

John King's Statement

From the Ezra Meeker Collection, MS 2, Box 9, 7/4

John King, a boy just short of seven years old, and his siblings survived the White River Massacre of October 28, 1855, although his mother and stepfather were killed. Sometime in the second decade of the 20th century, King apparently gave an account of his experience to Ezra Meeker. The following was transcribed from that typewritten document:

The Indians were frequent visitors at our house. They were "blanket" Indians mostly, and generally very uncouth, unkempt and untidy, and repulsive [sic]. As the season of 1855 advanced there was an uneasy feeling along the White River Valley. In fact some two weeks previous to the massacre a few families did remove to Seattle. On the first Firday [sic] preceeding [sic] the outbreak Nelson, one of the chief men of the Indians if the vicinity, came early in the forenoon to visit us, and remained until nearly noon. I remember that day he was unusually quiet and uncommunicative. Mother kept on with her household duties passing before and around him as occasion required. His talk was mostly in monosyllables and then only in reply to some question or suggestion. Finally he left, and said in mixed Indian and English, that "It would not be very long until Indian be gone and white man have all the land around here."

When my step-father returned we told him what Nelson had [said]. It was an enigma. It caused us an uneasy evening. I have sometimes thought he was trying as near as he dared to give us a warning, although some insist he was simply endeavoring to quiet our fears for the purpose of murdering us.

The Sunday following Nelson's visit, was the twenty-eighth day of October eighteen hundred and fifty-five. My step-father was not well, and was in bed in the southwest bedroom—his bed was in the northeast corner of the room. He is said to have had an attack of pleurisy. Mother, Enos Cooper (our hired man), by half-sister, and my half-brother and myself were at the table eating breakfast. The table was set in the center of the large room. Then came a sound from the door, a peculiar noise, but one which we recognized as being made by an Indian. As I remember, they never rapped at the door, but instead, uttered a peculiar grunt or guttural [sic] sound until some one opened the door. Mother started for the door, and by the time she had reached it we three children were beside her. As she opened the door there stood an Indian, but he was not standing before the door. He was standing a little to one side, and as the door was opened more widely he moved still further to the side. As his action attracted my attention I glanced past him towards the small log house and was startled to see another Indian who was standing back of one of the corners of the house with his gun pointed out between the ends of the logs; his face was to the gun and his hand near the trigger. I shall never forget the sight! I seemed as though I was looking directly into the muzzle of the weapon. Mother must have observed it at the same instant; because, before I could speak about it she screamed and at the same time seized us and threw us away from the door which she closed violently, and fastened. She did all this in an incredibly short time. It was evidently the intention to shoot

whoever should come to the door, and, of course it would have been natural for them to hope it might be one of the male adults. They had skulked upon us while we were at breakfast, because as soon as the door closed there were guns fired and the war-whoop was given. I looked out of the southeast window and saw Indians coming toward the house whooping and jumping, and swinging their tomahawks, and gesticulating in an excited manner. They seemed to rise out of the ground. There were a dozen or more in sight when I looked out, but there must have been more a few minutes later. They were armed with flintlock muskets which carried an ounce ball and did terrible execution. They attacked the front of the house, and began firing through the door and windows. I shall never forget the sickening sensation at the report of the guns, the sound of shivering glass, and my realizing sense of our utter hopelessness of our situation. Mother got my step-father's seven shooter and returned a few shots, but she soon discontinued its use. After a time she took us into the northwest bed-room, and bidding us get into the northwest corner of the room, as that was the farthest from the point of attack, covered us up with a feather bed. She did this I suppose to take advantage of the fact that it is a difficult matter to send a musket ball through a mass of feathers, especially the old flintlock-musket ball. I became tired of my confinement and peered cautiously from beneath the bed. I noticed that the direction of the balls was more upward than horizontal; they were coming through my step-father's room and tore huge slivers from the partition between the rooms. There [sic] were mostly over his bed. Waiting a time I crept along the floor to the door into the large room. Soon my step-father came to his door and was leaning against the left side of the door. Mother did not seem to have known of his presence there. I was watching him when I saw him stagger and lean more heavily against the casing of the door. He said "Oh God, I am shot!" Mother turned quickly and advancing said "Oh, Harry don't say so!" and support him in her arms. He opened his shirt front and there was a huge wound near the nipple. The ball had come through the front door. She helped him back to his bed. I returned to my hiding place. I shall never forget their parting. His prayers and advice were mingled with her sobs. After a time his moans ceased and I knew that he was dead. I never saw him again. In a short time I heard my mother and Mr. Cooper discussing the hopelessness of affairs; Mother told him that resistance was useless and advised him to attempt to escape. He came into the room where I was. With an axe he pried off a window-stop and then removed the lower sash. I saw him hesitate; he looked on way and another, then leaped from the window. A short time after the escape of Cooper there was a lull in the firing. I noticed steps in the large room which were not my mother's. Looking again from beneath my hiding place I saw that the rooms were much lighter than before, and that the Indians had gained an entrance into the house, one of whom was carrying some bread in his arms. I was taken outside. One of the first I saw was Nelson who was seated upon a cut from a log turned up upon and a few feet from the door. He seems to be directing the rest what to do. I was taken to him, as were my sister and brother a few moments later. At first I was anxious and afraid, but he told me not to fear; that he could protect me. I trusted him implicitly I remember and assured the children there was no danger because Nelson had said so. They were not as certain of this as I. When, or how mother left the house I never knew, nor did I see her after she hid us under the bed until after the Indians left the burning house. Nelson was kind to me, and as I remember, seemed to talk aside to me as though he did not want the other Indians to hear him. Strangely enough he took me to Mr. Thomas' where I had gone

to school. The trip was dangerous enough then, as there was only a path through the woods and the distance some two miles, but would be much more so now. The Indians were carrying out blankets, clothing and other inflammable articles and stuffing them beneath the house; they fired these and thus the house was gotten well ablaze.

Nelson dismissed all but one Indian, who, he said would help me to get to Mr. Thomas'. After a time Nelson left and we were then in the care of the Indian. When it pleased him, he started with us. He had me by the hand, I held sister's and she in turn was leading our little brother. I was surprised and alarmed at his starting towards the southeast, and demurred. He insisted and kept on; we began holding back. He partly led and dragged us to a low place in a rail fence. Near the barn a few rods from the house, here he suddenly let go of my hand and we staggered backward and nearly fell to the ground. The Indian petulantly [sic] muttered something which I have now forgotten. His manner was such as to lead me to think he did not care what became of us. He soon disappeared and I was alone with the children. I studied a time what was best to do. I concluded first to go to a nearer neighbor than Mr. Thomas'. I remember how our house appeared; it was consumed except some of the studding which were erect and smoking; the little one roomed building was burned also; the barn and out buildings were standing when I left. Leading the children I started for one of our neighbors living toward the south. I am not sure whether it was Mr. Lake's I had in mind or Mr. Brannon's but I believe I went to Mr. Brannon's.

As I went along I called long, often and loudly upon Mr. Cooper hoping he might hear me, but I became alarmed at the echo of my call from the woods for fear I might attract the attention of any Indians who might prowling about. I had not gone far until I became convinced I could get along better without the children. Looking around I found a roundish depression in the ground in which I placed them and covered them over with brush, charging them to remain there and keep still until I should return. I hurried to the neighbors, cautiously approaching after I came in sight of the house. As I came nearer I saw that the door was open; then that the windows were broken; and upon closer approach that the chairs, tables and other furniture was scattered about, and that the bed-ticks and pillows were ripped open and the feathers flying about here and there. Found no one either dead or alive, and then made my way back to the children. I then took them back to the ruins of our home. We were hungry; we had been driven from the breakfast table. In the log building had been stored some potatoes and several firkins of butter; the potatoes were nicely roasted, and there were streams of butter from the charred firkins. I dug some potatoes from the pile and spread some butter upon them and thus made a satisfactory meal for all of us. I now thought of making my way to Mr. Thomas'. I went in a somewhat circuitous way past the barn and wood shed. While here a half grown pup, a great favorite and a very noisy fellow too, came bounding to me. The children played with him, and I was at first disposed to comply with their wish that we take him with us. On second thought I knew it would not do as he would certainly betray our presence should he see an Indian. I did what was very hard to do—took a stick and frightened him away. I shall never forget the expression upon the poor brute's face at this unexpected and unusual treatment. Going father I again called Cooper! Cooper! but the only answer I received was the pitiful echo from the woods. As I was passing along I unexpectedly

came upon my mother prostrate upon the ground some hundred feet or so south-west from the remains of our dwelling. She was yet alive. I do not know how or when she came there, nor what was the nature of her injuries. She was pleased to know we as yet were safe, but chided me for my delay in making my escape. She told me I must take the children and go to Mr. Thomas' (the same man that Nelson had named a few hours before). I did not want to leave here; she told me it was best; that she could not live, and that I might save the children and myself. I wanted to remain. She explained that if the Indians should come back they would probably kill us all, and that I must go. With a sad heart and a courage inspired by my mother's charge of responsibility I made the attempt to do as she bade me. I never saw her again.

Our route lay through heavy timber and dense undergrowth [sic] along a path narrow and winding, some two miles as I remember. When I came to where Mr. Thomas had lived, the house was deserted. I went a fourth of a mile or so farther, to where I expected or hoped to find some white person, but they were gone. I went still further, but could not get near the house because of a cross dog guarding the empty dwelling. I returned to Mr. Thomas' not knowing what to do next. Mechanically I began retracing my way to my home. The children were a constant source of danger to me and themselves. My little brother was inconsolable. He wanted to go home to see his mother. He seemed to think I was out upon an expedition of my own and would not go home. I could keep my sister quiet by saying Indians kill; but my little brother did not understand the meaning of this, nor how his crying might attract the attention of the Indians should any be near. I was becoming tired as I had carried my brother the greater part of our trip, over three miles or so. I lacked about two weeks of being seven years old; sister was not quite four, and brother was not quite two years of age. It was getting late in the afternoon of a day late in the fall; they, and I too, were getting hungry, and I had nothing to give them or eat myself, except bark and an edible root which mother at one time showed me. I was in danger from Indians and wild animals, and as far as I know, some twenty miles from a white settlement. An almost overwhelming sense of my danger and helplessness came over me as I thought of the coming night. But I trudged on. Glancing along the path, to my consternation, I saw an Indian coming towards us. From his manner I felt sure he had neither seen nor heard us. My first thought was for the safety of the children. It flashed through my mind that they might be ransomed if captured. With this idea in mind I hastened into the underbrush, secreted them, charged them to remain quiet, and then ran diagonally back to the path nearer the Indian than where I left. I hoped in case he killed me he would spare the children. As we came nearer I recognized him as an Indian I had frequently seen while attending school at Mr. Thomas'—the school began the 27th of July—that summer. We called him Tom. I told him of the massacre. He said he suspected something of the kind as he had heard firing in that direction. He told me that I should get the children and take them to his wigwam, adding that "when the moon was high" he would take us to Seattle in his canoe. His squaw was as kind and amiable as could be, and did all in her power to make it pleasant for us, but the children were very shy. She set out dried fish and whortleberries for our repast, but nothing she could do would induce them to go near her. Our hunger was so great that the various and penetrating odors permeating the food she had brought us was no bar to our relish for it as I remember. A short time after we went there I had left the tent. I heard a cracking of brush near by. I turned. The

squaw had following me to have me return to quiet the children. After I had gotten them calmed, she spread a huge bear skin upon the ground (floor) of the tent and soon we were all sound asleep. Sometime during the night I was awakened by some one tugging at my shoulder.

Tom stood over me and said that it was time to go. The moon “was high” because it was shining brightly down through the circular hole at the top a peak of the wigwam. I was sleepy, and the children positively cross; they were “dead for sleep.” I made out to get them loaded into the canoe and we started for Seattle. Near the mouth of the Duwamish River we were delivered to another Indian –“Dave”—who headed for the sloop-of-war Decatur lying in Elliot Bay detailed there for the protection of that part of the coast. She was a little over five hundred tons burden, and carried sixteen guns. She was built in 1838, and at the time of which I speak was in command of Captain Sterrett. Dave delivered us to the marines and we were taken on board by them. He laughed heartily at me as we came within hailing distance of the sloop because I dropped flat to the bottom of the canoe thinking I was about to be s