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LIFE AND ADVENTURES OF A GOVERNNENT SCOUT

by EDWARD CHAMBREAU

Having seen the light of day on January 12, 1821, in the village of Froeshville, department of Moselle, France, my good and courageous mother took me to America in the year 1825. Prior to our departure my father had to flee from France for taking part in the conventionist movement of that time, and after being exiled in Germany for a while, joined his family a year later at Montreal, Canada

Here I attended school and enjoyed, so to speak, the bright and shining days of boyhood. Here is where no doubt my natural inclined disposition for a roving life was much impressed by the surroundings of that now beautiful metropolis. How often did I join the crowds of people strolling to the many neighboring Indian camps adjacent to the city on the great St. Lawrence river.

More or less the entire human race is to a certain extent disposed to superstition, and I must confess that I am not yet nor never was entirely free from it. In this connection I will say, probably at no time of life do superstitions have a more lasting effect than in the days of boyhood. When very young I came much in contact with Indian children, and soon learned all their ways and many of their superstitions. Although now nearly 60 years ago, I can plainly recall an instance when at one of these Indian camps, how an old Indian Medicine man called me to him and said, as he laid his hand on the top of my head, “You will travel a great deal among the red men, and I will therefore put a mark upon you, which will be your medicine, that if you are ever taken prisoner, and be beset by danger or if you are ever in council with them you may be able to show this mark.” He then proceeded to tatto on my arm a totem, in the shape of an Indian with bow in hand, discharging an arrow, the imprints of which are still visible on my skin. Then only 13 years of age, little I thought my future life would be what it has been, one of continuous intercourse with the North American Indians, little I thought this totem should sometime come to be a protecting power to my life and property. An incident relating hereto I shall picture to the reader at some future time.

From the time of this incident up to my sixteenth year I spent many hours with the tribes living in the neighborhood of Montreal. In the later part of the year 1837, I with many others, being implicated as members of the Society of Patriots was imprisoned for conspiracy at the prison Neuf, at the Faubourg of St, Anton near Montreal. Many days I spent in the dark cell used as a thumbscrew to extract a confession from me. Many other tests were employed to weaken my determination in shielding my co-conspirators. Ordeals, like having to witness from my prison window, how brave comrades and friends are put to death by hanging, only increased my vigilence and keenness. By the aid of these and through the intercession of Bishop Bourgette, I was finally liberated on New Years day 1838, and allowed once more to go forth a free man. My father then thought best for me to learn a trade, and decided to have me become a tailor. The reader can imagine how such an occupation would agree with the disposition I possessed. Is it therefore a wonder, attracted by the glowing posters of a newly arrived circus I was enchanted to follow an adventurous life, and casted my lot with the circus people. I did so without bidding farewell to my parents, and traveled through many cities of the United States. I gained in this way quite a geographical knowledge of the country, and also acquired a good judgement of human nature.

After leaving the circus I joined a traveling troupe of knights of the tambourine and bones; tiring of this combination I traveled with the then famous Sable brothers, until in my

twenty-second year I returned to my home at Montreal. My father, who had then accumulated quite a fortune as a commission merchant again thought it about time for me to settle down. He had his plans nicely laid out, had already picked out a companion for life for me, and insisted on my marriage. But betwixt the cup and the lip, there is many a slip, and so in my case. I quietly left and again roamed from place to place until the year 1846, when I found myself in St. Louis, Mo. This was at the time of the then beginning of the Mexican War, and passing a rigid medical examination and found as sound as a dollar, on May 7th, of that year I started as a general service man in Uncle Sam's employ for California.

Our expedition crossed the Missouri river at St. Joe, Mo., and we traversed the continent by the so-called Carson route, traveling through New Mexico and California, until we reached the Sacramento valley in the later part of July 1846. On our journey we had many exciting skirmishes with Indians, and suffered innumerable hardships, but after many adventures arrived safely at our destination. The forces then in California consisted of Phil Kearney's batallion, Col. John C. Fremont's men, and Stevenson's Regiment of New York volunteers, the latter arriving March 6, 1847 around Cape Horn. These forces were distributed up and down along the coast of California. I was sent under Lieutenant Hammond with thirty men to take the town of St. Gabriel. We stormed it against some fifty Mexicans, and a like number of Indians and took possess ion of the place, but at a loss of our gallant officer and nine men. Later in the fall of the same year I was present with Capt. Merritt in Benica, at the raising of the bear flag.

I could write pages of what happened to me during my stay in California and of the great gold discoveries at that time, but may this rough outline satisfy the reader until my real career as guide and scout commences. I will therefore pass over all up to the following year, when on May 26, 1847 the United States forces under the command of Fremont and Kearney started to recross the continent for the East. When we reached Ham's fork of the Bear river in Utah, the date I cannot recall, we met Bishop Blanchet, and his party of missionaries and immigrants, bound for Oregon. The party was much in need of an experienced and trustworthy guide, and implored the commander in charge for such a man. I was selected and granted a furlough of one year.

I, then in charge of the missionary party, started again westward, and from now on I will picture to my readers all that transpired more in detail, and especially dwell on all pertaining to my career as a guide, government scout and interpreter.

The duties and responsibilities now devolving upon me were indeed no child's play, the Indians, at that time being very bitterly disposed toward the whites. Although afraid of the military or other large forces and hesitating to attack any large body of men, were at all times lying in ambush and waiting their chance to capture or kill those whites traveling the dangerous and lonely trails of pioneer days. The most valuable possessions of' the emigrants then undoubtedly being their stock, and unless carefully guarded by day and by night, was in constant danger of being stampeded and stolen by the cunning redskins to the great hardships of its owners.

After leaving Fort Hall, the Indians began to show a very hostile nature, and this feeling increased every day of our journey until we reached the Whitman valley (near Walla Walla). Scarcely a night passed during the trip without an attempt made to surprise our party, but eternal vigilance was our motto and brought us safely to our destination, although many whites in this region were slain by the wily red men at that time. During the latter part of the trip the writer had occasion to return from the Blue Mountains to the Grande Ronde valley in search of some of our horses. On the way I came across two camps in the mountains and one in the valley, where I found the charred and ghastly remains of whites killed by Indians and the burnt remnants of their wagons and outfits, bearing the signs of

fierce conflicts and a sight terrible to behold. I finally found our strayed horses and returning to my camp, was overtaken by a war party of Indians, who made an attempt to gain possession of my horses. Just about ready to use my pistol, like a flash of lightning the picture of my old medicine-man friend, whom I had met when a boy at one of those Indian camps near Montreal, appeared before me vividly, and quickly drawing up my sleeve I pointed with my right to the imprints on my arm. The Indians then approached, examined the mark and invited me to dismount. We then had a smoke and unmolested, I again started and safely brought our equines to the mission. This being the first time that I had tested the totemic power of the old medicine man, I came to the conclusion that my intercourse with the Indians in my youth was a great advantage to possess in my present calling.

As long as man can retrace his thought to early history of mankind, or even mythical bible stories, wars have been precipitated and waged in behalf and on account of religion, and I can safely say that the coming of a new religion among the Indians was the cause of much blood shed in the pioneer days of the West. Rev. Blanchet's party were the first Catholic priests crossing the continent to Oregon, bringing, as the Indians termed it, another new religion of the white man. Dr. Whitman and his party of missionaries of the Presbyterian faith were then already established in what is now called Walla Walla. The massacre of this settlement on November 29th 1847 in the opinion of the writer, might have been totally averted by a little judicious management.

The measles, a usually harmless disease in children, had been carried by the whites to the settlement and attacked many of the adults of the Indian race, who had up to this date never known of the malady. The disease appeared very malignant, and it being a well-known fact, often terminates fatal in persons out of their teens. Now here is where the doctor made a serious mistake. He treated the sick, and many died in spite of his skill. The Indians have an unwritten law that holds their medicine man responsible for the sick he fails to cure, and if death ensues, he must follow the dead to the happy hunting grounds beyond in atonement for his failure. This, more than any other cause, brought about the slaying of Whitman and his party. Strange as it may seem, the doctor had not counted on this turn of affairs, but as well as he was acquainted with the superstitious traits and beliefs of the Indians, he should never have attempted to cure them. How many whites really were killed in those times can only be conjectured, but will never be accurately known. The red men hereafter were very hostile to all the "Bostons" as they termed the Americans.

It is worth to mention in this connection that none of the Hudson bay Company's men, consisting of English and French men were ever killed by the Indians, the latter always being more friendly disposed to them, more likely due to them not interfering in their private matters and religious beliefs. When the massacre occurred I was very near there, and the news of same spread like wildfire for hundreds of miles among the Indians and it was evident that a great war would be its natural outcome. The excitement ran also very high among the whites, and after a consultation, held in Bishop Blanchet's tent, it was decided December 4th 1847, to dispatch the writer to Governor Douglas and Peter Skeen Ogden, the manager of the Hudson Bay Company at Vancouver for council. I immediately started on my mission, and when I reached the Hudson Bay Company's old fort (now Wallula) on the Columbia river, Mr. Mc Bean, the company's representative at that place, was about to send someone for the same purpose to my destination. Mr. Beauchmin, a Frenchman, was his choice. He and I traveled together on the old trail down the Columbia river, stealthily and always on the lookout for Indians, arriving at Vancouver December 9th, making the journey in five days. After explaining our business, on Dec. 12th, three days from our arrival, a Hudson Bay Company's barge had been fitted out with various goods to redeem the captives in the hands of the Indians and the expedition started out for the scene of the trouble.

The Hudson Bay Company's barges were nothing more than large canoes, manned by a number of oarsmen, steersman and a lookout. The steersman had his post in the bow of the boat, and sculled the boat clear of rocks or other impediments when shooting the rapids. When it is remembered that the under current at the Cascades will carry anything once engulfed in its whirlpools, nearly a half a mile under water, and that no one capsized in those waters ever escaped, it is marvelous to think that a handful of people would undertake such a hazardous voyage, and thereafter brave so many infuriated Indians.

Indians respect brave men, however, and fear them with a superstition equal to idolation. They would never kill a man whom they considered especially protected by the great Father. Peter Skeen Ogden was a man whom all the Indians in the Great Northwest respected and feared, and he therefore took command of the barge, manned as follows: Front steersman, Legrand Pier; governay, La Framboise; oarsmen, Derbenuie, Robie, Machall, Donay, St. Andree, Chambreau, Ansee, Beauchain, and Sanglay. This little army boldly ascended the Columbia river, meeting different parties of excited Indians at the Cascades, the Dalles, and at the mouth of the Umatilla river. They were prone to talk, as they had all been informed of the happenings above, and massing together for war.

When at old Fort Walla Walla, we gave notice to the Indian Chiefs to meet them in grand council. Messengers were dispatched all over the country by the Chiefs, and a few days there after fully 5,000 Indians had assembled.

Time for the council having arrived, Mr. Ogden informed the Indians of his purpose to redeem their captives, and to buy all American women in the hands of different camps.

This council convened December 25th, and continued till the 28th inclusive.

Women formed an article of commerce among Indians of those days, like cattle or horses, and would be traded off at the will of their owners, therefore Mr. Ogden's proposal was not considered strange. After considerable talk, they were persuaded to bring the women in. The price paid for each woman was about $150, which was paid in Hudson Bay Company's goods, such as blankets and other Indian commodities. The last ones to bring in their captives were Chief Yellow Snake and Five Crows, who had grown rather fond of their charges, and were very reluctant to part with them. The total number of women rescued were ten, and with them the crew started with barge back to Vancouver, arriving safely on January 6th 1848. The women were then taken to Oregon City, reaching there January 9th, and glad to be turned over to their relatives and friends.

After the arrival at Vancouver, Sir James Douglass and Ogden prevailed upon me to remain in the employ of the Hudson Bay Company, and I accordingly stayed in and around Vancouver. At this time, all available men had formed into companies and started for the seat of war, leaving the country around Vancouver and settlements in Oregon almost unprotected. It also happened that a great many cases of measles occurred among the Indians, some of them terminating fatally, and especially as the news of the killing of so many of the Bostons at Walla Walla had reached the west side of the Cascades, many Indians congregated around Vancouver in the expectation of hearing of the defeat of the whites in the upper country. Special precaution was then taken, and the fort put on a war footing. An extra bastion mounted with two heavy guns was erected in front of the stockade facing the river, besides the ones already placed on each corner The stockade (fortifications) was built out of logs, standing erect, say thirty feet high, about eight to ten inches in diameter, and each log sharpened to a point on the end. Two large gates, one in the south and the other in the north, were securely fastened to the bulwark. In each of these large gates a smaller one was placed, just large enough to admit one person at the time. The gates were closed at all times; a sentry was stationed on the inside, and only persons possessing the password would be allowed to enter. Old Bruce or MacShall usually occupied the sentry box.

The writer was then especially detailed to watch the movements of and happenings among the Indians, and soon found that two of them were the main agitators, trying to incite hostile feeling towards the whites. Gambling ran high, and war dances were held nightly. The two Indians referred to above were one Le Coi, a Blackfoot raised by the whites, and a medicine-man named Wah Bet. Both were ardent gamblers, and the writer in some way incurred their displeasure. Once, overhearing a conversation of the two, he came to the conclusion that his life was conspired against. On that day Messrs. Douglas and Ogden summoned me to them, and said that something would have to be done to allay the excitement among the Indians. They thought, if the two above mentioned agitators were out of the way, much bloodshed would be averted in the future. They then informed me I should see to it that Le Coi and Wah Bet were made harmless. All I needed for this purpose was placed at my disposal, and a permit issued for me to leave and enter the fort at my pleasure. How I should execute the orders of Messrs. Douglas and Ogden was left to my own discretion. It may here be stated that the agitators, although leaders, had many enemies among their own race, as they had outraged many women and killed many men of their own race, but feared on account of their superior strength. I then laid low for a number of days, until I had laid my plans how to accomplish my purpose. Knowing the Indians well, I knew their weak points especially well.

After passing in and out of the fort for a week by night and by day and watching the movements of the agitators, I selected a very dark night and visited the various Indian camps. It is needless to say that I was prepared for any emergency. I had provided myself with a bottle of Hudson Bay Company's rum, safely concealed under my blanket, necessary weapons and ammunition. From previous exploits I knew where my game could be found, all I needed to do was to hunt up a gambling lodge, or where a war dance was in progress; these places were quickly recognized by the noise attending them. Nearing one of these gambling lodges, I peeped through a crack and saw about 30 Indians within playing and watching the game of Ec1uck-Ema. This is their favorite game and played by eight persons. Among the spectators I espied Le Coi; the fire in the center of the lodge plainly lighting up his face. I then entered the hut and safely crept up to Le Coi. After a while I placed the neck of my bottle of rum so it would draw his attention; his looks betrayed his longing for the liquor, soon taking up his entire attention. I motioned to the bottle whether he wanted some, he assenting with a nod; I again motioned for him to follow me. He was not long in doing this. We took a little path leading through brush and cottonwood trees to the bank of the river. When near a secluded spot I handed him the bottle. While in the act of drinking, I struck him a heavy blow in the back of the head with a sling shot, felling him to the ground. He gave just one groan, after which I dealt him some more blows and pulled his body out of the trail. After an hours search, I found the other agitator, and I proceeded in the same manner but not quite so successful. The first blow dealt him was a glancing one, and only partially stunned him. He got hold of my left leg, and came very near throwing me on my back. Had he succeeded he certainly would have killed me, for he drew a "dag", an instrument very much like an arrowhead, but much larger. However, before he had a chance to plunge the weapon into me, I had dealt him some more blows, and he released his hold. After finishing his earthly existence I scalped him, which I had also done with Le Col in true Indian fashion, to make it appear that both had been killed by enemies of their own race. Unseen by anyone I reached the stockade at midnight. The reader may imagine the excitement that prevailed the next day. True, the two had some friends, but the great majority of the Indians were glad to have them forever asleep. Even the whites wondered who could possibly have dispatched these two *good* Indians to the happy hunting grounds. The blame was finally settled on hostile Indians, and strange as it may seem, the writer was at no time suspected. After the first excitement had, worn off things quieted down, gambling and war dances ceased, and a normal state of affairs reigned again in and around Vancouver.

Many interesting pen pictures I could draw from my experience while in the neighborhood of Fort Vancouver, but will let it suffice to give the reader a few noteworthy occurrences and from my observations endeavor to explain some of their peculiar traits and customs.

If there ever was a curse to the Indians all over this continent it was liquor, and naturally the Northwest was not free from it. Although prohibited by the United States government and strictly forbidden by the Hudson Bay Co. to furnish Indians with liquor, unprincipled whites ran illicit distilleries at various places for this purpose. This liquor, distilled out of molasses, bore the striking name of “blue ruin” and the evil influence this fluid had on the wily red man meant indeed ruin to himself and his surroundings. One of these illicit distilleries was located about three miles below Oregon City on the west side of the Willamette River situated on a little creek emptying into the latter. In a log cabin about 12X12 in size, well hid in vine maple and brush, Mr. Morse, at that time the proprietor, did a flourishing business with the Indians and whites. This moonshiner camp, although only 100 yards from the Willamette River, was so well concealed that even with an experienced guide one would have considerable difficulty in reaching this place. I had occasion to visit the camp and found outside of the cabin two well armed men, and on entering the cabin, I noticed the walls decorated with a number of shotguns, rifles and pistols. In one corner two bunks were placed, and last but not least in the center of the room stood the distilling apparatus, which manufactured the deadly stuff called blue ruin. Morse was an American and his confederate, Johnson, a deserted English man-of-warsman. They operated mostly on the north bank of the Columbia river among the many Indian villages along this stream. At the mouth of the Willamette was situated Wa-ka-na-sis-ci (the village of the pretty girl). On the Lewis river, near its termination into the Columbia, Caw-halt-ci-we, meaning we arrive at the depot, and so many more to the mouth of the Columbia.

The mode of operation of Morse and his like would be to stick close to the west shore of the Columbia with their boat, and when opposite one of these Indian villages, cut straight across, Of course the Indians, always eager to obtain fire-water, not having any stamina to resist temptation, were only too willing to trade off anything in their possession for the deadly ruin, and not as they should have done--killed these illicit distillers and venders. After reaching the shore, the crooks would make the redskins sit in line with their vessels in front of them and the latter’s stock in trade, whatever it might be, out of the Indians reach. One of the liquor men would pour the rum into vessels while the other packed the goods, received in exchange, into the boat. This proceeding with 50 or 75 or even more Indians would take up considerable time, and once while being an eyewitness to such a maneuver I saw those who had received their liquor first in a beastly state of intoxication. The traders had not got quite through and a terrible row ensued. The former contesting every inch of ground to their boat, and when nearing threw the kegs, still containing some of the liquor, among the infuriated, drunken Indians. This diverting their attention for a while, the traders jumped into their boat with a number of Indians hanging to same, although already in deep water. A few well directed blows with their paddles sent the mad red skins to a watery grave and the moonshiners hurried away with their booty.

Now can the reader picture in his mind what took place in this Indian camp with no less than 100 of them drunk? Murder and outrages were the usual consequence. For the contemptible work of Morse and his ilk every white man had to suffer, as most of the Indians grew more distrustful toward the palefaces under such circumstances.

As I have stated before, the Hudson Bay Company men seldom had any difficulty with the Indians, no doubt due to the good judgement of human nature of their leaders and long experience as frontiersmen. When first locating among the Indians the Hudson Bay people seemed to arrive at an understanding with them to the effect they must always be friends, or to use the words of one of their leaders to an Indian chief in Chinook Jargon, as when talking to a child; “we must always live in friendly feeling. In the first place, we come to

swap (trade) with you, as you have things that we would like to have and we have things that you would like to have. If any of our palefaces injure you in any way you must report him to the tyee (boss), and if any of you injure us we will report him to your chief. We will then hold a council and see who is to blame. If we are to blame we will make your hearts glad, and if you are to blame you will do the same." With such an understanding the Hudson Bay Company men and the Indians were always at peace, because any Indian injured by them would be paid and his heart made glad out of the earnings of the employee thus found guilty.

And in all cases, to avoid misunderstanding, the bosses or head men reserved the right to do all the trading with the red skins, while all the trappers and other men in the employ of the Company simply worked for wages.

All beaver and other traps on Hudson Bay Company grounds and used by their trappers were the company's property. The trappers usually worked by twos, often great distances away from the forts, seldom had trouble with the Indians on account of being good men in the first place and well knowing the consequences of doing wrong to them.

As a rule I have found the many tribes of Indians I came in contact with, when treated fair, peaceably disposed. Certainly, like bad characters prevailed among the whites, they could be found among the Indians in those days. My experience has proven to me that most Indian troubles could be traced to the whites.

Another strange fact I observed, that as long as the Hudson Bay Company had control of the men they seemingly got along peaceably; instead of debauching the Indian women they were advised to take them as wives, and in this way were adopted into their tribes and looked upon as their till-a-kum (relatives)

I have mentioned before that at times I was greatly impressed with some wonderful feats produced by the medicine men of the various tribes I came in contact with and even up to this date I cannot account for some of their miracles.

Tani-man-wack was the name of all medicine men practicing certain rules to cure the sick, and embraced all the tribes from Vancouver down the Columbia river to its mouth.

The medicine man would have a certain number of helpers who would assist him in singing and making hideous noises while he himself would operate in the following fashions:

For pains in any particular parts of the body he would suck over the part affected, thus drawing the pain out through the skin. I have often seen medicine men spit out mouths full of blood from immense strain on their lungs. For all internal diseases, fever and the like, they depended on faith cures. A medicine man to claim special distinction in this line had to perform some wonderful feats at his profession, such as being securely tied hand and foot, then left alone in the lodge he would loosen himself in a few moments; eating fire and rolling in same; playing with rattlesnakes and allowing same to crawl under his blankets and many other such proceedings.

The most of the Columbia River Indians buried their dead in canvas resting in the limbs of trees. They were provided by relatives with dried salmon and other edibles for their journey to the happy hunting grounds. In times gone by if a chief should die, the tribe would kill a slave to send his spirit to care for his masters.

I will here relate how Indian chiefs are named, a proceeding not known to many readers of today. Any time between the age of 15 and 20, the chiefs' oldest son starts on a journey to be gone 12 moons (months) one great sun (year) ,one sun (day) ,and one sleep (night). He wanders on lonely trails, lives from the fruits of the hunt and is not supposed to be seen by any human being during his absence.

He is expected to start for home on the last sun and reach the same the next day before the sun crosses the meridian. The most striking object he observes or crosses his path during the last 2 hours of his journey becomes his name. Thus they bear names like Five Crows, Yellow Snake, Eagle of the Light, White Bird, Red Cloud, Little Bear, Young Man, Afraid Horse, Sitting Bull. All members of his tribe are looking for him on the day of his expected return before the sun reaches the zenith. He enters the camp amid great yells and rejoicing. All at once everything is silent, when the young chief advances to the center of the camp and announces his name and his experience during his year of absence.