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Three Pioneer Masons of the Early West

Members of Nova Caesarea Harmony Lodge, No. 2

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ON a bleak November morning of 1794, a stalwart figure in backwoodsman's garb stepped with soft and noiseless tread on to the porch of a tavern in Cincinnati, being probably of a mind to indulge in something designed to warm and cheer the inner man before proceeding to the business which had brought him to town. Hilarious sounds and loud talking reaching his ears convinced the traveler that "first drink time" already was part of the history for that particular day and establishment, with indications that some had negotiated a point rather removed from their "eye-opener." About to enter, above the roistering voices he heard the boastful proclamation, "I am the best man in Ohio!" Before anyone inside could take issue with the speaker, if indeed any were so inclined, the door whipped open and the newcomer in ringing tones demanded to know what was said and who said it. "Captain Kibby !" went up a shout in recognition, then silence.

From among the mixed crowd representative of a border town that filled the place, there stepped forth a tall English officer, evidently a stranger in the vicinity, who proceeded to a cool inspection of him who dared challenge his claim to the aforesaid title. He faced a man of forty, inch for inch his equal in height, dressed in picturesque fringed deerskin, splendidly proportioned, keen-eyed, with features bronzed to the color of an Indian from a life in the wilderness, an ideal type of the American frontiersman, Captain Ephraim Kibby, leader of Wayne's scouts in the campaign against the savages then recently closed.

"I say I am the best man in Ohio," repeated the Englishman, undaunted by his survey.

"If you had said you were as good a man as there is in Ohio, there would be no room for dispute, but as it is I dispute it," was the response of the American.

"Captain Kibby, step into the room," suggested the other, and opened a door which led into the long room of the tavern. This the captain was prompt to do, being followed inside by his opponent and all the onlookers, intent on seeing the "fun."

The Britisher, undoubtedly a man of experience and reputation in duelling, had things all prepared, for on the table lay two long flintlock pistols, primed and ready for use. Pointing, he ordered, "Captain Kibby, take one of them." At the latter's ready compliance he picked up the other with the words, "Name your time and distance."

Removing the handkerchief from his neck, the American held to one corner with his left hand and cocking the weapon in his right, reached the other end for the Englishman to take and likewise prepare, at the same moment exclaiming, "Here is the distance and now is the time!" Completely taken aback at such unusual, if not positively unheard of, conditions, his rival wilted, whereupon Kibby reversed his pistol and with the butt knocked him to the floor, while the house rang with shouts of "Hurrah for Captain Kibby!"

Little, perhaps, when making his challenging boast did the Britisher figure on the possibility of catching a Tartar, even in a rough frontier town as Cincinnati then was, where, as in all places of such character, trouble could be had for less than the asking. However, that he backed down before his American antagonist need not necessarily stamp him as being deficient in courage. Rather would it prove an unacquaintance with the ways of the West, where the favorite method of settling disputes and questions of supremacy was to engage at close quarters. Some of the more fierce among the backwoodsmen are said to have even gone to the extreme of tying their left hands together and fighting it out to the death with knives.

About a month later, on Dec. 27, 1794, there was instituted in Cincinnati the Masonic body known today as Nova Caesarea Harmony Lodge, No. 2, under its warrant of 1791, granted by the Grand Lodge of New Jersey, the delay in organizing being due to the protraction of the Indian war raging in the Northwestern Territory. The first petition for the degrees of Masonry was received on Jan. 21, 1795, signed by Captain Ephraim Kibby, hero of the foregoing near duel. Following investigation and favorable report, on March 4 he formed one of a class of three candidates who were the first to kneel at the altar of this frontier lodge likely nothing better than a wood

packing box, or a stool. In due time he was passed as a Fellowcraft and raised to the degree of Master Mason.

Ephraim Kibby was born in New Jersey in the year 1754. As a seasoned veteran of the Revolution, in which he was sergeant, he emigrated after the close of actual hostilities in 1781 to the Southwestern Pennsylvania border, where resided others from his native state. This region was constantly exposed to Indian attacks and forays, and it was here that Kibby acquired his knowledge of woodcraft and developed the skill in Indian fighting that afterwards made him famous along the Ohio. Strangely, however, not many of his adventures and exploits have come down to us, but it will be here recounted the few that are known, although they are unfortunately in but the briefest outline.

After assisting Major Benjamin Stites, a noted frontiersman of Pennsylvania, in founding Columbia, the first settlement in Southwestern Ohio, late in 1788, and having a similar part in the erection of Cincinnati a month later, Kibby became one of a number of hunters employed by contract to furnish buffalo, deer and bear meat for the sustenance of the soldiers at Fort Washington. This post was constructed at the latter place in the year following, lying about five miles down river from Columbia. Once, of a party of six hunting in the forest north of Cincinnati, all were killed in battle with the Indians with the single exception of Kibby. Another time, when traveling alone, this redoubtable adventurer, whose person apparently was greatly coveted by the red enemy, was chased for twenty-four hours through the wilderness. However, being in prime condition and exceedingly fleet of foot, he finally succeeded in shaking off the relentless pursuit and safely reached his home at Columbia.

As an officer in the frontier militia, Kibby was kept fully employed in the years of the Indian war which raged for five years from 1790 and included campaigns by Harmar, Wilkinson, St. Clair and "Mad Anthony" Wayne. In that of the overconfident St. Clair he served as a spy, and doubtless was one of those to "warn him of approaching danger," but whose reports were heeded not, to the consequent slaughter of the American army. When Wayne was organizing his force in 1792, in careful preparation for what was hoped to be the final action against the troublesome tribes of the North, a first thought of this sagacious soldier was the formation of a band of frontier scouts and spies to lead the way through the wilderness. To this end Ephraim Kibby was named leader, with the rank of captain, and

doubtless to him was left the selection of personnel. Its members, to the number of twoscore, were chosen from among the best and most experienced Indian fighters of the Northwest, and henceforth were known as Wayne's "forty famous scouts."

Roosevelt, in his *Winning of the West*, has this to say regarding the employment of these rangers:

It was on these fierce backwoods riflemen that Wayne chiefly relied for news of the Indians, and they served him well. In small parties, or singly, they threaded the forest scores of miles in advance or to one side of the marching army, and kept close watch on the Indians' movements. As skillful and hardy as the red warriors, much better marksmen, and even more daring, they took many scalps, harrying the hunting parties and hanging on the outskirts of the big wigwam villages. They captured and brought in Indian after Indian, from whom Wayne got valuable information.... Among these wilderness warriors were some . . . known far and wide along the border for their feats of reckless personal prowess and their strange adventures. They were of course all men of remarkable bodily strength, with almost unlimited powers of endurance, and the keenest eyesight; and they were masters in the use of their weapons.

When figures with the widespread fame of Neal Washburn, Robert McClellan, Andrew and Adam Poe, Ellis Palmer, "the Injun Killer," and ferocious Lewis Wetzel, were numbered among these scouts, the choice of Kibby as leader at once would establish his superior knowledge of the Western Ohio country and testify to his great all-around skill and reputation in Indian warfare. Furthermore, it points to qualifications peculiarly essential in the command of hardened half-wild borderers, men who in their pronounced spirit of independence found it ever irksome to work under orders, and who followed a chosen leader only so long as it suited their convenience or inclinations. Unquestionably Kibby's rangers were the greatest and most daring and desperate band ever assembled on the American continent.

During the winter of 1793-4, while out on Wayne's campaign, he was scouting with the famous McClellan in a howling blizzard and zero weather. The latter after a time began to show signs of distress. Alone in a great snow covered forest and unable at the moment to build a fire, Captain Kibby, with border resourcefulness, killed one of the horses and slitting it

open with his knife made a large opening in the carcass. Then gathering up the benumbed and stiffening McClellan, he placed him in the gory, but warm, aperture and in this manner succeeded in saving him from being frozen to death.

When Wayne was gradually cornering the Indian tribes in Northwestern Ohio, Kibby, in the spring of 1794, had opportunities to make several flying trips to his home at Columbia; it probably was on one of these excursions that occurred the marathon chase by the savages already mentioned. In March the captain set out with a small party of settlers and killed two Indians who had committed depredations in that vicinity. For this he was publicly congratulated by Territorial Judge, George Turner, in a letter which was copied in the Centinel of the Northwestern Territory, the earliest newspaper. A month later the same publication notices that Kibby and ten men trailed a body redskins who had stolen four horses from their settlement, and that following a pursuit of many miles and his force overtook and defeated the enemy in battle and returned in triumph with the purloined equines.

In August, 1794, occurred the fast flying action of "Fallen Timbers," near Toledo, Ohio, when the perfectly trained and disciplined troops of Wayne smashed their way through the Indian lines in record time and put the savages to complete rout, never again to be a serious menace to the peace and safety of the white settlements of the Ohio. Although official accounts fail to note the participation of Kibby's scouts in this battle, it is inconceivable that men of their intrepid and warlike natures, after having been so conspicuously employed, would be content to remain inactive when once the firing commenced. Indeed, more than likely they were in the thick of the fighting on this glorious occasion and added materially to their collection of scalps. Their services after a time no longer required, this fierce and heroic band, whose employment had proven of such value to Wayne, returned to Fort Washington, where they were disbanded

The next known incident in the life of Kibby was the abortive duel already related, with its unusual, and, to the onlookers, disappointing climax. This occurred in the same year. It was shortly afterward that he was initiated in N.C. Harmony Lodge. Just what prompted his action in petitioning so soon after this body was organized, raises interesting conjecture. The answer, however, is believed to lay in his undoubted close association with the officers and soldiers of Wayne's army, in which a traveling military lodge

was at work. This was Lodge No. 28, under the registry of Pennsylvania, formed in the spring of 1793, with Captain Robert Mis Campbell as Worshipful Master. Brother Campbell was so unfortunate as to lose his life while leading a charge early in the battle of Fallen Timbers. Numbers of Wayne's force were included among the members enrolled in N.C. Harmony Lodge during its first year, an illustration of the rush to the altar of Freemasonry that has obtained throughout all the wars of this country.

The last adventure of Captain Kibby of which there is record occurred in 1797, when he undertook the herculean task of cutting a road from Vincennes, Indiana, to Cincinnati, a distance of more than 155 miles. After completing the first 70 miles he in some manner became separated from his men in the almost impenetrable wild. After a vain search of several days the undaunted leader continued onward, blazing a path through the wilderness with no other guide save the sun, moon and stars. Being left without his rifle, he was forced to subsist almost wholly upon roots on his long and trying journey. At last Brother Kibby broke through at Cincinnati, greatly worn from hardships and exposure and reduced nearly to a skeleton from his exertions.

Not long hereafter he removed to the adjoining county of Warren, being one of its early settlers. To this time he had shown quite versatile ability on the border, having been hunter, Indian fighter and scout leader, surveyor, township clerk and road builder. Now followed his election to the Territorial and also the State legislature. After serving as inspector of Ohio militia with the rank of major, this sterling character of the backwoods, unsung in history except in one work as a "brave and intrepid soldier," passed away at Deerfield, Warren County, Ohio, in 1809, at the comparatively early age of fifty-four. Hardship and privation had their effect on the pioneers, even when they escaped the perils of the wilderness.