

BERRIEN & CASS COUNTY, MICHIGAN PROFILES  
PRESERVING LOCAL HISTORY  
WITH PEOPLE, EVENTS & PLACES  
By Jeannie Watson

# CHRISTIANA POLK & THE CAREY MISSION

Christiana Polk migrated to Southwest Michigan in 1822, and was a missionary at the Carey Mission in Niles, Berrien County, Michigan. She was an original pioneer of the region, and the wife of Isaac McCoy. Serving the Potawatomi of Cass and Berrien County, Michigan, she was a care giver, and angel of mercy to a people demoralized by war, and embittered by defeat. Her story provides insight into the conditions of early Southwestern Michigan, and the role that some women played in that historic drama. Chronicles of Christiana's sojourn with her husband in parts of Cass County, Berrien County, and the Elkhart territory (Indiana) explain several interesting details about the area. Her family's history and capture by the Indians is frightening and yet inspiring.

Historically those rare individuals who forged initial alliances with otherwise unfriendly cultures, and guides who found paths through unexplored territory were called PATHFINDERS. Christiana Polk, and her husband Isaac McCoy were Kentucky, Indiana, Michigan and Kansas Pathfinders. These missionaries found ways past the barriers of geography, cultural bias, human weaknesses, and the scars of war. Their Carey Mission was established at a time when fear of the Indian was rampant, and yet the needs of these human beings were great.

The Polk (Polke) family were of Irish descent, migrating from Donegal, Ireland. They settled in Whitehall, Somerset, Maryland. Christiana Polk's father was Captain Charles Polk an U.S. Army career officer, seasoned expert in the ways of the Native American Indian, and a negotiator who helped arrange the exchange of prisoners when white settlers were captured. Charles's father, William Polk (grandfather of Christiana), was the brother of the great-grandfather of James Knox Polk, 11th President of the United States. Christiana's mother, Delilah Tyler, was a historic figure in her own right. She and 4 of her children were captured by Kentucky Indian's, taken to Michigan, sold to the British, and their story became part of both states' history.

Christiana "Kitty" Polk was born on November 22, 1784 in Shelby County, Kentucky to Captain Charles Polk (1745-1823) and Delilah Tyler (1755-1797). She was raised and educated in that state. When she was age 18, on 10/6/1803 in Shelby, Kentucky, she married Isaac McCoy (1784-1846). The marriage produced 13 children: (1) Mahala (1804-1818) who died at age 14, (2) Rice (1807-1833) who practiced medicine and was a surveyor, (3) Josephine (1808-1831) who passed away at age 23, (4) Delilah (1809-1858) who wed Johnston Lykins, (5) John Calvin (1811-1889) who married Virginia Chick, (6) Elizabeth (born 1813), (7) Sarah (born 1815) who wed Thomas Givens, (8) Christina (1817-1837) who married William Ward, (9) Nancy Judson (1819-1850) was impaired by a childhood fever, (10) Eleanor (1821-1839), (11) Maria (born 1823), (12) Isaac, Jr. (1825-1849) who wed Martha Stone and was a carpenter settling in what is now Buchanan, Michigan, and (13) Charles Royce (born 1827) "who died in his youth."

As a wife and mother, Christiana was described as having "uncommon fortitude and mild disposition" by her husband. The Indian Advocate who worked with her spouse in 1846 stated that she "cheerfully met all the trials which befell her in those long years of suffering and toil, in her efforts to aid and sustain her husband in prosecuting his benevolent plans in behalf of the aborigines of America." Following her husband to Indiana, she supported his plans to improve on the plight of the Native American Indians. She supported his Clark County, Indiana Baptist ministry, and worked with him in the Indian Mission he founded on the outskirts of Terre Haute, Indiana. When the negative influences of the white man became too much to bear for the Indians, she accompanied Isaac, and his entourage, to the isolated region of Southwest Michigan in 1822, later to be called Berrien County.

There was no trail, suitable for covered wagons and oxen, heading due north from central Indiana, toward Southwest Michigan, in this era. Instead, Indiana and Michigan were laced with narrow Indian Trails, over which Native Americans traveled by foot or horse, mostly to make war on their neighbors. An oxen pulled wagon train needed more. The staff of the future Carey Mission, according to journal accounts, cut a 100 mile long road through the wildness to reach the St. Joseph River in lower Michigan. This was a challenging time for a gentile woman, with 13 children, one of which was a handicapped daughter, but Christiana made no protest.

To add to Christiana's gauntlets, Southwest Michigan had a reputation for being the home of tribes that had ambushed fleeing settlers at the Chicago Massacure, and fought in the bloody Battle of Tippicanoe and Brownstown. The inhabitants, in this era, had been described as "militant barbarians," where "warfare was part the Indian's regular routine of living." There were approximately "500 Indians in the Cass County area," and even more in Berrien County.

The last place, the McCoy wagon trail pitched their camp, before entering Southwest Michigan, was "near a little beautiful stream and lake in northern Indiana." John C. McCoy, son of Christiana Polk McCoy wrote, "my father, Isaac McCoy, named a little stream in northern Indiana, in Elkhart County, hitherto unnamed for my mother, Christiana. The clear, placid cheerful brook made him think of his wife, of her buoyant, unruffled nature . . . Christiana Creek . . . (This is still the name of the) stream that empties into the St. Joseph River a mile or two above the mouth of the Elkhart River . . .above South Bend, Indiana." Son John was less than ten years old when he witnessed the waterway christening. Others claimed that Christiana Lake in Elkhart was named after the Creek, and therefore Christiana. Another notation stated that Chistiania Lake (sometimes spelled "Christiann") and Christiana Creek in Ontwa Township, Cass County, Michigan bear her name.

When the McCoy caravan reached the woodlands west of St. Joseph River, on what is now Niles-Buchanan Road in Niles Township, Berrien County, Michigan, a survey of the area was done. It was decided that the Carey Mission would be built one mile west of the river. For ten years (1822-1832), the Carey Mission became a self-sufficient haven for the Indians, farmed over 58 acres of land, ran the finest grist mill in the region, and offered solace to the downtrodden. The Carey Mission School educated the children of the Potawatomi, and even sent some pupils to college back east. The Carey Mission Church converted the Indians to the Baptist faith, and collected a following from Cass and Berrien County. Many lived in dispersed encampments, or small farm lots, in a six mile wide area, which center was the Carey Mission, and the Indian Village of Pogwatigue (which became Niles, Michigan) .

Christiana welcomed into her home as family, Potawatomi children who had no place else to live. She taught the Indian children skills necessary for survival in a culture that was rapidly changing around them, as settlers moved into the area. When her husband had to travel, she took

over areas of leadership. She would fill a wagon with blankets, food stuffs, and medicines, and make her rounds of the Indian encampments. Administering to the sick, reaching out to the Indian women, and offering her help for the children, Christiana became known as an angel of mercy.

When her husband, Isaac McCoy, became embroiled in the controversial Indian Removal Act, she stood by him, and followed his conscience, despite the opposition. When it was time to go to Kansas and set up schools and missions for the Potawatomi there, she went without complaint. Then Christiana accompanied him to Missouri when that mission work needed their services. She was a dedicated missionary, who spent her life providing for the needs of her family and the American Indian.

However, what Christiana Polk McCoy is most remembered for is her story telling, and the way she used those tales to teach children lessons of kindness and forgiveness. In doing so, she helped bridge the chasm between the Native American Indian and the white race. Her most famous story involved her parents and siblings.

Christiana "Kitty" Polk's mother Delilah, brother William and sisters Nancy, Ruby and Eleanor, were abducted by the Kentucky Indians before she was born. The tale she told about the "life and death experience" was preserved by her son William Polk, and the American Baptist Historical Society. Christiana told the tale when she wanted to help someone understand human nature, and the best way to deal with fear and hatred. Although the tale involved tragedy, her insight served her well as a missionary. For the sake of historic accuracy, this true story includes all significant details, regardless of their shocking nature:

#### STOLEN BY THE INDIANS

Captian Charles Polk, his wife Delilah Tyler, and their four oldest living children "settled at Linns Station, about twelve miles from Louisville, Kentucky in 1781. He was a commander of a militia assigned to protect the local settlers from Indian attacks. However, those hostilities were interspersed with times of peace, when the Indians traveled to other hunting grounds. Their were three forts in the area, located fifteen miles apart, that offered protection from the Indians, when it was needed. In the spring of 1782, the Cherokee returned to the Louisville area, and started raiding homesteads, stealing possessions, and scalping settlers. "Having taken alarm at the depredations of the Indians in the local neighborhood," the Polk family moved to the first of the forts for protection from their homestead, as was the defensive plan was to join forces at the fort in times of danger. The fort of their sanctuary was called "Fort Kitchelor's Station."

When one of the other forts came under attack, "Captain Polk and his men" left their families guarded by a few soldiers, and the garrison went to help protect those in dire jeopardy. Unknown to Captain Polk and his soldiers, the Indians had staged a diversion to lure the fighting men away from the women and children in Fort Kitchelor's Station. The Indians had, in fact, quietly laid in wait, hidden in the forest surrounding the first fort, until the army was well away from their families. On August 31, 1872, "on a clear and bright morning . . . about one hour before the break of day . . . the first alarm. . . (was) the war-whoop of the Indians as they assailed the fort from different quarters and obtained immediate possession by climbing the walls and unroofing the cabins." Defenders were killed with mercy, including women who held guns. About 30 prisoners were taken, valuables were stolen, and the fort was burned to the ground. The fort became known as "Burnt Station" for many years after the attack. Only one known person escaped to tell of the raid and capture, because the child had hidden in the woods.

When Captain Charles Polk and his troops returned, and discovered what had happened to his family, he immediately consulted with his superior Colonel Floyd, and others, in the two remaining forts. The general opinion favored immediate pursuit of who ever had survived. To this idea, Charles took objection, realizing that the Indians kept scouts in the rear of escaping raiding parties, and could not be surprised. Once alerted to pursuit, they would massacre all prisoners. The Indian culture of the Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana and Michigan region, all, had several cultural tenets in common. They were migratory, thought little of long distant travel, and lived within nature's rules of "survival of the fittest." When they captured women it was usually for the purpose of slavery, revenge, ransom, or to obtain a wife. Children might be adopted into an Indian family, enslaved or murdered. They were warring tribes, who did not hesitate to kill, became violent when provoked, and even "drank the blood of their victims" in dehumanization rituals. Captain Polk, "known as he was for his determined bravery, perseverance, and patience," was able to convince his fellow army officers that there was a better way to save their families, rather than hot pursuit. If they could be located, the best solution was to negotiate with the Indians, buy them back.

In the mean time, the raiding party, with its 30 prisoners, including Christiana's mother Delilah and four siblings, were forced to march north through the wilderness. Delilah was used to dealing with the Indians in less volatile times, through her religious charity affiliations, and like most of the army wives, spoke the local Indian language. Other women of their group, were growing tired of the pace set, became belligerent, and the children were fearful.

When they reached the Indian encampment, she politely greeted her captor's women, and inquired as to the good health of the chief's squaw and papooses. Such an act was consider good manners in the Indian culture, and a sign of respect. In reply to gloating statements by the Indians, Delilah replied that her husband "would be much disappointed on his return to find his family taken away" agreeing with their assessment of the situation, instead of responding with trepidation or showing intimidation. The Indians did not respect fear in adults, responded hostilely to any sort of defiant behavior, and were highly sensitive to the respect due one according to rank within their society. Their culture demanded courage, confidence, and etiquette at all times. Delilah noted a "marked difference in the treatment of her children and the others the next morning, following her show of respect toward them. On the next day, some of the Indians took her young son William from her, dressed him in feathers and Indian garb, and playfully called him the "Chief of the Long Knives."

The lighter attitude did not continue, however, With the next sunrise, the women and children were forced to resume their march north. A short distance out of the encampment, all of the children were taken from the mothers and carried or led by the warriors. In protest, a Mrs. Ash challenged the Indian who had taken her child, and stated that if he killed the two year old, she would go no further. With that declaration, the women were forced to walk about twelve miles without resting. When the Indians did stop, they broke open watermelons they had stolen from the fort, and ate without offering any to the thirsty women and children.

Delilah, parched for water, and sure the children were likewise, held out her hand indicating that the watermelon should be shared with all. With a laugh of approbation at her confident demeanor, she was given pieces of watermelon which she distributed to the prisoners. When she offered Mrs. Ash a piece, the woman shook her head declining. The action immediately, invoked great anger from the Indians warriors. Who immediately took consul among themselves. It was later learned that rejecting an offer of food was an extreme insult, and that settlers in the past, had treated anything the Indians touched as dirty, contaminated, and beneath them to eat. The Indian who had taken Mrs. Ash's child stepped forward, stripped her of all her clothing above the

waist, and handed her, her child. The prisoners were immediately forced to begin marching north again. Delilah was ahead of Mrs. Ash when she heard the tomahawk strike the woman's head. Mrs. Ash screamed, the Indian delivering the blow gave a war-whoop, and then all fell silent. The slain woman's body was left where it fell. The prisoners were forced to walk until sunset.

Just before they reached the Ohio River, Delilah accidentally stepped into a small hole and sprained her ankle. Falling down, she braced for the tomahawk that would soon end her life. Her Indian master, with a "kick and surly voice, ordered her to march," but she indicated she could not. The tomahawk was raised to end her life, but as it was braced to strike, a humane Indian brother behind caught the warrior's arm, and intervened. A discuss followed, and Delilah's life was saved for the moment. She was forced to walk on the damaged ankle, in great pain, until they were placed in canoes. While crossing the river, the humane fellow who had saved her, ripped the moccasin off of the badly swollen foot. The toe nail fell off, and part of the flesh of the foot as well. This elicited sympathy from her rescuer, who instructed her to wash the foot in the water. When they completed the crossing, this kind Indian fellow helped her to a blanket, provided marrow oil (from buffalo bones) to put on he foot, and a larger moccasin. She was then given her youngest child, and slept the night on the blanket. The next morning the group continued on its way, Delilah walking with great pain.

On September 4, 1782, the Indians separated the prisoners into two parties. Much to the grief of this mother, her two oldest children were sent with the contingent of which she was not apart, while her two youngest children accompanied her. Finally, Delilah found herself at one of their villages on the Auglaise River in northwestern Ohio, where they stayed for 4 days. Then the party headed for Detroit through lower Michigan, but her youngest daughter was kept at the village, so they told her, to be "raised as one of their own squaws," and become the wife of a warrior. When the second group of Indians and prisoners caught up with her party on the journey, her older son was reunited with her, but the Indians informed her that the older daughter was sold to the Shawnee. It was later learned that the children were sold to the Potawatomi in Southwestern Michigan.

In Detroit, Delilah, her son, and daughter were sold to British Commander Colonel De Peyster, who was occupying the area at the time. Having sold their slaves, the Indians collected their ransom profit, and left. Delilah was certain she, and her two children, would not have survived the journey, if she had not followed the etiquette of the Indian culture, and maintained her confident but respectful demeanor. She feared for the survival of her two daughters who were missing.

The English "treated them with the kindest of attention and humanity." Deliah and her two children were given a house in which to live, assured that the British would seek the release of her other two children, and earned her keep by sewing garments for the British. This was the era in which the English, in defiance of the newly formed United States of America, and the winning of the Revolutionary War (1776), still occupied parts of Michigan.

For three years Captain Charles Polk, U.S. American Army officer seached for the captives. He thought his own wife and children had either "been slain in the Fort Kitchelor's Station massacre," or were now slaves of the Indians. His searches provided no clue as to where they were, or what exactly happened.

Delilah, by working quietly in Detroit, to support herself and her children with sewing, seamstress and mending jobs, was able to save enough money to send her Kentucky husband a message. "He traveled alone on foot through the trackless wilderness" of Kentucky, Indiana, and lower

Michigan to Detroit.

The British in Detroit treated Charles Polk with kindness, uniting him with his wife and two children. In 1785, a prisoner exchange was arranged with the Michigan Indians who then had the girls, and the two Polk children lost for so long were traded for Indian prisoners. Charles had to go alone to collect them, as they were living in encampments with the Potawatomi in lower Michigan. So much time had passed that when Charles traveled to collect his children, and then reached to embrace his own "flesh and blood," the youngster hid from him, having forgotten their biological family, own language, and American heritage. He had to convince the two Indian families to give up the children, despite the prisoner exchange agreement made by their elders. One of the youngsters had even been adopted by a Potawatomi family. With the Polk family united, and returned to Kentucky, more children were born, including Christiana.

This abduction story had a happy ending, but many other such incidents, in this era of time, did not. The tale was recorded, kept by the McCoy family, and became part of history.

Thirty seven years later in 1822, after her family had been united, following the abduction incident, Christiana Polk accompanied her husband, Isaac McCoy to Southwestern Michigan, to establish the Carey Mission, and serve as a missionary to the Potawatomi Indians. Her tenets were kindness, forgiveness, respect, and service.

In conclusion, Christiana "Kitty" Polk was a Michigan pathfinder, who found pathways through unchartered cultural territory. Where there had been war, hatred, and pain, she forged a cultural bridge with compassion, charity, and friendship. The creeks and lake named after her provide a suitable memorial to this "angel of mercy." Despite the controversy surrounding her husband and the Indian Removal Act, and the complex play of events that lead to it, no one can deny that her life was dedicated to serving the Native American Indians. Christiana Polk has earned her place in local Southwest Michigan history.

Copyright © 2011 by J. M. Watson

---

## RESEARCH

- Christiana Polk by son William McCoy, worldconnect.rootsweb.ancestry.com
- History of Cass Co., MI, Waterman & Watkins, 1882, pg. 41-51
- Tales of Early Niles by Ralph Ballard, 1948, pg. 65-75
- All Name Index, History of Cass Co., MI by Debra Graden, 2002, pg. 39, 42, 43, 45, 46, 47, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57,208
- A Baptist Bibliography edited by Edward C. Starr, Vol. 14, Sec.Lea-McGuire, American Baptist Historical Society
- Isaac McCoy Papers, Kansas Historical Society
- Missionary Abomination Unmasked Pamphlet by Timothy M. Smith 1830
- Carey Mission Plaque, Niles-Buchanan Rd & Philip St., Niles, MI
- U.S., Sons of the American Revolution Membership Applications, 1889-1970, Captain Charles Polk (2/21744, Frederick Maryland-9/11/1823, Vincennes, Know, Indiana
- A Twentieth Century History of Cass Co., MI by L.H. Glover, 1906, Lewis Pub. Co.
- An Account of SWMI & St. Joseph Co. by Charles Adam Weissert (1878-1947) & George Newman Fuller (1873-1957), pub. MI Pioneer Historical Society
- Rootsweb.com, ID 120479, Delilah Tyler (mother of Christiana Polk)
- Christiana Polk Find A Grave, Mozilla Firefox
- Crhristiana Creek Postcard, early 1900s, Elkhart, Indiana
- Ancestry.com Family Trees: McCoy, Polk, Tyler, Langley, Knox, White, Sisk, Covey
- Author's Local History/Family Lore/Legends Of The Past/Genealogy Files