



UNCLE JOHN FIFE AND THE APACHES

Uncle John Fife certainly did not look like an Indian fighter, yet he carried deep in his flesh two Apache bullets, one in his arm and one in his leg. He was a suave, handsome, elderly salesman for the Cheetah Packing Company when we knew him.

Like most of the Fifes, he was an entertaining conversationalist. Sarah Jane Fife White and her brother John were devoted to each other, and he often came to her home and especially to her birthday parties. Whenever we saw him, we would listen fascinated by his stories. He made everything that he talked about interesting; but when he started on his adventures in Arizona, we would sit enthralled by his vivid account of his life there. He had the gift, just like Grandmother, of making us see what he was talking about. As Keats said, "He made pictures behind our eyes," and we visualized in our imagination the scenes he was describing, the old Oak Grove ranch house, with its dusty courtyard and the loop-holes under the eaves, and the mesquite and grass-covered foothills of the Chiricahua Mountains.

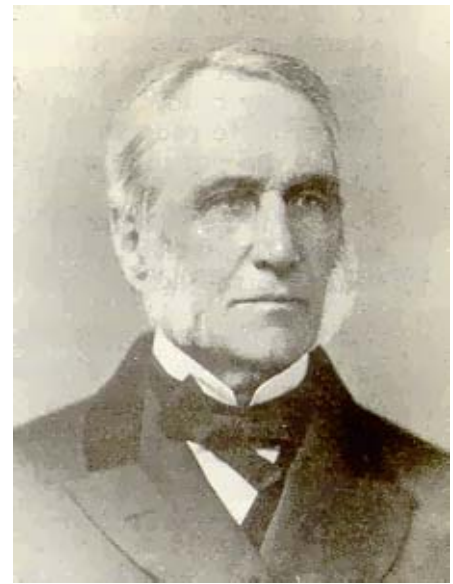
Great grandfather, Colonel William Nicol Fife, who had been appointed an honorary colonel in the United States Army by President Grant, had an adventuresome nature. After many exciting experiences in coming to Utah from Scotland in 1853 and after serving as the first United States Marshal in Ogden for nineteen years, he began to feel that Utah was becoming too tame for a man of his caliber. Also there was talk that the United States Government was about to start harassing any Mormons who were polygamists. Since he had three wives, he decided to leave Utah.

Even though he was not "called" to go to Arizona in 1881, he put his tools, machinery, supplies, and family into several covered wagons and started out on the long trail by way of Lee's Ferry for Cochise country in the southwest part of Arizona to settle in an isolated spot at the mouth of Pinery Canyon in the foothills of the Chiricahua Mountains. The nearest ranch was that of the White Brothers who had come from Pennsylvania; but even that ranch was six miles away. The grass in that part of Arizona was extremely abundant, making a cattle ranch a very desirable venture except for two facts: the price of cattle was low; and second, that it was dangerous Apache country. However, Colonel Fife developed a fine ranch, and he had a ready market for his cattle and hay at Fort Bowie, where the Sixth United States Cavalry was stationed to protect the settlers and miners from the Apaches.

To augment his income, Colonel Fife conducted a profitable business freighting timber from his sawmill to the mines in Tombstone and Bisbee. He hired two men to help with the freighting. These two men, with his son John, who was about twenty years of age, freighted



William Nicol Fife
(Engraving from Whitney's
History of Utah)



John Fife
(Father of Wm. N. Fife. Age 71)



John D. Fife, Sarah J. Fife White, and Walter T. Fife.
Taken in 1900

together since there was great danger from the Apaches, even though General Cook and the soldiers from Fort Bowie tried to keep them under control.

One night the Apache Indians broke away from the San Carlos Indian Reservation, located on the Gila River. John Fife heard of this when he went to the timber camp where Colonel Fife had a number of men employed. This camp was about ten miles from the Fife home at the Oak Grove ranch. At the camp John was told that the Indians were approaching several hundred strong under their chiefs, Who and Geronimo. John, realizing the danger to the settlers in the lower valley, decided to ride alone down the canyon to the valley below to notify the few scattered ranchers of the approaching danger. He rode from ranch to ranch warning the settlers. However, the attack did not take place as expected.

The next morning word came to the ranchers that several mountaineers had reported that the Indians had left the Chiricahuas, crossed the San Simon valley to the south, and entered Old Mexico.

Thinking that the danger from the Apaches was over, John Fife decided to leave his father's home and return to the logging camp for the freight wagons and the spans of mules and horses. John went up the canyon without encountering any Apaches. After the wagons were loaded, he started out with the two Fife employees, Frederick Lobley and Thomas Fornoise and their loads of logging. They were making their way cautiously down the canyon when they saw a small amount of dust near the mouth of a gully.

They had gone but a mile and a half from the logging camp when they were attacked by a band of Indians. Realizing they were surrounded and in great danger, Lobley endeavored to make his way down the canyon for help, while Fornoise and John unharnessed the teams to give the horses and mules a chance to escape. Suddenly, heavy fire was opened from all sides of the three men by the Indians, Lobley was shot six times in quick succession and dropped to the ground. The Indians pounced upon him, mutilated his body, and then proceeded after John and Fornoise. By this time they realized that they were completely surrounded by the Indians with no means of escape. John and Fornoise tried to creep along through the brush toward a cliff of rocks on the western slope of the canyon, but five Indians arose from behind a fallen tree, fired point blank at a close range of about fifty feet from them, and one shot struck Fornoise's head, killing him instantly. At the same time John received a shot in the arm and two more shots in the body. One member of the Indian band ran towards John, but John shot him just as the Indian reached him. Three more shots lodged in John's body. After firing his last shot, he lay close to the Indian, who had fallen, for protection, and the firing ceased, as the Apaches thought John might be dead also.

During all this fighting the Indians were shouting ferocious, bloodcurdling yells and whoops and pouring volley after volley into the brush.

Fortunately John's courage and presence of mind never failed him for a moment. He had fought the fierce Apaches with remarkable courage, and had shot with rapidity and precision, considering that his left arm was almost useless. One bullet had struck him in the right groin and another in the fleshy part of the thigh. He was bleeding profusely and in great pain.

His courage and accuracy of fire had made the Apaches conduct their attack from behind tree stumps, rocks, and other objects that gave them shelter. Now as he lay partly sheltered by the dead Indian, they did not know that his last shell had been fired, and they were not absolutely sure that he was dead.

Since they were not going to take anymore chances of losing other members of their band, they decided to burn him out.

They set fire to some of the brush in which he was hidden and waited at the other end for him to be crowded out by the flames. While John lay severely wounded and bleeding in the brush, two terrible and revolting forms of death stared him in the face. In front of him was a band of fierce and blood-thirsty savages who would probably subject him to the most horrible tortures and mutilations as soon as he emerged from his hiding place. If he did not move he would be burned to death, for the flames roared and crackled as they hit the mesquite, approaching nearer and nearer every moment and threatening literally to roast him alive. The fire had already reached close to his feet. The terrific heat and smoke had become so intense that it was almost past human endurance.

Then he heard a voice say clearly and distinctly, "Get up and run through the fire." The brush and foliage in the canyon and on the mountain sides were all ablaze, creating a thick blanket of smoke. John sprang to his feet and with teeth firmly set and lips tightly drawn he plunged through the flames and smoke. He ran over the hot charred ground trying to get as much distance as possible between him and the burning brush and the waiting Apaches. It was life or death for him and in spite of his wounds, he ran, never slackening his pace for an instant, until he had run nearly three miles. He knew Colonel Clute's mining smelter was ahead where help could be found. Added strength seemed to be given him in his dire distress.

At last with the smelter in sight he collapsed, completely exhausted by his wounds and his long run. He fell on the bank of the stream that flowed by the smelter. Some of the miners had seen him running, and when he fell they ran to his assistance. He was unconscious, but they could see what had happened and cared for him as well as they could.

They sent a messenger to Fort Bowie for an army doctor and for help in case the Apaches should attack the smelter. In a few hours an army surgeon, a company of the Sixth United States Cavalry, and fifty Apache Indian scouts under the command of Colonel Madden, Captain Lotyen and Lieutenant Glass arrived. When the army surgeon looked at John's wounds, he told the miners that there was little chance for his recovery, because of their serious nature. Since there was no place to care for John at the smelter, the army surgeon suggested that they should take him to the nearest ranch which belonged to the Riggs family.

A messenger was dispatched to tell John's parents of his serious condition. When the messenger reached the Oak Grove Ranch, Colonel Fife was not at home. Diana Fife and the other members of the family were grief-stricken when they heard about John's grievous wounds. When Diana heard that the army planned to take John to the Riggs Ranch, she decided immediately to go to her son. It was far into the night when the messenger arrived, but Diana Fife, not knowing when the Apaches might attack again, gathered her children about her; and in the tense darkness, they hurriedly walked across the foothills and prairie, a distance of over six

miles, to the Riggs Ranch. Colonel Fife had taken their only means of transportation with him, so they had no choice but to walk with anxiety dogging their footsteps all the way.

Meanwhile John had been taken by Government ambulance to the Riggs Ranch where a more suitable room could be obtained for him than at the mountain camp. He had been guarded by troops while being taken down , into the valley. He was also accompanied by a number of cowboys and ranchers all along the way. At the Riggs Ranch, Mrs. Riggs and her daughter Martha made everything as comfortable as possible for the wounded young man. When his mother and Agnes arrived, they did all that they could to relieve his pain.

The army surgeon had been unable to remove all the bullets from John's body and there was great danger from infection. For days John lay delirious and in great pain. For days his life was in danger. As the time went on, though, his strong young body began to heal. For eleven weeks he was too ill to be moved to the Oak Grove Ranch. Finally the white-faced young Indian fighter was strong enough to be moved to his father's home. However, he never completely recovered from his wounds for many years. As he recovered his strength, he resumed his job of freighting logging to the mines, the work he was doing when Jane and Barnard visited the Oak Grove Ranch in January and February of 1884.

John Fife had many exciting adventures in the years between 1881 and 1884, the year when he left Arizona, but the most dangerous of all was his escape from the Apaches.

John had displayed great bravery during his ordeal. As he looked back upon his marvelous escape, he always said that God had prompted him to take the course for his deliverance. It was the voice that had told him what to do. The voice had given him the strength and courage to fight for his life in extremely adverse circumstances. God wanted him to live. His destiny was not fulfilled--but the fulfillment is another story far removed from the Apaches and Arizona.

ADDITIONAL DATA (1966) AS TO LOCATION OF COLONEL WILLIAM N. FIFE'S RANCH

Mrs. Myrl Roll, who was a Riggs and now lives in the vicinity of the former Colonel William N. Fife ranch, has given information upon the exact location.

Colonel Fife once owned Sections 13 and 14 of Township 17 S.R. 28 East, located in Cochise County. Mrs. Roll has kindly drawn on a large scale map sent to her the location of the foundations of the Fife house and the grave site.

Fife Peak can be seen on most highway maps, and is thought to have been named after Colonel Fife. Fife Peak is approximately three miles southeast of the old Fife house site. Fife Canyon is also seen on the large scale map and extends from his former land holdings to the southeast.

On the page 69 map, the arrow should point more to an area approximately one-half inch lower and then one-half inch to the right. The former Fife ranch is not far from State Highway 181 near where it turns into the road leading to the Chiricahua National Monument.

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