

Her Midnight Ride

Listen my children, and you shall hear, about the midnight ride of Sybil Ludington!

Sybil Ludington?

Poor Sybil. It is difficult to rhyme Ludington except, perhaps, in Limericks. Consequently Paul Revere was singled out by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow for enduring praise.

Of all the midnight riders galloping about the countryside during the American Revolution -- warning, "The British are coming!" - equally deserving is 16-year-old Sybil.

She was the oldest of 12 children of Col. Henry Ludington, who in 1777 commanded the militia of Dutchess County, N.Y. - just across the state line from Danbury, Conn.

Col. Ludington was so active in the revolutionary cause, the British put a price on his head. General Howe, the British commander in New York, offered a reward of 300 English guineas for his capture dead or alive.

To collect this bounty, General William Tryon, former governor of New York, had himself and 2,000 of the king's troops set ashore at Westport, Conn. He then marched off on a search and destroy mission.

The British expeditionary force reached Danbury the next day where it burned most of the houses and destroyed some American military stores.

Then, drunk on stolen whiskey, the British troops raged through the town -- looting, raping and abusing the townspeople.

A contemporary account described the attack on Danbury: "One of the most brutal and disgraceful performances of British arms in all the war." News of the atrocity was carried by messengers throughout New England.

One of the messengers raced to Col. Ludington at his home. "Muster your regiment and drive off the British," pleaded the weary rider.

Col. Ludington saw the danger immediately. Tryon might turn west and attack General Washington's flank at Peekskill, N.Y. Unfortunately the militia -- the only one between Danbury and Peekskill -- was on furlough after service in the Hudson Highlands.

Nevertheless, Ludington determined to summon his 421 men to oppose the British advance.

Sybil had listened to the messenger's report and her father's decision. As the eldest child, she had grown up doing jobs usually assigned to sons.

Quickly she volunteered, "I'll go and get the men. They know me and I know the road."

She dressed in riding breeches while Col. Ludington saddled a horse. At 9 p.m. on that night -- April 26, 224 years ago -- Sybil set off on her mission.

"There's trouble!" she yelled as she pulled into darkened farmyards. "The British are burning Danbury. The Colonel wants you right away. Bring your guns."

Sybil got home at daybreak, having covered 40 miles during the night. By then, nearly the whole regiment had mustered. In haste, Col. Ludington led his little troop of Minute Men into Connecticut where he joined other farmer-fighters who had responded to the alarm.

The Americans caught up with the retreating British and harassed them all the way back to their ships. Many Red Coats paid for the raid with their lives.

Alexander Hamilton wrote Col. Ludington: "I congratulate you on the Danbury expedition. The stores destroyed have been purchased at a pretty high price to the enemy."

Gen. George Washington personally thanked Sybil, as did Gen. Rochambeau, the French commander fighting with the Americans.

At age 23, Sybil married Edward Ogden, and they had six children. She died Feb. 26, 1839, just a few days short of her 78th birthday. She is buried near her father in the old Presbyterian burying ground at Patterson, N.Y.

The Daughters of the American Revolution has placed historic markers at several points along the route of his midnight ride.

In 1940, Berton Braley wrote a poem about Sybil in an attempt to do for her what Longfellow did for Paul Revere.

Here are a few stanzas, by no accident similar in style to that of Longfellow:

Listen, my children, and you shall hear
Of a lovely feminine Paul Revere
Who rode an equally famous ride
Through a different part of the countryside,
Where Sybil Ludington's name recalls
A ride as daring as that of Paul's

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The Colonel, muttered, "And who, my friend,
Is the messenger I can send?
Your strength is spent, and you cannot ride;
And, then, you know not the countryside.
I cannot go, for my duty's clear.
When my men come in, they must find me here.
There's devil a man on the place tonight
To warn my troopers to come and fight.
Then, who is my messenger to be?"
Said Sybil Ludington, "You have me."

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"You?" said the Colonel, and grimly smiled.

"You, my daughter, you're just a child."

"Child!" cried Sybil, "Why I'm sixteen.

My mind is alert, and my senses keen.

I know where the trails and roadways are

And I can gallop as fast and far

As any masculine rider can.

You want a messenger? I'm your man."

Author: Lindsey Williams

Home

cutline - 3 col., horse and rider

Illustration provided.

[Sybil Ludington: "I'm your man."]