

George Simpson Part II

This is the second article in a series about Sir George Simpson and his mixed blood son George Stewart Simpson. He was 28 years old when he became Hudson's Bay Company's (HBC) acting governor-in-chief in North America. The first article recounts his aristocratic roots although he was born out of wedlock and goes on to discuss the changes in the status of the mixed blood marriages over 200 years of the fur trade.



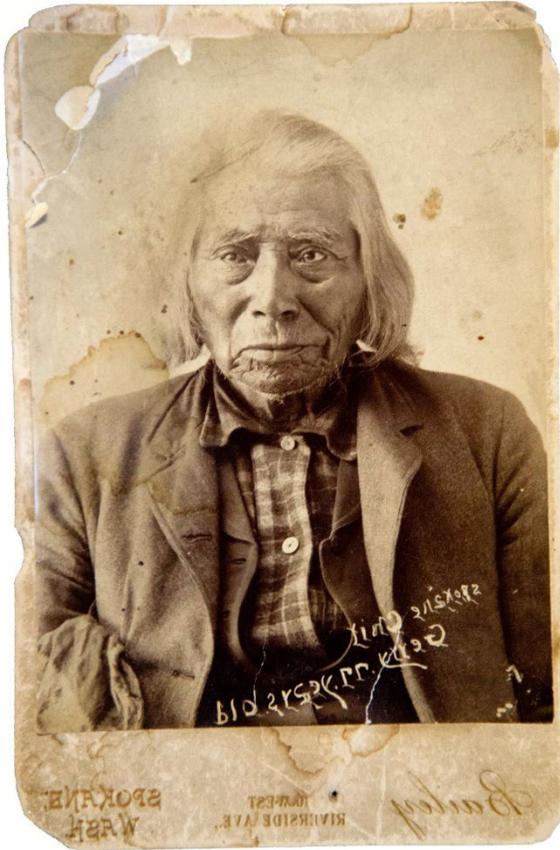
Over the 40 years during which he was essentially “The Little Emperor” of the fur trade, Simpson was constantly seeing future possibilities for the business and making changes to effect their fruition. Many of those decisions continue to affect the economy, ecology, and humanity of Northeast Washington. At the outset I want to dissuade readers from judging this man by our standards even though many of his contemporaries would have either approved or disapproved of his actions in terms similar to those we would apply today. Rather, I want to emphasize the tremendous changes that occurred over the course of his tenure.

When he arrived in North America in 1820, Simpson had travelled by sail boat for a month from London to New York. Then he travelled to Montreal where he joined the Beaver Club, "an animated expression of the *esprit de corps* of the North West Company". The men of the Beaver Club were the predecessors of Montreal's Square Milers. (From about 1870 to 1900, 70% of all wealth in Canada was held by this small group of approximately fifty men.) This is notable because up to that point, Hudson's Bay was in fierce competition with the North West Company (NWC) over control of the fur trade. The Beaver Club was already 35 years old, a year older than Simpson himself. He was soon on his way to the annual meeting of the partners of the North West Company at Fort William (today's Thunder Bay, Ont.). Here he delivered a message that Lord Bathurst, secretary of state for war and the colonies, had entrusted to him, calling for an end to the violence between the two companies.

These events presage the remarkable ability of Simpson over the course of his life to arrange operations of mutual benefit to competing parties and end up in control of the resulting organization. They also highlight his penchant for rapid travel and ability to quickly assess the economic situation and the people involved. The next year, 1821, the North West Company and Hudson's Bay merged and although technically the resulting company had a Northern Department ranging north from Rainy Lake near the present border between the United States and Canada and west to the Fraser River and the Pacific Coast including the Columbia River, and a Southern Department. Simpson was in charge of the Northern Region in 1821 and both after 1825.

Simpson soon charged John Lee Lewes and John Dugald Cameron to conduct an inspection of the old NWC posts west of the Rocky Mountains. This included Spokane House at the mouth of the Little Spokane River. They reported that many of the posts could be made profitable by the elimination of

excess personnel. Their report would soon lead to the establishment of HBC Fort Colvile in 1825 and the abandonment of Spokane house much to the dismay of the former NWC men stationed there.



1Spokane Garry

Simpson passed through our area 3 times in the 40 years that he oversaw HBC operations. The first was in 1824 when he set a record of 84 days getting from the York Factory on Hudson Bay to Fort George (formerly Astoria) near the mouth of the Columbia. Quickly assessing the situation, he foresaw the Columbia River as a future border between American and British interests. He ordered Fort Vancouver be built at the confluence of the Willamette and Columbia Rivers as the main depot on the Columbia River, to replace Fort George and be positioned on the north side of the Columbia in 1825, the same year that Fort Colvile was established. While at Spokane House, he met Slough-Keetcha, a Spokane (called Spokane Garry), and a Kootenai called Kootenai Pelly. Seeing they might convert to Christianity; he recruited them to go east to the mission school at HBC's Red River colony (near today's Winnipeg). All of these things would have huge impacts on our region.

Continuing his series of record-breaking trips, Simpson returned in 1828 after moving the HBC headquarters from the York Factory to Lachine,

(from the French word for China), located eight miles from Montreal, above the rapids in the Saint Lawrence River. The name recognizes that early explorers there were looking for a northwest passage to China. This trip of 5000 miles remains the longest North American canoe journey ever made in one season. On the way out he was accompanied by a dog, his mistress and a personal piper. He visited New Caledonia, where Fort St. James was established on the south end of Stuart Lake in the middle of present-day British Columbia. Simpson was intent on strengthening the HBC position against Russian fur trading to the north and American fur companies to the southeast. He sent Peter Skene Ogden southeast to trap out furs in the Snake River country in 1824 thereby discouraging American trappers from advancing westward; and established an HBC sawmill five miles up the Columbia River from Fort Vancouver to strengthen HBC supplies of lumber, which Simpson saw, along with salmon, beef and other agricultural products, as important future trade items.

Returning to England at the end of that trip in 1829, Simpson was looking for a Scottish wife. He married his 18-year-old first cousin, Frances Ramsay Simpson in 1830 and brought her back to the Red River settlement. Sylvia Van Kirk describes the event. "Frances Simpson's arrival in Rupert's Land had serious repercussions on fur-trade society. Most of the HBC officers had married native women after the custom of the country. But with the British marriage of Governor Simpson, who had himself cast aside a



Frances Ramay Simpson

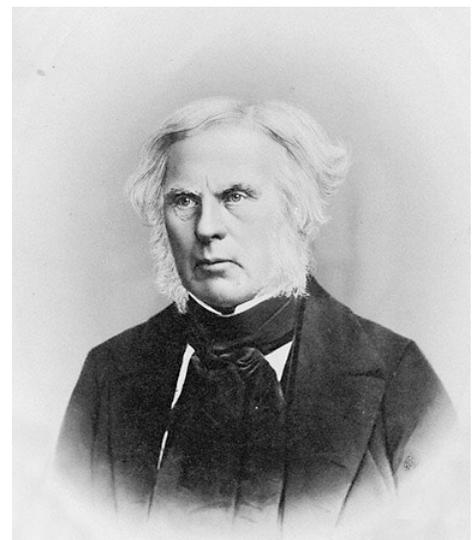
native wife and family, racial prejudice increased. Simpson determined that native women, regardless of the rank of their HBC husbands, should be excluded from respectable society, especially in the Red River settlement (Man.) where the Simpsons took up their winter residence.” Frances’ first child died soon after childbirth the next year. She herself became ill and Simpson took her back to England for rest and medical attention. She had 3 daughters there, but her health declined. After a brief return trip in 1838, she returned to live at Lachine in 1845 where she had a son. She died of tuberculosis 7 years later.

In 1841 George Simpson was once again headed to the Northwest. By this time, he had met with Baron von Wrangel, head of the Russian Fur Trade and arranged to supply foodstuffs to the Russian-American Company in Alaska in an agreement which prevented their expansion further south. He had also been knighted by Queen Victoria. On the way west he met James Sinclair’s wagon train of 100 settlers heading to the Oregon Country. His trip too him to Fort Vancouver from where he boarded a steamboat, the Beaver, owned

by HBC and travelled north visiting forts along the coast. Simpson became convinced that HBC could not hold off American occupation at the Columbia but foresaw the 49th parallel as the eventual border. He also decided that maintaining so many forts along the coast was inefficient given the expedited travel of steam boats.

After more travel by steamship at an HBC meeting in the Sandwich he ordered HBC headquarters moved to what is now Victoria, BC and that all forts along the coast be closed except Fort Simpson. That decision made an enemy of his former friend and head of Fort Vancouver, John McLoughlin. McLoughlin also felt that Simpson had done a poor job of investigating the murder of McLoughlin’s son John at Fort Stikine (Alaska) concluding it was just a drunken brawl.

Simpson did however make a new friend of King Kamehameha III of Hawaii by supporting the king’s desire to keep Hawaii independent of foreign control and providing funds for a Hawaiian diplomatic mission to Britain and France and Belgium which secured Hawaiian independence. From Hawaii Simpson headed back to Sitka where



John McLoughlin



King Kamehameha III

he took a Russian ship to Okhotsk and travelled across Siberia past Lake Baikal, through St Petersburg and back to England completing a trip around the world.

Simpson returned to Montreal a rich man living with his wife and holding banquets at his home for wealthy friends. His interests turned to railways, real estate, and banking. He was part of the negotiations that established the 49th parallel as the Canadian-United States border in 1846. By the time that Frances died in 1855 Simpson had sired at least eleven children by at least seven women, only one of whom was his wife. He died from a stroke in 1860 four days after hosting a party for the Prince of Wales.