

Based on material found in The Boy
Captive of Old Deerfield, by Mary
P. Wells Smith adapted by Myrabel
Gould Fiske

During the autumn of 1703, Nature smiled her sweetest on the little settlement of Deerfield. Never was there a more beautiful Oct. Yet in spite of Nature's smiling face fear gripped the hearts of the settlers. War had again been declared between France and England. Well they knew at the first excuse of war between the mother countries, the French would invoke the aid of their Indian allies. The Bloody Brook massacre and several attacks on families with murder, scalplings, and capture were so recently in their experience that fear dwelt in every heart. They realized that theirs was the northern most settlement and the most exposed of the Bay State Colonies. Their north gate looked out on an unbroken wilderness extending straight to their enemy in Canada.

As the days passed several events indicated the presence of lurking Indians. Only after nightfall did the settlers dare to care for their cattle pastured in the surrounding meadow. One night Reverend John Williams was nearly captured by Indians creeping out from the shrubbery. He escaped and hurried to warn the householders who were still living north of the palisades. Some eight families braver than the others had taken up the fertile land that lay north extending even to the edge of where Greenfield now stands. A few evenings later, two young men were carried away while following up stray cattle, and not found. With these indications of danger, work on the palisades which had been allowed to deteriorate during the five years of comparative peace was taken up with vigor. Every able-bodied man and boy was called to work from dawn to dark. On Oct. 15, a letter was sent to Gov. Dudley of the Mass. Bay Colony begging assistance with the result that twenty soldiers were sent from Conn. and Northampton to

reinforce the garrison. With this assistance and with the newly completed palisades the settlers felt a tiny bit assured,

Another difficulty while less serious was very annoying. There were only 15 houses in the fort and the homes north of the stockade were so exposed that those families finally decided to abandon their houses and move in with their friends. Every household took as many as possible. They slept three and four in a bed, some on beds on the floor. This seemed the utmost of crowding but with the accession of the twenty soldiers, somehow they had to crowd a little more. Small shacks were built where there was a bare spot of ground and some families were glad to live in cellars or dugouts. Fires were built in these shelters and beds made on the ground. Thus, the brave little band passed the early winter. In spite of these inconveniences there was little complaining.

Autumn slipped into one of the severest winters with the deepest snows the settlers had ever known yet they began to feel more at ease. There was an old saying, "No fear of Indians until the leaves put forth in spring." Life went on with births, marriages, and deaths. On Dec. 3d, a band of young men much to the disapproval of their elders rode south on the Springfield trail. The object of this rash trip was the wedding of John Sheldon to Hannah Chapin of Springfield. The next morning the troupe returned safely bringing the happy bride to her future home riding on the pillion behind her new husband clasping his waist tightly with her arms. Births came frequently that winter among them a daughter Jerusha, to the Williams family.

Storm followed storm, the snow grew deeper and deeper. Deacon Hoyt and Martin Kellogg moved back to their homes and most of the families north of the stockade followed. As Deacon Hoyt said, "Unless Satan himself helps them I see not how it is humanly possible for the Indians to traverse the two hundred miles between us and Canada in such depth of snow."

In spite of the inconvenience of close quarters, greatest friendliness existed among the settlers. Deerfield had no doctor and neighborly help was the chief reliance in sickness. In every attic hung great bunches of herbs and roots, and the women knew how to use them. So the women watched with, nursed, and doctored each other in sickness.

It took more than sub zero days to keep the little band at home from church. The meeting house stood in the center of the stockade. Wooden benches ranged each side of the middle aisle. The women and girls sat on one side, the men and boys on the other. Deacon Hoyt and Deacon Sheldon sat on the Deacon's seat beneath the high pulpit facing the congregation. The building was unheated and its icy chill made the interior colder than without. The frosted breath of the people rose in clouds. A foot stove was a luxury only fit for women. Men and boys would not coddle themselves but were forced during the long sermon to rap their feet together to keep up circulation. Mr. Williams just raised his voice and kept on. This zero Dec. day was a special occasion for Baby Jerusha Williams, only three days old was baptized. Every infant must be baptized the first Sunday after birth. During the short noon hour, the people ate a cold lunch and then returned to the meeting house for a second service. After this, the negro slaves who had sat in the "negroes" pew in the gallery hurried home to prepare a hot supper. Now the piles of snow reached almost to the top of the palisades. The last of Feb. several omens indicated future trouble and Mr. Williams decreed a special day of prayer. Work was suspended and a rigid fast was observed.

As Feb. closed a first robin brought the hope of approaching spring to the settlers. That night all went peacefully to bed. The watchman paced up and down the stockade. Toward morning he grew sleepy and as he leaned against a window sill to listen to a mother crooning to her baby he slept. Another moment he found the fort filled with painted

howling savages. The French Gov. of Canada had decided to appease the Abinaki Indians and strike a blow on the English by sending an army to attack and murder in cold blood the Deerfield settlers. The force numbered 200 French and 140 Indians. At a second inspection, an Indian scout reported the guard asleep and over the snow drifted to the palisade, rushed the enemy. Once inside, the enemy attacked most of the houses inside and north of the fort. Among the first to be assaulted was Parson Williams' home. Axes and tomshawks hacked at doors and windows, the wooden barriers fell, all accompanied by blood curdling yells from a hundred savage throats. People were hauled from their beds and bound in their night clothing or even naked and left to stand in the zero morning. Infants were torn from their mothers' and killed as was Baby Jerusha Williams. Whoever resisted was slaughtered. Most of the people living south of the fort took refuge in Captain Jonathan Wells' house and escaped. In the onslaught, Mr. Williams had raised his pistol to protect his wife but fortunately it missed fire or he might have been killed. The door of Ensign Sheldon's house, too strong to fall to the attack of the savages can be seen in Memorial Hall. The Indians did succeed in hacking a hole through which they thrust a gun and killed Mrs. Sheldon Sr. The Sheldon house and the Meeting House were used as temporary depots for the captives. Constantly through the attack, Hertel was sending captives and plunder to a rendezvous at the base of Shelburne Mountain, fearing a rescue attack from Hadley. In a brave resistance at the Catlin home, Mr. Catlin and his son Jonathan were wounded and left helpless to burn to death in the fire the savages set. Many who had fled for refuge to their cellars were smothered to death by smoke. The battle was still waging when after three hours of such murder and suffering, the Hadley rescue force rushed in. They had been alerted by the red glow of burning Deerfield and had given the alarm to Hatfield.

The enemy taking with them the prisoners and booty still remaining beat a retreat to Shelburne Mt. The Hadley party with what ever men were able tried to follow but were beaten back.

The ruined settlement which had boasted 290 inhabitants, now numbered 130, many terribly wounded. 49 of the inhabitants had been slain and 111 were carried into captivity. Of its 41 houses only 24 were left standing. Mr. and Mrs. Williams and five children were among those starting the terrible trek of two hundred miles to Canada but Eunice Williams still weak after the birth of her baby faltered as she was driven to wade the swift Green River and was slain. Her monument reminds all who pass by of the suffering of this little band of our ancestors. They struggled through mountains of snow, waded through melting rivers, climbed seemingly impossible mountains always goaded by their captors to hurry on penalty of death by the tomahawk, much of the way on the point of starvation. That tale is another story but it is a part of our treasured history.

This account of one of the most famous raids in history is immortalized in The Boy Captive of Old Deerfield, by Mary P. Wells Smith. A new issue of that famous book will be on sale Friday, May 1, 1954.