Narration: In the autumn of 1812 the American victories at sea gave people in the United States a sense of hope. The invasions of Canada had not gone well, but the Americans were willing to try again. In the west, William Henry Harrison had recruited a sizeable army, much of it crack Kentucky sharpshooters. William Atherton, a 21 year-old farm boy was one of the recruits.

William Atherton. [We] volunteers from Kentucky left [our] homes on the 12th of August, 1812. We anticipated danger, and made arrangements to meet it.

Narration: In late fall, 1812, Atherton traveled with Harrison’s army on a search-and-destroy campaign west of Lake Erie. Harrison's plan was to clear Native tribes from their lands, then head for Fort Detroit. Harrison was ruthless.

William Atherton: At Fort Wayne we were ordered to march to two Indian towns for the purpose of burning their houses and destroying their corn. We accomplished this.

Hickey: Frontiersmen and Natives were accustomed to engaging in a very brutal form of warfare…they killed women and children, they took scalps and other body parts for souvenirs, took no prisoners-of-war. That kind of warfare was typical of what occurred on both sides on the frontier.

NARRATION: But by December, Harrison's men were suffering as they struggled toward Detroit.

William Atherton: The men became very sickly – the typhus fever raged among us. We saw nothing but hunger and cold staring us in the face. We scarcely had anything to eat… many times the dead march was heard in the camp.

Narration: There was worse to come. In early 1813, a portion of Harrison's army encamped at Frenchtown near the River Raisin, in what is now Southeastern Michigan. [co.monroe.mi.us.gov]

Atherton: We were accommodated with all the necessaries of life. We almost seemed to forget we had an enemy in the world.

Narration: But on a quiet January night an attack force of over eleven hundred British and Native warriors, commanded by General Henry Procter, [Borneman 70, Latimer 117-8] silently made its way through the snowy forest. Shadrach Byfield, the private from Wiltshire, was among them. [Latimer 119]

Shadrach Byfield: Under cover of a wood, we approached near to [the enemy], unperceived.

William Atherton: I slept soundly until awaked by the startling cry of "to arms! to arms!" and the thundering of cannon and the more terrific yelling of savages…The first thing that presented itself to my sight was the fiery tail of a bombshell – and these came in quick succession.

Shadrach Byfield: Before daylight, we had charged them several times.... I was much affected by seeing a lad, about 11 or 12 years of age, who was wounded in one of his knees. The little fellow's cries...
from the pain of his wound; his crying after his dear mother; and saying he should die, were so affecting that it was not soon forgotten by me. [Then] I received a [musket] ball under my ear and fell. My comrade exclaimed, "Byfield is dead!" And I thought to myself, Is this death?

Narration: But the British and Native forces soon overwhelmed the Americans. Colonel Proctor, who had no combat experience, simply marched away, leaving eighty wounded prisoners to his Indian allies. [Latimer 119] And the Native warriors, long enraged by Harrison’s brutality, were not in a merciful mood.

Decroix: There’s a number of American wounded that are left behind in some of the cabins. And there is only a very small British guard on these folks, and many of these prisoners are massacred.

Miller: Tecumseh’s brother said whenever the Indians win a battle it’s called a massacre. Whenever the whites win a battle it’s called a great triumph. So political spin was used here about who was committing atrocities.

Rick Hill: When the Hodinoshonee would take a prisoner it really depends on what happened just prior to that and what that person did. If that person had killed somebody on our side then in likelihood they would be executed or if not, you know, pretty severely tortured.

Sugden: Indians had very logical reasons for killing prisoners. They, they had no jail to put them in and they had no means of granting them parole in exchanges. And they often said, well the reason we kill prisoners is that we don’t want to fight our enemies twice.

Narration: But William Atherton would not be killed at the battle of River Raisin.

William Atherton: An Indian took me to the back of house, put a blanket around me, gave me a hat… he returned, bringing with him [a] pack horse, and… gave me the bridle, making signs to march on.

Sugden: Captives, particularly young male captives, were very highly prized amongst the Indians. And, and they, they were often integrated into the Indian tribes in a in a remarkably close way.

Narration: William Atherton from Kentucky would now learn to be a Potawatomi in the cold quiet forests of Michigan.

William Atherton: I have nothing to say against the Indian character. They are a brave, hospitable, kind, and honest people, but Kentucky, my home, would rise up before my mind. I found among the Indians a scrap of newspaper printed at Lexington. This I read over and over, again and again…