

Lesson Forty

George Rogers Clark

LESSON IDEA

To tell the story of one a great American frontiersmen and to learn how his courage and leadership helped to safeguard the western flank of the colonies during the Revolutionary War.

PREPARATION

Read "During The Week" and have a copy of *Quest Of A Hemisphere* on hand.

SHRIEKING WAR WHOOPS, flashing tomahawks, and sweeping destruction brought the War for Independence home to every man, woman, and child living on the western frontier of America in 1776. They were not forced to defend themselves against smartly uniformed soldiers, but against savages who would murder the smallest child or most helpless woman without hesitation. Neither age nor gender mattered when the scalps were presented for payment at Fort Detroit. Henry Hamilton, the fort's commandant and dutiful English servant, paid handsome rewards for such trophies.

Hamilton sought to hound American settlers along the Mississippi, Ohio, and Wabash river valleys. At his direction, homes were burned, cattle were slaughtered, homes were destroyed, and entire families were murdered. Preferring to avoid the dirty work himself, he instead sought help from Indians willing to participate in the barbarism.

It was a strategy both uncivilized and cowardly, yet quite successful. What persuaded the Indians who carried out the raids and massacres to do so? [Explain that the settlers, as they pushed further west, cleared trees, built cabins, and planted crops on hunting grounds that the Indians believed belonged to them.]

What did the British hope to gain by exploiting and encouraging this savagery? [Ask each family member to express an opinion.] England at the time was a haughty and self-righteous world power determined to maintain her rule over the 13 colonies, which occupied only a narrow strip of land east of the Allegheny Mountains. If the colonies could be contained within that area, then

the rich and unexplored wilderness to the west would be England's to exploit. British agents could strip valuable resources from the continent, deliver it to British ships at the mouth of the Mississippi River, and then reap enormous profits by selling the raw materials to other countries. Only a Herculean effort by American frontiersmen kept this British scheme from reaching fruition.

One such frontier hero was George Rogers Clark of Virginia, a schoolmate of James Madison and personal friend of Thomas Jefferson. At the age of 19, Clark had followed the wilderness trails west in a search for cheap and plentiful land. When he found the acres that pleased him, he settled into the life of a farmer and log cabin pioneer.

Clark was, however, more soldier than settler. In 1774, when troops from Virginia passed near his cabin on their way to fight the Indian tribes that were raiding frontier settlements, he left his farm to join them. It was during the ensuing war that Clark established his reputation as an Indian fighter. And it was in the wake of the war that victorious Virginia gained rights to the wilderness lands that now include Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana.

In 1775 Clark moved into Kentucky, where famed frontiersman Daniel Boone had helped to organize a settlement called Boone's Fort. Within a year Clark earned the rank of major in the militia. The Boone's Fort pioneers, as angry with Britain's high-handed colonial policies as were the New England patriots, realized they might soon be forced to fight the British as well as the Indians. Indeed, only a few weeks prior to the battles at Lexington and Concord, the Kentucky settlers appointed a committee to draft resolutions of independence and frame rules for self-government as a new province.

But England did not choose to fight openly in the West. She preferred instead Hamilton's strategy of enticing Indians to terrorize, kill, plunder, and scalp. At Boone's Fort, Clark began planning countermeasures. The solution, he believed, was

to move north (conquering British outposts along the way) until reaching Detroit, where much of England's war-making potential could be destroyed.

During the winter of 1778 he sent two spies to visit the main settlements. According to their reports, the British posts at Vincennes, Kaskaskia, St. Louis, and Cahokia were manned by small garrisons comprised of ex-French officers and privates. The population of the area was predominantly French. As in Canada, England had let the people largely manage their own affairs, confident that they would not take up arms against her. But would the French, who disliked the English, nevertheless risk blood to defend the outposts from attack by the Americans? Clark's agents assured him that they would not, speculating that a small force of determined frontiersmen could easily sweep through the entire district, and that the residents would welcome them as deliverers.

Based on this intelligence, Clark set out for Virginia to present his proposed blueprint for victory to Patrick Henry, who had recently been reelected governor. Henry enthusiastically approved the plan, as did George Mason and Thomas Jefferson. Official orders soon followed, authorizing Clark to enlist seven companies of 50 men each, and to purchase flatboats, guns, powder, and supplies. Returning to Kentucky, he established his supply base on a small island in the Ohio River, opposite the present site of Louisville.

In June 1778, Clark and 130 of his fellow frontiersmen set out to conquer the western frontier. They canoed down the Ohio River to a deserted French outpost in southern Illinois, then marched overland, with munitions and supplies on their backs, to Kaskaskia, a fort on the Mississippi south of St. Louis.

ON THE EVENING of July 4th they sighted the outpost. Waiting until dark, they burst raucously into town, creating an impression that their force was far larger than actually the case. They captured the fort without a fight. The commandant, as the Clark's scouts had reported, was a Frenchman with only a handful of men and no desire for battle. The people, also French, welcomed the Americans and, though

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

Many of the details of Clark's expeditions mentioned in this lesson were taken from Volume 5 of historian John Clark Ridpath's *The New Complete History of the United States of America*. For further details about the frontier war against the British and Indians, see Chapter 45 ("The West And The Revolution"). Ridpath's fascinating and reliable historical works may be available at your local library.

they must have been startled by the appearance of their guests, prepared a feast in their honor. After marching 120 miles through swampy wilderness, the frontiersmen's clothes were ragged, their leggings mud-crusting, and their feet almost bare.

Clark sent a small force north to Cahokia, which was as easily conquered as Kaskaskia. With the help of a French priest, Father Gibault, he made peace with the region's principal Indian tribes.

With the preliminaries of his campaign over, Clark was now anxious to strike at the heart of British power: the fort at Detroit and its commandant, Henry Hamilton. He intended to move his base of operations to Vincennes on the Wabash River, but Father Gibault persuaded him to remain at Kaskaskia and allow the Frenchman to take a small force to Vincennes, and other Wabash towns, to explain the American plan. The French priest succeeded in persuading the people in those areas to pledge their allegiance to the American cause and to participate in the plan to capture Detroit.

Hamilton, predictably, reacted to Clark's victorious sweep with the fury of a cornered lion. With a force of some 400 soldiers, 350 Indian warriors from 13 tribes, and several cannon, he started immediately for Vincennes. The people of the unfortunate village had no choice but to submit to the British commandant and renew their oath of allegiance to England. Hamilton planned a spring campaign to recover the lost settlements. He repaired and armed the fort and began gathering a larger coterie of Indians (within a few days he recruited 700), bringing his total force to 1,500 men. He then began sending out war parties to burn settlements and kill Americans. At one point Hamilton's hordes even threatened Clark's forces at Kaskaskia and Cahokia. They opted for easier prey, however, when the Virginian utilized his cannon to clear trees in a wide circle around the forts to preclude the assailants from taking cover.

During this time there were probably some on the American side who mocked Clark his "grand plan" for conquering the western frontier. His forces appeared to be surrounded and hopelessly outnumbered. Others may have condemned him for making matters worse by inciting Hamilton to even more outrageous atrocities. Is it unusual to mock a leader when his plans are not going smoothly? Do real leaders quit in despair when confronted with such opposition? [Encourage family members to make comparisons with today's world leaders and events]

Clark had no intention of surrendering to an enemy as barbaric as the British commander. The Virginian had two qualities that seem essential to all great leaders: persistence and realistic confidence in his own judgment. He continued to drill his men, train volunteers from nearby settlements, and wait (and watch) the enemy.

At last, his opportunity came in January 1779 when a Spanish merchant from Vincennes brought news that Hamilton had only 80 men (or thereabouts) defending his fortress. The rest had been sent on massacre missions with orders to continue the butchery until spring, when Hamilton planned to call them back and sweep the West clean of Americans.

It was now or never for the American cause, and Clark did not hesitate. Leaving his volunteer militia to guard Cahokia and Kaskaskia, he dispatched a company of riflemen to Vincennes in a small boat mounted with cannon. He and 130 seasoned frontiersmen traversed nearly 180 miles of unbroken wilderness across southern Illinois.

THE RIVERS had flooded the bottom lands, yet in only 11 days the Americans were within nine miles of their target. They had marched around 15 miles each day through mud and rain with rifles, ammunition, food, and blankets on their backs. But the worst was yet to come. The Wabash River, which lay between them and the fort, had overflowed its banks and turned the plains into a slimy lake. For some of the men it seemed an impossible barrier; for others, a providential warning of impending disaster. But for Clark, who understood the far-reaching consequences to the drive for independence in general, and the settlers personally, should Hamilton be allowed to succeed with his planned spring massacre, the forbidding river was simply another obstacle to be overcome.

Here is how one historian described his coura-

geous leadership:

When Clark saw his men hesitate at the brink of a five mile stretch of water, he gave a war whoop and marched into the flood. He ordered those nearest him to start singing a favorite tune. Down the line, the men began to sing, and fell in behind their leader.

At night, the army camped on little islands of hilltops in the vast swamp. The flood seemed endless to the tired and hungry men. Each morning ushered in another day of wading. Sometimes, the water reached their armpits, forcing them to carry their rifles above their heads. The short troopers clung to floating logs and branches of trees. When soldiers dropped exhausted, their comrades pulled them into canoes to save them from drowning.

A little drummer boy, only fourteen years old, kept up the spirits of the men with his funny antics. When the water was too deep for wading, he floated on his drum, bobbing up and down like a cork, and paddled with his feet and hands. One morning when the water was coated with a film of ice, Clark hoisted the little drummer to the shoulders of a tall, comical sergeant. With his drum perched on the sergeant's head, the lad beat the charge, while Clark followed close behind them into the icy flood, waving his sword and shouting the command, "Forward! MARCH!"

Inside the fort, Commandant Hamilton must have felt smug and secure, never suspecting that with each passing hour the Americans were moving ever closer, or that the residents of the village would welcome the frontiersmen and join them in the attack. Still, Clark faced a serious disadvantage. Not only were his men exhausted after the long, hazardous march, but the batteries, boat, and riflemen he had dispatched from Kaskaskia had not yet arrived. Storming the fort was impossible; he had no defense against Hamilton's cannon.

But Clark was as ingenious as he was courageous. Under cover of darkness, he dug an entrenchment within firing range of Hamilton's strongest batteries and manned it with his most expert riflemen. Within 15 minutes after daylight the American marksmen had disabled seven gun-

ners and silenced two of Hamilton's cannon without losing a man of their own. Under the unerring rifle fire, the British could not reach their heavy weapons. On February 25, 1779, the English barbarian surrendered to Clark.

It was a monumental victory that brought renewed hope to the American patriots in the East who had suffered one defeat after another. The battle between frontiersmen and their British and Indian adversaries did not end at Vincennes, however. Before the Revolutionary War was over, many more settlers would suffer the terror of British-directed Indian massacres. And the warring tribes would experience the swift and sweeping revenge of Clark and his men. But when peace came, British control of the Northwest was broken and new treaties extended the boundaries of the United States to the Mississippi River.

Concluding Thought

George Rogers Clark, like John Adams, George Washington, and other great American leaders, had the persistence, courage, wisdom, and fearless determination that enabled Americans to follow him with confidence and Englishmen to tremble in fear at the mention of his name. His extraordinary leadership and courage safeguarded the western flank of the 13 colonies and kept the country west of the Alleghenies from being split into a new assortment of English colonies that would have barred U.S. expansion and possibly sparked another war.

Looking Ahead

Less than a century later, the 1777 citadel of British barbarity would become the home of one of America's most famous scientific geniuses. It was in Michigan that an energetic boy named Thomas Alva Edison organized his first business enterprise and began the experiments that would lead to some of the world's most valued inventions. We will learn more about Edison next week.

DURING THE WEEK

In our lessons to date, we have not mentioned many of the naval heroes who won important victories against the British. The stories of John Paul Jones and Esek Hopkins are told in *Quest Of A Hemisphere* by Donzella Cross Boyle (pp. 125-128). Read and discuss those accounts during a family dinner hour. [NOTE: We may want to post these pages on our website. — rwl]