

# SIR!

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## WHITE MEN taught the INDIANS how to SCALP

In Europe the Puritans Chopped off Their Enemies' Heads. Over Here They Found It More Convenient Just to Hack off the Victim's Scalp. The Redskins Quickly Took up the Grisly Sport

By PAUL BROCK



Scalper holds victim with knee on his shoulder, tears off scalp lock with circular knife stroke.

● ● Scalping, one of the most gruesome aspects of the long struggle between the white man and the red didn't originate with the Indians, according to one learned authority on Indian lore. Ethel Brant Monture, great-great-grandchild of Joseph Brant, the great Mohawk leader, states that the Puritans practised it in England long before it was used in North America. And the Puritans didn't merely remove a few square inches of skin from the skull—they chopped off the whole head

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of skin from the skull—they chopped off the whole head and mounted it on a stick.

“When they emigrated here,” says Mrs. Monture, “they continued the practice, but soon decided that heads were too heavy to carry.”

They found it more convenient to hack off a chunk of skin from the skull of the vanquished foe, with the hair attached. This served as a check on the number of enemies killed by the individual settler. The Indians retaliated by scalping the settlers, and soon all the warring factions—Indians, Englishmen and Frenchmen—were collecting the scalps of their enemies.

Some idea of how deeply entrenched scalping became in the annals of North American warfare can be found in the fact that not until 1953—only seven and a half years ago—was it considered safe to scrap an antiscalping law from the statute books of Pennsylvania.

Through the centuries of struggle the grisly art developed fantastic refinements of technique and cruelty, and the white man was largely responsible for its spread. During the Colonial wars he never hesitated to offer big money for the scalps of enemies, both white and red, so that the scalping of humans actually became more profitable than the hunting of predatory animals. Except when being scalped themselves, many white settlers considered it good fun and were just as enthusiastic about scalp-taking as the Indians.

Even the women settlers shared this enthusiasm. There are many instances in the history of the Wild West of tough pioneer women scalping Indians when goaded into doing so by atrocities committed against themselves or their children. Sometimes in the early days of settlement the man of the house had to leave his wife and family while he journeyed to the fort for necessary supplies of salt and ammunition. If savages attacked the unprotected house, the hardy frontier housewife often displayed courage and ferocity which could match any Indian's.

In March, 1697 Indians attacked Haverhill, Massachusetts. Mrs. Mary Dustin, the wife of a settler, was dragged from her bed by the marauders while nursing her week-old baby. The baby was torn from her grasp and its head dashed against the trunk of a tree. A tomahawk brandished above Mrs. Dustin's head warned her not to cry out or resist.

Along with her child's nurse and twenty other prisoners taken on the raid, she was forced to accompany the Indians on a 150-mile march into the woods. One by one the captives, growing weak, lagged behind and were tomahawked. Finally Mrs. Dustin and the nurse were the

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only prisoners left. The raiding party was now so far away from the settlements that the Indians left the two women without a guard. Nor did they post any sentries at night.

As the warriors slept around the campfire, Mrs. Dustin picked up a tomahawk and began a personal carnival of grisly revenge. Silently and swiftly the lethal weapon swept down on the skull of each sleeping Indian, the blade sinking deep into the brain and the victim dying without so much as a groan. Only one wounded squaw escaped into the forest to tell the gruesome tale of a *Yenghesse* woman's revengt.

Having killed all ten of the warriors in the space of two minutes, Mrs. Dustin performed the final act of retribution—she sharpened one of their knives and scalped every man. Then she carried her ghastly trophies all the way back to Haverhill.

The red man soon came to value the scalp of his enemy as a handy, visible trophy of his personal victory. The more scalps he possessed the more prestige he enjoyed among his people.

This was vividly and savagely illustrated in 1756 by an Indian named Cotties, whose ambition was to become chief of his band, which was located near a white settlement some 30 miles from Philadelphia. The warriors of the band laughed at Cotties, taunting him to produce the scalps of the enemies he claimed to have killed, and accusing him of being only a squaw.

Stung by their taunts, Cotties decided to compete in the game of collecting scalps with the entire band of sixty Indians.

**A**T Sherman's Creek lived William Sheridan with his wife and fourteen children. Cotties hid himself outside

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the Sheridan homestead, and when Sheridan came out for firewood, Cotties stabbed him to death. Shortly afterward the eldest son came to look for his father. He too was killed. The wife and the other sons and daughters ventured out one by one. In an hour Cotties had sixteen scalps on his belt.

Half a mile down the creek, buried in a deep wood, was a solitary cabin occupied by two old men and one woman. Cotties broke down the door, tomahawked all three occupants and scalped them.

When he returned to the Indian camp the other braves threw down their weapons at his feet. Nineteen scalps in one day! The whole band had taken only eighteen in the same time. Cotties became their chief, for such a hero to the Indians was little short of a demigod.

At least half of all the victims of scalping were alive and often conscious when the gory ritual was carried out. Many a settler of the Western plains lost his scalp without losing his life. In fact, some Indian tribes used scalping merely as a warning to settlers not to intrude on their private hunting grounds. Others considered it a fate worse than death to arrive back at camp after a foray minus their own scalps. Knowing this, their enemies deliberately refrained from killing them, considering the taking of their scalps a much greater punishment.

With the loss of their scalps the victims were assumed to have lost their masculinity and their bravery as warriors. They were reduced to the status of slaves in their tribe. A live, scalped warrior, according to the Pawnees, was a walking dead man and had no right to participate in the masculine affairs of the village.

The Crees considered the scalp of a victim far more valuable financially than the victim's life, and even used their own scalps to pay for crimes they had committed. When a Cree killed another Cree in a rage or by accident, he would offer his own scalp to the family of the dead man as compensation. He would lie down passively, without a murmur of agony or protest as the knife gouged the incision around his skull and his scalp was jerked off.

There was a certain finesse necessary in the operation, and warriors practised on all the dead bodies that came their way.

The Chinooks of the Pacific Coast used either a knife or a sharp piece of bone.

"They make an incision above the forehead," reported French explorer Dufrot de Mofras, "over the ears and then down along the neck as far as the shoulder

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blades. Then, getting hold of the flap of skin at the back, they pull the whole scalp off while they keep their victim immobilized on the ground with their feet on his shoulders.”

Usually, however, the process was less complicated—the knee on the chest or between the shoulders, the deft circular knife stroke, the tearing jerk of the scalp lock.

Warriors of some tribes marked their choice of scalp lock on their own skulls with a circle of clay or chalk. This was meant partly as a challenge to their potential enemies and partly as an act of courtesy to the scalper. The hair was often cut very short and even shaved, except for the scalp lock. Some Indians wore their scalp locks neatly plaited, so that the scalper could grasp the hair firmly. Others adorned their topknots with teeth, shells and other ornaments.

The Muskagee Indians carefully preserved and stiffened the scalps of their victims and used them as drinking vessels and eating bowls at harvest feasts and war dances. The grisly trophies were handed down from father to son and became the measure of a man's personal wealth.

One white man who was both scalped and terribly injured, yet survived to tell the tale, was Josiah Wilbarger. In 1830 he was with a party of four men—Christian, Haynie, Standifer and Strother—on a survey along the Colorado River between San Antonio and Nacogdoches.

Near Pecan Spring the men halted at noon and were immediately attacked by Indians, some of them using only bows and arrows. An arrow passed through the calf of Wilbarger's right leg, another

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through his hip and a third through his left thigh. Strother was killed outright, and a bullet broke Christian's thigh.

Haynie and Standifer escaped on their saddled horses. As they mounted they saw Wilbarger pitch headlong to the ground, apparently shot through the head. They also saw fifty Indians rushing for his scalp.

**WHEN** the two survivors reached safety, a posse was organized. After a search lasting several days, Wilbarger was found, still alive, under a big oak tree. His body was caked with blood and the bone of his entire skull was exposed. He had been stripped by the Indians, and the only piece of clothing they had left was a sock which he had torn from his foot and placed over his naked skull.

Wilbarger gave the posse the story of his scalping.

"After being wounded in three places by the arrows," he said, "a bullet knocked me to the ground. It had gone into my neck at the rear and come out at the chin. It paralyzed me. I didn't feel any pain. I couldn't move a muscle but I was still conscious.

"I knew everything that was going on when one of those savages drew out his knife and cut around my scalp. I felt him jerk the scalp off but there was still no pain. I knew when the Indians were stripping me of my clothes. They had cut Christian's throat, but the sight of the bullet hole under my chin probably made them think it was unnecessary to cut mine. They figured I was already dead.

"Then there was a lapse of time during which I remember nothing except that the sun was halfway down the western sky when I regained consciousness. Now I felt pain and I knew I was alone and couldn't move.

"Dried blood was all over me and I was still bleeding. I felt a thirst that was agony. I tried to stand up and walk but couldn't. I dragged myself to the camp waterhole.

"After drinking I lay down in the water and stayed there until I was almost numb with cold. Then I crawled out onto dry land to be warmed by the sun. At last I fell asleep.

"When I awoke green blowflies were buzzing around my scalp. My wounds had stopped bleeding and I was again consumed with thirst. I crawled back to the waterhole, and after I had drunk again sharp hunger tormented me. I crawled to some bushes and ate a few snails I found there, then drank more water.

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"About nightfall I decided to try and crawl back along the trail, but I'd gone only about a quarter of a mile when I had to stop under an oak tree. I rested there, semiconscious, until the cold wakened me. Then you came and rescued me."

Miraculously, Josiah Wilbarger recovered, though the skin never again grew entirely over his skull bone. He lived for eleven years, leading an active life, until an accidental blow on his exposed skull brought death.

Perhaps the only white man in history to lose his scalp to an Indian and then get it back was William Thompson, a line repairman for the Union Pacific in the 1860's.

On August 6th, 1867 Indians tore up the steel at Plum Creek Station, Nebraska, and Thompson was sent out with five armed repairmen to relay the track.

The Indians swooped down during the night. Thompson was hit in the right arm by a rifle bullet but tried to run into the surrounding brush. A painted warrior on a white pony ran him down and clubbed him with his rifle butt. The warrior then dismounted, drew a long knife from his belt, stabbed Thompson in the neck, and grabbed his hair. He started hacking away at the scalp. Though the pain was agonizing, Thompson kept quiet and pretended he was dead.

Yelling a victory whoop, the Indian tore the scalp from Thompson's head and held it out at arm's length to be admired by his comrades. Then, tucking the grisly relic into his belt, he mounted his pony. As he did so, Thompson saw the scalp fall to the ground without the Indian's noticing it.



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Sick with pain, and so weak from loss of blood that he was almost unconscious, Thompson dragged himself to where the scalp lay, retrieved it, and tucked it under his body. A search party found him twelve hours later. He was still alive. They dressed his wounds and placed the scalp, which Thompson had guarded so carefully, into a bucket of water.

Runners were sent for surgeons, and Dr. Irah Pecke and Dr. George Moore agreed to attempt to replace Thompson's scalp onto his bare skull. They sewed the scalp back in place with little hope that the graft would take. But after a week Thompson's head wounds started to mend and the scalp began to join up with the rest of the skin on the lower half of his skull. Within six months hair had covered the scars and Thompson's scalp was part of him once more.

Strangely, scalping was never popular anywhere but in North America. The South American Indians preferred to take the entire head, and this is still the custom among a few tribes today. Further north, the Incas took scalps, but they also took the entire body, using the hide in the manufacture of drumheads.

Scalping in North America, then, seems to have been a cultural improvement over head-hunting. If Ethel Brant Monture is right, the gentle emigrant Puritans from England really started something in this country when they brought over their rather drastic pastime of cutting off heads and mounting them on sticks. Obviously cricket hadn't been invented when the Puritans landed in the New World.

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