

THE BEN WRIGHT MASSACRE.

WHAT was the Ben Wright massacre? Until it was given prominence by the great Modoc war in 1873, few people, not residents of Northern California or Southern Oregon, had ever heard of it, and yet it is one of the most stirring incidents of our Indian history. The first question that suggests itself is, Who and what was Ben Wright? The first half of the query can be readily answered, but the last is still a matter of dispute. People who knew him vary in their estimate of his character, in proportion to their divergent ideals of true manhood. I will place him before you as he is described by those who knew him best, including his warmest friends—and I do not know that he had any enemies—and each can measure him by his own ideal standard of humanity and classify him accordingly.

Ben Wright, so those who knew him intimately assert, was reared in the State of Indiana, where his father was a manufacturer of considerable wealth. His parents belonged to the brotherhood of Quakers, but the peaceful tenets of that sect found no lodgment in the heart of young Wright. Possessed of a dauntless spirit and a restless desire for adventure, he left the home of his boyhood, while yet a beardless youth, and sought the wild frontier of the West. There he found kindred spirits from every State in the Union from Maine to Florida, as well as the French, English and Scotch trappers from Canada and the "Greasers" of Mexico. They were a wild, reckless set of men, with whom strength, firmness and bravery were the standard of manhood; with whom whisky was a necessity, and whose only female associates were the Indian women of the various tribes with whom they came in contact. In such society young Wright's character was moulded and shaped for its life work. For years he traversed the plains and mountains of the West with the brigades of trappers, enduring hardships of every description, fighting Indians and wild animals, until he came to have few equals and no superiors in all the arts of the mountaineer. When gold was discovered in California, like hundreds of his companions, he went to the mines in search of new adventures. It was in this way we find him in the mines on Scott River and then on the Klamath in 1851.

He mined a little and hunted a great deal, living the life of a "squaw man," a term used to signify one whose cabin was occupied by an Indian woman either temporarily or permanently. With the character and customs of the savages he was thoroughly familiar, and all the arts of savage warfare had been acquired in a school where one must either learn or perish. He seemed to pride himself upon his resemblance to an Indian. His glossy black hair fell in long, waving tresses upon his shoulders, and this, with his buckskin suit, made the resemblance very striking when his back was turned; nor was the illusion entirely dispelled by a glimpse at his face, bronzed by years of frontier life. One night, during a campaign against the Modocs the previous fall, a disturbance was heard among the horses picketed near camp, and two Modocs, who were prisoners in the camp, think-

ing their friends were stampeding the animals, broke from their guards and made a dash for liberty. Wright was one of the first to rush out into the darkness in pursuit, but before he had taken half a dozen steps one of the men, thinking he was an Indian, seized him by his streaming hair and jerked him backwards upon the ground. The mistake was discovered in time to save his life; and though often urged to cut his hair, and thus prevent such mistakes in the future, Wright would never consent to part with his flowing locks. Not only did he look like an Indian, but he acted like one in all his dealings with them, scalping the fallen and committing other barbarities, such as cutting off the ears, noses and fingers of the wounded before their eyes had closed in death. He was not alone in this, for other members of the company followed their leader's example with all the zeal of a disciple. He was an ideal man in their eyes. Added to his other qualifications, for such they were in Indian warfare, was the fact that he scarcely knew the sensation of fear, tempering his bravery with a cautiousness that experience had taught him was necessary in dealing with so treacherous a foe. He hesitated not to crawl into the very heart of an Indian camp when out reconnoitering, trusting to his agility and nerve in case of discovery. He fought Indians for the love of excitement, as did some of his followers, and took as much delight in being on the warpath as did the proudest warrior that ever bore a scalp home in triumph to his lodge. Such was Ben Wright. The men who composed his company in 1852 varied from those who sought to pattern after him as closely as possible to those who, having gone into the field at first from a sense of duty and a desire to defend helpless emigrants from the attacks of ruthless savages, remained to punish the perpetrators of the horrible butcheries they had witnessed.

Having seen who were the actors in this memorable campaign, let us proceed with its details and the horrible incidents that led to it.

The Applegate Trail, which led from Fort Hall to Southern Oregon, was laid out in 1846, and was used that fall by a few emigrants. They suffered so severely in the Umpqua Canyon that the route was shunned by emigrants after the next year. In 1848 Peter Lassen laid out the celebrated Lassen Road, using this trail as far as Pit River. In 1849 the emigrants on this route were snowed in and suffered severely in the mountains of Plumas County, California, and again the route was abandoned by emigrants. In 1852, however, those bound for Northern California and Southern Oregon came over this trail because of its shortness, and the fact that causes which had brought it into disrepute did not exist between Yreka or Rogue River Valley and Fort Hall. The trail led through the heart of the Modoc country, passing along the bank of Tule Lake and across the Natural Bridge on Lost River.

Early in August, 1852, John Onsby received a letter at Yreka from his uncle, having come by the way of Sacramento, stating that he and many others were coming on the old Oregon trail to Yreka, and that great suffering