

DARKTOWN MEMORIES



SPOONIN

Incidents connected with the
early settlement of Fort Hall, Idaho

The old Fort Hall Trading
Post, was established in the
fall of 1834 by Nathaniel J.
Wyeth, of Boston Mass.

The buildings were situated
near the mouth of the Portneuf
River in what is now Blaine
County Idaho.

Irving, the Historian, states
that Wyeth established this
post for the express purpose
of disposing of a stock of goods
which he had brought from
the east under contract for
the Rocky Mountain Fur Company.
But for some cause not explained,
the latter named company
refused to take the stock.

At this time, Weyth himself only remained a short time at his new post. Leaving twelve men there to carry on the trade for furs, he proceeded on down to the Columbia when he established a second Trading Post, which he named Fort-Williams, at the mouth of the "Walamut" (or Willamette as it is now spelled) near the present site of Portland, Oregon.

At this early date, all of the fur companies trading posts were called Forts.

They were built of stone, adobe or logs, the walls being from twelve to sixteen feet high and

enclosing a half acre of ground more or less.

They were provided with bastions at two of the corners at least, and often all four of the corners were thus provided. The only openings in the outer ^{wall} consisted of a row of port holes at short intervals around the entire enclosure, and one large heavy wooden gate - with a ~~small~~ gate, just large enough to admit one person at a time. This small gate was set in, and formed a portion of the large gate. The outer walls of the enclosure forming the back walls

of all the living and store rooms, all of which faced and had openings to the inner court;

This precaution was necessary to guard against the attack of Indians. And when ever there was reason to suspect treachery, only a few Indians would be admitted within the enclosure, at a time.

Fort Hall soon became the rendezvous or head quarters, for a large number of "Free Trappers". As all trappers not in the employ of some one of the several fur companies were called.

This, with the fact that the plains of upper Fortness and Blackfoot River was, at that time, a great buffalo range, soon made Fort Hall a place of considerable importance.

A man by the name of Capt. Grant was in charge of Fort Hall trading post for a number of years - but I think it was after Myer had sold the place to a rival company. However, the object of this narrative is not an attempt to record the transactions of the various fur companies, but simply to relate some

of the incidents that transpired in and around that section of country, which were related to me by the few whites, Mexican and Indian trappers who still remained in that vicinity when I established my little trading post there in 1868.

The Blackfoot-Indians seem to have been the boldest and most troublesome of all the surrounding tribes.

By one of their smart-tricks they succeeded in getting away with all the horses belonging to the post at the time.

Knowing that Blackfoot were

lurking around the place, the trader kept his horses close to the post under guard during the day and corralled them inside the fort or stockade nights.

It was the duty of the man in charge of the herd, to instruct the one guard kept on duty nights, when to turn out the animals in the morning. At early dawn this horse boss, would call out in a loud voice "Turn out the horses".

It appears that a Blackfoot who doubtless could not speak or understand a word of English, had for several

mornings secreted himself near the big gate, and got not only the four words but also the tone of the man's voice down fine. Some time before daylight one dark morning this Indian, from close outside the gate sang out, "Turn out the horses".

The drowsy guard hearing the order - and ^{not} suspecting anything amiss - at once unbarricaded, and pushed open the heavy gate liberating the hungry herd. As soon as the last animal passed out; the Indians dashed in behind them - fixing a few shots back through the open

gale as a warning - and struck out for the north, with howls and jeers, getting away with the entire outfit.

That young Blackfoot-rascal had evidently, when out of earshot of the Fort, spent some time at rehearsal, for several men who heard the order that morning declared it was given in a perfect imitation of the boss's voice.

Another little incident that took place there, was one in which Jim Bridger took part.

A gay young Canadian French trapper while riding along up the Portage one day a few miles

above the Fort, stopped at a young Bannock's lodge. Finding out that the Indian was out hunting and his handsome young wife was there alone.

The Frenchman, by threats of shooting her in case of refusal, made her mount behind him and strike back for the fort as fast as possible.

He had scarcely reached the fort with his stolen prize, when the ^{angry} young husband ~~came~~ came up with his horse on a dead run. But Frenchy had got inside and closed the gate before the Indian reached it. Jim Bridger, a natural

born leader of men, and acknowledged boss of trappers whether white or red, happened to be at the post. The young Indian who recognized Bridger, at once appealed to him for help, stating that he was willing and ready to fight the man that had stolen his wife - with either guns or knives on horseback, or on foot, with the understanding that the survivor should have the woman.

Bridger, who was noted for always demanding a square deal told the Frenchman that he must either accept the Indians challenge or at once give up

the woman.

At first the Frenchman said he would do neither; that he had the woman and proposed to keep her.

But, as my informant, himself a Frenchman, expressed it, "It only take de Jim Brige two min - it to make de French-man give up de girl."

As a preliminary to the next story, I will say that the buffalo once so numerous along the western base of the Rocky Mountains from Bear River on the south to Salmon River on the north, were all wiped out by an exceedingly

heavy heavy fall of snow which occurred either the winter of 1836'7 or the winter following.

This snow was said to have reached the depth of four feet on a level all over the Fort-Hall and adjacent country. A Chinook wind cut it down to about one half that depth, when a sudden freeze up formed a crust that bear a man but not strong enough to bear the weight of a horse or buffalo, remaining in this condition for over a month.

It not only destroyed the buffalo and much other large game, but caused the loss of nearly all the horses in that part of the country.

1836-37

The following spring a party was made up at Fort Hall to go to California on foot for the express purpose of stealing horses.

Free trappers, mostly St. Louis and Canadian French, a few mixed bloods and full blood Indians with two Mexicans who were to act as guides - making in all about twenty men - The majority of the party were armed with flint-lock muskets, luckily however, a few of the Indians were armed with bows and arrows only. Each person also carried beside his ammunition, a rawhide lariat and several pairs of extra moccasins.

The party endured great privations and hardships. Nearly perishing at times for lack of food and water.

What little game they procured during the greater portion of their long journey were sage hens, rabbits and even smaller game, was mostly killed by the Indians with bows and arrows.

From the description of the route given me, I think they passed Owens and Tulare lakes and ^{went} on down into what is now Monterey county, where they stole ~~a band~~ of about ^{hundred} two ^{hundred} head of good horses, many of them being broke to ride. Taking their back trail they ^{made} the best possible time - living mostly on horse flesh.

For a few days, to guard against a surprise in case they were followed, several of their men kept well back on their trail as a rear guard, but as no one showed up they abandoned this precaution, traveling more leisurely. When to their great surprise one evening after making camp for the night, a lone horseman rode up bearing a white handkerchief in his hand, a flag of truce, - known to all enlightened races - . Being alone with no arms in sight, he was allowed to enter their camp.

They described him as being a fine looking Spaniard or possibly

a Mexican richly dressed, riding a fine animal and leading another equally as good.

His silver mounted saddle, bridle and spurs were greatly admired by the whole horse thief crowd.

After asking for, and receiving permission to camp with them, he took off his saddle and turned his horses loose with herd.

He then explained (one of the Mexicans acting as interpreter) why he had followed them so far. His statement was as follows:

"I have thousands of horses and would have given you people double the number

~~the number~~ you have taken had you come to my rancho and asked for them. I destroy hundreds of my inferior ones every year by driving them over the bluffs into the ocean, horses that would be well suited to your wants - being tough and hardy even if they are small.

You have here only two of my animals that I care anything about. One of them being my Lady's favorite saddle horse. The other a Stallion that I imported from Spain last year. These two animals are worth no more to you than the two I brought with me, and

which I would be pleased to exchange for those two I have mentioned. I greatly desire to recover my lady's favorite animal, I care more for it than for the much more valuable Stallion.

My lady's parting words were "I know you will bring back to me my dear old pet." So you can see, gentlemen, why I am so anxious to recover this one animal at least.

Every man in the posse readily consented to this very liberal proposition. Some even suggesting that he be allowed to take a dozen or more of the best horses back with him. This he declined to do saying

that the two animals were all that he cared for.

The next morning the black stallion and the old favorite saddle horse that the lady so greatly prized, were brought up, the saddle being placed on the black, while the best of feelings seemed to prevail in the whole crowd. After shaking hands with every member of the party, the Spaniard placed his foot in the stirrup and while in the act of mounting, was shot in the back by the two Mexicans, falling dead from his horse. This cowardly and treacherous murder came near costing the

two villains their lives.

Before they could reload, their guns were wrenched from their hands and broken by the greatly excited and indignant crowd.

They had no sympathizers - not one - even the Indians present, said they should ^{be} shot at once as they were not fit to live.

A council or sort of trial followed, in which it was demanded of the Mexicans to explain why they had done this brutal murder. "Here is where the company made its mistake. The heinous act alone should have been sufficient to condemn them to death at once."

The lying "greasers" saved themselves by making some of the party at least, believe that if the Spaniard had been allowed to return, he would have gathered a large force of men, and followed them to Fort Hall if necessary and have killed the whole outfit; that he had come to them alone merely to find out their number, how they were armed, and also be able to identify every man later when they would be captured or killed etc.

The oldest man in the gang - the only one whose hair was turning grey - a full blooded Indian - did not believe their lies,

for as soon as it was ~~was~~ decided to let the villains live, he drove an arrow to the heart of the big black saying that no cowardly dog should ever ride the brave and good man's best horse.

The fine saddle and other valuable equipments that had evidently cost the Spaniard his life, were divided between his slayers. Even his sombrero with its wire silver band was taken by one of the murderers.

By living on horse meat, thus losing no time in hunting, the home trip was made without further incident worthy of note.

The above narrative was related to me by two different members that had taken part in the adventure.

One an old St. Louis Frenchman "Old Lewy" he was called, I think his ^{real} name was Dubouille.

The other, known to the whites as Old Beaver John - was a full blood Shoshone Indian.

Their statements agreed in all essential points.

Old Lewy, further said that, the long journey did not do him, or many of the others, any good, as they lost all their horses in gambling the following winter; that the next spring two men

on the expedition

who had not been with them, had won nearly all the horses and they charged the free trader from five to eight beaver skins for the use of an animal during the trapping season.

I remember one more story which I think worth relating. It occurred several years later than those already narrated.

During the early 40^s all of the travel to Oregon Territory passed by Fort Hall on what is now known as the old emigrant wagon road.

An abundance of wood, water and grass - and also a trading store where supplies could be

purchased, induced many of the emigrants to lay over there a week or two, to rest up and recruit their worn and weary animals.

It appears that one morning an emigrant found that some one had stolen six or eight head of his best mules and horses the previous night. It was also noticed that one Kit Pearson and one Jim Beckwith had vacated their camp near the Fort.

On missing his stock the emigrant called at the trader's store for advice regarding the same.

Capt. Grant, then in charge of the post, advised him to see

Jim Bridger, saying that if any one could assist him Bridger would be the man.

The emigrant and Bridger soon came to an understanding.

The former, ^{acting on Bridger's advice,} offered a reward of a beaver trap for each head of his ^{animals} recovered. (These traps would cost him \$16- each at the trader's store.)

Bridger at once, made this offer known to Mechan Leclair, a little Frenchman noted for cool daring and fighting qualities. Both Bridger and Leclair, were satisfied that Carson and Beckwith had stolen the stock, and also felt sure that they

would strike out east with it.

I will here state that stealing stock in that country at that date, was not regarded as a great crime - and seldom if ever, visited with the severe penalties meted out for a like offence away back in old Missouri.

Of course no gentleman would steal a horse from a friend or neighbor. Stealing stock from an outsider however, was a different proposition which the best of them occasionally resorted to in times of need.

Leclair (or Mehan as we called him) readily accepted the job

of recovering the stolen stock.

Taking with him "Thomas Lavette" a young Mexican, which he had adopted a few years previous, he struck out east well mounted and only eight or ten hours behind the stolen stock.

Carson and "pard" had kept clear of the wagon road until they reached Soda Springs, where there was a small store its principal stock ^{in trade} being "wet goods", here they had called to quench their thirst and purchase a little tobacco and other necessaries of life.

This much the pursuers learned by asking a few seemingly

careless questions regarding the travel, keeping the object of their own movements to themselves.

They rode away from the place very leisurely but quickening their gait as soon as out of sight.

They made their camp some distance from the road that night, and pulled out before daylight the next morning.

During the following afternoon, by keeping a sharp look out from every high point on the road, they finally sighted their men. As it was not intended from the start, to try to take the stock by force, they now had to exercise great caution in

keeping track of their game, without being discovered themselves.

Shortly after sundown they saw Pearson and Beck with leave the wagon road and make camp on a small creek.

The object being to steal back the stock - they decided to do it during the coming night if possible. By keeping themselves secreted behind a hill they worked their way up to within a half mile of the other fellows camp. Here they picketed their own horses and after waiting a couple of hours for every thing to quiet down, they approached the camp on foot-

or rather on their hands and knees the most of the distance.

They found that one of the emigrants' horses that had a bill on, was staked out some three hundred yards above camp on a little grass plat - the mules and other horses grazing near the bill - with the exception of their own two saddle horses which were staked within a few yards of where the two men were sleeping.

Mechan and the boy first secured this little bunch of animals with ropes brought along for that purpose.

Removing the bill Mechan

directed Thomas to lead the animals back to where their saddle horses were left, while the older man kept up the clanging in imitation to a bell horse quietly grazing.

After nearly an hour spent in leading the tired and hungry animals back to the appointed place, the boy came back for further orders.

So far the work had been quite simple and easily accomplished, but to secure the two other animals - which was highly essential to the success of the enterprise - was no easy task at best, and made doubly hazar-

done by the fact - that a very watchful dog was keeping guard over them.

Mechan then explained to Thomas, that as he was young and had a reputation yet to establish, he should crawl up and bring away the two horses while he (Mechan) would continue to properly work the bell.

The boy being quite ambitious to acquire fame, readily consented to undertake the job.

"Which he many years ^{later} explained to me."

First he tried to crawl directly to the animals but the loud growl of the dog scared him,

from further attempt - in that direction, crawling back some distance he got down into the shallow creek and keeping along under the bank waded around the bend making as little noise as possible, got up to within a few feet of the nearest horse, but as soon as he raised his head above the bank, the dog warned him that he was still on the look out;

And to make it more interesting one of the men got up apparently to see what the dog was making such a fuss about.

The man came out to the two horses, passing within a few

feet of where the kid was concealed. After seeing that the two horses were all right the man stood still for some time.

Thomas said, "Then I got scared I think sure he going up to the bell, I don't know if he had gun, so dark I couldn't tell,

but I know Michan had gun and I know he fight now fore he loose the horses. I think pretty fast then, If dog go with man I cut picket rope, jump on one horse and lead other one to the other horses so fast as I could, I know Michan come then if he no git killed."

Well, it appears that the ding-dong of the bell was sufficient to convince the man that everything

was all right - up there for he scolded the dog telling it to go and lie down and stop its noise.

The obedience of that well trained dog, opened the way for the boy to establish a enviable reputation, for ten minutes later without protest from the dog, he was leading the two horses quietly to the bell.

The bell music was kept up however until the older man had given Thomas time to reach the other animals when he soon joined him.

It's needless to add that no time was fooled away on the

home stretch.

On passing Suda Springs on their way back they stopped a few minutes for refreshments.

The proprietor noticing the stock, said "Why Mehan you have got- leason and Beck with the stock." The answer was,

"Yes, You tell de dam Kit leason and de dam Jim Beck with de little French man got his noo, you bet he no folly me."

The emigrant- cheerfully paid the promised reward, while Mehan and the kid each had added an extra horse to their number, and I think it would

bet a safe two to one bet that
some other emigrant further
east woke up some morning
finding himself shy a few
animals.