Simon Girty Biography

Simon Girty

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Biography

Simon Girty (1741-1818), American frontiersman and one of American history's infamous renegades, defected to the British during the Revolution and led Indian raids on his own people.

Simon Girty was born near Harrisburg, Pa. His father was killed by Indians, Simon was held prisoner by the Seneca for 3 years, and at 15 he was forced to watch his stepfather being tortured to death at the stake. Yet Girty almost became a Seneca and was close to the Delaware Indians, too. After his release from captivity, he worked for the British as an interpreter of the Seneca language. However, he had no qualms about serving in Lord Dunmore's War against the Shawnee.

After 1776 Girty acted as an interpreter for the Continental Congress until he was discharged for "ill behavior." He served with Indian fighters and led a small expedition in 1778. Then, suddenly, he turned against the American cause and fled to Detroit to work for the British. He interpreted for lieutenant governor and Indian superintendent Henry Hamilton, the notorious "Hair Buyer," who traded goods with his Indian allies for Yankee scalps.

Girty acquired such strong influence over Indian war parties that he accompanied and even led them on raids into Pennsylvania and Kentucky settlements. On a foray in 1782 his reputation for cruelty was documented by a witness who reported Girty's participation in the torture-murder of Col. William Crawford. Girty particularly wanted the scalp of Col. John Gibson because the colonel had repulsed Girty's siege of Ft. Laurens and in a captured letter had bragged that he would trepan Girty--that is, open his skull--if he caught him.

After defeating David Rogers' force on the Ohio River in 1779, Girty and his warriors helped capture Ft. Liberty, where despite British assurances of safety many prisoners were slaughtered. After the Revolution, Girty participated in the defeat of Gen. Arthur St. Clair on the Wabash in 1791 and fought against Gen. Anthony Wayne at Fallen Timbers in 1794. Girty had to flee to Canada after the Americans occupied Detroit in 1796.

When Oliver Hazard Perry's 1813 victory on Lake Erie opened Canada to American forces, Girty fled to his friends the Mohawks. His house was overrun but not destroyed because the Americans did not realize that the renegade had lived there. He returned to it in 1816, old and blind, and died on Feb. 18, 1818.