

THE PROBLEM WITH HISTORY

It was a small article in the Fennimore Times Centennial edition of September 1936, which read as follows:

“Hawley Scalped In Indian War”

“Major Aaron Hawley, grand father of Harry Hawley of Platteville, was the only man known to have been scalped by Indians because of the color of his hair.

He had entered the English army at an early age, and had worked to the rank of Major before coming to America. Upon arriving here he entered the American army and was immediately given his former rank and also command of a fort in Illinois.

As Blackhawk's army marched up the Mississippi, in 1832, 'Major Hawley advanced ahead of the force to explore and study the situation. He was captured by Blackhawk and had the signal honor of having Blackhawk himself deign to take his scalp, as it seems that up to that date he had had no red hair in his collection.

At least the general presumption was that Major Hawley had died in this fashion, for soon afterwards Blackhawk was seen fleeing on a white horse with a red Scalp tied to the saddle, and Major Hawley was the only man in the country who owned a white horse or had red hair. The body, however, was never found.”

Well, I thought after reading this, it sounds doubtful. After all Will and Ariel Durant said “Most history is guessing, and the rest is prejudice.” That is the problem with History. What is based on impartial observation? Not much. What is legend wrapping itself about an event? Quite a lot.

I consulted all the records I could find about Aaron Hawley. I found nothing about him being a major in the British Army, or about him joining the American Army and commanding a fort in Illinois. If anyone can document that for me, I stand willing to learn. According to the Hawley Family records Aaron and his brother Pierce were the children of Gideon and Lavinia Hawley of Bridgeport Connecticut. Aaron was born October 5, 1795 in Ferrisburg, Addison County, Vermont. Lavinia died in 1845 and is buried in Potosi, Wisconsin. I do know that Aaron Hawley was a dedicated member of the Methodist Episcopal Church. The Wisconsin United Methodist church has a timeline of the history of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Wisconsin which has as its second oldest entry: “1828 Aaron Hawley, local preacher active in Wiota” Wiota was then called Hamilton's Diggings and was the site of Fort Hamilton during the Blackhawk War.

Hawley had moved from Kendall County Illinois to Lee County Illinois with his brother Pierce, and Rev. Jesse Walker, a Methodist Episcopal Minister. While in Lee County in 1824, Aaron and his brother assisted Rev. Walker in setting up a mission among the Potawatomi near the confluence of the Fox and Illinois rivers. Hawley worked with the mission and moved to Newark Illinois in 1825. In 1828 Aaron and Pierce moved with their large families to “the diggings.” Pierce Hawley later scandalized his family and friends by becoming a Mormon. When the Blackhawk war broke out in 1832, Aaron Hawley did not join a militia, as the article implies. He was in the Sangamon country of Illinois buying cattle. When he heard of the outbreak of hostilities he joined others, including Indian agent Felix St. Vrain in hastening for home to protect his family. “Major” Hawley was not “advanced ahead of the force to explore and study the situation.” On May 24th 1832 Hawley and the others were riding as a group toward Fort Hamilton and encountered a party of Indians at Kellogg's Grove (Near Pearl City Illinois) who began firing on them.

The New Galenian newspaper of May 30th described the event as follows: “they saw an Indian, 300 yards ahead; they advanced 100 yards, and saw eight more, five in front and three

on their right; they stood, for a moment, and wheeled for a retreat, only 4 of the whites being armed. They rode about 300 yards before the first gun was fired, the Indians followed, firing constantly. Mr. Hale, being on a poor horse, was shot first. In retreating down hill, St. Vrain was seen with his head turned back, as if in the act of speaking to the Indians. That was the last time he was observed. There is no doubt but he also met the same fate of Hale. Slain by the very band to which he was U.S. Agent. Fowler was shot in the ravine at the bottom of the hill; he was seen to fall, an Indian stooping to scalp him. The last that was seen of Hawley, he was 300 or 400 yards ahead of the Indians, on a fleet horse. Nothing has since been heard of him. If he met with Indians on his retreat, he also has, probably, been murdered.” Hawley’s body was never found.

His family history says he was captured and “burned at the steak” (sic). There is no reliable documentation of Blackhawk having personally scalped him, or being seen with his coat, or his horse, or his red haired scalp. All of this is probably rumor festered into legend and entered in the history books of authors wanting some spice. Frank Stevens 1903 Book “The Blackhawk war” reported that the Indians who murdered Hawley and the other three were Sac (Sauk) Indians of Blackhawk’s band under the command of one “The Little Bear” who was under orders of Blackhawk to murder St. Vrain for siding with Keokuk, the tribal chief who opposed Blackhawk’s War. These are all rumors now engraved on the page. There is no proof that the Indians who killed them were Sac, let alone that “The Little Bear” purposely pursued the victims. Many historians say “The Little Bear” did not even exist. Most Historians believe the Indians were Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) renegades going to join Blackhawk without the approval of the tribe. In fact, almost all of the Ho-Chunk fought on the side of the United States. Blackhawk, in his Autobiography said a party of Winnebago’s had come to his camp “and told me that they had killed four men, and taken their scalps; and that one of them was Keokuk’s father [the Indian agent Felix St. Vrain]. They proposed to have a dance over their scalps!”

So our 1936 Centennial article is mostly nonsense. The problem with history is that when nonsense is recorded, too often it becomes “history”. As Mark Twain said: “Every man is wholly honest to himself and to God, but not to anyone else.” So we sort and try to find the truth.



Graves of those who died at the Kellogg’s Grove Monument