THE CAPTURING OF BLUE JACKET

Last principal war chief of the Shawnee Tribe of Indians

This incident is included in John Sugden’s book

*Blue Jacket, warrior of the Shawnees*

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In May 1788 Blue Jacket’s party ran off some horses from Strode’s Station on a fork of the Licking River. They retreated through rain and high wind toward the Ohio, and near Cabin Creek, above Limestone, Blue Jacket and one or two companions dried themselves by a tree stump they had set on fire and watched the back trail. Suddenly a pursuing posse swept toward them. As the whites advanced, shots were fired, but the damp powder prevented most from igniting. Blue Jacket scrambled down the high bank of the creek and then up a rise but then found himself being headed off by horsemen under one Andrew Hood. For a while the chief dodged about the trees, looking for an escape, but finally he realized it was hopeless. He threw his musket away and strode toward the Big Knives to surrender.

He was treated abominably. One Kentuckian struck Blue Jacket violently on the forehead, whether with a gun barrel or a hand is uncertain, and “raised a great lump as big as your fist. They knocked six rings out of his ear, which I picked up and kept,” said a witness. A number of armbands were taken from the chief, and it was said that guns were fired at him, although they flashed in the pan without discharging. There was a brief discussion about whether the prisoner should be killed outright. Blue Jacket protested that he had only been taking horses and that no one had been killed on the raid, but sentiment was still strong against him. But Blue Jacket was in luck. No one fancied committing the deed in cold blood. Instead, the Kentuckians decided to take their prisoner into Limestone.

Here was hope, for Blue Jacket knew Daniel Boone, who lived in Limestone. He told his captors that he had taken Boone’s son hunting and that Boone had once given him meat and tobacco. After eating, the chief was set on a horse and told to pilot the posse to the town. Christopher Wood remembered seeing the chief come in. He struck “a most singular appearance,” with a ravenskin cap and spread wings upon his head. The party fell to carousing in Boone’s tavern, drinking throughout the night, an activity in which Blue Jacket heartily participated, imbibing long drafts of whiskey. Before long the men were in a drunken stupor. John Hanks, who put up in another house, visited Boone’s during the night and found the Shawnee war chief sprawled across Frank Jones of Cross Plains.

In the morning the captive was prepared for another journey. He wanted to cam’ his empty musket and appear as a warrior but instead was pinioned with a backpack strap. One witness recalled that Jimmy Bath “tied him . . . did it pretty roughly too. . . . Bath put the string round his neck, so that he couldn’t get it over his head, and then tied a knot, and then jerked his arms back as far as he could and tied them above his elbow.” According to a son of one of the party’, some of the barely sober Kentuckians fired powder from their muskets at the helpless prisoner.
The halt for the second night was made at Robert Scouse's cabin, just below Bourbon in Kentucky. The place had only one small room, but Blue Jacket was placed inside, tied hand and foot and hobbled by a log chain. Those whites who could not share the hut bedded out beneath the stars, while those inside took turns to stay awake on guard. Old Stephen Riley, it was said, had been drinking. True or not, when his turn for sentry duty came, just before daylight, he was too weary to keep his eyes open. Blue Jacket, alert as a fox, saw his opportunity. He slipped the log chain, somehow freed his feet, and stole outside. But then Mrs. Scouse saw him and raised the alarm. The Shawnee chief bounded in td the woods, while Scouse loosed his dogs and the men fell to their weapons to chase after him.

Blue Jacket had been more than forty years in this wilderness, and there was no catching him. He crossed a bear's trail, which threw off the dogs, and stripped off one of his woolen leggings to throw on a bush, probably to suggest a false trail. Various rumors of his escape reached the chastened backcountry men. Wood heard that Blue Jacket survived fourteen days on leaves and herbs, unable to free his hands, but stole a horse from Stockton's Station, near Flemingsburg (Fleming County), and used it to get home. Another participant said the chief reached the Indian towns with his clothing torn away and his body lacerated by bushes. Nonetheless, he escaped, and the captors had to content themselves with auctioning Blue Jacket's horse and gun.

It was a close call for the Shawnee war chief but by no means his first. During his brief captivity it was noticed that Blue Jacket had a scar on his neck, and it was understood that he had been shot by a courageous pioneer woman during an Indian raid on her home on the Clinch or Nolichucky Rivers in what is now Tennessee.

Blue Jacket's escape probably enhanced his reputation among the Indians, "writing a dramatic finish to what had in fact been a rather disappointing raid. And there must have been other, more successful, forays, for the chief advanced in reputation. Some of his rivals, such as Black Snake, had their triumphs too, but by 1790 it was Blue Jacket, not they, who had become the premier war chief of the nation.

His elevation occurred at a critical time, for the prospects of the tribe, which had seemed to stabilize for a while, suddenly clouded. The hopes Brant and others had pinned on a renegotiation of the treaties crumbled, and the Indian confederacy fell with them.
Note: Blue Jacket’s Town on the Mad River drainage (now in Bellefontaine OH) was destroyed in October, 1787. He established a new town on the Maumee River near what is now Defiance OH but the date is not certain. Bath County was named for Jimmy Bath and Bourbon County was named for the village of Bourbon. It is now known where Blue Jacket went after slipping the log chains at Bourbon.

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