The Cuyahoga

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Chapter 7: Survival -- Man and Boy

The Man

They said, when you faced Lorenzo Carter's pale blue eyes when he was mad, he had your attention.

But the man called Abel Gunnar was facing not only the eyes, but the hole in the end of Carter's gun.

"You're not leaving the mouth of the river, Gunnar. You're coming back with me now."

Carter was not a reflective man who could carry a point through the territorial councils and courts. He was big, spade-chinned, slab-chested and direct. What he knew was that people kept leaving the village he was trying to build. It had to stop. Carter was not a member of the Connecticut Land Company nor an employee. He was the first bona fide settler to move to the Cuyahoga to stay.

Most river mouths spawn cities as surely as a waterfall attracts a mill wheel community; but the Cuyahoga repelled people. Ague and waterborne fevers were intense at the hot pocket at the basin mouth. A sand bar held in stagnation and blocked out all but the shallowest draft boats. Besides the first and second surveying parties had returned to Connecticut and down-talked the region.

Seventy Seneca families and two-score Ottawas and Chippewas on the cliffs at the mouth discouraged settlers who didn't know the peaceful temper of the Seneca, Stigwanish. They also emphasized the fact that the west bank of the Cuyahoga was officially and legally Indian Country. So settlement on the east bank of the river put a woman and her children right on the edge of the frontier, in some places only 50 feet from foreign soil.

Though the powerful Connecticut Land Company tried to force settlement on the river here, it would not build. But Lorenzo Carter wanted to see a town grow up around him.

Probably the biggest man the river will ever see, Lorenzo Carter was not inhibited by knowledge of the fine points of law nor by philosophical hesitance, nor religious reverence. He faced the Gods with his hat on, his proposition plain, and his ax and rifle handy. He turned back nature itself, 65 the Connecticut Land Company, and 70 Senecas to make this creek a Great Lakes' port.

"You can't leave, Gunnar."

"I am gonna leave, Major."

When Major Spafford came to Major Carter and said his man

had run off, Carter asked which direction, then grabbed his Yaeger and rode south. Eleven miles from the mouth, he caught up to Gunnar.

“I’ve stolen nothing, Major. I owe no one. In fact, Major Spafford owes me wages. But I’m leaving. And you have no legal right to stop me.”

“True. But I’ll do it.”

Abel Gunnar was speechless with outrage. Carter’s voice softened to a blacksmith’s rasp bobbing iron. “Abel, set a spell and take it resty.”

The Major cradled his gun pointed at Gunnar, but he sank to a squat, “Look the blow it would be. Ye’ll see I can’t let ye go.”

Gunnar looked around him and back at the Major’s gun. There was no way but to listen again.

While the port at the mouth of the Cuyahoga is named for and sustained Moses Cleaveland, it was really founded by Lorenzo Carter and should have borne his name.

General Cleaveland selected the mouth of the Cuyahoga for the capital of the Reserve. But so unfavorable was the location that none of the surveying party except for the Stileses and the Kingsburys chose this river mouth for their own land. Most returned to Connecticut.

Then in 1797, Lorenzo Carter came out of Vermont. At 30 he wore authority as easily as an old work shirt. He threw up his

historic log hut on the east bank at the mouth of the Cuyahoga (at the foot of St. Clair), not a small one like the other two there, but a large one with a loft.

On the map of the Land Company back in Connecticut, Cleveland was then a nicely ruled plat of streets on paper, all nicely named. Carter built his hut large so there would be a place for the now four settlers to gather and talk of filling in the blank map.

Immediately his large cabin was needed for the settlement's first wedding on the second of June. Chloe Inches married William Clement who followed her all the way from Ontario. But what hurt Carter, the married couple immediately moved out. Then the Kingsburys moved away to higher ground to the south, to begin The Mills, later called Newburgh.

Severe ague and fever attacked everyone at the river mouth. There was no doctor. To escape it, Job Stiles moved his family out to where Kingsbury was. Then Elijah Gunn and his wife Ann moved out.

Although some new settlers came, in the fall of 1799 only seven courageous people remained in the trading post at the Cuyahoga mouth. Sadly Carter watched them all move. Finally he and Rebecca Carter and their remaining son were the only non-Indian residents of Cleveland.

In fact, until March 1800, Rebecca and Lorenzo Carter were Cleveland.

A handful of settlers came, but Carter envisioned a city. To

make the point that civilization had reached to the mouth of the Cuyahoga, he felt he needed a grand ball. Several of the settlers in other parts of the Western Reserve were Revolutionary veterans who still revered the magic date, July 4.

Hence the first grand ball on the Cuyahoga was held in Lorenzo Carter's cabin, July 4, 180l, to the tune of the Reserve's first fiddle belonging to Samuel Jones. In this woman-scarce country, 20 men came to dance with 12 women; some came two days' riding distance. Perhaps news of the ball traveling back east by letters may have ultimately helped settle the Cuyahoga. But Carter did not believe so.

He decided that the country wouldn't grow until there was a school. So the first school in Cleveland opened in 1802 in Carter's front room, taught by Anna Spafford, daughter of Major Amos Spafford.

A few people came, but did not stay. Civilization needs a tavern, Carter felt. Therefore he and Amos Spafford traveled to the Court of Quarter Sessions at Warren and paid four dollars for a license "to keep tavern." While education was going on in Carter's front room, philosophy and sour mash were available in Carter's back room.

At the same time, he bought 23½ acres on St. Clair east of West Ninth Street on which to build a finer tavern. The tavern did indeed bring some civilization, but it was not enough.

A city needs religion, Carter felt. When the Reverend Joseph Bodger came through on horseback, Carter persuaded him to

light down in the valley of the Cuyahoga, giving the minister violently aggressive hospitality and the use of his house.

He ignored the services, but invited the Senecas to fill the pews, and brought Sam Jones and his fiddle.

“But it didn’t take root, Major,” Gunnar said.

“No,” admitted Carter, cradling the long gun as friendlily as possible without diverting the muzzle from Gunnar’s chest, “but I thought me to start a store, and so Elisha Norton laid into the house some trade goods for the women.”

“But the store didn’t help, Mr. Carter. Mostly the Indians used it. Nobody’s putting down cellars or roots.

To prove permanence, Carter had bought a piece of the river at Superior and Union Lane; and he began construction of the first frame house made of sawed boards floated in from Buffalo. West of Water Street and north of Superior Lane, the big cabin encouraged the settlers with its back-east look. Transients looked at it and beamed. Some stayed.

When it was almost finished, fire caught in the chips. The blaze leveled Cleveland’s first frame house, and with it, the state of civilization at the Cuyahoga mouth. There would not be another frame house for eight years. Carter built another log cabin.

On the same site, he built a blockhouse, designed for a tavern in peacetime, Carter’s Tavern.

As the British-Indian threat rose, the first state militia was

organized on May 7, 1804. Lorenzo Carter was elected captain of the Cleveland Company in the 2nd Brigade, 4th Division, under Major Spafford. In August, Carter was elected major, heading one battalion.

"So you know very well, with me headin' it, Gunnar, there'll be no dust-up with the British that can hurt us."

"I've never been afraid of that, Major. I'm leaving because I just don't think Cleveland will ever come to much' til the Indians are out."

Gunnar rose; but he sat down again as he heard Carter half-cock the firing lock. "You got to stay and help see to it."

Carter personally didn't consider the Indians a threat. He understood their language, and thought of them not so much as savages as good fellows who could give you a hand, and once in a while "needed a little talking to." Carter's hold over the Indians constantly amazed the settlers, but they couldn't believe it would last.

When O'mic, the Ottawa, was charged, tried, and convicted of robbing and murdering two white trappers, Carter was hurt because O'mic was a long-time friend. But the murder trial, Cleveland's first, was 68 apparently fair, viewed by all 18 Cleveland families. The verdict was hanging.

There was no jail, and the settlers feared Indian retaliation, so they asked Carter to keep the prisoner.

When the Indians saw Levi Johnson building the gallows, they

did become hostile. Then one night they drank heavily and descended on Carter's cabin on the riverbank.

The power of one man with a made-up mind to turn off a mob has always staggered the imagination. But the manner in which Lorenzo Carter stormed out of his cabin and tongue-lashed the mob of red men was talked about for years. They say he roared in Indian, "Of course you can beat me, but I'll probably take ten of you with me! Who does that want to be?"

Pressure built up to clear the Indians from the land west of the river, the Indian boundary.

Settlers kept moving away from the mouth of the Cuyahoga. The courtly Samuel Huntington (future governor) moved from his extra large log cabin to Newburgh Mill, then to Painesville.

On the Fourth of July 1805, the tribes west of the Cuyahoga sent representation to a council at Fort Industry on the Maumee to meet with a U.S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs, a Connecticut Land Company man, and a spokesman for the Firelands Company. The Indians finally agreed to sign over their lands west of the Cuyahoga if they would receive an annual payment of $13,760 forever. Action depended upon their seeing the money and receiving the first payment.

Lorenzo Carter and five men rode to Pittsburgh and brought the money.

That opened the land west of the Cuyahoga to settlement, but no surge of people came through or to Cleveland.

Major Carter said to Major Spafford, “We must have a vessel so they can float out the yield. It’s what’s needed to draw commercial men here.”

“We’ve no shipwright in the whole Reserve.”

But up on the riverbank, Lorenzo Carter began Cleveland’s shipbuilding industry. With only the help of local settlers, he built the 30-ton sailing vessel, Zephyr. They hauled it to the water with eight work cattle. Flat-bottomed and a poor sailer, she did nevertheless sail short-haul cargo successfully on Lake Erie; and it was an important accomplishment even to be able to build and launch her.

Furs from the Senecas and grindstones made in Cleveland could now ship east to trade for iron and brass and glass needed for guns and beds and windows. But the cargoes for the boat were disappointing. Settlers could bring their goods to the boat quite well from east of the river over Buffalo Road. But from west of the river, there was little more than the Indian’s lake-shore trail to Detroit.

Carter talked to Sam Huntington who represented the county in the new state capital. The legislature appropriated funds for a road from the mouth of the Cuyahoga to the mouth of the Huron River. Construction of the road was supervised by Lorenzo Carter. Detroit Road it was called, then and now.

Still Cleveland did not grow. One more handicap was the Connecticut owners themselves. There were now in the Connecticut Land Company a new breed of shareholders. Unlike

the original shareholders who preferred to remain in Connecticut and send hired developers out to New Connecticut, these new shareholders packed wagons and came on out themselves. But most of these men naturally would not settle in Cleveland. As shareholders they each owned several hundreds of acres and were themselves town builders. Their names became towns: David Hudson of Hudson, Eliphalet Austin of Austinburg, Alexander Harper of Harpersfield, Edward Paine of Painesville, David Root of Rootstown, Joshua Stow of Stow, Strong of Strongsville, and Ely of Elyria.

As these towns competed for cash buyer settlers for their land, they lured away settlers from Lorenzo Carter's town.

These townships did wagon their products and produce to the boat at the Cuyahoga mouth. If the Zephyr were not in, however, they had to stack their goods on the shore or leave them in the wagons.

Major Carter said to Major Spafford, "It won't be a port until we have a warehouse."

Spafford nodded. He rounded up Gunnar and Elijah Gunn and Samuel Jones and Ashbel Walworth. With their help, Lorenzo Carter built of logs Cleveland's first warehouse.

Gunnar rose again slowly, not to excite Carter's trigger hand, "But, Major, I didn't see much difference after the warehouse."

"You saw enough so that suddenly Murray and Bixby were encouraged to build a sixty-ton ship."

“And nothing to ship. The land’s too poor to yield.”

“It’s not to be a farming village, it’s a port city. The land is only to hold the improvements: warehouses, docks, manufacturies.”

“They don’t amount to anything. Tax assessor values the whole place only twenty thousand dollars.”

“It’ll rise with commerce.”

But Gunnar pointed out that Charles Dutton had sold two acres right on public square to Turhand Kirtland for only 30 dollars, and that Kirtland soon resold it to Jacob Coleman for 30 dollars. Coleman also soon felt the choicest piece of land in Cleveland was a bad buy. He offered it for sale, but couldn’t move it without a loss.

“You see,” Gunnar explained to Carter, “there’s not enough people to do any commerce. And those we got are leaving. We had seventy-eight. Now we’re down to fifty-seven.” Gunnar rose, picked up his duffel.

But he froze when he heard Carter’s lock snap to full cock.

“That’s why you’re going to stay, Gunnar. I’m not losing any more people. Town needs you.”

“You’ve no right, Carter. I owe no man. In fact, Major Spafford owes me wages!”

“You got to come back and let him pay you. You don’t have the right to make Major Spafford into a thief, a defaulter of wages. Bad name for him, bad name for the city.”

“City!” Gunnar laughed. “Carter, you’re crazy enough you’re dangerous with that gun.”

“I am that.”

Gunnar turned back.

In that same year, an alarm came into Cleveland that a ten-horse, sixox train of six wagonloads of people was approaching from the east with intent to settle hereabouts. The wagons, it was said contained “an avalanche” of impoverished immigrants to be thrown on the village for support. They were four families of Brainards from Connecticut and the families of Elijah Young and Isaac Hinckley. Worse, it was reported, “Still more wagons follow.”

The Cleveland Township Trustees sent out a constable to warn them off. Then Alonzo Carter, son of Lorenzo, heard about it; and he confronted the town fathers, “You fools!” A good son’s anger on behalf of a father, right or wrong, makes forum or debate pointless. And Alonzo had some of Lorenzo’s brawn of arm and blaze of eye.

The wagons came on.

They were followed in the same year by wagons of Fishers, McIntoshes, Gates, Sears, Storers, Aikens, Fosters, Poes, Kroehles. Today, there are streets and roads and suburbs named for most of these.

But the point is, when they arrived, they met to plan in Carter’s Tavern, sent children to school in Carter’s front room, bought

farms off of Carter's Detroit Road, and then hauled corn and whiskey and leather and timber back over it to Carter's warehouse to wait for Carter's boat.

The legislature granted an incorporation charter to Carter's town, spelled Cleveland, on December 23,1814.

What Major Carter never had the pleasure of seeing was that Jacob Coleman did finally sell those two acres on the northwest corner of Public Square to William Coleman in 1815 for 55 dollars. William Coleman later sold just 94 feet of it for 200 dollars to Leonard Case, Jr. And in years to come, W.G. Marshall leased that corner for 12-thousand dollars a year for 99 years. Once the site of the Marshall Building, at this writing a parking lot across Superior Avenue from the Renaissance-Cleveland Hotel.

It took about 130 years to figure out what Carter did. People went back to his Erie Street grave in 1938, and put up a monument. Few people see it. But, of course, all can see the great port on the Great Lake, Carter's Cleveland.

The Doan Boy

For one crucial summer, the destiny of the Cuyahoga valley bore down on the thin shoulders of a wiry 13-year-old boy. Without him, this would be a very different book.

The unwritten rule of the world has always had it that the people or nation which controls the mouth of a river controls the entire land basin drained by that watershed.

Despite all treaties, the British and those Indians loyal to them were looking covetously south and east from Detroit again. The Americans were slow to settle the northern part of the Ohio country, and they were respecting the official Indian boundary which made the territory west of the Cuyahoga and north of the Greenville line officially Indian.

Now we've said that Lorenzo Carter was having trouble holding a settlement at the mouth of the Cuyahoga, and that the summer of 1798 threatened the settlement of 12 families with annihilation when bilious fever struck. Every family was down with the debilitating sickness. This 72 was characterized by extreme fevers, which burned a settler three or four times a day. When the fever subsided, it was immediately followed by extreme ague, called shakes, which left even strong men so spent they could not drag themselves around to procure food or to care for their sick.

Just before this scourge struck the mouth of the Cuyahoga, Nathaniel Doan was setting out from Chatham, Connecticut, with his family. He had a wife, son, three daughters, and a contract with the Connecticut Land Company. If he would establish a blacksmith shop on the banks of the Cuyahoga and keep it there one year to serve the settlers, he would receive title to ten acres.

Nathaniel Doan was 22 days just getting to Utica, New York, where he stopped to rest his family and team at the house of his brother, Timothy.

After six days, he was ready to push on. Loading up the wagon,

he found already stowed there an unfamiliar canvas duffel with a knife thonged to the outside. He picked it up and studied it, puzzled. Looking around behind him, he encountered the level voice of his 13-year-old nephew, Seth Doan. “Leave it in, Uncle Nathaniel. I’m going with you.”

When the argument grew quickly to involve both families Nathaniel Doan talked across the head of the boy to his own brother. “The Cuyahoga is directly on the Indian boundary. I cannot be answerable.” He looked at his own daughters. “It’s enough blame will be on my head as it is.”

Young Seth Doan said, “I’ll be answerable for myself, Uncle Nathaniel.”

Nathaniel said, “I have it in letters there are more children in the burying ground at the Cuyahoga than grown people.”

Seth Doan’s father said, “He’s been a healthy boy. And he’s spoken a lot of going with you. We denied him. But. . .”

Nathaniel Doan said, “If he was bigger, it would be different. He could help.”

“He’s been brought up to carry his weight, Nathaniel.”

“But it’ll be another mouth.”

“But another two arms.”

While they argued, Seth Doan walked into the barn and led out the pair of Connecticut Fancies. As he backed them in with the

wagon tongue between, Nathaniel Doan pressed his lips over his teeth, but he didn't say "No."

Ninety-two days from Chatham, Connecticut, they were approaching the Cuyahoga. They had reached the place where Mentor is now when the bilious fever hit their wagon. They were unable to prepare food or drive the team. The wagon was just stopped in its ruts.

Seth Doan crawled over to his uncle, "Uncle Nathaniel, we should unhitch and let them try to graze."

Nathaniel Doan opened his eyes and stared at the boy. The boy had never seen a grown man with that strange glassy, uncomprehending look.

Young Doan crawled over the family to the tailgate, and unhooked it. The jolt of the drop startled the horses, but the family hardly moved.

He let himself down to the ground and looked around. The wagon was stopped in the bottom of a hollow because the horses had missed the encouragement from the driver's seat usually needed to mount a steep bank.

Seth Doan crawled up to the seat and snapped the reins across their rumps. But the horses looked around at him. He crawled down and went forward to talk up the horses. They were dry.

Crawling painfully up into the back of the wagon, he got out the leather water buckets and walked down the hollow. He found an intermittently dried-up stream and filled the buckets.

Halfway back to the horses, he had to set one bucket down. Three quarters of the way back he had to pour some out of that one and drag it over the ground. Returned to the horses, he couldn't lift the bucket to their muzzles

He could not let go of the leather bucket to unhook the checkrein without the bucket collapsing. He pondered it a moment, and decided he would have to sacrifice this water. He drank himself, then let the bucket collapse and the water run out while he climbed up to unhook the checkrein.

He made many trips to the stream and back, resting between. Then he was able to lead the horses up the rise out of the hollow. As they moved slowly along the ruts through the woods, he found a protected place for the night, and unhitched. With no strength left to remove the collars, Seth tied the horses to the rear of the wagon, and crawled under it. As darkness set in he was frightened by the chills that took over his body, and by the silence above him.

Two settlers, Parker and Church, found the wagon next day. They were generous men, but they knew they couldn't afford close contact with the sick family. They did hitch up the horses and lead the wagon to the Cuyahoga. It took two days.

The stillness and the heat in the settlement made it feel like the last stop this side of hell. Then Lorenzo Carter took over the family. He got them housed with the Carters and the Stileses. But they saw that the settlement at the mouth of the river was in very serious trouble from the bilious fever. There was no general greeting.

Even the powerfully built Lorenzo Carter staggered under the sickness. But he did show the Doans how to find butternut bark, powder it, and mix it with some dogwood bark and cherry bark to make a medicine in the absence of calomel or quinine in the settlement.

When their tea and coffee was used up, he showed the Doans how to burn rye and peas to make coffee. And every fourth day or so Carter raised enough strength to hunt for game. The Senecas were now afraid to come near.

The settlement sank daily.

Seth Doan was not sturdy; he was a wiry, enduring boy. He still had his fevers and chills like the others, but each time be recovered more than they. And as the sickness deepened into August, only two men in the settlement could move around between seizures, Carter and Seth Doan, age 13.

Carter showed Seth how to care for the glaze-eyed settlers. For those two, there were no days and nights, only time that turned black every twelve hours. Food and water were the main problems, then medicine.

The nearest real mill at that time was on Walnut Creek in Pennsylvania. Carter could not leave the village alone to go there for meal. Yet his corn was diminishing, and he was getting less and less game because his own legendary strength was waning. Silently and side by side, the man and boy went through the village feeding the people, washing them, bringing water, and tending livestock.

And once a day, when his first seizure was over, Seth Doan took a light sack of corn down to Kingsbury's hand mill and ground it. He could not carry a full sack, nor could he carry the hand mill back downstream to the settlement. And he got so he waited for his second attack to come and 75 go before hurrying back. But sometimes his third attack came when he was on the trail.

Then Lorenzo Carter's strength failed. The only white man moving in the settlement was Seth Doan. Between his own seizures, he continued to care for everyone. Then by exploring every cabin he found food, ammunition, some soap. But moving around in the ghost settlement, he could not find food for the animals, so he finally cut them all loose to forage for themselves. Some strayed off and were lost.

The nights were the worst for the boy. Voices called to him. He was often too exhausted to move to them.

One afternoon he heard a strange language in a voice that would peel bark. He went outside and wandered through the silent settlement, looking.

Behind him there was a light step. He turned and ducked. Looming above him was a hawk-faced Seneca. Seth started to run, but the Indian ran around him and cut him off. Young Doan was too tired to run. The Indian pointed violently to a hide-wrapped bundle placed out in the open. Seth walked to it suspiciously, but he sliced the thongs and opened it. It was corn.

The Indian nodded, and thumbed his chest. "Stigwanish!" Then he fled.

For two months Seth Doan was the only man feeding Cleveland.

In mid-November, four of the settlers recovered enough so there were two or three days between their seizures. These men set out for Walnut Creek to get flour. They intended to return as fast as possible because both the existing corn and the strength of Seth Doan were running down fast.

Seth Doan continued to make the daily trip. But on his way back to the settlement one day, he saw the rangy figure of Major Carter swinging down the trail toward him. When they met, Carter lifted the bag of meal off Seth's shoulders, and walked back north alongside.

He looked down at the boy and nodded. "I hope you'll be choosin' some acreage here, Seth."

When snow fell in 1799, the settlers recovered quickly.