Twice Told Tale of Noted Tyrone Cave of Pioneer Days

By Win V. Working

In looking through old files the writer recently encountered the following story written for the Herald back in 1917. The years have wrought changes and three of the sons of pioneers mentioned are dead. They are Louis Brahs, Thomas McCarthy and John Kahlow. Mrs. John Brahs, whose reminiscences are dealt with in the story, lived for several years after it was written. The writer directs attention to the fact that he has written a great many articles on various subjects since this copy was prepared back in 1917, having covered murder trials and other events of national interest, as well as politics in many states and in Canada in the 16 years intervening. The 16 years old story follows.

In the side of a ravine near the top of Ney hill in Tyrone, just a short distance, as the crow flies, from the point where Scott, Sibley and Le Sueur counties meet, one may find on close inspection, and aperture which resembles a small natural cave.

This cave, insignificant as it appears today, with its entrance nearly closed by dense growth of shrubs and small trees and its interior nearly filled with decayed vegetation, has in interesting history. The excavation was made by the settlers of the neighborhood in the summer of 1862 as a place of refuge from the Indians. Among the settlers living in the vicinity at the time were John Brahs, father of Louis Brahs, William Ney, father of Henry Ney and Mrs. John Gentz, John Mc Carthy, father of Thomas McCarthy, who lives just over the line in Blakely township, are all well known residents of Tyrone. Other families now gone who lived there were the Colemans, Gormans and Briegels.

These pioneers had come out to the west in the fifties from across the ocean and others from the eastern states—to wrest a livelihood from the wilderness. They had erected log cabins, cleared small patches of the heavily timbered land and begun the cultivation of their small farms with oxen.

They were sturdy, wholehearted, peaceable folk—these pioneers. They also were industrious. The men looked after the farms while their wives, besides doing the light housework, spent many hours at the spinning wheel and the loom. Thus the time passed—uneventful, except for those events incident to frontier life—until the year 1860. Then came rumblings of Indian troubles.

There were many Indians in this part of the country then—mostly Sioux and Chippewas—but they were generally friendly and there had been but few clashes between them and the whites. Indians frequently visited the Tyrone pioneers and the older men among the “palefaces” were wont often to sit with them around the campfire and smoke the pipe of peace when they were camped near their log cabin homes. As the rumors of troubles spread slowly through the frontier country the settlers came uneasy. This country was confronted with a great national crisis at that time, however, a crisis which culminated in the War of Rebellion—and all eyes were turned toward the East. Had it not been for the war, it is possible that government intervention might have prevented the uprising among the Indians.

Be that as it may, the fact remains that in the summer of 1862, the settlers retreated, whenever an attack appeared imminent. As it was harvest time, the men who had not gone to war went about in armed groups after fashion of the pioneers of New England to get in the crops and

care for the stock. Small bands of hostile Indians were often seen, but no attack was made on the settlers. The anguish of the women, however, during those days of suspense, may be imagined. Finally, after many days of anxiety, 500 soldiers arrived from Ft. Snelling. By that time a large band of Indians had reached Norwegian Grove, near Gaylord. These were driven off. A short time after the marauding bands were rounded up, the uprising was suppressed and the danger was over. Confidence was restored, the setters returned to their homes to resume the added burdens of those who had gone to fight for the Union. Just before the first massacres were perpetrated most of the Indians living in Tyrone disappeared. A few stayed, however, and remained on friendly terms with the settlers. Among them was Chief Renville, who had a cabin near the spot where the Indian Slew bridge formerly stood. It was from this chieftain that Renville county took its name. He and other Indians advised the settlers to leave the neighborhood and many of them did so. They turned their stock (if any they had) packed what possessions they could in their ox-carts and fled to Belle Plaine. But the heroic little band of Tyrone pioneers already mentioned, decided that they would rather remain and face the danger than abandon the homes to secure which they had endured so many hardships. Accordingly they dug the cave and in it they placed their personal effects; within it also, the women and children (and sometimes even the men) found refuge.

That was 55 years ago. Since that time Tyrone has developed into a prosperous agricultural district; log cabins having given way to spacious modern farm house and ox-teams having been superseded by automobiles as a means of travel. Today, though there are man sons and daughters of settlers now living in Tyrone and elsewhere, who were in the cave at the time of the outbreak, the sole survivor of that little band of Tyrone pioneers who sought refuge there is Mrs. John Brahs.

Mrs. Brahs, who now lives with her son, William, in Henderson (besides Louis in Tyrone, there is another son, Frank, at Henderson. Three of the children are dead) is 87 years old. Though more than a half century has passed since the uprising, the events of those stirring days are still vivid in her memory. She can still see in the mirror of her memory, their little log cabin home, which stood just a mile south of the present home of her son, Louis, previously mentioned; but most sharply outline, are those anxious days of the outbreak and the cave in the ravine.—Midland Feature Service

Belle Plaine Herald, March 23, 1933

Reformatted: 4 November 2019

Le Sueur County, Minnesota