
LITTLE POLLY AND THE INDIANS

For Jennifer, from Dad (1977)

One day in the summer of 1782 there was a wedding near Hannastown, Pennsylvania¹. The pioneers all were very hopeful, because this was the first summer since 1776 when there was no war². Pennsylvania had joined twelve other American colonies to fight the King's soldiers for freedom, and they had won! On this July day, a wedding party was being held at the Miller farm. Most of the women and children of the area were at the party. The men and older boys were cutting hay in a nearby field. Soon they would be done and would join the fun. Already the fiddle music was drifting across the hills.

Little Polly Truby, a seven year old, was happy to be with her friends. She and the other children were running around the cabin, trying to dance to the music. Her real name was Mary Ann, but her nickname was Polly. Polly's daddy, Christopher Truby, was one of the very first pioneers in Westmoreland County. He built his log cabin near the present Court House in Greensburg³. Christopher Truby had been a soldier in the war against King George's Redcoats. Today he and his neighbors were working hard to bundle the first hay crop before the rain came. Polly's oldest brothers Michael and Stophel were working with him. Polly had come to the wedding party with her older sisters Catharina and Elizabeth. Her brothers John and Jacob were also there because they were too little to help the men in the fields.

¹ **2006 Note:** In the last quarter century, I've heard or read two distinct variations on this story. **The first** is that Polly was kidnapped *the very day* of the infamous raid on Hanna's Town. See my reference in this section's introductory notes to Ann Warren's thoughts on this tradition, from more than 20 years ago. **The second variation** is merely that the child had been kidnapped by the Indians and that her father secured her release in the area of Lake Erie. This telling of the story does not blend it with the Hannastown incident. The latter version is that told to me on several occasions between 1978 and 2001 by **Charles S. L. Robinson**, heir of the Hovey/Robinson lands north of Parker. This "non-Hannastown version" was told by "the venerable James Truby, of Kittanning, Pa., aged ninety-four years, a great-grandson of Col. Christopher Truby, commander of Fort Allen . . . He furnished the author with *the account of the capture and rescue of Colonel Truby's daughter, Mary Ann*. She was captured by the Indians in 1779 and rescued shortly thereafter near where the town of Clarion, Pa., now stands by her father and William Jack" (**SOURCE:** C. Hale Sipe, *The Indian Wars of Pennsylvania*. Pittsburgh: The Telegraph Press, 1929; pages 505, 635, 664--see Fort Allen).

I hope in time to document both the written and remaining oral variations and to assess them, using the sparse but important primary sources available concerning the Hannastown raid.

² **2006 Note:** "There was no truce in the Northwest following the surrender of the British at Yorktown in October, 1781 . . . The frontier was wide open. Irvine [William Irvine, Commandant of Fort Pitt] at Pittsburgh could do nothing. Hence on July 13, 1782, there appeared before Hannastown, county seat of Westmoreland, Gwaysuta and his band of Seneca. The town was burned to the ground, and much of the surrounding country was devastated. Relatively few whites were killed. Wheeling was then attacked but without the success experienced at Hannastown" (**SOURCE:** Randolph C. Downes, *Council Fires on the Upper Ohio*; Pittsburgh: 1940; pages 271 and 274).

³ **2006 Note:** We've learned since that Truby's home apparently was near Fort Allen (the Truby Blockhouse), about three miles away from the Court House. He sold some of the land on which the Court House was built to those who were establishing the new county seat in Greensburg, after the burning of Hannastown.

When noon came, the men stopped working to take a little rest and to eat some food. All at once, Michael Truby saw strangers moving in the forest. What was he seeing? Were they friends? Were they bad men? They were INDIANS! And their helpers were some pioneers called "Tories." The Tories wanted King George to be the King of America! They were angry because George Washington and the Continental soldiers had won the war! Michael shouted for the others to run!

The men and boys had to warn the settlers to go quickly to the fort at Hannastown. They would be safe there. Captain Matthew Jack jumped on his horse and rode as fast as he could for the Miller farm. The Trubys and the other men headed for the cabins of all their neighbors, to spread the alarm. They would make a plan to defend themselves against the Indians once everyone was safely in the fort.

Captain Jack did not get to the Miller farm in time to help. The Indians, screaming an awful war cry, already were running out of the woods. Sybilla Truby was near the other side of the forest clearing from where the Indians appeared. She called her children to run into the forest. A quick count showed Catharina pulling Jacob along. Elizabeth had John. But where was little Polly? Sybilla glanced back at the farmhouse just in time to see Mrs. Miller grab Polly and another child and sweep them into the house.

But this was not a good idea! The Indians soon had all the people from the house as their prisoners. They burned that house and soon were killing all the cows and hogs. Only the people who ran for the forest got away. Sybilla Truby wanted to scream for Polly to run to her, but that would tell the Indians where she and the other children were. So they quickly and quietly ran through the forest toward the fort. All five of them were crying for their little Polly.



Adam and Jennifer Marshall
at the reconstructed Hannastown Fort
July 1978

When it was nearly dark, they arrived at the Hannastown Fort. Sybilla told the rest of the family the sad news. They gathered in a little circle to pray for Polly and the others. Christopher and Sybilla asked all the children to hold hands. They quietly sang a psalm in German, as they always did at church. Then they gave their Polly to God. They thought they never would see her alive again. Christopher Truby was being very quiet, however, while the others were crying. His mind was already working on a plan to get Polly back. He left quickly to find his good friend Matthew Jack.

While the settlers were preparing the fort for a grand attack, the Indians marched their prisoners through the woods to Hannastown. The war party burned the whole town to the ground, except for Robert Hanna's house. Then the pioneers played a trick on the Indians! After sunset, the people in the fort made a lot of noise and stomped their feet hard on the wooden planks to make it sound like marching soldiers had come. The Indians became frightened and decided to leave before morning. Polly trudged along the forest trails with the other captives--twenty in all. Most were women and children. The settlers did not dare follow them now, for they knew the Indians would kill all the prisoners if they followed.

Early the next day Christopher Truby put his plan into action. He and Matthew Jack had been friends with many Indians before the war. They were afraid Polly would be killed because she could not make the long trip to Canada--she was only seven years old! So they went after her by themselves. They followed the Indians and Tories to the area around Lake Erie. Then they found some friendly Indians who would help them. These friends visited the war party for Christopher Truby. They paid money to buy Polly back from the angry Indians and the Tories.

A few weeks later, who should come running down the trail to the Trubys' log house but Polly Truby herself! Her mother cried, "Mary Ann! My little girl is safe!" Her brothers and sisters came running, and they hugged her for a whole hour. Her father and Captain Jack told everyone the story of her rescue.

Do you think anyone was happy to see that little girl running down the path? I do! And I'm glad little Polly Truby finally came home safely. Polly Truby grew up and married a doctor named Simeon Hovey. They had a farm near Parker's Landing, Pennsylvania. She lived until she was 93 years old. All her little Marshall nephews and nieces loved to hear her tell again and again the story of her adventures with the Indians.

SUGGESTED READING

Where the Rivers Meet, Clarence Edward Macartney (Pittsburgh: The Gibson Press, 1946); chapter II is called "The Hannastown Massacre" (pages 19-28).

Hassler, Edgar W. *Old Westmoreland: A History of Western Pennsylvania During the Revolution* (Pittsburgh: J. R. Weldin & Co., 1900); chapter 26 is called "The Destruction of Hannastown" (pages 176-181).

Locate copies in your library or through the interlibrary loan system.