

Simon Kenton's Gauntlet

by Alan King

Simon Kenton was born in the Bull Run Mountains of Prince William County, Virginia in 1755, of an Irish immigrant father and a mother who was a first generation Virginian. He was a large, strong youth and would be a larger man. He left his home at the age of 16 to find his way in the Kentucky wilderness. Stories tell of how Simon was madly in love with a girl named Ellen Cummins. When he found out that she was to be wed to another, he was enraged. He called the groom out to fight on the wedding day, and he was beaten senseless by Willy Leachman and his friends for his arrogance. Soon after, he met the young man alone and returned the favor. In fact, he believed that he had killed his rival.

Simon's uncle was an Indian trader who had brought back many tales of the wilderness along the Ohio River. He told of the skies blackened by the passage of birds, the ground shaking from the passage of buffalo, and the fish so thick in the streams that they could be caught by hand. Fearing hanging, Simon left for the wilds of Kentucky in 1771. Kenton traveled for several weeks before reaching Pennsylvania, where he met a wealthy miller named Butler.

Using the name Simon Butler, Kenton soon convinced Butler that they were long lost relatives from Ireland. He worked for Butler for two months and got good wages and a fine flintlock rifle. Kenton named it "Jacob" and it soon became like a part of him. He also used Butler's name for nine years, only going back to Kenton after learning that he hadn't killed Leachman after all. Ironically, Leachman had been accused of killing Kenton.

Soon Kenton began looking to join a party that was going to "Kaintuckee." He made several unsuccessful attempts to find the canebrakes he had heard about, but finally in 1775 he found fields and fields of cane on Limestone Creek.

He was severely tested many times in his first few years on the frontier. Once, during the winter of 1773, he escaped naked with one other survivor of an Indian attack and wandered in the Kentucky wilderness for a week barefoot and hungry before finding other hunters.

Kenton formed many lasting friendships among his fellow frontiersmen, including Daniel Boone and George Rogers Clark. He is said to have saved Boone's life at least once. He is credited with saving many settlers' lives over the years. He also made lasting enemies of the Shawnee.

In September of 1778, while on an expedition to steal Shawnee horses, he was captured near the Ohio River by a band of Shawnee. The Shawnees knew him as "bahd-ler," the man who's rifle was never empty (because of Simon's ability to reload while running); the man who a hundred Shawnee had vowed to capture, only to fail. Only Daniel Boone's capture would have been more important. This respect for Kenton's abilities as a warrior probably saved his life. The Shawnee had much slower and more painful ways to dispatch great enemies.

They tested him with nine of the legendary "gauntlets." Shawnee from all over the area would form a double line armed with sticks and clubs and force a prisoner to run between them. The first of these gauntlets took place in the Shawnee village of Old Chillicothe which is located where the present day Xenia Township village of Oldtown now stands. Several markers commemorate the gauntlet and mark the location of the original village. This gauntlet was nearly 1/2 mile long and went from Sexton Point south of Oldtown to the large council house near the present Tecumseh Motel. Kenton was forced to run this gauntlet twice before breaking through the line and running nearly to the council house where he was struck unconscious.

Soon the Shawnee Council declared him "Cut-ta-ho-tha" which means "condemned to be burned at the stake." His execution was to be a national event for the Shawnee and after painting him black, they started for the town of Wampatomica at the center of the Shawnee territory, where the largest audience could be gathered. They took Kenton from village to village staging new gauntlets in each village.

After the sixth, while attempting escape, Kenton had a hole hammered in his skull by a ceremonial pipe/tomahawk and was unconscious for two days. On the day that he was to die, he was recognized by a fellow frontiersman and blood brother, Simon Girty. Girty was a great friend to the Shawnee and he pleaded successfully for Kenton's life. Simon was then adopted by the Shawnee, and since the Shawnee were allied with the British against the Americans at that time, he eventually made his way to the British fort of Detroit. Finally in the summer of 1779 he was able to escape from Detroit and make his way back to his settlement.

He eventually managed to earn the rank of General, and despite his wild life and numerous battles, he lived to the ripe old age of 80 years, fathering nine children. He is buried near Bellfontaine, where he made his home after the wars with the Shawnee were over.