

The Cascades Massacre

Letter of L. W. Coe

Story of the Indian War at Fort Rains, W.T., 1856



By Donald A. Brown,
Historian

Skamania County Historical Society

Cascades, W. T., 6th April, 1856

My dear Put: We have had a little "tea party" since you left, and I will try and give you a little description of the same.

On Wednesday, March 26, about 8:30 o'clock a.m., after the men had gone to their usual work on the bridges of the new railway, mostly on the bridge near Bush's house, the Yakimas came down on us. There was a line of them from the Mill Creek above us to the big point at the head of the river, firing simultaneously on the men. The first notices were the bullets and the crack of the guns. Of our men at the first fire one was killed and several wounded. Will give you a list herein after. Our men, on seeing the Indians, all ran for our store through a shower of bullets, except three who started down stream, for the middle blockhouse distant one and one-half miles.

Bush and his family also ran into our store, leaving his own house vacant. The Watkins family came to the store, after a Dutch boy, who was lame from a cut in the foot, had been shot in their house. Watkins, Finlay and Bailey were at work on the new warehouse on the island, around which the water was now high enough to run about three feet deep under the bridges.

There was great confusion in the store at first, and Sinclair of Walla Walla, going to the railroad door to look out, was shot from the bank above the store and instantly killed. Some of us then commenced getting the guns and rifles which were ready loaded, from behind the counter. Fortunately about an hour before there had been left with us for transportation below nine United States government rifles, with cartridge boxes and ammunition. These saved us. As the upper story of the house was abandoned, Smith, the cook, having come below, and as the stairway was outside where we dare not go, the stove pipe was hauled down, the hole enlarged with axes, and a party of men crawled up, and the upper part of the house was soon secured. We were surprised that the Indians had not rushed into the upper story, as there was nothing or anybody to prevent them. Our men soon got some shots at the Indians on the bank above us.

I saw Bush shoot an Indian, the first one killed, who was drawing a bead on Mrs. Watkins as she was running for our store. He dropped instantly. Alexander and others mounted into the gable under the roof and from there was done most of our firing, it being the best place of observation. In the meantime we were barricading in the store;

making portholes and firing when opportunity offered. But the Indians were soon very cautious about exposing themselves. I took charge of the store, Dan Bradford of the second floor, and Alexander of the garret and roof.

The steamer "Mary" was lying in the mouth of Mill creek, and the wind blowing hard down stream. When we saw Indians running toward her and heard shots, we supposed she would be taken, and as she lay just out of our sight and we saw smoke rising from her, concluded she was burning, but what was our glad surprise after awhile to see her put out and run across the river. I will give an account of the attack on her hereafter.

The Indians now returned in force to us, and we gave everyone a shot who showed himself. They were nearly naked, painted red, and had guns, bows and arrows. After a while Finlay came creeping around the lower point of the island toward our house. We shouted for him to lie down behind a rock and he did so. He called that he could not get to shore, as the bank above was covered with Indians. He saw, while there, Watkins' house burn. The Indians first took out all they wanted—blankets, guns, clothes, etc. By this time the Indians had crossed in canoes to the island, and we saw them coming, as we supposed after Finlay. We then saw Watkins and Bailey running around the river side toward the place where Finlay was, and the Indians in full chase after them. As our men came around the point in full view, Bailey was shot through the arm and leg. He continued on and plunged into the river, swam to the front of our store and came in safely, except for his wounds. He barely escaped going the falls. Finlay, also, swam across and got in unharmed, which was wonderful, as there was a shower of bullets around them.

Watkins next came running around the point and we called to him to lie down behind a rock, but before he could do so he was shot in the wrist, the ball going up the arm and out the elbow. He dropped behind a rock just as the pursuing Indians came following around the point, but we gave them so hot a reception from our house that they backed out and left poor Watkins where he lay. We called to Watkins to lie still and we would get him off; but we were not able to do so until after the arrival from The Dalles of the steamer "Mary" with troops—two days and nights afterward. During this period Watkins fainted several times from weakness and exposure, the weather being very cold, and he was stripped for swimming, down to his under-clothes. When he fainted he would roll down the steep bank into the river, and the ice-cold water reviving him, he would crawl back under fire to his retreat behind the rock.

Meantime his wife and children were in the store, in full view, and moaning piteously at his terrible situation. He died from exhaustion two days after he was rescued.

The Indians were now pitching into us right smart. They tried to burn us out, threw rock and fire-brands, hot irons, pitch-wood—everything that would burn on to the roof. But you will recollect that for a short distance back the bank inclined toward the house, and we could see and shoot the Indians who appeared there. So they had to throw from such a distance that the largest docks and bundles of fire did not quite reach us, and what did generally rolled off the roof.

Some times the roof got on fire and we cut it out, or with cups of brine drawn from

pork barrels, put it out, or with long sticks shoved off the balls. The kitchen roof troubled us the most. How they did pepper us with rocks; some of the big ones would shake the house all over. There were now forty men, women and children in the house—four women and eighteen men who could fight, and eighteen wounded men and children. The steamer “Wasco” was on the Oregon side of the river. We saw her steam up and leave for The Dalles. Shortly after the steamer “Mary” left. She had to take Atwell's fence rails for wood.

So passed the day, during which the Indians had burned Iman's two houses, your sawmill and houses, and the lumber yard at the mouth of Mill creek. At daylight they set fire to your new warehouse on the island, making it as light as day around us. I suppose that they reserved this building for the night that we might not get Watkins off. They did not attack us at night, but the second morning commenced as lively as ever. We had no water, but did have about two dozen bottles of ale and a few bottles of whiskey. These gave out during the day. That night a Spokane Indian, who was traveling with Sinclair, and was in the store with us, volunteered to go get a pail of water from the river. I consented and he stripped himself naked, jumped out and down the bank, and was back in no time.

By this time we looked for the steamer from The Dalles, and were greatly disappointed at her non-arrival. We weathered it out during the day, every man keeping his post; never relaxing in vigilance. Every moving object, shadow or suspicious bush on the hill received a shot. The Indians must have thought the house a bombshell. To our ceaseless vigilance I ascribe our safety. Night came again; saw Sheppard's house burn; Bush's house, near by, was also fired, and kept us in light until about four o'clock a.m., when, dark-ness returning, I sent the Spokane Indian for water from the river, and he filled two barrels. He went to and fro like lightning. We, also, slipped poor James Sinclair's body down the slide outside and the corpse was quite offensive.

The two steamers now having exceeded the length of time we gave them in which to return from The Dalles, we made up our minds for a long siege and until relief came from below. We could not account for it, but supposed the Ninth Regiment had left The Dalles for Walla Walla, and proceeded too far to return. Morning dawned — the third morning — and, lo, the “Mary” and “Wasco,” blue with soldiers, and towing a flat boat with dragoon horses hove in sight. Such a haloo as we gave! As the steamers landed the Indians fired twenty or thirty shots into them, but we could not ascertain with any effect. The soldiers as they got ashore could not be restrained, and plunged into the woods in every direction, while the howitzers sent grape after the now retreating redskins. The soldiers were soon at our store and we, I think I may say, experienced quite a feeling of relief on opening our doors.

During the time we had not heard from below. A company of dragoons, under Colonel Steptoe, went on down; Dan with them. The blockhouse at the Middle Cascades still held out. Allen's house was burned and every other one below, George W. Johnson's, S. M. Hamilton's, F. A. Chenowith's, the wharf-boat at Lower Cascades-all went up.

Next in order comes the attack on the “Mary”. She lay in Mill Creek — no fires — wind hard ashore. Jim Thompson, John Woodard and Jim Hermans were just going up

to the boat from our store and nearly reached her as they were fired upon. Hermans asked if they had any guns. No. He went up to Iman's house, the rest staying to get the steamer out. Captain Dan Baughman and Thompson were ashore on the upper side of the creek, hauling on lines, when the fire became so hot that they ran for the woods past Iman's house. The fireman, James Lindsey, was shot through the the shoulder. The engineer, Buckminster, shot an Indian on the gang plank with his revolver, and little Johnny Chance, Watkins' stepson, climbing up on the hurricane deck, with an old dragoon pistol, killed his Indian. Johnny was shot through the leg in doing so. Dick Turpin — half crazy, probably — taking the only gun on the steamboat, jumped in to a flat boat lying alongside, then jumped over-board and was drowned.

Fire was soon under the boiler and steam was raising. About this time Jesse Kempton — shot while driving an ox team from the sawmill — got on board — also a half-breed named “Bourbon,” who was shot in the body. After sufficient steam to move was raised, Hardin Chenoweth ran into the pilot house, and lying on the floor, turned the wheel as he was directed from the lower deck. It is almost needless to say that the pilot house was a target for the Indians. After the steamer was backed out and, fairly turned around, he did toot that whistle at them good. Toot! toot! toot! It was music in our ears. The steamer picked up Hermans on the bank above. Iman's family, Sheppard and Vanderpool all got across the river in skiffs, and boarding the “Mary,” went to The Dalles.

Colonel George Wright and the Ninth Regiment, Second Dragoons, and Third Artillery, had started for Walla Walla and were out five miles, camped. They received news of the attack at 11 o'clock p.m., and by daylight were back at The Dalles. Starting down they only reached Wind Mountain that night, as the “Mary's” boilers were in bad order because of a new fireman the day before. They reached us the next morning at 6 am.

George Johnson was about to get a boat's crew of Indians, when “Indian Jack” came running to him saying the Yakimas had attacked the blockhouse. He did not believe it, although he heard the cannon. He went up to the Indian village on the sand bar to get his crew; saw some of the Cascade Indians who said they thought the Yakimas had come and George, now hearing the muskets, ran for home. E. W. Baughman was with him. Bill Murphy had left the blockhouse early for the Indian camp, and had nearly returned before he saw the Indians or was shot at. He returned, two others with him, and ran for George Johnson's, about thirty Indians in chase. After reaching Johnson's, Murphy continued on and gave Hamilton and all below warning, and the families embarked, in small boats for Vancouver. The men would have barricaded in the wharf boat but for the want of ammunition. There was considerable government freight in this wharf boat.

They stayed about this craft and schooner nearly all day, and until the Indians commenced firing upon them from the zinc house on the bank. They then shoved out. Tommy Price was shot through the leg in getting the boats in-to the stream. Floating down they met the steamer “Belle” with Sheridan and forty men sent up on report of an express carried down by Indian Simpson in the morning. George and those with him, went on board the steamer and volunteered to serve under Sheridan. The steamer returned and the Indians pitched into Sheridan; fought him all day and drove him

with forty men and ten volunteers to below Hamilton's, notwithstanding he had a small cannon; one soldier was killed.

The steamer "Belle" returned next day, (third of the attack), and brought ammunition for the blockhouse. Your partner, Bishop, who was in Portland, came up on her. Steamer "Fashion" with volunteers from Portland came at the same time. The volunteers remained at the lower Cascades; Sheridan took his command, and with a batteau loaded with ammunition crossed to Bradford's island on the Oregon side, where they found most of the Cascade Indians, they having been advised by George Johnson to go there for the first day of the attack. They were crossing and re-crossing all the time and Sheridan made them prisoners. He pressed a boat's crew and as they towed up to the head of the island and above, saw great numbers of Indians on the Washington Territory side and opposite them. Sheridan expected them to cross and fight him, and between them the friendly Indians in his charge, he thought he had his hands full. Just then Sheridan discovered, Steptoe and his dragoons, infantry and volunteers, coming down from the "Mary" surprising completely the Indians, who were cooking beef and watching Sheridan across the river. But on sound of the bugle the Indians fled like deer to the woods with the loss of only one killed — "old Joanam." But for the bugle they ought to have captured fifty. So ended the battle.

The Ninth Regiment are building a blockhouse on the hill above us: a strong force here. Lieutenant Bissell and twelve men who were stationed at the upper Cascades, were ordered away, and left for The Dalles two days before the attack was made upon us. The Indians Sheridan took on the island were closely guarded. Old Chenowith (chief) was brought up before Colonel Wright, tried and sentenced to be hanged. The Cascade Indians, being under treaty, were adjudged guilty of treason in fighting. Chenowith died game: he was hanged on the upper side of Mill creek. I acted as interpreter. He offered ten horses, two squaws and a little something to every "tyee" for his life; said he was afraid of his grave in the ground, and begged to be put in an Indian dead house. He gave a terrific war-whoop while the rope was being put around his neck. I thought he expected the Indians to come and rescue him. The rope did not work well, and while hanging he muttered, "Wake nike quash co-pa mamaloosa!" He was then shot. I was glad to see the old devil killed, being satisfied that he was at the bottom of all the trouble. But I cannot detail at too great length.

The next day Tecomeoc and "Captain Joe" were hanged. "Captain Joe" said that all the Cascade Indians were in the fight. The next day Tsy, Sim Sasselas and "Four-fingered Johnny" were hanged. The next day Chenowith Jim, Tunwalth and Old Skein suffered the same fate, and Kenewake sentenced to death, but reprieved on the scaffold. In all nine were executed. Banaha is a prisoner at Vancouver, and decorated with ball and chain. The rest of the Cascade Indians are on your Island and will be shot if they get off from it. Such are Colonel Wright's orders. Dew, Watquin, Pater, Makooka John and Ketzue, and perhaps more have gone with the Yakimas.

I forgot to mention that your house at the lower Cascades, also Bishops, were burned; also to account for Captain Dan Baughman and Jim Thompson. They put back into the mountains, and at night came down to the river at Vanderpool's place, fished up an old boat and crossed to the Oregon side. They concealed themselves in the rocks on the river bank opposite, where they could watch us, and at night went back into the

mountains to sleep. They came in safely after the troops arrived. We do not know how many Indians there were. They attacked the blockhouse, our place, and drove Sheridan all at the same time. We think they were no less than two or three hundred. When the attack was made upon us three of our carpenters made for the middle blockhouse, overtook the cars at the salmon house, but the mules loose, and with the car-drivers, all kept on. They were not fired upon until they got to the spring on the railroad, but from there they ran the gauntlet of the bullets and arrows to the fort. Little Jake was killed in the run, and several more wounded. I append a list, of the killed and wounded, but this is a long letter; knowing you would be anxious to have all the particulars, I have endeavored to give you a true description. Dan is writing to others at home, and he has read this letter. We have got to work again building and transporting; are going to build a saw mill as soon as we can. We had but few specimens of poor men here during the fight — generally all behaving well. There was, however, one notable exception, a person who arrived at the store a few minutes before the fight commenced and whose name I will give you in person.

—Killed—

George Griswald, shot in leg; B. W. Brown and wife, killed at saw mill, bodies found stripped naked in Mill creek; Jimmy Watkins, driving team at the mill; Henry Hager, shot in Watkins' house, body burned; Jake Kyle, German; Jacob White, sawyer at the mill; Calderwood, working at the mill; "Bourbon," half-breed, died on the "Mary" going to The Dalles; James Sinclair, of the Hudson's Bay Company, Walla Walla; Dick Turpin, colored cook, on the steamer "Mary"; Norman Palmer, driving team at mill; three United States soldiers, names unknown; George Watkins, lived four days; Jacob Roush, carpenter, lived six days.

—Wounded—

Fletcher Murphy, arm; P. Snooks, boy, leg; J. Lindsey, shoulder; Tommy Price, thigh: two soldiers United States Army; H. Kyle, German; Moffat railroad hand; Johnny Chance, leg; M. Bailey, leg, arm; J. Alain, slightly.

I am a little afraid to go to Rock Creek to fish, in fact have had no time so far. Don't think I shall have much fishing this summer. Wish you were here.

Yours, L.W. Coe.

(Note: It is not known whom Coe refers to by his "notable exception." The only information I have found is the following note from another article: "There was but one case of lack of fortitude among the men. This fellow, who is not mentioned elsewhere in this article, was the fiercest of all in appearance, but when the attack came he was completely overcome by terror. He wailed and cried, and got in the way of the defenders till they were so exasperated that they threatened to pitch him out to the Indians if he didn't behave. At this he dove under a bed and was not heard from for a long time. It is not to be wondered at that one man broke down under such a strain, but rather it is to be recorded to their credit that all the persons in the beleaguer-ed building were in full possession of their faculties." D. A. B.)