers then charged shouting and shooting as they came with the cavalry following closely. The Indians were routed from the thickets and fled in disorder. Wayne listed his loss at 33 dead, 100 wounded, and estimated the enemy's casualties to be twice as large. Among the dead were eight prominent chiefs and a number of British rangers of Captain Caldwell's division. One British soldier was captured. The exultant Americans burned the nearby villages and cornfields including, as Wayne reported, "the houses, stores, and property of Colonel McKee, the British agent, and principal stimulator of the war now existing between the United States and the savages."²⁹

McKee was furious after the battle and accused the soldiers of mutilating the dead. He had remained at a respectful distance during the fighting. Colonel Campbell, commander of the British fort at Miami Rapids,

²⁷ Douglass Brynner, *Report on the Canadian Archives for 1891*, Q 67, p. 63.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Q 68, p. 70.

²⁹ *American State Papers*, IV. 491.

was angered at the destruction of McKee's property. He exchanged several sharply-worded notes with Wayne and a clash was nearly precipitated.³⁰

The defeat shattered the morale of the tribes. Captain Brant mourned the death of his fellow chiefs and resigned all to the Great Spirit. Wayne followed up his victory by offering the olive branch and a treaty was concluded by August, 1795. The terms were all in United States' favor much to McKee's mortification as he and Wayne had long been enemies. He claimed that the Indians did not realize the meaning of the terms they had signed. Most of the chiefs who attended the treaty sessions died suddenly upon returning to their tribes. They were believed to have been poisoned by their own people when the treaty terms became known. The Indians sought to explain by saying they had been poisoned at the treaty council at Greenville.³¹

Jay's treaty providing that Detroit and the Northwest should be surrendered to the United States by June, 1796, completed the humiliation of the Indians. There was nothing left for them to do but to go westward or submit to American rule. McKee was indignant at this complete desertion by the British of their loyal allies.³²

In the meantime McKee had made progress along other lines. He was appointed a justice of the common pleas court by the governor of Canada on July 24, 1788.³³ A year later he was appointed a member of the Board for the Settlement of Crown Lands.³⁴ This work led him to the Canadian frontier where he sought a suitable location for tribes which would not live under American rule. Loyalists who came from the United

³⁰ Theodore Roosevelt, *op. cit.*, III. 215-217.

³¹ *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, XII. 195.

³² Theodore Roosevelt, *op. cit.*, III. 222.

³³ *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, XL. 621.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, XII. 9.

States after the war were also awarded grants.³⁵ In November 1792, he was appointed Lieutenant of Essex County in Upper Canada. His chief duty seemed to be to keep the militia in readiness for service at any time.³⁶

Both Colonel Campbell and Colonel Butler were nearing the retirement mark and in order to have a commissioned officer in active service, Lord Dorchester promoted McKee to the same rank as Colonel Guy Johnson in September 1794.³⁷ However, his new duties now required the Indian leader to be near his commander at Quebec when he was needed much more in the Indian country. To solve this dilemma Lord Dorchester appointed Colonel McKee Superintendent of Indian Affairs (December, 1794) during the absence of Sir John Johnson who was in Europe. The salary of Colonel Guy Johnson who had died recently was appropriated for McKee.³⁸

In order that the Indians might be placated, Dorchester gave Colonel McKee the exclusive right to buy lands for the Crown with the purpose in view of establishing Indian reservations.³⁹ His resourcefulness in handling this and other tasks for both Dorchester and General Simcoe led the latter to propose that "the efficient deputy Superintendent should be added to the Council of the Province of Upper Canada".⁴⁰

However, McKee was now seeking to avoid rather than receive additional honors due to ills attendant to old age. His life had been spent in the forest for the most part regardless of weather conditions and he now found himself susceptible to rheumatic attacks which

³⁵ *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, XII. 26.

³⁶ *Public Archives, Documents Relating to the Constitutional History of Canada, 1759-1791*, II. 200.

³⁷ Douglass Brymner, *op. cit.*, Q 69—I. 78.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Q 71—I. 99, 100.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, Q 281—II. 53.

⁴⁰ *Public Archives*, II. 178.

became more severe and more frequent in his later years. As early as June, 1796, he recommended that his son, Tom, who had married into a wealthy and cultured family, be appointed as his successor in the superintendency.⁴¹ During his later years he spent his time drawing up plans for a campaign in case an Indian war occurred.

While he was living at Malden, Ontario, late in 1798, his ailments became very much worse. His afflictions finally developed into lockjaw from which death released him on January 14, 1799. A newspaper account summed up his demise in part as follows:

The old virtuous Colonel McKee died at his seat on the river Thames, the day before yesterday. His remains have been interred this afternoon with great pomp at the seat of his son, Tom, at Petite Cote. . . . Great Britain has lost a great support, the Indians a tender parent, and the United States the most inveterate and unnatural enemy.⁴²

⁴¹ *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, XII. 238.

⁴² Eugene F. Bliss, editor, *Diary of David Zeisberger, a Moravian Missionary Among the Indians of Ohio*, I. 26, footnote.