

WILLIAM BIGGS

NARRATIVE OF THE
CAPTIVITY OF WILLIAM
BIGGS AMONG THE
KICKAPOO INDIANS IN
ILLINOIS IN 1788

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William Biggs among the Kickapoo
Indians in Illinois in 1788**

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In the year 1788, March 28th, I was going from Bellfontain to Cahokia, in company with a young man named John Vallis, from the State of Maryland; he was born and raised near Baltimore. About 7 o'clock in the morning I heard two guns fired; by the report I thought they were to the right; I thought they were white men hunting; both shot at the same time. I looked but could not see any body; in a moment after I looked to the left and saw sixteen Indians, all upon their feet with their guns presented, about forty yards distant from me, just ready to draw trigger. I was riding between Vallis and the Indians in a slow trot, at the moment I saw them. I whipped my horse and leaned my breast on the horse's withers, and told Vallis to whip his horse, that they were Indians. That moment they all fired their guns in one platoon; you could scarcely distinguish the report of their guns one from another. They shot four bullets into my horse, one high up in his withers, one in the bulge of the ribs near my thigh, and two in his rump, and shot four or five through my great coat. The moment they fired their guns they ran towards us and yelled so frightfully, that the wounds and the yelling of the Indians scared my horse so that he jumped so suddenly to one side of the road, that my gun fell off my shoulder, and twisted out of my hand; I then bore all my weight on one stirrup, in order to catch my gun, but could not. I had a large bag of beaver fur, which prevented me from recovering my saddle, and having no girth nor crupper to my saddle, it turned and fell off my horse, and I fell with it, but caught on my feet and held the mane; I made several attempts to mount my horse again; but the Indians running up so close, and making such a frightful yelling, that my horse jumped and pranced so that it was impossible for me to mount him again, but I held fast to my horse's mane for twenty or thirty yards; then my hold broke and I fell on my hands and knees, and stumbled along about four or five steps before I could recover myself. By the time I got fairly on my feet, the Indians were about eight or ten yards from me – I saw then there was no other way for me to make my escape but by fast running, and I was determined to try it, and had but little hopes at first of my being able to escape. I ran about one hundred yards before I looked back – I thought almost every step I could feel the scalping knife cutting my scalp off. I found I was gaining ground on them, I felt encouraged and ran about three hundred yards farther, and looking back saw that I had gained about one hundred yards, and considering myself quite out of danger. A thought then occurred to me, that I was as safe and out of danger as I would be if I were in the City of Philadelphia: the Indians had quit yelling and slacked their running – but I did not know it then. It being a tolerable cold morning and I was heavily clad, I thought perhaps the Indians would give me a long chase, and probably that they would hold out better than I could; although at that time I did not feel the least tired or out of breath. I concluded to throw off my two coats and shoes, as I would then be better prepared for a long race. I had my great coat tied around me with a silk handkerchief pretty much worn – I recollect tying it with a slip knot, but being in a hurry, it was drawn into a double hard knot; I tried some little time to get it loose – the longer I

tried the harder the knot seemed to get, that stopped my running considerably; at length I broke it by some means, I do not know how. In the morning I forgot to put on my shot pouch before I put on my great coat, and then put it on over it. I pulled off the sleeves of my great coat, not thinking of my shot-pouch being over my coat, it having a very short strap, the coat got so tight in the strap that I could not get it loose for a considerable time. Still trying, it hung down and trailed on the ground, and every two or three steps it would wrap around my legs and throw me down, and I would catch on my hands and knees, it served me so several times, so that I could make no headway at running. After some considerable time, I broke the strap and my great coat dropped from me – I had no knife with me.

The Indians discovered that something was the matter and saw me tumbling down several times. I suppose they thought I was wounded and could run no farther; they then set up the yell again and mended their gait running. By the time I got my great coat loose from me, and was in the act of pulling off my under coat, I was pulling off one sleeve I looked back over my shoulder, but had not time to pull it off – the Indians being within ten yards of me. I then started again to run, but could not gain any ground on them, nor they on me; we ran about one hundred yards farther and neither appeared to gain ground: there was a small pathway that was a little nearer than to keep the big road, – I kept the big road, the Indians took the path, and when we came where the path comes into the big road the Indians were within three or four yards from me – we ran forty or fifty steps farther and neither appeared to gain ground. I expected every moment they would strike me with their tomahawks – I thought it would not do to be killed running like a coward and saw no other way to make my escape than to face about and to catch the tomahawk from the first that attempted to strike me, and jerk it from him, which I made no doubt but I was able to do; then I would have a weapon to fight with as well as them, and by that means I would be able to make my escape; they had thrown down their guns before they gave me chase, but I had not fairly faced about before an Indian caught me by the shoulder and held his tomahawk behind him and made no attempt to strike me. I then thought it best for me not to make any resistance till I would see whether he would attempt to strike me or not. He held me by the shoulder till another came up and took hold of me, which was only four or five moments; then a third Indian came up, the first Indian that took hold of me took the handle of his tomahawk and rubbed it on my shoulder and down my arm, which was a token that he would not kill me and that I was his prisoner. Then they all took their hands off me and stood around me. The fourth Indian came up and attempted to strike me, but the first Indian that caught me pushed him away. He was still determined to kill me, and tried to get around to my back; but I still faced round as he was trying to get to my back – when he got up by my side, he drew his tomahawk the second time to strike me, but the same Indian pushed him off and scolded him very much – he let his tomahawk hang by his side, but still intended to kill me if he could get an opportunity. The other Indians watched him very closely. There were but four Indians that gave me chase, they were all naked except their breachcloth, leggins and moccasins. They then began to talk to me in their own language, and said they were Kickapoos, that they were very good Indians, and I need not be afraid, they would not hurt me, and I was now a Kickapoo and must go with them, they would take me to the Matocush, meaning a French trading town on the Wabash river. When the Indians caught me I saw Mr. Vallis about one hundred yards before me on the road – he had made a halt. They shot him in the left thigh about seven or eight inches above the knee, the ball came out just below his hip, his horse was not injured – he rode an elegant horse which carried him out of all farther danger – his wound mortified, he lived six weeks after he was wounded, then died. I understood their language, and could speak a little. They then told me to march; an Indian took hold of each of my arms, and led me back to where they shot at me, and then went about half a mile further off the road, where they had encamped the night before and left their blankets and other things. They then took off my under coat and tied my hands behind my back, and then tied a rope to that, tying about six or seven feet long, we then started in a great hurry, and an Indian held one end of the rope while we were marching. There were but eight Indians marched in company with me that morning from the camp. The other eight took some other route,

and never fell in with us again, until some time after we got to their towns. We had marched about three or four miles from that camp when Vallis arrived at the fort, about six miles from where they caught me, where they fired a swivel to alarm the people who were out of the fort – when the Indians heard the swivel they were very much alarmed, and all looked that way and hallowed yough, yough. They then commenced running, and run in a pretty smart trot of a run for five or six miles before they halted, and then walked very fast until about 2 o'clock in the afternoon, when they separated, I supposed to hunt, having nothing to eat. The old chief and one of the other Indians kept on a straight course with me, we traveled about three miles, when we got a little way into a small prairie and halted about fifteen minutes, there one of the party fell in with us, he had killed a bear and brought as much of the meat with him as he could carry. We then crossed the prairie and came to a large run about one mile and a half from where we had halted to rest. By this time three Indians had joined us. We halted there, made a fire and roasted the bear meat, the other two Indians staid behind as spies. Whilst the meat was cooking, the Indians held a council what they would do with the Indian that wanted to kill me. He was a young fellow about 19 years of age and of a different nation, being a Pottowatema. They did not want him to go to war with them; they said he was a great coward and would not go into danger till there was no risk to run, then he would run forward and get the best of the plunder, and that he would not be commanded; he would do as he pleased; was very selfish and stubborn; and was determined to kill me if he could get a chance. They determined in their council to kill him. It is a law with the Indians when they go to war, if an Indian will not obey the counsels and commands of his captain or chief, to kill them. When their meat was cooked, they ate very hearty, and when they were done eating, three of the Indians got up, put on their budgets and started, this young Indian was one of them. I also got up to show a willingness to be ready. The old chief told me to sit down, and the three Indians started off. In about three or four minutes after we started, but varied a little in our course. We had not traveled more than one hundred yards when we heard the report of a gun. The old chief then told me that they had killed the Indian that wanted to kill me. The other two Indians fell in company with us before night. We then traveled till about 10 o'clock in the night, when we encamped at a large grove of timber in a prairie, about four miles from the edge of the woods; made no fire that night. We traveled about forty miles that day. After they rested a while they sat down to eat their jirk. They gave me some but I could not eat any. After they were done eating, one of the Indians was sitting with his back against a tree, with his knife between his legs. I was sitting facing him with my feet nearly touching his. He began to inquire of me of what nation I belonged to. I was determined to pretend that I was ignorant and could not understand him. I did not wish them to know that I could speak some Indian language, and understand them better than I could speak. He first asked me in Indian if I was a Matocush, (that is a Frenchman in English). I told him no. He asked me if I was a Sagenash, (an Englishman). I told him no. He again asked if I was a Shemolsea, (that is a long knife or a Virginian). I told him no. He then asked me if I was a Bostonely, (that is American). I told him no. About one minute afterwards, he asked me the same questions over again. I then answered him yes; he then spoke English and caught up his knife in his hand, and said "you are one dam son of a bitch." I really thought he intended stabbing me with his knife. I knew it would not do to show cowardice, I being pretty well acquainted with their manner and ways. I then jumped upon my feet and spoke in Indian and said manetway, kien, depaway, in English it is no, I am very good, and clapped my hand on my breast when I spoke and looked very bold; the other Indians all set up such ha! ha! and laugh that it made the other Indian look very foolish. He sat still and looked very sulky. After they had rested a while, they began to prepare to lay down. They spread down a deer-skin and blanket for me to lay on. They had tied a rope around my arms above my elbows, and tied that rope across my back, and a rope around my neck; they then tied the end of another rope behind to the neck rope, then down my back to the pinion rope; then they drew my hands forward across my stomach and crossed my wrists; then tied my wrists very tight; then tied my legs together, just below my knees; then tied my feet together with a rope round my ankles; then took a small cord

and tied in between my wrists, and also between my ankles very tight, in order to prevent me from drawing out my hands or feet; they then took another cord and tied one end to the neck rope; then to the hand rope; then from the hand rope to the knee rope; they then took a rope about six feet long and tied one end to the wrist rope, and the other end to a stake about six feet from me stretched very tight, and an Indian laid on that rope all night; then they took another rope about the same length, and tied one end to the knee rope and the other end to a stake, and another Indian laid on that all night; then they tied a large half-dressed elk rope, one end to the back part of the neck rope which made a knot as big as my fist, the other end they tied to a stake about six feet from my head. When they finished their tying me, they covered me with a blanket. They tied me in the foregoing way nine nights in succession; they had me stretched and tied so tight, that I could not move one inch to turn or rest myself; that large knot was on the back of my neck, so that I was obliged to lay on it all night, and it hurt my neck very much. I never suffered as much in the same length of time in all my life; I could hardly walk when we got out to their town. They never made me carry anything except a blanket they gave me to keep myself warm, when they took all my clothes from me. The Indians carried a deer-skin and blanket all the way for me to lodge upon. When my hands and feet became sore with the tying the Indians would always pull off my moccasins at night and put them on in the morning, and patch them when they would require it.

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