

CHILDREN OF THE FOREST

By Calvin V. Crane, Port Jervis, N.Y.

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Traveling down the Old Mine Road, the present Route 521 through Montague, about 4 ½ miles below Port Jervis, one notices two gravestones marked Christopher Decker and his son, Daniel Decker, and just beyond a stone house, in recent years the home of the John Teller family. It is described in Mrs. Amelia Stickney Decker's book, "That Ancient Trail", as having been built in 1827 by Christopher, who came to Montague previous to the Revolution.

The gravestone of Christopher states that he died 20 May 1846, aged 58 years, 1 month and 25 days, which would indicate that he was born in 1788, several years after the war. He was evidently the son of Christopher and the grandson of Stoffel Dekker who is described in the minutes of the precinct of Mannissink written by the Town Clerk Salomon Cuykendal as having been elected and chosen by the "Officers and freeholders as constable" at their annual meeting held 1 March 1767.

Evidence points to Stoffel as being a land owner along the river above this place and owning land on both sides of the river opposite the end of the Shippekonk or Maschippucong Island. This Dekker family evidently had more children, for one of them is described as Sarah, about 12 years of age at the time of the Indian raids of the 1750 period, and she having a brother somewhat older.

On the Pennsylvania side was an apple orchard which was there when the first white men came to this area. In the early 1800's, this was the site of a beautiful farm owned by Safarine VanNoy and his wife, Maria VanGordon, whose parents lived across the river in New Jersey. It was a typical Dutch homestead with large barns and outbuildings. It was well built and large as was the style in the early days.

Farming was carried on in Dutch style by the two children after the death of their parents and I can recall fields of corn which were cultivated two ways, lengthwise and crosswise of the fields. It was a pleasure to look at them. By the home was a large horse chestnut tree. The flood of Oct. 1903, carried away a large portion of the bank and left the corner of the home hanging over the river's edge. The foundation and tree were there several years ago when I visited the place, the present Stenzler Recreation area.

Safarine and Marie had two children who remained single throughout their lifetime. They were Amy, born 30 Oct. 1837 and Benjamin (Bennie), who was born 11 Nov. 1839 and who died 17 Jan. 1907 at the home of Charles and Druslla Quick who lived on the hill just east of the Half Way House, the present Evergreen Lodge. He made his home with them for some years previous to his death and left them the farm as partial recompense for their care and kindness to him during the last years of his life.

It was at this home that the data was given relative to the capture of Sarah Dekker and her brother by the Indians and was related as follows:

This place was known as the Old Orchard Eddy and during the period of rafting, rafts were tied up in this eddy and raftsmen were accommodated at the spacious home of the VanNoys. Tradition says that Sarah or Sally Dekker, accompanied by here brother, went across the Old Orchard Eddy to milk the cows which were pastured on the Pennsylvania side. This happened one afternoon in September. Sally was about 12 years of age and her brother 14.

There were some rumors that Indians were on the war path in the Susquehanna valley and the children asked to take their guns with them. This they did and when they rowed over to the other side of the river, they went to the orchard and set their guns against an apple tree while they milked the cows. The river was "up" on this occasion and the children were rather late in doing the milking.

Below the eddy was a ford in the river by which it was possible for the cattle to cross in the summer and fall when the river was low, and also to drive across with loads of hay, corn, wood, etc. When the river was high or "up, it could not be forded at this point. When the youngsters had finished milking, they went to the tree to get their guns and found to their great surprise that some one had taken them, and to their dismay saw two Indians who ordered them not to move or make a sound.

One Indian took the two pails of milk and the other the guns and told the youngsters to walk ahead of them. They went a short distance westward to the hill beyond, where there was a small gap through which they passed and came to a spring where the Indians had made a camp for the night. The spring is still there although generally dry in the summer. It was known as Sally's Spring for many years, and the gap where they spent the night was known as Sally's Hollow or in the Dutch language "Saunches Clofee".

At this place Sally was put in the care of two squaws in the party and her brother was passed over to a male Indian. Years afterward Sally related that the Indians drank no water as long as there was milk left in the pails.

When Sally and her brother did not return and no evidence of their whereabouts could be found, the parents decided that they must have been taken captive by the Indians and a searching party was sent out. They figured that the most likely place to find the Indians would be in the valley of the present Cumming's or Deep Hollow brook, a short distance to the east where there was a known trail leading to the west. In doing this they overlooked the place where the party had camped for the night, which was close at hand.

Before daybreak, the Indians broke camp and made preparations for departure. This was a hard experience for the Dekker youngsters, who could hear the roosters crow in the barnyard and see their native home, but they were too well acquainted with the nature of the savages to try to escape, the penalty of which would have been death.

Their captors, by their knowledge of the country and avoiding known trails, eluded the searching party and returned to their native haunts. Sally and her brother were well treated and after being held captive for some time, were traded to some of the Delawares of the Munsee or Minsi tribe. Here they learned the life of the forest and language of the Indians.

Sally's brother married a squaw and went away to parts unknown and was not heard from there after. Sally married one of the Munsee warriors who had been good to her and become the mother of two children.

As previously stated, the Old Mine Road from this area to Kingston and points on the Hudson where there were trading posts, was well traveled by the Indians who would carry back loads of furs, etc. from their native haunts to trade with the Dutch for guns, ammunition and other articles. An old Indian on his trips to and from these places, frequently asked permission of the Dekkers to camp on their land for the night, and to rest up. When the weather was cold, the Dekkers were accustomed to invite him into the house and let him sleep in front of the fireplace. Mrs. Dekker probably hoped to get word of her children from him at some future time. Sometimes when she would broach the subject he would answer "Him all right" and nothing more. He generally would arrive to the Dekker homestead at night and leave before daylight, thus avoiding any direct contact with the family.

On one occasion after an urgent pleading for word from her two captured children and receiving the customary reply, she broke down and wept bitterly in his presence. The old Indian seemed to be moved by her emotion and on leaving, said to her "Some day me bring him". Some time passed without any word from the Indian except "No can bring him yet".

At last, when her hopes seemed to be at an end, one night there came a knock at the door and there stood the old Indian and beside him what appeared to be a squaw. The old Indian announced "Now me bring him". The squaw at his side was Sally, who related the story of her life for the eight years that she had been away. She wore clothes made of deerskin adorned with needle work and beads of her own manufacture.

Mrs. Dekker was convinced that this was her daughter and tried without avail to persuade Sally to stay with her and her father, but Sally, as was previously stated, had become the wife of a warrior of the Munsee tribe, a mother of two boys and a convert to Indian life. She loved the wild carefree life of the Indians, her family, and the life which the forests afforded. She stayed with her family while the old Indian went to Kingston to do his trading but when he returned no amount of pleading could induce her to remain. Neighbors who she remembered came in and besought her to remain, for the sake of her parents, but to no avail.

When the old Indian returned, Sally made a final crossing of the Old Orchard Eddy and spent the rest of her days with the people of her adoption in their native forests.

About nine miles north of the Dekker homestead lived Jurian Westfal and his wife. This was about the site of the present Huguenot, but was at that time claimed by New Jersey. In June 1758, Jurian's boy, Peter, was captured by a war party of Indians. At the time he was four years of age. A copy of his father's will is in the collection of the Minisink Valley Historical Society of Port Jervis. In it, Jurian mentions his son as being a captive and his setting aside a portion of his estate "If he lives to come back from his captivity".

Peter came back after 25 years, having heard of his inheritance. His mother recognized him but he did not remember her. He did remember the home and the little pond where he was playing when captured. That little pond is still there and brings back a grim reminder of the trying times through which our ancestors passed.

Peter had forgotten his native Dutch language and could only converse with his people through two Indian interpreters who came with him. He said he had been well treated by the Indians and had become a chief. He too, would not listen to the entreaties of his family to stay with them, and returned to the life of the children of the forest.

This article was written by Calvin Crane, a well known historian from Port Jervis, N.Y. It was in one of the Orange County Genealogical Society Newsletters. Minisink Valley Historical Society gave us permission in 2009 to reprint this article for our members since much of the stories take place in Montague, N.J. Some of the language is a little bit hard to understand because of the time period of when it was written, but the stories are still well worth reading.

By the way, according to our own genealogist Mim Carpenter, Calvin VanEtten Crane is buried in the Dutch Reform Church Cemetery here in Montague, with his wife Mary Skinner Crane and their son, James.