

FERGUS MOORHEAD, THE PIONEER – PROSPECTS IN THE TWO LICK VALLEY,  
IN 1770 – WITH SOME BROTHERS AND FRIENDS LOCATE IN  
INDIANA COUNTY IN 1772 – HIS CAPTIVITY, &C.

In the month of May, 1772,\* Fergus Moorhead, his wife and three children, his two brothers, Samuel and Joseph, James Kelly, James Thompson and few others, bid farewell to their friends and relatives in Franklin county, and set out on their journey to the “Indian Country” west of the Allegheny. Though the prospects of acquiring extensive possessions and wealth for themselves and posterity, might buoy up the adventurous spirits of the three brothers, it may well be imagined that Mrs. Moorhead left home and all its endearments, with a heavy heart. But, being a woman possessing great energy of character, as is shown in the sequel, and touched, perhaps with that romantic spirit peculiar to that period of which we are writing, she pressed forward with a firm step and a resolute heart, determined to share with her devoted husband the dangers and trials of the wilderness.

Fergus had a wagon in which he placed the provisions necessary for the journey, his farming utensils and household effects. This was drawn by three good horses. His other live stock consisted of a yoke of oxen, two milch cows, several head of sheep and hogs, and a lot of fowls. The progress of the party was necessarily slow. The military road, opened out some years previous from Cumberland to Fort Pitt, was the only one that led at that time across the mountains, and was in many places scarcely traceable, while it occasionally passed through swamps and ravines, and then again over rocks and along mountain slopes, so as to render it almost impassible. But even this road, bad as it was, had to be abandoned, as its course diverged considerably from the point which the adventurers wished to gain. Hence they had to make their way, as best they could, through the wilderness.

It would be a fruitless task to attempt a description of the toils, the hardships and the dangers, to which the party were daily and hourly exposed. Beast of prey were roaming on all sides, seeking an opportunity to devour them. The rattle snake and copperhead lay coiled among the weeds and bushes, ready to strike the deadly blow. And, most dangerous of all, the war whoop which sounded from hill to hill, and echoed through the intervening valleys, gave warning of the proximity of the savage, thirsting for plunder and for blood.

In the night and in the day the party was continually exposed to danger. With naught but the heavens for a covering they laid down at night to rest themselves, and forget for a few hours the fatigue of the day on the lap of “nature’s fond nurse, baemly sleep,” while one of the party stood as sentinel, not knowing what moment they might be attacked by the wild beasts of the Indians. In the day they had often to halt, and cut away logs and remove other impediments, and as there were no bridges, they had frequently to cross streams at imminent peril.

At length, at the end of four weeks from the time they had left Franklin county, the party reached the point of their destination. Where the town of Indiana is now built, was the spot that had been selected for a settlement by Fergus Moorhead, who had made an excursion into this section in 1770. For reasons which to them were obvious, the party changed their determination, and located a few miles further west. Though they were now relieved from the fatigue incident to their journey, our pioneers were far from living at their ease. Having sat themselves down in the forest, without house or shelter, and remote from the nearest settlement, we may readily imagine that their situation was far from comfortable. But, “where there is a *will* there is a *way*,” and this trite saying was abundantly verified in the case of the Moorheads.

The land now owned by Isaac Moorhead was that which they selected for their future residence. On the first day, they naturally looked around to find a spot of ground on which to erect buildings that would answer their immediate necessities, and selected the site of the Isaac Moorhead house. On the next morning, they commenced the work of building a cabin. After finishing their houses they built pen for their horses, cows, oxen, sheep, hogs and fowls.

When these were completed they were once more enabled to lie down, if not under their own “vine and fig tree,” at least beneath their own roof, and enjoy the refreshing sweets of slumber. We next see them laying the “axe to the root” of sturdy oaks of the forest and prostrating them with unsparing hands. They then planted some corn and potatoes, for which they have cleared and grubbed a small patch of ground, and after this put another one in order for the garden. When all this was accomplished, Joseph and Samuel left their brother and his family to return home. By this time the harvest was rapidly approaching, and it was necessary that Fergus should obtain provision for his stock. In this respect, he was very highly favored. The land subsequently owned by David Ralston, south of Indiana, was then partly clear to timber and

brush, and clothed with a coat of luxuriant grass, of which he cut a sufficient quantity to supply his animals during the whole winter.

He then employed himself in clearing land for the purpose of raising grain. The difficulties of a pioneer's life can only be apprehended fully by those who have had such experience as this family had, and the hardships and annoyances are almost beyond human conception. They were buoyed up with the promise made far back in the days that are numbered with the past, that "the desert places should be made glad and the wilderness to blossom as the rose."

The greatest annoyance was the venomous reptiles and beasts of prey, with which the country abounded. It was almost miraculous if they could go beyond their cabin door without hearing the quick snap of the vice-like jaws of the wolf or seeing the subtle panther crouching on a neighboring tree, its fiercely brilliant eyes peering through the thick frontage, or the bloodshot eyes of the catamount glaring hideously from a neighboring thicket. It was nothing uncommon to be confronted by a huge bear or two, who were at all times ready to greet them with a friendly "hug."

The copper-head and rattle-snakes were so numerous that, attracted by the shelter of the house, they would steal into it and secrete themselves in the beds or any place that would afford them concealment. The cunning fox, too, could be seen loitering around in constant readiness to commit some petty depredation.

Their cattle were in imminent danger of the most ferocious of these animals, and not unfrequently Mr. Moorhead or his wife was placed under the necessity of taking dogs and going to their relief, if they could not escape and get into the house. At night they were very annoyed by their attacking the cattle or sheep in their pens, and Mr. Moorhead would frequently be forced to arise and assist the dogs in driving them away. This was always attended with the greatest danger, from the fact before mentioned, that the snakes were so numerous as to almost preclude the possibility of escaping unharmed. They were also in constant dread of the Indians, who when the attention of the dogs were drawn to the nocturnal depredators of the cattle and sheep pens, might seize the opportunity to attack the family in their wild-wood home.

He had brought with him a sufficient quantity of flour to answer his wants till his potatoes and corn would be matured, and fit for use in the fall. The corn he had to carry to a mill on the Kiskiminitis, in what is now Westmoreland county, to be ground into meal. Here new difficulties had to be encountered, inasmuch as he had to go the intervening distance between his house and the mill, without the aid of a road, his course lying through the woods, up hill and down dale; through brake, brush and swamp, and his only guide, the bright sun that shone in the heavens above him. At night, he had to lie out-doors, and his horses had to content themselves with such sustenance as the woods afforded. The dangers of the day would only be supplanted by those of the night. We can imagine that his was "no very comforting condition," and the thought of his wife and three children, in the midst of the wild forests, was not calculated to aid to his peace of mind.

The wild game which abounded in the woods, supplied him with all the animal food of which he was in need, but for salt, tobacco, iron, clothes, &c., he had to return to Franklin county, and these articles had also to be packed across the mountains, on horseback. This was no small undertaking for one man, nor was it unattended by great danger, for it required three or four weeks to make the journey. During all that time, he would travel day and night, halting only long enough to permit his horse to graze on the grass that grew in the woods, which was the only food upon which they had to subsist, not knowing at what moment he might be killed by the Indians, or devoured by some wild beast. The reflection that this small family might be at the mercy of the savages, and that on his return he might find them murdered, his home burned, and his good destroyed, was a source of infinite concern to him, and but served to urge him along the more speedily.

Such were the difficulties and anxieties under which Mr. Moorhead lived for four years from the time he left his fireside and his home in Franklin county, and located in what is now Indiana county, till the ever memorable year of 1776.

Independence year was fraught with important national events and individual incidents. In that year the American colonies took active measures to shake off the "British Yoke," and, in the same year, several engagements, on land and on the sea, occurred. The British employed all the Indians that would engage on their side, to the number, as has been estimated, of about twelve thousand, but many small parties, acting as spies and marauders on the frontier, were not included in that estimate.

At this time of which we write, Samuel Moorhead, who had been elected, captain, was stationed, (in July, 1776), with a small company of backwoods militia, at Kittanning. Being attacked with the small pox, he was unable to perform his duty as an officer, and on this account went to his brother, Fergus, and

prevailed on him to take command of the company, while he remained with Fergus' family until he had recovered from his illness. He then returned to Kittanning, and he and Fergus passed the evening together in talking about their family and friends, and planning how they should manage their business. It was agreed that Fergus should return to his home on the following morning, in company with a soldier named Simpson.

A party of Indians, who were lurking around the fort, happened to overhear the conversation of the Moorheads, and, being well acquainted with the road Moorhead and Simpson would take in the morning – it being what was then known as the “Kittanning Path” – the secreted themselves near it, on a hill, since called “Blanket Hill,” about midway between Kittanning and Moorhead's, and there awaited the approach of their intended victims. Upon the arrival the Moorhead and Simpson, who, though on horseback and armed, did not suspect an attack, the Indians fired, killing Simpson and the two horses on the spot, and before Moorhead could extricate himself seized him and made him a prisoner. After scalping Simpson, they stripped off his clothes and left his naked body lying at the side of the path, with the two dead horses.

The Indians ordered Moorhead to take off his boots, and loaded the two saddles and bridles on his back, and thus accoutred, started with him into the woods, so as to evade pursuit, marching in single file, and taking care not to tramp down the weeds, in order to leave their trail as indistinct as possible. In this way they proceeded rapidly all day, and in the evening came to a halt to take supper, which consisted of the remains of a deer killed some days previous, and of a ground hog, which one of the party shot during the evening.

Having regaled themselves with the food just mentioned, the party prepared for lodgings by gathering some dry leaves on which to sleep. And then made arrangements to secure Moorhead against escape during the night. They caused him to lay down, and drove a stake in the ground on each side of him and passed a long rope over his body, on each end of which an Indian laid himself. In this way they confined him every night during his captivity.

On the following morning Moorhead was deprived of his clothes, and forced to put on an Indian dress. He was compelled as the day before, to carry the saddles and bridles, and to travel all that day and all the day following, without eating anything. They also took from him his tobacco, thus depriving him of what, under the circumstances, would have been to him a great luxury. After traveling about fifty miles, over hills and rocks, through swamps and thickets, and crossing streams and ravines, they reached an Indian camp. The Indian that had shot Simpson, and the one who first seized Moorhead, fired off their guns and raised the scalp halloo as they approached the encampment. This was a long yell for every scalp that was taken, followed by shrill, quick, piercing shrieks. These were answered from the camp by the discharge of rifles and whooping and cries of joy. All rushed out to meet the approaching party.

As the Indians crowded around him, Moorhead expected to be put to death at once, but they offered him no violence, and entertained the war party with great hospitality. Here they remained two nights and a day, and leaving only in the morning after the second night, traveled about forty miles, and in the evening reached an Indian village. Here he saw the Indians for the first time, perform several dances, one of which was the war dance, from which circumstances he inferred his hour was come, and that he was to be killed forthwith.

But his apprehensions were happily unfounded, though he was compelled to pass through a trying ceremony. After kindling a large fire, the whole company, men, women and children, danced around it for a long time, and then formed into two lines, armed with hatchets, ramrods and switches. Having thus arranged matters, Moorhead was called to run the gauntlet, but as he had never before heard of such a ceremony, he did not understand them. His captor endeavored to explain it to him, saying he was to pass through the two lines and receive a blow from each individual as he passed, and exhorted him to run his best, as the faster he ran the sooner the performance would be over.

Moorhead entered upon the chase with the feelings of a man who supposed he was running for his life, and was severely switched along the line, three-fourths of the way, when a tall chief, more devilish, if possible, than his companions, threw sand in his eyes, which added to his pain and completely blinded him. He tried, however, to proceed, but in his effort to grope along, he was pushed about from one to another, and struck and switched until two young warriors each took him by the hand, and ran with him into a wigwam, where he was quickly visited by his captor, who asked him if he felt sore? Moorhead replied that he felt very much hurt, and inquired what he had done to merit such usage? The Indian replied he had done no harm, that he had now seen all their ceremonies, and that in future he would receive better treatment.

Moorhead was taken by his captors to Quebec. On their way thither the party traveled leisurely, some days advancing but two or three miles. Relying entirely upon their success in hunting for the means of

subsistence, it may readily be understood that they did not “fare sumptuously” every day, but after reaching Quebec, Moorhead was sold to the British, and there kept in confinement for eleven months. The treatment now received was worse, he said, than that which he received from the Indians.

His food was of the coarsest and most unhealthy sort, the bread being dry and mouldy and the meat sour and sometimes almost putrid. From the second day of his captivity till the close his garments were neither changed nor washed. During all of that time his hair was not cut nor combed nor his beard shaved. At the end of eleven months he was exchanged and sent to New York.

From New York, Moorhead set out immediately, on foot, for his former home in Franklin county. Though supplied with provisions, such was the reduced state of his health, in consequence of long confinement and ill-treatment, that he was able only to carry a small stock with him. He was obliged to halt often during the day to rest his weary limbs, and, as his route lay mostly through the wilderness, he had to sleep at night in the open air.

At length his stock of provisions became exhausted; he found himself compelled to kill a dog that followed him from New York, and to subsist upon its meat. Even this unpalatable food did not hold out, and he lived for some days upon frogs and fruits. So altered was his appearance that when he reached his father's, in Franklin county, no one knew him.

From the day on which he was taken prisoner until his arrival in Franklin county he had not heard a word of his family, neither did they know anything concerning his fate. Mrs. Moorhead had been left with three children, and soon after her husband's capture gave birth to a fourth, which was among the first, if not the first, white child born in this country, and was named by his mother, Fergus, after the father. In the meantime one of the children had died with the small-pox, and on Mrs. Moorhead devolved the melancholy duty, in the absence of any assistance, to close its eyes, make its coffin and deposit it in the silent grave. Shortly afterwards she was visited by her brother, who assisted her in boxing up and burying her provisions and effects, after which she accompanied him on horseback to her former home in Franklin county, where she remained till the unexpected return of her husband, for all had given him up for lost.

In 1781, Fergus Moorhead, with his wife and children, returned to his border home. What was remarkable was the articles which Mrs. Moorhead had buried in the ground were mostly in a state of preservation. The live stock was gone, having most probably been killed by the Indians. A number of families from the counties east of the mountains came with Moorhead and settled in the vicinity.

Among this number were James Kelly, James Thompson,\* Moses Chambers, Colonel Sharp, S. and W. Hall, his brothers, Samuel and Joseph, the Walkers, Dixons, Dotys, and others.

The first thing that was accomplished was the erection of a fort or block house near Moorhead's cabin (near the present site of the stone house), large enough to contain all the families and their effects. Here they remained at night and also during the ensuing winter, considering it unsafe to sleep in their cabins. They next betook themselves to clearing out farms, and would work alternately on each tract, so as to give each individual an equal chance with the others, to have his ground prepared for seeding in the fall.

While the party was at work felling timber and clearing ground, two or three men would stand guard with loaded rifles so as to give timely notice of the approach of danger, and be ready to resist an attack from the enemy. But the Indians did not assail them, probably on account of the precautionary measures lastly mentioned.

In the course of a few years, the settlers became comfortably situated. They raised live stock and grain in abundance, engaged in domestic manufactures, and erected saw and grist mills, and soon became a thrifty community. Their children grew up and settled lands around them, and each year brought arrivals of new families from the east.

As the settlements increased, the Indians withdrew, and in a little over twenty years from the period of Moorhead's return, this section had been organized into a county, its seat of justice had been located, and its public buildings were erected.

Mr. Moorhead died at the age of eighty-nine, and has left a numerous and respectable progeny, many of whom are yet residents of this county. Some of them occupy the very spot which was the theatre of so many trials and hardships in days of yore.

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\* See sketch of James Thompson.