

OLD WEST STORY

Blinn Family

Clara Isabel Harrington was born in Elmore, Ohio, on October 21, 1847. Richard Blinn, a wounded Civil War Veteran was born in 1842. The two were married on August 12, 1865, and lived in Perrysburg, Ohio. A year after the marriage, Clara gave birth to William. Clara sang in the church choir and was described as small, with a dimple in her chin, freckles on her nose and as being a beautiful lady.

In 1868, Clara's parents decided to follow the westward movement and headed for Ottawa, Kansas. The Blinn family thought they would go along, but Richard wanted to go beyond Kansas. They left on March 15, 1868, and Richard wrote in his diary that they were headed for Sand Creek, Colorado Territory. They took a train as far as Kansas City and then set out on wagons. Progress was a bit slow as they spent three days fixing a wagon. They got lost and witnessed a prairie fire and arrived at Sand Creek on April 20. "Here we are at last. "Everything looks fine. I like the place first rate," Richard recorded in his diary.

Richard set up a rest station and charged the Southern Overland \$84 per week to board the drivers and \$50 per quarter for the stables. Things did not go all that well. Richard's war wound, in the arm, never fully healed. Clara was homesick and fearful of the Indians she saw riding by. They formed a train of eight wagons, 100 head of cattle and eight men and headed back to Kansas where the Blinns planned to build a home near her parents. Clara was carrying all the money in the outfit, about \$800 in paper and gold. On the fourth night out they stopped for an early dinner and then decided to get in a few more miles before dark. Clara and Willie were in the largest wagon and they pulled out ahead of the others. That was the moment about 75 Cheyenne that had been watching the train, swooped down, split the train and ran the lead wagon across the Arkansas River. The warriors cut off the rest of the train and the men had to dig in. Burning arrows caught several wagons on fire and the party was trapped for five days. The Indian war party grew to about 200 before one of the men managed to escape and reach Fort Lyon. The Army managed to rescue the men with only two of them wounded, but it was way too late for Clara and Willie.

About four miles down the road from the ambush Clara managed to scribble a note on a card and drop it into a bush. Fortunately, the note was found and given to Richard. It said, "Dear Dick, Willie and I are prisoners. They are going to keep us. If you live, save us if you can. We are with them. Clara Blinn." The other side of the card said, "Dick, if you love us, save us." In a recent treaty between the whites and Indians, the Indians had promised to stop taking white prisoners.

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But like all treaties, it didn't last long. The Cheyenne continued to rape and abuse the white women that they captured. In that respect, Clara was a bit luckier and she was not treated badly. On the other hand, Willie didn't fare as well. He was beaten and was starving. The Cheyenne were figuring that if she were damaged goods, there would be little value in using her as a hostage when making demands for peace.

A trader by the name of William Griffenstein was married to a Cheyenne woman in Black Kettles band where Clara was being held. Griffenstein sent an Indian boy into the camp to tell his wife's mother that her daughter had died. When the boy returned he told Griffenstein of a white woman and child in the camp. Griffenstein sent a mixed-blood boy known as Cheyenne Jack into the camp with pencil and paper and instructions for the white woman to identify herself and make her wishes known. Clara wrote a letter dated November 7, 1868, in which she pleaded for someone to buy her and her child. She said she would work for her rescuer and "do all that I could for you." She said she was afraid she would be sold into Mexican slavery. Assuming that Richard was dead, she asked her father be notified she was alive. She also stated that the Indians told her that "when white men make peace we can go home." Griffenstein gave the letter to the local Army commander who forwarded it to General Sherman.

On the same day the letter was forwarded to Sherman, George A. Custer's 7th Cavalry was following a fresh trail that led directly to Black Kettle's Camp on the Washita River. Custer was not only unaware that there were white hostages in the camp; he wasn't even aware whose camp it was as he attacked on the cold dawn morning of November 27, 1868. Most of the Indians fled before the onslaught, but a few fought. Black Kettle and Little Rock, the leaders, were killed. Custer captured the camp, burned the tepees and shot 875 Cheyenne ponies. He reported 103 Indians killed and 53 captured. He also had 16 soldiers killed and 21 wounded. The Battle of the Washita also cost the lives of Clara and Willie. It was certainly not unusual for Indians to kill their captives when their camps came under attack from soldiers.

The Army doctor stated that Clara was shot just above the left eyebrow, her head was scalped, and her skull extensively damaged. One or both breasts were reportedly hacked off. Willie's undernourished body showed violence about the head and face. He was apparently killed by holding his feet and smashing his head against a tree. Clara supposedly had a piece of cornbread on her stomach, perhaps hidden for an attempted escape, or for Willie. Nearby was a package of paper money and gold coins.

Clara and Willie's bodies were taken to Fort Arbuckle, Indian Territory for burial. They were buried with military honors on

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Christmas Day. General Philip H. Sheridan snipped off the hem of Clara's dress and a lock of Willie's hair to send to the family in Kansas.

Richard was unaware of their fate and was searching for them until January 8, 1869, when he met a man named Campbell who said he had seen the bodies of Clara and Willie on the Washita Battlefield. He told Richard the bodies were buried at Fort Arbuckle. "I shall try to take them home," he wrote in his diary. On February 16, Richard reached Fort Cobb and was given the piece of dress, lock of hair and Clara's shoes. He did not get to Fort Arbuckle until late February and by then had given up on the idea of taking his family home. He built a log fence around their plot, bid them a sad farewell and headed back to Perrysburg where he lived with his father. In 1871, he filed an Indian depredation claim of \$2,400 for lost stock and wagons. The claim was pigeonholed for 20 years, until long after his death. He kept two small stones from the Arbuckle Cemetery in his pocket until he died of tuberculosis on September 18, 1873. He was buried in the Fort Meigs Cemetery in Perrysburg.

Almost two decades after his death a lawyer was able to collect \$1,200, or half the claim. Naturally, every member of the family wanted a piece of the pie. The lawyer decided the best way to spend the money was to erect a nice monument on the grave with the three names on it. The remaining \$917 was divided between seven family members.

Clara and Willie were not to rest in peace. The Army abandoned Fort Arbuckle in June of 1870. So, after a short rest Clara and Willie and all the other bodies were reinterred in Fort Gibson, Indian Territory, now Oklahoma. In the process, the identification of the Blinns was lost and they now lie in graves as "Unknown Woman" and "Unknown."

Source: Wild West Magazine, June 2007, Article: *Captive Clara Blinn's Plea: If you Love Us, Save Us* by Gregory F Michno

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