

HUGGINS' ACCOUNT OF THE 1855 BRIGADE

The story of the coming via the Naches Pass, of the Hudson's Bay Company's Brigade, with the Fur returns of Outfit 1855, from the various posts in the Oregon department, and the return of same, packed with goods.

By Edward Huggins

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The Board of Management of Hudson's Bay Company's affairs, with headquarters at Fort Vancouver, Columbia River, had decided that the "Fur Returns" from the different posts, or trading establishments in Oregon and Washington Territory, for the year ending May 31st, 1855 – which hitherto had been taken to Fort Vancouver – should this year, be taken to Fort Nisqually (which post is situate on Puget Sound, six miles south of Steilacoom, directly upon the high road between Olympia and Tacoma) by way of the Cascade range of mountains, through Naches Pass, and the supply of goods required by these posts, and servants, for the trade and wants of the ensuing year should be obtained at Fort Nisqually and freighted back by the horse that carried the furs.

The principal reason for making this order was because Fort Nisqually was overstocked with goods, the usual kind required to carry on trade with Indians, and a small selection of the finer kinds of goods, to satisfy the demands of the now fast increasing white population coming into the country to find employment at the large saw mills in operation and in the course of construction, and also to take up claims – farms – under the United States' liberal land laws.

We at Fort Nisqually made preparations for packing the goods for the interior posts long before the arrival of the Brigade of Horses bringing the furs. A small press was made by one of our Canadian carpenters. It was a primitive affair but answered all purposes. Its pressing power was the wedge and it made a compact, small bale. Each bale weighing about eighty pounds, two of which made a load for a horse and weighed 160 pounds, a load quite heavy enough for a common pony weighing from 700 to 1,000 pounds to pack over such roads and trails as are found in this mountainous country. Some of the goods couldn't be pressed and such were put in strong boxes. Shot and ball were put in rawhide casings, which required to be strong enough to prevent loss en route.

On the 27th of June the Fort Journal states that "three French Canadians arrived at the Fort and presented an order from Mr. Angus MacDonald, the officer in charge of Fort Colvile [Fort Colvile up the Columbia River named for Andrew Colvile of the HBC

Committee], for flour and other provisions for the use of the Brigade, which was in the mountain approaches and would probably arrive in about five days." They were correct in their prediction, for on the 2nd of July at about midday, I was startled to see a tall, rather slim man ride into the Fort, dismount and walk towards the large house where he was met and kindly received by Doctor Tolmie. This was Angus MacDonald of Fort Colville, and now in charge of the Brigade of upwards of 200 horses, most of them packed with furs, the result of the year's trade of Fort Colville, Walla Walla, Boise, Hall, Okanogan, Nez Perce and the Snake country.

I had heard a great deal about MacDonald and was anxious to meet him, which desire was soon gratified, for Doctor Tolmie brought him to the packing room where I was working and gave me an introduction to him. He was rather a good looking man, about six feet in height, straight and slim, but was said to be very wiry and strong. He had a dark complexion, with long jet black hair reaching to his shoulders and a thick long and very black beard and mustache. He wore a dressed deer skin over shirt and pants, a regatta or rowing shirt and had a black silk handkerchief tied loosely around his neck. He had a black piercing eye and deep sonorous voice, with a low and rather monotonous manner of speaking. He was fond of telling Indian stories and legends, and would sometimes keep the audience entranced and spellbound, when walking slowly to and fro in the large Nisqually reception room, telling some blood curdling Indian story, in which he had borne a conspicuous part. He could talk several Indian languages and had lived a long time amongst the Blackfoot Indians and was full of interesting stories of adventure amongst that one time savage tribe. He was excessively fond of living the life of an aborigine and would much prefer to live in a tent or lodge than in a house built in accordance with civilized plans. He was fairly educated. He read a great deal and was well up on the politics of the day. He was a good French linguist but his native tongue was the Gaelic of the Scotch Highlands, and he was very fond of singing, or chanting, in a deep, not by any means musical voice, Gaelic songs and verses improvised by himself.

Sometimes Dr. Tolmie would join in, when he sang or attempted to sing, some old and well known Scotch ditty. The Doctor could talk and understand Gaelic although he wasn't a native Highlander, but came near being one, having been born in Inverness. The Doctor was very fond of music and although he was not the possessor of a voice like "Marios" or "Jean de Resche," he could sing a great variety of Gaelic songs. But as for MacDonald he was never tired of chanting Gaelic lines. I should think it was something like the late Signor Folis' voice, the great basso, when suffering from a very bad cold. The most astonishing thing about it was that "Mac" labored under the idea that he was a fine singer, and the possessor of a voice which only required a little training to be equal to any of the leading basso profundos of the day. He was married to either a Nez Perce or a Kalispel, the daughter of a leading chieftain, and had several

children by her. One a girl named Christine, who was said to be quite good looking, for a long time was the belle of Colville.

MacDonald was a staunch Briton, and was very plain spoken. In fact, I thought he was sometime offensively rude when talking to Americans. He made a visit to us during the San Juan difficulty, and I recollect that I once took him to Olympia where he never missed an opportunity for getting into a wordy quarrel with some American upon the San Juan question. I thought that more than once I saved him from being assaulted for talking so contemptuously of decent Americans. It was only the fact of his being my friend that saved him, but he didn't appreciate it, and continued as abusive as ever until at last I refrained from taking him with me when I visited adjoining towns. One time at Fort Steilacoom [U.S. military post 6 miles from Nisqually] he got into an argument with an officer just as prejudiced against the British as was "Mac" against the Americans and a challenge to fight a duel was very nearly the result, but I succeeded in calming troubled waters. "Mac" would have fought in a minute and the American officer was a regular fire eater.

Not very long after his arrival there came trotting into the Fort yard the first detachment of the Brigade, about 20 horses, all laden with packs of furs and in charge of two men. Detachments continued to arrive until upwards of 200 pack animals were inside the Fort yard and about 25 men were in charge of them. There were also spare animals for packing and riding and not a few were packed with tents, cooking utensils and what little provisions remained. Unloading the animals immediately commenced, each detachment being attended to by the two men to whom its care belonged.

The valuable lot of furs was turned over to me and I had 20 men selected to watch them. There was a lot of work to do with these furs, exposing them frequently to the air, beating and getting them ready for making into larger bales for shipment to Victoria. Amongst the lot of furs received were a large number of Foxes, Marten and Mink, small but valuable furs and strict watch had to be kept over them to prevent speculation by Indians. Sometimes even white men would be trying to get away with a valuable Marten.

Some of the furs had been slightly damaged in crossing the many rivers along the route, but I was surprised to see them open up in such condition as they did. To give some idea of the extensive character of the fur trade at the few posts in the Rocky Mountain district, and in a country not at all remarkable for prolific returns, I will give here a statement of the kinds and quantities of the furs I was now handling and just delivered by the pack train.

1,200 Bear skins (250) of the Grizzlies); 200 Badgers; 2,500 Beaver; 350 Fisher (a beautiful fur scarce and hard to catch. It is something like the Marten, only very much larger, and a first class skin was worth here from \$5 to \$8 and in the London market would fetch

probably \$20 to \$30); 12 Silver, 80 Cross Silver and 334 Red Foxes; 185 Lynx (prime fur); 1,500 Marten; 575 Mink; 8,000 Musquash; 412 Land Otter; 580 Wolves (prime fur) and 45 Wolverine.

The men accompanying MacDonald were a cosmopolitan crowd. There were Scotchmen, French Canadians, Halfbreeds, and Iroquois Indians. The foreman was a Scotch Highlander and when at home was in charge of a little trading post amongst the Blackfoot Indians. The Canadians were strong, wiry fellows, and amongst them were men who had been in the employ of the company for fifty years. The Iroquois or Halfbreed Iroquois were the best looking men in the band. The handsomest and strongest man amongst them was a halfbreed Iroquois and French Canadian. He was very strong and agile, and being the champion athlete amongst his own people, he challenged our hands to run a foot race and other games requiring strength and endurance. Although amongst our staff were some strong and powerful fellows this Iroquois beat them all, and at running a foot race he beat them badly.

These men of the Brigade were great fellows to brag and crow and they were constantly taunting our fellows and claiming their superiority. Our men, especially the Englishmen, and several were attached to the place, felt humiliated at the idea of this Iroquois beating them so easily. They were aware that one of the clerks of the establishment, a young Englishman likewise, was able to outrun them all easily and they felt satisfied that this young fellow could beat the Iroquois champion. They begged him to accept the braggart's challenge and they felt satisfied that he could take the laurels from the brow of the fastest runner in the Colville, Nez Perce country.

The young Englishman was a little doubtful of his ability to beat such a muscular, strong looking fellow and resisted the importunities of the Nisqually men for some time. But the conduct of the Brigade men became so insufferably boastful, that he at last gave in and agreed to run the champion a short race of 100 yards. The coming contest caused a great deal of excitement and so confident were the Colviles of winning that they offered to bet almost all they were worth upon their man, but the young clerk would not allow the Fort men to run any risk of losing and refused to run if they insisted upon betting.

MacDonald laughed at the idea of the young man for a moment thinking he could compete with such a well known runner as their champion, but agreed to act as starter with, I think, Doctor Tolmie and Mr. Peers acting as judges. The race was to be run in the evening after the day's work was over. In the summer time and in the evenings, it was customary for the young people and a few old ones likewise, to assemble at the water gate, where there were seats placed at the foot of the palisades.

Then young men would have games, run races, throw the hammer, put the stone and pitch quoits. These sports would bring around us many Indians, who would sometimes join in the games but not often.

The starting point was down the road, west of the gate. A line was drawn and 100 yards measured off, terminating almost opposite the small gate where another line was made. The first man to cross this line was the winner. Between 6 and 7 p.m. a large crowd had assembled at the gate, for the coming race had caused quite an excitement and many Indians from the Nisqually and Puyallup rivers had come to witness the struggle, for the clerk was well known to the Indians and was rather a favorite. At the time appointed the contestants appeared. The Iroquois, Edourd Pichette was his name, wore a gaudy, loud colored shirt fitting tight around his big, barrel-formed chest. A handsome red silk belt around his waist and a pair of thin cotton drawers which showed his handsome, muscular legs to good advantage. He was a splendid figure of a man, such a chest he had. It was round like a barrel and altogether he looked a fit model to satisfy any fastidious painter or sculptor.

The young Englishman stripped well also, and I noticed that MacDonald was astonished when he saw his well developed chest and powerful arms, for the young man was a leader in the prevailing games throwing the hammer, putting the stone and pitching the heavy iron quoits.

All was now ready for the race. The Halfbreed was cool and confident of success, as were his fellows who, to the last, were anxious to bet their last shirt and inch of tobacco (the tobacco sold to the men came in large 100 pound rolls and was like a rope and about one inch in diameter) upon their favourite. The starting place was 100 measured yards west of the water gate, a small postern gate which led to the creek, the "Sequallitchen" river. At the time its boards were perforated with holes, made with bullets fired by the Snoqualmie Indians when they attacked the Fort in 1849. It was here that poor Leander Wallace fell, shot to death by these same Snoqualmies.

Well all was ready and at an agreed upon signal from MacDonald a fair start was made. The young Englishman jumping ahead at the start and, to our astonishment, he increased his lead until the end of the first 50 yards when Pichette, the Iroquois, shortened the distance between them to about three yards. From then on to the winning sprint the handsome young Iroquois shortened the distance, but to the intense disgust of MacDonald and his company the Englishman won the race by a distance of about four or five feet.

Oh, the howling and hurraing by the English part of the crowd. "Sacreeing" and other demoralizing French expressions from Canadians and the silent jubilant looks of the Nisqually Indians. It was all very pleasing to the English victor. Edourd Pichette earnestly begged the Englishman to run him the distance of one mile, or half a mile and

down to two hundred yards but the Englishman was wise and refused to run any more and was content to rest on his laurels. The young man's reputation as a great runner, who had defeated the Rocky Mountain champion, spread over the Indian country between Colville and the base of the Rockies. [Nowhere in the manuscript is the name of the young clerk given but Mr. Huggins himself neatly fits every descriptive detail and may well have been the athlete who prudently 'retired' undefeated.]

A dance was given by Dr. Tolmie to the MacDonald band of packers before leaving for their homes. One of the large stores was emptied of goods and it became a fine dancing hall. A room about 60 feet in length and 30 feet in width, its floor was rather rough but that didn't trouble the dancers. One or two of the Canadians were fair fiddlers and of course a liberal supply of whisky was provided and nearly all the young Indian girls and Halfbreeds in the neighbourhood were there. In those days there were quite a number of French Canadians, ex-Hudson's Bay Company servants, married to Indian women and living in this country.

The Indian women and the Halfbreed Women and girls were passionately fond of dancing and almost all the Indian women had an original way of dancing, a step of their own. It was very comical to see them, ten or a dozen at one time. "Jigs" were their favourite dances and they would stand facing their partners and keep time to music by simply bobbing or jumping with both feet from the ground at the same time.

We had in our employ at that time about ten Kanakas (Sandwich Islanders) and to vary the entertainment I would persuade these men to dance some of their native dances. They would cheerfully comply, and standing in a row would begin a wild and monotonous chant, keeping time by moving their bodies with great exactitude and twisting about, in which I could see no dancing but merely posturing and sometimes it seemed to me to be an unseemly performance in the presence of ladies.

One of the men attached to Fort Nisqually was an Englishman named Dean (one of the two sons of Mr. Thomas Dean, the Bailiff sent out by the London directorate to supersede Dr. Tolmie). He was a genius, a comical character and a natural musician. He could sing comic songs in character and was, for a time, the life of the place. He made, in the course of two or three hours, a common tin whistle upon which he could play fairly well tunes from operas. He made a set of Punch and Judy figures, or dolls, and he would go through the performance of Mr. Punch and his wife, Judy, just as clever and good as I have often seen it performed in London.

It was arranged that he should give his Punch performance at MacDonald's party. He did so and I never before saw a party of men so pleased and delighted in my lifetime. Several of the men had never been out of this country in their lives – had never been inside a theatre. Young Dean's Punch and Judy show was a revelation to them. There was one old chap in the crowd whose manifestation of pleasure particularly pleased

me. He was a Canadian Frenchman, a very stout old man, small in stature but very strong and muscular. He was upwards of 60 years of age, and had been in this country all his life. He understood enough English to follow Punch's show, and to witness that old man's expression of delight was, to me, a far better show than Mr. Punch's. Oh, how the old man would laugh. He would lay down upon the floor, kick up his heels and burst into paroxysms of laughter, almost causing all of his fellows to do likewise. I am sure this old fellow and others of the band never forgot Monsieur Punch and I can fancy how often the story of the show would be told by the campfire and in the wilds of the trappers' camps in the Rockies.

The horses had put on flesh and their backs had nearly healed up when the Walla Walla contingent was ordered to get ready to start for home. On the 18th of July the Brigade of 55 horses, laden with goods, started for Fort Walla Walla and on the 25th of July, 1855, MacDonald with the remainder of the train left for Colvile, taking with them 76 horses packed with goods.

Doctor Tolmie received a communication from MacDonald after he had arrived safely at his journey's end and his letter was very interesting indeed. He left here in July and in the month of September the Indian War broke out. We, at least Doctor Tolmie, knew the condition of the minds of the Indians and had been in communication with Governor Stevens on the subject, but had no idea that the outbreak was so imminent. MacDonald's letter opened his eyes and alarmed him greatly.

The Walla Walla party, which had left Nisqually a few days in advance of the main body, became alarmed at something they providentially had learned on the road, and encamped before entering the foothills and awaited the arrival of MacDonald. Lucky for them they did, for if they had continued along ahead, no doubt they would all have been murdered. Being Hudson's Bay Company people would, in my opinion, have made no difference to the murderous young scoundrel, Qualchen. To get possession of what would have been to the hostile Indians such an immensely valuable lot of goods as were in the pack train, the bloody minded young villain would have murdered the entire party, including MacDonald, without the slightest feeling of compunction.

MacDonald's influence amongst the Indians must have been very great indeed to have allowed him to come scatheless through such a danger. He was looked up to by the Spokanes, Nez Perce, Blackfeet, Kalispels and indeed all the tribes between the Yakima valley and the Rocky Mountains, as a great medicine man, although a white man. I have no doubt that reputation, along with the ability to talk to the Indians in their own language, permitted him to pass safely through the ranks of the Indians, who were almost on the eve of declaring themselves hostile, and safely conveying such a valuable lot of goods to their destination.

The preceding article was written by Edward Huggins, clerk at Fort Nisqually between 1850 and 1870. The article appeared in the 1961 summer edition of THE BEAVER magazine.