

CAPTAIN MARTIN SCOTT

From the book - *Thirty Years of Army Life on the Border* –Chapter XIV
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CAPTAIN MARTIN SCOTT AND THE COON

When I first joined my regiment (the 5th U. S. Infantry) at Fort Howard, Green Bay, in the spring of 1833, I was assigned to “D” Company, then commanded by Captain Martin Scott of “coon” notoriety. The coon story has been so often related that it is probably familiar to many; but as I shall have a good deal to say about Captain Scott, whose peculiar reputation is aptly illustrates, it may not be amiss to give a brief repetition of it here. The story, as I understand, first appeared in a newspaper published at Utica, N. Y., in 1840, and the purport of it was something like the following:

Captain Scott, with several friends, were supposed to have been hunting in the woods, and had become separated. As they were passing along, one of them discovered a raccoon sitting upon the highest limb of one of the tallest trees, and fired at him, but missed the object, and went on. Soon another of the party made his appearance and made his shot, but with the same result; and after this several others took shots at him, but all were equally unsuccessful: the coon was not harmed. After a while, however, Captain Scott passed that way, and, seeing the raccoon, drew up his rifle, and was in the act of pulling the trigger, when the coon said to him, “Who are you?” – he replied, “My name is Scott,” – “What Scott?” inquired the coon. – “Why, Captain Scott.” – “Are you Captain Martin Scott?” said the coon. – “The same,” Was the answer. – “Then,” said the coon, “you need not shoot; I’ll come down”

This officer had served for many years at our most remote frontier posts, and he had always borne the reputation of having been the best shot of his day. His ambition consisted in owning the best horse, dogs and guns; and he was a thorough sportsman and hunter, besides being a faithful and gallant soldier.

MARTIN SCOTT AND THE BEAR

At an early day, when he was a boy only twelve years of age, living at his home in Bennington, Vermont, a bear made his appearance in that neighborhood committing great havoc among the farmers’ sheep and creating much alarm among the timid inhabitants of the surrounding country. So great was the excitement produced by the advent of this savage intruder that the people of several towns turned out in mass to hunt him down. They organized into parties to scour all the adjacent mountains and woodlands on a certain day, and were to assemble at the hotel in Bennington after the day’s hunt was over

Now our young hero felt an earnest desire to participate in this exciting sport; but he was perfectly well aware that his father would not give his consent to such a proposal if it were presented to him. He therefore very quietly got up before daylight on the appointed day, took an old smooth-bore gun of his father’s, loaded it, and started out alone into the mountain where the bear was last heard from. He wandered about nearly

all day, but without discovering any signs of the animal, and at length turned toward home; and as he was descending the mountain, he came to a shelving rock, and was just in the act of passing over it, when suddenly he came upon the bear lying apparently asleep just beneath where he stood. He at once ranged the gun to his shoulder and fired, and he fortunately lodged its contents in the vitals of the beast, killing him instantly.

He then started for the tavern where many of the hunters were congregated, and were relating to each other the history of the day's experience. He told them that he had killed the bear; but they did not believe it possible, and it was with great difficulty that he finally persuaded some of the men to go with him to verify his statement. When they reached the place where the animal lay, they were amazed that so small a lad would have had the temerity to attack such a monster. He was a huge fellow, and they were obliged to construct a stout litter to carry him into town.

When they arrived at the entrance of the village they mounted Martin upon the top of the bear, and thus carried him in triumph through the street. On passing his father's house, the old gentleman came out, and in a very abrupt manner said, "Come down from there! What are you doing up there, sir?" The men replied, "Let the boy alone, for he has killed the bear!" And thus they went on to the tavern where they celebrated the event with great feasting and rejoicing. After this day they dubbed Marin "the Bear-hunter;" and he has often said to me that this was the happiest day of his life.

CAPTAIN MARTIN SCOTT ENTERS THE ARMY

As he was ploughing in the field one day during the year 1814, the postmaster of the village brought him a letter marked "War Department, Adjutant-general's Office," and directed to "Ensign Martin Scott," on opening which he found a commission for himself as ensign in the United States Army. He made no application for the appointment, and its being conferred upon him was a mystery, which was never solved to the day of his death. He accepted his appointment, and forthwith joined his Company at Sackett's Harbor. He was shortly afterward sent to the Western frontier, where he found ample scope for the development of his skill as a marksman.

SCOTT'S MARKSMANSHIP

His reputation for accurate rifle and pistol shooting was well deserved; and I am not aware that he was ever excelled, if indeed he was ever equaled, by any of his contemporaries. One of his performances with the pistol, which I have often heard vouched for by officers who had witnessed it, and which appears to me to require more skill in the use of the arm than any other feat I have heard of, was in taking two potatoes, throwing them into the air successively, and putting a pistol-ball through both of them as they were coming down.

Some of his performances in rifle shooting I have witnessed; and for great accuracy I must acknowledge that they exceed anything of the kind I have ever seen. He proposed to me upon one occasion that we should take an old-fashioned United States "gager" that he had, and determine which could load and fire three shots in the shortest space of time, and make the best target.

Accordingly a playing-card, with a spot or "bull's-eye" in the center, about the size of a dime was attached to a log of wood, and placed at seventy yards from where we proposed to stand. Captain Scott then took the rifle uncharged, with powder-flask at hand, and the balls and patches in his mouth, and he made the three shots "off-hand" in one minute and twenty seconds. I then went myself to the target, and found one sound hole directly through the center of the bull's-eye. I was surprised at the precision of the shot, but observed to the Captain that the other two had entirely missed the target. He shook his head, and called for the axe: when we split the log, and found the three balls in one mass, all having passed through the same round aperture directly in the center of the card. He was also a very excellent marksman with a bird-gun; and although I have seen him fire numerous shots, I do not remember ever to have known him to miss his bird.

As those persons who are not familiar with the history of Captain Scott may have some desire to know what became of him, I will add, for their information, that he was killed while gallantly leading forward his command in that most sanguinary battle of the Mexican war – Molina del Rey – fought in September 1847 – thirty-three years after he received his commission in the U. S. Army.