

Recollections
of a
Chief Trader

in the
Hudson's Bay Company
By
Joseph William McKay

Fort Simpson
1878.

Statement of Joseph William McKay,
Agent of the Hudson Bay Com-
pany at Fort Simpson, B. C. (1844 to 1856)

Came to Fort Vancouver on the Columbia river in 1844, in the employ of the Hudson Bay Company, having made the journey over land from Canada. A party of five, natives of Scotland like myself, were ordered to the Pacific Coast and we made our way from station to station whenever opportunity served and sufficient company could be found to make traveling safe as the Indians could not be trusted along the whole route. Rivalry between English and American traders had caused numerous reports to be spread among the natives tribes, prejudicial to either one party or the other, and in many instances one Company actually incited the Redskins to hostilities against the other Company. At the Simcoe Mission on the north side of the Columbia is what is now Washington Territory, we were besieged by Cayuse Indians who had come ~~by~~ across the river from the Hord river country and, ^{we} were only rescued, when nearly all our ammunition was exhausted, by the timely

arrival of a party of "voyagers" with supplies from Vancouver. Shortly after my arrival I was ordered into Oregon to join Mr. Paul Frazer, who had established a station for the Company near the Mouth of the Umpqua river. Mr. Frazer was alarmed at the influx of American Emigrants into his immediate neighborhood from different parts of the United States. Several trains arrived over land during the autumn. On account of this many of the Indians had shifted their location, hunting was neglected and our business very poor. Under the circumstances Mr. Frazer thought it best to send me back to Fort Vancouver at the beginning of 1845. On my journey I was present at several political meetings in connection with elections for the Territorial Assembly and was much amused at seeing some of our hunters and trappers, illiterate French Canadians, receive nomination for office.

In the neighborhood of Yamhill I met with an American by the name of James Clymer who appeared to be the head of a party who had arrived overland from Missouri the previous

autumn. The majority of Mr. Clymer's companions seemed to be thoroughly disgusted with Oregon or Columbia as it was then called, and it was intended to make up a party sufficiently strong to undertake the journey southward, across the mountains into California. The general opinion then was that it was an exceedingly dangerous undertaking on account of the warlike nature of Indians on the route.

On my return to Vancouver I found to officers of the English Government which had been sent out by the Aberdeen Ministry in a frigate to inquire into and give an opinion on the boundary question. I was detailed to accompany the officers on their journey through the country, to take charge of the baggage train, guides, etc. We were the first to explore the Cowichan country which made a very favorable impression upon the officers who expressed the opinion that the country between the Columbia and the Straits of Fuca must be held at all hazards, an opinion which apparently carried no weight with the Home Government.

These explorations occupied the remainder of the year 1845, but early in 1846 I was sent off to California on business of the Company with a view of looking for a basis of supplies nearer than England in case the farming establishment at Fort Vancouver should be irrevocably lost to England. Our vessel arrived in San Francisco in March 1846 and I found the whole population, foreign and Mexican in great excitement over the prospect of annexation to the United States. Some maintained that it was already an accomplished fact and that General Fremont had already hoisted the stars and stripes, while others asserted that a large army of native Californians was advancing and that Fremont had been put to flight by superior numbers. Such of my countrymen as I had an opportunity to converse with during my stay in San Francisco seemed to take sides with the Americans, though they blamed the English Government for not taking prompt action with a view of securing to the British crown a Colony which would certainly prove valuable in the future.

Just as we were leaving the port of San Francisco the U.S. Frigate "Porpoise" was underway to assist in some movement of Fremont's forces and we heard some firing after we had passed out of the narrows and had all sails set for the Sandwich Islands.

My stay in the Islands was not prolonged. My business was entirely in the interest of the Hudson Bay Company, but ~~the~~ I could not help noting the strained feeling existing between the English and Americans in the Sandwich Islands owing to the possibility of war between their respective mother countries. Found it impossible to purchase a cargo of Taro because the agents of the Russians at Sitka had secured nearly the whole crop as well as large quantities of Sugar and rum, but having made arrangements for shipments of provisions the following year I set sail for Victoria, where everything seemed full of activity and martial bustle owing to the arrival of the "Fitzgard", "Herald", "Pandora" and "Cormorant" - men-of-war from England.

In the month of October I proceeded northward in the steamer "Beaver" and was placed in charge of various stations of the Company on the Sounds. During my sojourn at Port Simpson and several visits to the Fort St. Georges which the Company had leased from the Russians I had frequently come in contact with the officials and agents of the Russian American Company. They were always extremely affable and polite, but at the same time many instances of their resorting to petty tricks of trade came under my immediate observation. In August 1847 a chief of the Staghine Indians whom I knew well and had reason to believe perfectly trustworthy, told me that he had been approached by a Russian officer with presents of beads and tobacco, and that he was told that if he would get up war with the English in that vicinity and compel them to withdraw, he should receive assistance in the shape of arms and ammunition and in case of success he would receive a medal from the Russian Emperor, a splendid uniform and anything else he might desire, while his people should always be paid the very highest prices going

for their peltries.

In spite of these intrigues the Hudson Bay Company always secured nine-tenths of all the land otter and beaver killed in the whole region watered by the Staghine river and a good proportion of the furs from the Russian coast north of the river in the direction of Chilkat and on Tongass and Wrangel Islands. The Russians sent armed vessels down there at various times to break up the traffic, but we managed to keep it up by means of canoe-communication on the intricate inside channels and with the help of American and other vessels who came to trade on their own account, but generally brought up either by our or the Russian American Company.

Late in 1847 there had been some fighting between the Simpsonians and Tongass tribes and a Mr. Shemelin of the Russian Company came to Bella Bella to see me, as I had great influence with the Simpsonians, and to ask me to use it to stop the fighting which interfered very much with hunting and trade as nearly all the skins went for arms and ammunition obtained from contraband

vessels. The captains of these vessels generally were the instigators of war between different tribes. While the Russian was at my house seated at the dinner table an Indian beckoned me from the door and I stepped out. He told me that a large fleet of canoes which we had sent into the Russian possessions was returning loaded down with furs and that they were within a few miles of the port. I was unphased and for a few moments did not know what to do, ~~for~~ it would never do to let the Russians get positive proof of such transactions. Remembering the fondness of Muscovites for strong drink I sent for a small remnant of rum I had left in my store house and he began to ply my guest with the precious fluid. There was less than a gallon and it took nearly all of it to put my visitor hors de combat, but the ruse succeeded and while he lay utterly unconscious on a bench and his men were ^{being} entertained in one of the Indian houses, the expedition landed, the peltries were put away and the canoes sent off to a neighboring cove out of view.

In the summer 1848 the frigate "Constance" came to Victoria and also visited the northernmost stations of the Hudson Bay Company on the Sound. She brought us news of the two important events in Europe of an entirely dissimilar nature, but both of the highest importance to mankind in general - the breaking out of the French Revolution and the invention of Chloroform. The Indians in the neighborhood were much impressed with the formidable appearance of the "Constance" which was a fine ship and well manned and officered. I was told afterward that the Simpsens were on the point of making final arrangements for a simultaneous outbreak of these people and the Staghines and Tongass in the Russian possessions, and that the appearance of the frigate caused the execution of the plot to be postponed for an indefinite period.

All through the year 1849 the Indians seemed restless and on the point of beginning hostilities, but by judicious treatment and preserving our temper even in face of the most provoking behavior of the impudent rascals we managed to get

along peacefully and did considerable business. Toward the end of the year I was ordered to Port Rupert and from there to Victoria, which was the headquarters of the Hudson Bay Company.

While engaged in the office there I was one morning in December called out by the foreman of the Blacksmith shop, who told me that an Indian from the vicinity of Protection Island (now Nanaimo Bay) had been in the shop to have his gun repaired and while waiting and watching operations he had picked up some lumps of coal which he observed very closely. Subsequently, when he saw the men use some coal to replenish the fire, he said that there was plenty of such stone where he lived. I went to the shop and talked with the Indian and told him to bring me some pieces of coal from his home and I would give him a bottle of rum and have his gun repaired for nothing.

The man, who was quite old, went away, but he was taken sick and did not return until early in April, 1850, when he brought a canoe load of coal which proved to be of fair quality. I

fitted out a prospecting party at once and about the first of May we landed near the place where the town of Nanaimo is built now. For several days we looked around and on the 8th of May I located the Douglass vein, which is still being worked, at the place from which the old Indian had taken his specimens.

On our return to Victoria I made a favorable and very circumstantial report on our discovery, but owing to the press of other business on hand the mine was not actually opened until August 1852.

In the same year (1850) I was commissioned to explore the country lying between the newly discovered coal mines and Victoria for farming lands and during the summer we located several large tracts with a view of opening them to settlers. In the course of these explorations I found indications of gold on various occasions, but nothing which would warrant more extensive prospecting. One location, about 20 miles from Nanaimo, is now being worked by Chinamen.

In the year 1851 an Indian belonging to Queen Charlotte's Island produced some coarse gold dust which he claimed to have found near his village. The rapid development of gold mines in California had set everybody wild on the subject and the Company concluded to ascertain the truth of the Indian's statements. Accordingly the brigantine "Huron" was fitted out and manned with some men who had had experience in mining. The prospectors spent several months on the island, but in order not to alarm the Indians they went as traders and only looked around when opportunity served. They did not succeed in finding any surface diggings at the place indicated by the Indians, but after considerable searching in the neighborhood the outcroppings of a quartz ledge were discovered which showed free gold in nearly every specimen. As it was getting late in the season and the party was not prepared to go into quartz mining the brigantine returned to Victoria with about half a ton of specimens of fair average.

The following Spring, 1852, the schooner "Recovery" was dispatched to Queen

Charlotte's Island with all necessary appliances for quartz mining and a party of twenty laborers. A house was erected and work began on a shaft when two Chiefs came to the gentlemen in charge, a Mr. Chalmers, and told him that the land had belonged to them ever since the beginning and that the Company's men might walk over it and hunt over it, but must not dig into the ground any farther than is necessary to make a garden and grow potatoes. Mr. Chalmers tried to purchase the ground without explaining the value of the ledge, but the Indians proved obstinate and said they would not allow the men to dig any more. The next day two men were fired at while at the bottom of the shaft which was then some 20 feet down, and one of them was severely wounded.

As the Indians were very numerous on the Island - from 500 to 600 warriors - Mr. Chalmers became alarmed, packed up everything portable and took men and stores back to Victoria. I was then entrusted with organizing a force of 60 men, which was to consist of half of laborers and half of men intended for guard duty. In a

few weeks the force was ready and the schooner once more returned to Queen Charlotte Island. The very next morning the Indians attempted to surprise us but were prevented by the watchfulness of the sentries. Operations at the mine were immediately resumed and pushed with great vigor, but during all that time the natives kept up a continuous system of petty annoyances and openly boasted that not one of our party should return alive. Under such unfavorable circumstances the work went on and a considerable quantity of ore was extracted, though we could make use of but a small force of laborers, the majority being required for continuous guard duty. However, when the ore had been thoroughly tested in England it became evident that it would not pay for working as long as it was necessary to incur a heavy extra expenditure on account of the strong guard required. As soon as this became known at Victoria the whole enterprise was immediately abandoned. When the Indians noticed our preparations for withdrawal they

became very daring and impudent and only by the most careful management and great forbearance I got the party and movable property off without further bloodshed. This put an end to gold mining on Queen Charlotte Island for the time being.

In the year 1853 accompanied Capt. Pattle on an exploring expedition the most important result of which was the discovery of the rich coal deposits at Bellingham Bay.

The Bornean war having broken out I was ordered to Fort Simpson again to see to the most scrupulous compliance with the terms agreed upon by the Hudson Bay and Russian American Companies, for a strict maintenance of neutrality ~~to~~ as long as hostilities continued between the respective mother countries. This arrangement which had been informally sanctioned by the two Governments was highly satisfactory to all parties concerned and very creditable to the individuals who conceived the project and brought it to maturity. During all that bloody war the representatives and employes of the two Companies were on

the best of terms, nothing beyond a good natured discussion of military events ever coming under my observation.

We saw a few English vessels of war cruising along the coast and taking an occasional peep into Sitka harbor, but the crews were never allowed to land anywhere in the vicinity, ~~and~~ and I am sure that the Indians within our possessions at least had no idea at the time that the two countries were at war.

Here I must take the opportunity of refuting, as far as I can speak from personal observation, the charge frequently made that the Hudson Bay Company did not act in good faith with respect to the mutual agreement existing between the two Companies, since the close of the Russian redoubt at the mouth of the Stalkine river, not to sell any liquor ~~to~~ and fire arms to the Indians. As for ^{the} guns we concerned all the tribes trading with the Hudson Bay Company had been provided with rifles and shotguns for many years previous to the agreement and they continued, as a matter of course, to trade for guns of all

descriptions among themselves, but no new arms were imported for a prolonged period of time, in spite of the fact that this measure caused a considerable falling off in the quantities of skins brought in by the Indians who had almost forgotten the use of these primitive weapons since fire-arms were first introduced among them at the beginning of the century.

The sale of liquor was stopped immediately upon promulgation of the necessary order from headquarters of the Hudson Bay Company and it was strictly carried out on our side though the measure caused great immediate loss in the way of trade.

I remember one instance which occurred at Fort Simpson and which may serve as an example of the manner in which the agreement was adhered to on our part. In 1848 a Chief from Chilkat, named Keskla, came to the fort and demanded some liquor, saying that he would pay any price we might ask. There was one hoghead of rum left at the station and the Chief seemed to be aware of the fact. I refused very decisively

to sell him any, but he continued to make the most tempting offers until finally he covered the path leading from the Company's store down to the landing place with sea otter skins, laid close to each other across the path - a distance of run 300 or 400 yards, - and said I should have them all if I would roll a barrel of rum over the skins to the beach and leave it there. I resisted the offer, but with the first opportunity I shipped the remaining rum to Victoria in order to place myself beyond temptation in the future.

As far as my observation goes the policy of not selling any liquor to the Indians was a bad. They would obtain it or make it anyhow and the measure only threw the very best skins into the hands of American or other traders who penetrated from time to time into the labyrinth of islands and channels belonging to either the British or Russian possessions. A limitation of sales to any one party would have been much more to the purpose.

In 1853 a Frenchman was sent up to Fort Simpson in the employ of the

Hudson Bay Company and as he was a very good cook I kept him at the station. During four or five months he behaved himself very well, but one day one of the Simpsyan Chiefs came to me and told me I must send Leon (the cook) away from there. I asked him what Leon had done to deserve being dismissed, and the Chief answered that he would ruin all his people. When I pressed him for an explanation he finally told me that Leon had made an offer to another Chief of the Simpsyans to teach him the art of making whiskey out of potatoes for a large number of skins under the condition that the Chief was to take the Frenchman down to Victoria in a canoe when the bargain was concluded.

This was a very serious matter as the Simpsyans, Flydas and Bella Bella raise great quantities of potatoes and consequently it was necessary to take prompt measures. I called Leon into my room and told him that I knew about his infamous proposals to the Indians, but that in consideration of his previous good behavior I would

procure for him another situation in the Company's employ, provided he would make a full confession and tell how far the scheme had progressed. Otherwise he should be dismissed immediately.

Being taken entirely by surprise the man confessed and I told him to continue in his present duties until there was an opportunity of sending him away. Next morning Leon was missing and I felt great apprehension lest he should hide among the Indians and teach them his pernicious art.

Messengers were sent out to the different villages and the Chiefs warned not to harbor the man who was a dangerous man and was to be sent out of the country. At last, when four or five days had elapsed without tidings, a report reached me that the man was hiding at Bella Bella. Immediately upon receiving the information I took four armed men with me and proceeded to that place by canoe. The chief at Bella Bella denied all knowledge of the Frenchman, but without paying any attention to his protestations I told the assembled natives that \$50 would

be paid to any body who delivered the Frenchman Leon at the Hudson Bay Company's office in Victoria. This had the desired effect. Four hours later Leon, hand and foot was lying at the bottom of a large canoe and on his way to Victoria, and thus a very serious evil was averted for the time being. I trust that the somewhat irregular proceedings by which he was removed from the country will be considered justifiable under the circumstances.

The above statement was made to me by Mr. Jas. Wm. McKay at Fort Simpson, B. C., July 22, and during the passage from Fort Simpson to Wrangell, Alaska, July 23, 1878, and by me taken down in shorthand.

Sam Petruff