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## Article Title: Journeys to Historical Sites in Nebraska: Massacre Canyon

Full Citation: Addison E Sheldon, "Journeys to Historical Sites in Nebraska: Massacre Canyon," *Nebraska History and Record of Pioneer Days* 4 (1921): 53-60.

URL of article: [http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1921Massacre\\_Canyon.pdf](http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1921Massacre_Canyon.pdf)

Date: 11/9/2011

Article Summary: This article was the first of a series of short stories about contemporary excursions to historical sites in Nebraska. The participants in this trip to the last battlefield in the Sioux-Pawnee war were a Pawnee Indian scout captain, a veteran in the US Indian service, John W Williamson, who had been present at the Massacre, the curator of the Historical Society museum, and the editor of the publication. This brief article provides a unique perspective into the tragedy of August 5, 1873.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: Lute H North, John W Williamson, Elmer E Blackman, Addison E Sheldon, Tall Bull, Sky Chief, Nick Janis

Place Names: Detroit-Lincoln-Denver highway; Republican Valley; Lincoln Highway; Columbus, Nebraska; Genoa, Nebraska; Platte River; Phelps County, Nebraska; Kearney County, Nebraska; Black Hills; Frenchman River; Beaver River; Driftwood River; Hitchcock County, Nebraska

Keywords: Sioux; Pawnee; Massacre Canyon; US Indian service; Sioux-Cheyenne War

Photographs / Images: Pawnee-Sioux Battlefield in Massacre Canyon, Hitchcock County, Trenton Boy Scouts in foreground; Pawnee-Sioux Battlefield in Massacre Canyon, Hitchcock County: J W Williamson and Captain Lute H North in foreground



Pawnee-Sioux Battlefield in Massacre Canyon, Hitchcock County. Trenton Boy Scouts in foreground—Committee autos in Canyon. Shows where Pawnees suffered greatest loss. Photo by A. E. Sheldon, October 15, 1921.

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## JOURNEYS TO HISTORICAL SITES IN NEBRASKA

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By Addison E. Sheldon

This is the first (for publication in this quarterly) of a series of short stories upon notable historical sites in Nebraska. Each story is preceded by a personal pilgrimage to and study of the site and its literature.

It is time for Nebraskans to know more of our places of historic interest; to mark them with worthy monuments; to find in them inspiration for holding in cherished memory noble lives and deeds of Nebraska pioneers.

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### MASSACRE CANYON

#### The Last Nebraska Battlefield of the Sioux-Pawnee War

Four of us left the city of Columbus in the afternoon of October 13, 1921. One was a frontier soldier of fifty years ago, captain of Pawnee Indian scouts, rider in desperate charges into hostile camps—Lute H. North of Columbus. An-

other, a veteran in the U. S. Indian service, leader in winning wild men to the new, machine-agriculture, dweller with them on the open plain and in the earth lodge, guide and adviser in long marches and great crises, John W. Williamson of Genoa. The third a digger for bones and flints in old Indian village sites and grave yards—curator of the Historical Society museum—Elmer E. Blackman. The fourth held the wheel of the Essex car.

Our course was southwest, following, as nearly as good roads permitted, the trail of the Pawnee tribe as it set out on its last Nebraska buffalo hunt in July, 1873. The hunting trails of those years followed the line of least resistance, diagonal swells across the valleys, high ridges over the divides. They forded the streams at the shallows, and rounded the edge of the swamps. Vainly we tried to trace the old trails as we rolled over the Lincoln Highway into Columbus, crossed the Platte where many islands break its channel into a handful of silver streams, shot through the twilight across the vales and prairies into the city of Hastings, where our first night out was spent. The eye could only search the landscape and the imagination surmise where the ponies dragged the tepee poles in the old days.

Early the next morning we were going thirty-five miles an hour over the Detroit-Lincoln-Denver highway, headed for the Republican valley. Some change from the old days when the long line of the Pawnee nation strung itself out,—warriors, squaws, children, dogs and ponies,—across the plains. Impossible now to do more than look at the map and trace a rough line showing the route pursued by Williamson and his Pawnee in 1873 and other lines indicating where Captain North and the military trailed the high divide between the Platte and Republican in the Sioux-Cheyenne war in 1864-70.

Like a lake bed lies the great wide bowl of corn and wheat land—heart of Phelps and Kearney counties. Across this our auto sped. Axtell, Funk, Minden, Holdrege—then the deep ravines which give notice of the nearing Republican—then down the long tongue of divide which leads into Oxford. How the pulse stirred while memory and imagination kindled at the great inland valley stretching to the west! Greatest buffalo-

pasture of America! Every summer the migration of bison herds from the Black Hills and surrounding plains southward to the tender gramma grass and pleasant waters of the Republican proved its attraction. Following the buffalo came the coyote,—then the Indian—finally the white men—each hunting the choicest beef steak that ever graced a campfire or banquet hall.

What old-time tales fell from the lips of our party as we turned up the valley road, perfection smooth with powdered dust. Many an incident of the buffalo days and early settlement, of the first quaint log-cabin pioneers who risked their lives in order to live "where the game was" in the great outdoors of the West. Each member of our party had seen the valley in its early years and each had his tale to tell.

It was at the end of the tawny October afternoon when we crossed the Frenchman river at Culbertson and turned west up a long hill crowned with the high divide which separates the Frenchman from the Republican. Seven miles out one sees, from the top of this hill, the fingers of a giant's hand stretch from the Republican northwest toward the Frenchman. Each finger is a deep canyon or ravine parting the prairie with almost impassable chasm. It is fifty-two years since Captain North and his company of Pawnee scouts picked up the trail of Tall Bull and his band of murderers on these plains. But of this another time. It is forty-eight years since Williamson and his Pawnee had a most tragic experience in one of the Giant's fingers.

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In the early morning of August 5, 1873 the Pawnee nation broke camp on the Republican a few miles west of where Trenton now stands and started on its last day's hunt for buffalo. There were three hundred warriors, four hundred women and children, twelve hundred ponies and a thousand dogs. They had had successful hunts on the Beaver and the Driftwood. Already their ponies were well loaded with dried buffalo and robes. The day before three white men had come to their camp and told Mr. Williamson that Sioux warriors had been watching the Pawnee for several days and that a large party of them were camped close by on the Frenchman. Sky Chief,

leader of the Pawnee, had answered. "the White men wish the Pawnee to leave the buffalo for them to kill. The Great Father gave us leave to hunt for three moons. We will make one more drive of buffalo and then return with plenty of meat to our village on the Loup."

A mile long that early August morning the Pawnee nation trailed across the divide, going northeast. Soon buffalo were seen coming from the northwest over the crest of the hill toward the Pawnee. Eagerly the Pawnee hunters rode out to the chase. As they approached the buffalo a transformation took place. Part of the buffalo became, by throwing off the buffalo robes which concealed them, a band of Sioux warriors riding in wide war circles and shooting at the Pawnee.

"There's only a few Sioux. We can whip them" shouted the Pawnee chiefs as they summoned their fighting men. Near at hand was a deep ravine. Into it were hurried the Pawnee women, children, dogs and pack ponies. As they sought refuge there the skyline to the north and west swarmed with hostile Sioux. Round they rode in circles firing as they rode.

There were two white men with the Pawnee camp, one a young man from the east who had begged to go on the hunt. When he saw the Sioux, he fled. Williamson, the other white man bore the written authority of the United States to conduct the Pawnee on their hunt, and to preserve peace. The Sioux chiefs had signed a treaty of peace at Fort Laramie five years before. In their own camp at this very time was Nick Janis, of French descent, married to a Sioux squaw and commissioned in the same manner as Williamson to conduct the Sioux buffalo hunt and keep the peace.

Williamson tied a handkerchief at the end of a pole, raised it and rode out to stop the Sioux, hoping that the U. S. commission which he held could effect this. A shower of arrows and bullets from the circling warriors showed how vain the hope. Sky Chief, leader of the Pawnee, had before the onset of the Sioux dashed off in pursuit of a buffalo to a ravine far to the northeast and there was killed and scalped without knowledge of the desperate situation of his people. As Williamson rode back a bullet struck his pony. The poor beast stumbled on a few more yards and fell at the edge of the ra-

vine which sheltered the Pawnee women and children. As he stripped the saddle from the dying pony he swept the battlefield with one searching glance which forever fixed it in his memory:

On either flank the Sioux warriors were rapidly advancing to envelope the Pawnee.

Below in the fork of the canyon, the Pawnee women were standing in a circle with arms uplifted chanting the ancient tribal song—a prayer for victory.

Wave upon wave of Sioux warriors circled nearer and nearer. Arrows and bullets flew thick and fast. The plains filled with hundreds of Sioux. The Pawnee warriors were everywhere driven back. A desperate situation surely for Williamson and his Pawnee.

No chanted prayer to Tirawa availed in that desperate hour. "Fly from the Sioux" rose the cry in the ravine, for their enemy was upon them. Cutting packs and tepee poles loose from their ponies the disastrous flight down the ravine began. Some, warriors and women, refused to fly. They sought refuge in deep holes dug by the flood torrents in the bottom of the ravine. Everyone of these was cut off and scalped. The larger part of the Pawnee who perished were found on this part of the battlefield.

Three miles Massacre Canyon winds to the point where it opens into the Republican valley. Headlong toward this opening the Pawnee camp fled. All was confusion. Warriors, squaws, children, dogs, ponies in a mingled mass. Along the bluff rode the Sioux firing into the fugitives below. The bottom of the ravine where the fight began is 150 yards wide. Half a mile below it narrows to a gorge barely wide enough for a trail. Here the flood of humanity and beasts choked the gorge and many perished. Farther down a similar gorge was the cause of another slaughter.

An incident of this flight is burned into Mr. Williamson's memory. A little Indian baby, two or three years old, had fallen from her mother's back and stretched out her hands in vain to the panic-stricken rout begging to be taken with them. After the fight a number of partly burned bodies of Pawnee

children were found near this place. The Sioux had evidently stacked them up and tried to obliterate them.

Probably every Pawnee would have perished had it not been for the appearance of a column of United States Cavalry coming up the Republican Valley, bearing at its head the old flag. From the hilltop the Sioux warriors spied this sooner than the Pawnee fleeing down the ravine, and checked their pursuit.

As the mob of Pawnee warriors, squaws, children, dogs and ponies poured out of the mouth of Massacre Canyon into the broad valley of the Republican the pursuing Sioux rounded up several hundred loose Pawnee ponies and vanished with them over the hills to the north.

The army officers urged that the remaining Pawnee return to the battlefield under cavalry escort and retake the abandoned food and equipage. To this they would not listen. They said the food would be poisoned and the equipment destroyed. The Pawnee nation suffered in this battle the most terrible defeat by the Sioux in its tribal history. One hundred and fifty-six had perished. Most of their ponies and camp outfit was lost. Nothing for them to do but to go back to the old home on the Loup overwhelmed with the most terrible disaster they had known. The grief of the survivors was heart rending. The squaws wailed the lamentation for the dead. The stolid warriors tore their hair while tears ran down their faces. In distress, hunger and humiliation those who escaped turned their faces homeward, never again to return on their tribal hunt in the Republican Valley.

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Forty-eight years is a long time in the life of the frontier. On the morning of October 15, 1921 we were on the battlefield. From every quarter across the divide came automobiles concentrating on the canyon where the battle began. Hundreds of men, women and children thronged the hillsides looking down the dark ravine where the pride of the Pawnee was crushed by the Sioux. A platoon of boy scouts from Trenton eagerly scanned the sod finding a few fragments from the far-off fight. Editors of newspapers from Trenton and Culbertson were there. A thin thread of smoke along the Republican Val-



Pawnee-Sioux Battlefield in Massacre Canyon, Hitchcock County. J. W. Williamson (right), and Captain Lute H. North (left) in foreground.  
Photo by A. E. Sheldon, October 15, 1921.

ley was evidence of the Burlington fast mail bound for Denver. At the canyon's edge stood Scout Williamson and Captain North, near the spot where Williamson's pony was shot from under him in the battle. Below were the forks of the canyon where the Pawnee women stood with bare heads under that August sun of 1873 and chanted their prayer—the old time Pawnee prayer for victory. Alas, not the only women who have prayed for victory in war, for the life of their soldiers, in vain!

We gathered in eager group at the canyon's edge and listened to Williamson tell the story of the last battle between the Sioux and Pawnee nations. He had told it many times since he saw it, but never before as he told it that October morning for his feet were on the battlefield, his eyes ranging the hills where the hostile Sioux charged and circled. Below in the forks of the canyon stood a fleet of automobiles. The

sympathetic ear listened as though to catch the chant of the Pawnee women. The Past and the Present were blended while we listened to the story and renewed the recollections of the old Nebraska days.

Never again on Nebraska prairies the useless feud of red men fighting each other for buffalo hunting ground. To the historian, the novelist, the poet, the dramatist belong those years of romance and mystery. All too soon the last eye that saw them will be closed, the last witness which told their tale will be silent.

Here some day shall arise a monument fit to halt the traveler's journey and claim his attention and sympathy. Upon its granite shoulder shall be deeply cut an inscription reminding the generations yet to be of these tribes which once found home upon these plains, of their customs, their religion, their arts, their struggles, and of this last great conflict between the two greatest of these Nebraska tribes—the Pawnee and the Sioux.

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