
Life at Old Fort Colville

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LIFE AT OLD FORT COLVILLE.*

January 1st to 31st.¹

On the entry of the year I gave a good fare and moderate libation to the Indians, I was frequently thanked by them. I gave our few engaged servants each their bottle² of Demarasa.

Again a ball is made and the tag and rag of the country with good women and bad flock to it at her Britanic Majesty's old commission house.³ The night is cold and a few fitful gusts blown down under the eye of the northern star beats sharply through our beards whilst Charlie plays inside to a crowded and excited crowd the stirring notes of Roy's Wife of aid a Vallach. The simple and ancient notes of Scotland are reverted by the old smouldering trunks of Columbia and the granite hills of that stream. A fair haired quarteroon lady⁴ of mild yet serious countenance presents another Charlie⁵ with a white and neatly ironed shirt. This Charlie is a square shouldered, bull necked, hound eyed muscular gambler of about five feet eight and the same ponderous knife with which he struck at the cripple in December is sheathed on his side, Its handle is of brass and scaled with with mettle like the hide of a crocodile. A navy revolver is on his other hip as he thanks the fair one for the shirt. She looks in his eye but she sees nothing yet a sense as if she were in the presence of the Fiend thrilled her veins and marrow and she withdrew to dress. Whilst he did so too. The ball plays and dances well, and the murderer and thief and the honest thinker acts his part. But Charlie's friend Williams in a log hut by a mountain stream three leagues away from the ball is dressed otherwise. He too has his bowie of monstrous length and his tube of six charges—he is reclined grimly on his floor before his fire and as he stares vacantly at the flames of his fire a pale iron faced athletic longnosed blood shot eyed mate who had just taken supper with him after a game of cards steals and bends behind him and fires a round of another six charge navy into the back of his head. The ball passes out through the centre of the forehead

*This record of life at the old Hudson's Bay Company's Fort Colville and at the old United States Army Post at Fort Colville was transcribed by William S. Lewis from the papers of Angus MacDonald, late Chief Trader. The footnotes were prepared by Mr. Lewis and Jacob A. Meyers.—Editor.

1 1863.

2 The customary holiday "regales."

3 The British Boundary Barracks, at White's Landing, now Marcus, Wn.

4 Mrs. McRice, the community laundress.

5 Charlie Harper.

with the blood after it and the brains too yet the murdered springs up as if galvanized by omnipotence and stood appalling to look at even by his murderers. Thereupon the iron faced enemy seized a large cast steel axe and giving the staring dead who still stood on his feet a heavy blow on the temple he fell with an awful groan. Three other wretches helped the iron faced to wipe the blood of the planks and rob the dead of his notes and dollars, then threw him beneath the floor of his hut. They then took a draught of Rotgut⁶ and smoked their pipes with the cold indifference of confirmed mischief and callousness of a life to guilt. The night waxed on and Charlie at the ball was morose, stealthy, blasphemous and overbearing. Twice he took the floor from an open faced herculean Irish miner and twice the Irish man evaded the taking up of an insult from a brute but resigned the floor to get clear. The night blew frequent and hollow gusts from the north, and the travelling stars stood far to the west as the rot-gutted crowd stole off—sleighted off—rode off—and yelled off to worse or better homes. Charlie was yet left and Charlie of the violin still felt his instrument. The armed Charlie hereon entered the bedroom of the woman that gave him the shirt. She refusing his invitation to another dance—he stole out whispering “take care”. He entered the log room of the fair who washed his shirt—and having few passes and threats with her husband⁷ who slipped into another room to get his rifle, Charlie thereon levelled his navy with both his hands, fired and shot the woman dead through the throat. A scared fellow that stood by her merely remarked—you hurt her Charlie when he again walked up to her body and whilst he cocked his other tube the frightened man in the room stole out. Charlie in an instant was in haste to escape—ran for his blankets and horse leaving his pocket book full of forged and real notes and letters to fall into the hands of the sheriff. The sheriff⁸ laid down to sleep while the murderer made off to the murdered Williams. On his way a fine vigorous mare was locked in a Frenchman’s stable. After much time lost to steal her, his own steed being fagd, he was baffled by the strength of the humble stable—and he spurred on. On enquiring

⁶ American frontier whiskey, a vile compound of raw alcohol, water and flavoring extract, mixed on the ground, as distinguished from the H. B. Co’s. “rum;” the latter was a rare drink and could not be sold in competition with the inferior “rotgut” article. In fact it was only sold by the company in small quantities and to reliable persons, never to Indians or to the vicious raffraff element of the frontier community.

⁷ McRice was a teamster and freighter.

⁸ MacDonald’s daughter, Christina, informs us that the then Sheriff was Bo: Lamphere.

of the iron faced where Williams was he was told that Williams went down to the Columbia. Charlie here retraced his steps upon the second night escaping all the runners and sentinels out for him and made his way to an Indian camp six leagues down the river Columbia. He left his horse for a canoe—got a few dried salmon and floated down the current with his Saddle Cabress and blankets. Two miners not knowing him saw a man in the centre of his canoe paddling with a piece of driftwood and seemed to be entirely at the disposal of the stream as every playful whirl and ripple rowed and twisted his canoe at their will. They thought him drunk. The Indians said something of him, and death, and a woman, but the current passed on and Charlie in his canoe was borne by it to a miner's⁹ hut some two or three leagues lower down.

That day a tall 6 feet savage with hair on end who did not apparently wash his face all his life stalked grimly into my room and told me of Charlie's track. During the evening a pursuing party led by a discharged British Sapper¹⁰ called upon me requesting my using all my knowledge to discover Charlie. This Sapper was of a slant eyed open, and fine countenance. Supported by a huge swarthy and powerful French Canadian,¹¹ with another Sapper and an Okinagon half breed¹² of lunatic appearance yet very acute and determined. They thought Charlie would fight to the last as he was they said "A desperate desperado" I thought and told them that whatever his courage might be nothing but fear made him try to escape and that withal his resolution that his best parts might be harassed so that his defense might be of no force. Well said the Sapper I have a double barrel laden with ball and three slings¹³ each for him anyhow off they started in the dark with all their hairs and beard covered with frozen By this time Charlie was brooding in his miner's hut as he stared grimly at the fire and rafters now and anon, and seemed to start at every sharp rap which the frost binding airs struck out of the neighboring trees. The Sapper and party with two sturdy Indian canoe men were by this time closely counting every moment of his life with every stroke of their paddles, and before he knew that they found his tracks at all they surrounded his hut. Now was

⁹ Harper forced this man to feed him, threatening to kill him if he told of his whereabouts; a threat that the miner ignored as soon as Harper had gone on.

¹⁰ One of the former British garrisons stationed at the British Boundary Barracks during the international boundary survey.

¹¹ Joseph Martin.

¹² Joseph LaFleur.

¹³ Buckshot.

his time as he had twelve rounds in his two revolvers and out of sight of theirs. His antecedents awed them, none chose to walk in on him, On being challenged to come out he refused. The giant dark Frenchman said "we will smoke and burn you out if you do not disarm yourself and be delivered into our hands, tis your last chance and you will have a fair trial by court." Charlie still hesitated, nor would he fire upon them nor would he come out. At last they began to pile pitch timbers round his house to burn him and he finally threw out his arms and came out with his hands up like a helpless and blockheaded fiend, who was so cruel in taking life yet so fond of keeping it. They then made a grim breakfast on the roof of the hut as it was level with the face of the bank in which it was dug, and he sipped his coffee with them. On asking if the woman was dead and being told "yes" he said "Oh Lord! Oh my God", They then paddled up the stream till they met the sheriff with a second party after him. As the tall and well formed official claimed him one of his own party cocked his revolver on him and said "hold back there Master Sheriff or I'll pierce you through. Your labor is no more responsible as it ends here!" Charlie shall be lynched here and he shall hang by the neck. Mercy he refused and he shall be refused mercy. As the desperate and far famed Charlie heard his doom from this sturdy miner who swore with a calm vehemence "By God boys string him up!" He, the former desperado became pale—shivered and was pitiful to look at. He was entirely unnerved and he could scarcely stand as he staggered in the snows gnashing and moaning like a dying wolf. The rope was soon on his neck and he said "Well let me pray. I hope I will go to heaven". The husband a dark haired and skinned American said 'No Charlie There is no praying for you. Think not of heaven now. We came to send you straight to hell"! and with that he soon swung from and off the plate beam of a miner's log house¹⁴ by which they stood.

Williams body was lifted up in a few days in the presence of none with the sly and pale faced moon and his shadowy murderers. Broken bits of cloud veiled the cold celestial orb on her course as the iron faced with his party at three hours after midnight stood out and in a mule park dug a hole wherein they tumbled him hat boots, spur and coat on. Then having closed up the dismal and last resting place of Williams with great caution finishing it with a sod and a heavy swig of Rot Gut was again

¹⁴ Leo's, now Rickey's Bar, below Rickey's Rapids on the Columbia.

swallowed and they stalked into their huts, charged their pipes with plug of three dollars per pound and thought it was "all right" with them and the dead.

In these days the Major¹⁵ in command was losing his beeves weekly, and the iron faced with his party fared well on the on the fat of the "damned North", broiled steakes, roasted fleeced ribs, broiled loins and Rot Gut and Monte and Poker had their turns whilst the stout and well set major swore daily for his stolen steers. Just as he was weary of reflections on his lost cattle a broad flat chested, grey haired, big eyed savage with a mouth reaching from side to side of his face and over hung in its span with two ponderous lips an inch thick stepped quietly to his side and said "I saw a steer's head". "The devil you did, where" was the Major's reply. "It is in the place of a man of the color of iron in the face. It was killed in the snows by his house and he feeds well"! A search being made by a tall black haired intelligent Lieutenant of the U.S. army who was designedly in full uniform a mink faced old soldier of the republican army¹⁶ was colared whilst denying any share in the death of the beef and he swore lustely that there was none in the vicinity and says he "I'll be damned upon my honor if you can find any here. The Lieutenant eyed him inch by inch. The iron faced was in the shadow of the forest hearing the denial and thought it was sufficiently clear to put a ball in the uniformed boy of the "damned abolitionists" but the distance was too much and the chances of escape more so. The mink faced turned more dun as the subtle reasoning Lieutenant hauled the beef out of his hen house. "There you see how you lie" said the officer walking away to the barracks with his prisoner. On being questioned by the Major the mink face swore it was taken there by two men who escaped on the finding of the beef in his hen house. The iron face was musing on his chances of not being criminated when his door was suddenly opened and he was told at the point of three fixed bayonets to "walk to the major's" When brought into the Major's parlor he did not even deign to take off his hat, but stood as cold apparently as a piece of Oregon quartz and certainly more impenetrable. His eye was of a green yellow hazel with long, dense and beautiful lashes, his forehead vast, upright but very broad in its lower re-

¹⁵ In the fall of '62 the regular troops were called east to take part in the War of the Rebellion. To take their place two companies of volunteers were recruited in San Francisco and came to the post at Fort Colville. These companies were in the command of Major Curtis.

¹⁶ These two volunteer companies were largely composed of bums, vagrants and petty thieves recruited along the Barbary Coast at San Francisco.

gion, his nose long, bold and energetic in finish, his mouth thin upperlipped and close set, his jaws heavy and advanced. Just the face to storm the cannon's mouth in the excitement of battle, yet the gleam of the eye was shuffling and indirect and when centre to centre before the Major's it glanced another proof of mean resolution. He threw all blame on the two who escaped and by his absolute coolness gulled the Major to let him go. Giving his honor as a miner and blacksmith living by honest fare that he would be found at his hut any day further evidence might be required. And he stalked heavily out of the room. The Major thereon said to me with a kind yet rather baffled expression of goodness in his face. "I believe the damned fellow is in earnest". "I believe so too" said I "as he never caught or kept sight of you". The mink face was now held to the chain alone and The Iron faced thought it were better to clear out so in a few hours he and his associates save one young trout faced youth of 19 were on their mules. It was cold and the hollow moon clear and clean looked sharp as the axe with which he struck Williams as they waded heavily through three feet of firm compact snow which laid on their track as far as the Spokans.¹⁷ The southern bred mule plunged, rolled and often refused the way. The heavy Spanish spur of an inch prong was ceaselessly kicked into her side by the ponderous boot and limb of the Iron faced murderer and they were wading warily south imagining crimes to come and oblivion by escape for those past.

Vague rumors were out that the California criminal Welles who killed the driver of his car and the two police men who hand cuffed him and who sleeping too soundly by his side in that car were by their own weapons shot dead by him, looked like a certain fellow hereabouts this winter. The description fell to the share of Williams. Six thousand dollars reward tickled the major's fancy, and the mink faced being out on bail was requested by the sanguine major to enquire about Williams. He went forth at the Major's call like a thing intent on that labor. It was dark the mountain brooks were strangled by ice, each bough and branch hung heavily down with a new fall of snow hung heavily down! yes, as if bending with heaven's offering to man's inheritance of something more clean and spotless than he was in the habit of seeing below. The mountain owl was about his inheritance when the mink faced stole on the top of his boots into the

¹⁷ Customarily spelled by the fur traders without the final "e."

trout faced's hut. Where is Williams, glorious news for him. "Six thousand dollars for him"! Mind 'tis damned good pay! and no foul play! Six thousand What! Why Yes six thousand the Major says so! All offered! Six thousand dollars for his head! Three thousand to the Major, fifteen hundred to you and as many to me. Where is he if its him. Of course it is him. Well if it is not him he will have to die once anyhow and he may as well die at once! Where is he " During this time the trout faced youth of 19 was swallowing this speech with a most stealthy murderous gusto. The lights of his hog like eye would mock the fiend within it when he rawly replied 'Well if that's all tis all right for I have killed him already' "You" "Yes me" "Well that is just in our hands" and they whipped off to the Major's exultingly.

The trout faced youth told his tale and swore that he alone "did it"—as he knew the reward for Williams and that he was sure of his being the man who shot the police and driver in California. The Major ordered a party to go and uncover the dead for proof and the trout faced youth with Stygian indifference began hastily to disenter the body of the murdered Williams. There he was his boots and spurs and coat on. With his hat too, a piece of a gunny sack veiled his face from the dust. But on a coroners judgment being pronounced it was said he was not the man, The trout faced youth was now chained up for murder and when he found his feet locked instead of his purse filled he deposed to the crime as orginally committed by the iron faced, himself only being cognizant of the fact as he only "helped to wipe the blood from the planks".

Again the night is cold and the firmament comes down around our heads compact with frozen airs and flakes and gloom. A sigh as if nature were to sever some of her deeds passd through the forests whilst seven stalwart horse men on hard and shaggy Indian steeds presd to the south on the track of the iron faced and party. The pursuing men were armed with double barrels and rifles, revolvers and bowies.

The iron faced and party, in two parties, of two each, were wading afoot through the snowy waste of the Spokane plain, 80 miles away from the hole into which they tumbled the dead Williams. They were poring and sweating with a heavy walk without arms or horses, as they left the former in their hut whilst out to see their horses at grass! Although "The Son of Man comes like a thief in the night" they did not watch so that the iron faced

with his grim companions among whom is the trout faced youth are now heavily chained to await the July Circuit¹⁸ Judgment?. The Citizens to the number of eighteen were with cords in hand to lynch them were awed and plausibly convince by some dark satirical reasoning that it were better to let them alone. They were then locked up in the "Skookym House" but a few visits of the moon saw them steal away from that "damned place".

WILLIAM S. LEWIS.

JACOB A. MEYERS.

¹⁸ The Territorial Circuit Court.