OUR BERKSHIRES

BERKSHIRE ENTERS HISTORY

By Morgan Bulkeley

IN OUR LATE perspective of great and costly wars, King Philip's War, if it is remembered at all, is likely to be thought of as a flintlock and tomahawk operetta by Gilbert and Sullivan. Actually that Indian war, which raged all over southern New England in 1675-6, for a time threatened the very existence of the Bay, Plymouth, Rhode Island and Connecticut colonies.

At the time there were about 20,000 Indians in Southern New England and about twice as many settlers. Several thousands lost their lives. Property destruction was enormous. Communities like Northfield, Deerfield, Brookfield, Worcester, Dartmouth, Middleborough, Simsbury, Warwick and Wickford were annihilated. Others like Springfield, Westfield, Marlborough and Providence were largely destroyed by fire. In proportion to population, King Philip's War inflicted greater casualties and losses upon the people than any war in American history.

IT WAS this war that gave this county its first tie to American history through "Indian Fighter" John Talcott. As a toddler Talcott had come to Hartford in 1636 with the original company of settlers led by Thomas Hooker. Twenty years later he was a rising army officer and an elected commissioner for the United Colonies. He became a deputy and assistant magistrate as well as treasurer and chief military officer of Hartford County.

In 1676 he was made head of the army of Connecticut and led a force of 240 whites and 200 friendly Mohegan and Pequot warriors on

what his men called "the long and hungry march" into the Nipmuck country of central Massachusetts; they found few Indians. In June, however, Talcott's army put an end to a fierce Indian assault on Hadley; then they proceeded upriver in search of more Indians. An officer summed up the difficulties of the guerrilla warfare:

"Exsperienc teacheth that if the enimy bee ether alaramed or have intelligenc, great bodyes must be content with littell suckses."

After his return to Hartford, within a week Talcott was on his way into Narragansett country leading 300 English soldiers and their Indian allies. In two days of battle they killed or captured 238 Indians including women and children with the loss of but one Connecticut Indian. For Talcott, who never lost a fight, this was the greatest success.

In the second year the fortunes of war had definitely shifted to favor the aroused colonists. The always-divided Indians, dislodged from their lands, were plagued by hunger, disease and desertion. On Aug. 14 King Philip himself was betrayed and shot in a Rhode Island swamp near where the war had first erupted. Bands of fleeing Indians had begun to slip westward.

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MAJOR TALCOTT'S soldiers and Indian allies who had been in western Plymouth as late as Aug. 3 after a corn-destroying march, reached Westfield on the heels of some 150 fugitive Indians. They immediately took the trail westward through the wilderness, and on the third evening sighted the enemy campfires across the Housatonic fordway (at Great Barrington). After planning a dawn frontal attack abetted by a rear encirclement, the pursuers slept on their arms.

There are various historical accounts of the Aug. 15 onslaught

upon the unsuspecting fleeing Indian families. The plan was not perfectly executed because the flanking party down-stream was forced to shoot a warrior who had arisen for some early fishing. Talcott at once poured a volley across the river upon the awakening Indians. The rout was complete "as appeared by the dabbling of the bushes with blood observed by them that followed a little further."

Hubbard's "Narrative of Indian Wars," written somewhat later, states "45 were killed or taken prisoner, whereof 25 were fighting men, without the loss of any one of his company, besides a Mohegan Indian." Hoyt, publishing his "Antiquarian Researches" 150 years later, apparently rewrote this to "25 Indians were left on the ground and 20 were made prisoners,"—a good example of one historian promoting another's mistakes. Taylor's "History of Great Barrington" further promotes both.

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TO SET the record straight exactly 291 years after the skirmish, in spite of many historians there is no reason at all to doubt the letter sent August 19, 1676 by Ye Councill of Connecticott to Major Edmon Androsse, Esq. Govr. of Yorke, as published in the official "Colonial Records of Connecticut," especially since Major Talcott was just four days from the fight, was sitting on the council and probably drafted the letter.

It states in part: "about 150 enemie were overtaken ... neare unto Ousatunick, whereof ours slue 40 and took 15 captives some others allso were taken neare the same road who informe that the enemies design was to go over Hudson's River ... then to attempt another incursion into our quarters, to see what farther mischeifes and depradations they can doe against us ... their wicked contriveances

will doubtless incite and animate all true Englishmen to endeavoure the confusion of such blood-suckers, as are now, thorow God's mercy to us, totally routed in these partes and gathered into a nett there with you, so might more easily be extirpate, by your wisdome and care..."

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THIS ONE Berkshire battle on the day after King Philip's death was the last significant one of the war. It prompted the above council to lift the monthly austerity fasting, to disband the troops and to appoint August 30th "to be solemnly kept throughout this Colony, a day of publique Thanksgiving."