

# Robert Williams, A Soldier at Fort Rains Tells His Story

“I was the first person stationed at the blockhouse who suspected that the Indians were preparing for mischief, while carrying a message from Mr. Griswold, who lived at the Middle Cascades, to Mr. Hamilton, who lived on a farm at the Lower Cascades. The word was for Mr. Hamilton to bring up immediately a yoke of oxen which Mr. Griswold had purchased of him, and also to hitch them to one of a lot of new government wagons that were at the landing and bring it up also. Mr. Hamilton started on this mission the next morning, but learned that the Indians were on the warpath. He abandoned the wagon and hastily returned to warn his neighbors and seek safety for himself and family.

“In passing each way by Indian camp, as I had to do, in going to and from carrying the message, my attention was particularly attracted at seeing the majority of the Indians standing together in council and dressed in war-like costumes while some were playing at a game, resembling shinny. Their actions were suspicious and confirmed my belief that they were planning mischief. The movements of some of them in particular, going in a half circle through the timber, thus to flank me, awakened in my mind a very strong suspicion that they were planning to catch me to kill me.

“I did not show to them any evidence that I susicioned them of doing me harm, but after I got past their camp and out of their sight I hurried with my utmost speed to the blockhouse, and then told Sergeant Kelly and my other comrades my suspicions. But by reason of our belief in the strength of our position, few as they were of us, we did not dread any danger from the Indians or even think any more about it, for during the whole night previous to the attack six out of nine of us there, and an old German, H. Kyle, were drinking whiskey toddy and telling army stories, the old German taking an active part in the sport and claiming to be one of Blucher’s Waterloo veterans, but none of them got drunk.

“When the attack first began on the blockhouse, nearly all the men in the detachment were scattered around the vicinity. There were but three of us in close proximity to the blockhouse; Sheridan, and the cook McManus and myself. We all heard the shooting, but strange to affirm, even after the previous, I, nor the two others had even the least suspicion that we were attacked by Indians. My first feeling at such an unusual occurrence was that of indignation at such foolish conduct, thinking all the while that some person was firing off his revolver. But the cook quickly found what was the matter, and immediately gave the alarm, crying ‘Indians!’



**The Middle Blockhouse, with Fort Rains on the hill and Palmer's store by the river, as it was when the Indians attacked it in 1856.**

“McManus and myself were standing close together near the blockhouse and on the instant the alarm was given we cast our eyes towards the hills and timber which closely surrounded us in front, and then we beheld to our horror the painted and half-naked savages, exultantly firing upon all they could see. McManus, who stood by my side, was shot in the groin. He died shortly after in the army hospital at Vancouver from its effects.

“I truthfully confess that when I beheld the savages engaged in their bloody work, and my comrade fatally shot, I felt for a few moments as if my hair was lifted from my head. Then my thoughts instantly reverted to the great peril I had escaped the day before, the panoramic view of which will vividly remain stamped on my memory.

“My wounded comrade and myself lost no time in getting inside the blockhouse. I then quickly got on my accouterments and gun, and immediately commenced the defense. The incessant firing and racket of the Indians gave unmistakable warning of deadly danger to those of my comrades who were strolling around. They all got to the

blockhouse in safety, excepting Lawrence Rooney, who was so unfortunate as to be captured upon the hill while cutting wood.

“The two or three unfortunate families who were living close by the blockhouse ran to it with all their might for the safety of their lives, but several were severely wounded in running the gauntlet. We had altogether with us, three killed and seven wounded. Among the former were Mr. George Griswold, who might have escaped death but for the confidence in the friendliness of the Indians toward him, and his standing in view and waving to the Indians to cease firing, thinking all the time they were Cascade Indians, whom he well knew, and not suspecting that there was a large force of Yakimas among them.

“The German boy, Jake Kyle, mentioned in Mr. Coe’s narrative, was killed while riding on horseback down the road on the hill about 100 yards in front of the blockhouse. The Indian that shot him stood by the side of a tree close to the road, his gun about reaching the poor boy, who fell instantly upon being shot. It was an agonizing sight to us to behold the poor, unconscious boy writhing in deadly agony for several hours. Sometimes he would endeavor to sit up, but, each attempt provoked the Indians to shoot arrows into him.

“John Switzler and Tom McDowell, and another man to me before unknown, were on their way from the Upper to the Lower Cascades, but before they had proceeded far they discovered the hostile Indians. Being unarmed, they made a desperate effort to reach the blockhouse, and providentially did in safety, but greatly fatigued. They proved a valuable acquisition to our small force. The three gallantly aided us during the defense in all duties assigned them to do.

“After they got in, the door was made secure by a bolt and a strong chain. That being completed, we prepared in terrible earnest for our uneven and deadly conflict by giving our savage enemies a treat of canister shot, fourteen rounds in all, from our six-pounder gun which finally made them precipitately retreat for better shelter. They, however, returned to their first position to pay their respects to us again. But by this time they had learned our mettle, and wisely concluded that they could not whip us, so they returned behind the hill out of range of our guns to torture and put to death our unfortunate comrade, Lawrence Rooney, whom they had captured. We could not see them at it, but we heard our comrade’s piercing screams.”

John Attwell later told: “The Indians tied Rooney to a tree and then stuck pitch splinters through his skin, and set them on fire.” An Indian who was there but did not take part, told this to John a few years later.

“After they had accomplished that last unhuman and diabolical cruelty, the main portion left and went to the Lower Cascades. The outrages which they did there are fully narrated in Mr. Coe’s narrative. They, however, left enough behind to besiege the blockhouse. But they did not offer to fight us anymore, consequently our little party deemed it advisable to, if possible before night came on, make an effort to get food and water. I volunteered to do so. The sergeant willing consented to my going. The stranger who joined our force with Switzler and McDowell gallantly volunteered to go with me in search of whatever we could find to sustain life. Our companions in the blockhouse

were meanwhile watching us with guns in hand ready to defend us to the utmost of their ability if occasion offered. But, luckily, we were not molested.

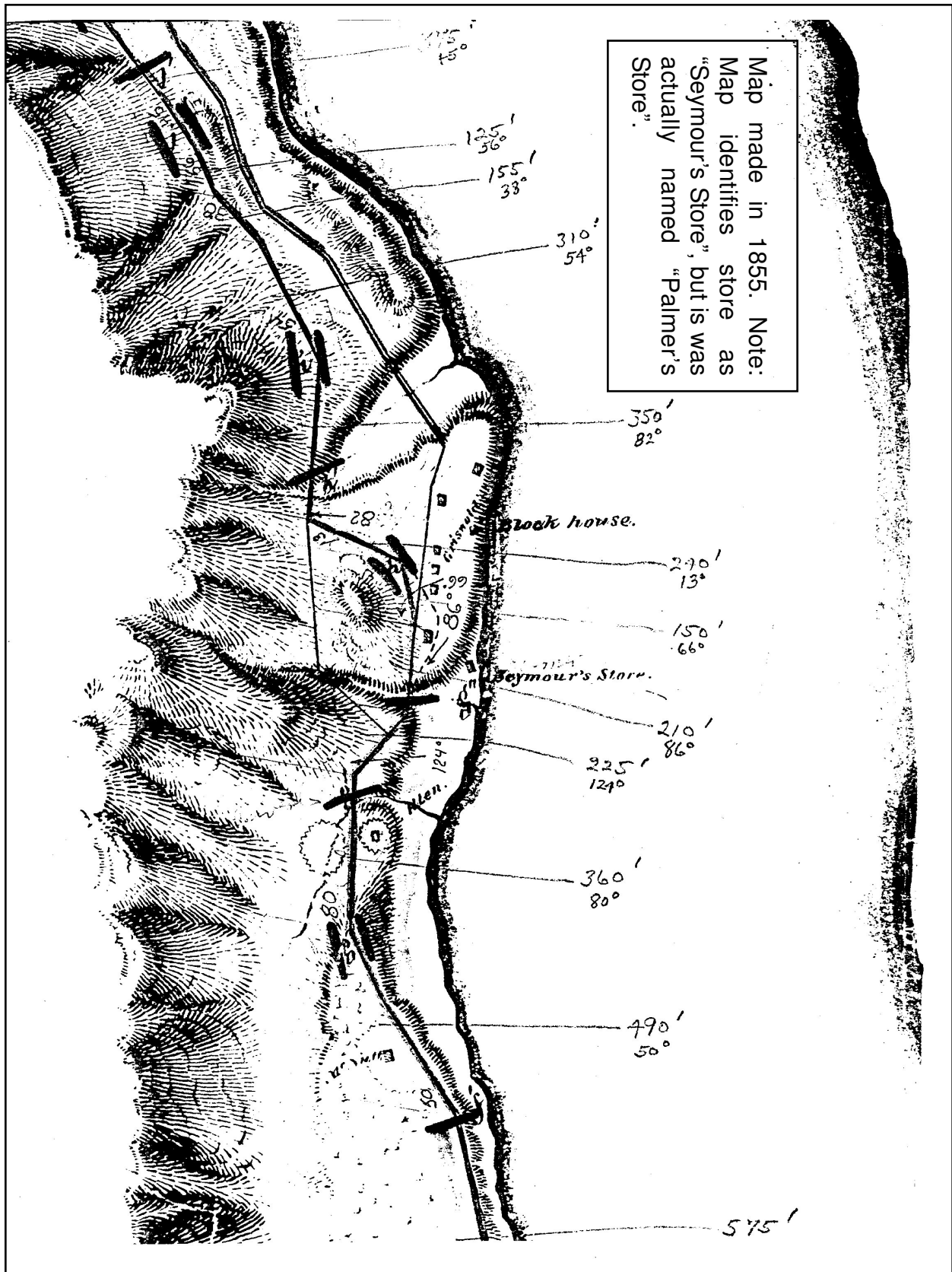
“I went through a window into Mr. Griswold’s house, and to my great joy I found dishpan-full of excellent doughnuts. I then handed them to my companion outside to take to the blockhouse, which he did to the delight of all. In the meantime, I discovered in the pantry a large fine ham, which with the doughnuts, sufficed to relieve all the pangs of hunger. But we failed to get any water. So ended the first day’s transaction, but still in constant vigilance by day and night it was necessary to depend for the safety of our lives until we could get assistance.

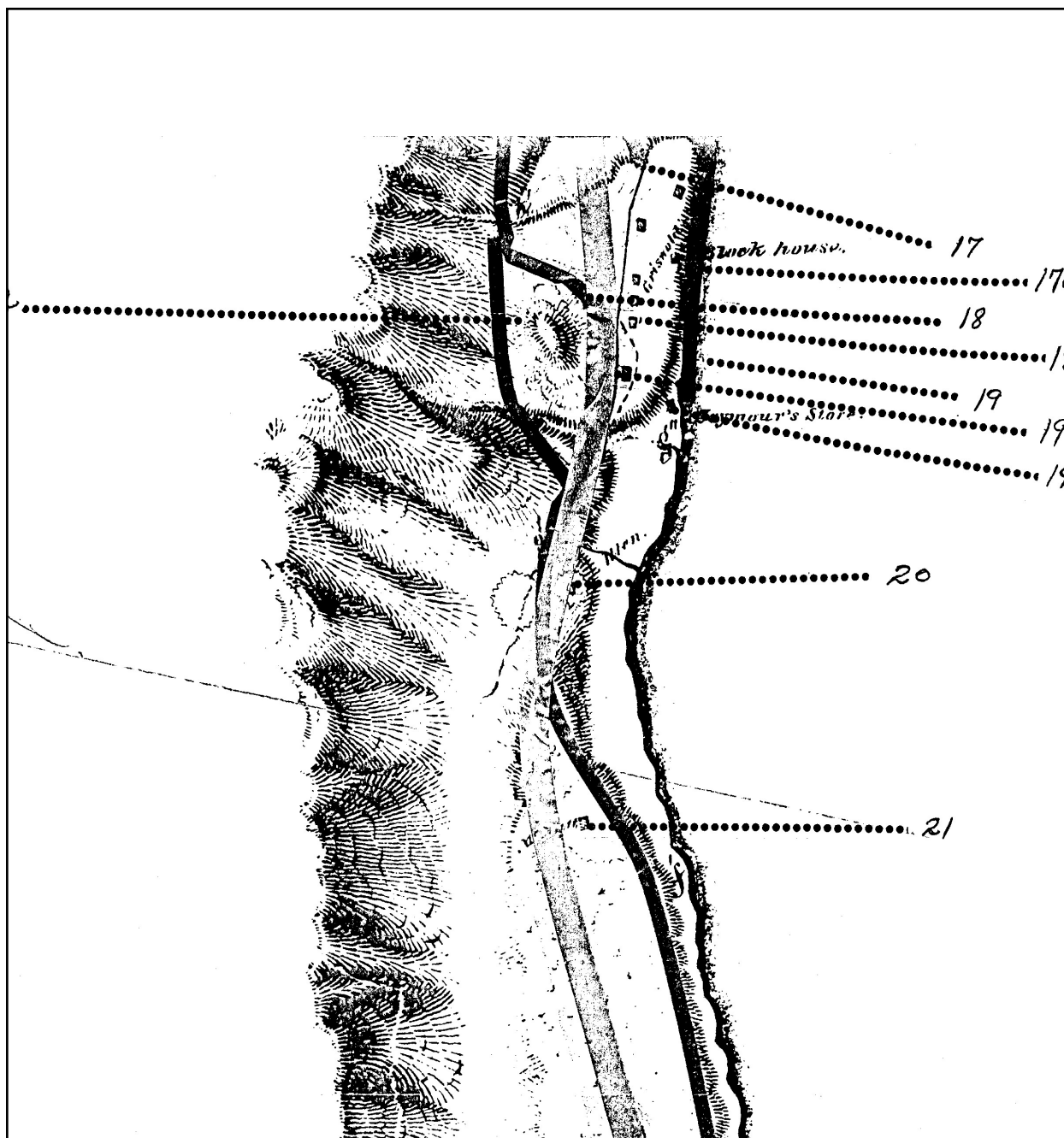
“The second day, the Indians were still besieging us and thus preventing us from getting elixir, water, which by this time all of us greatly needed, especially the wounded. Close by there was a small saloon, owned and kept by the Palmer brothers, who, with a brother, kept a store at the foot of the hill by the river bank. Luckily they made their escape immediately after the Indians commenced their attack, locking the doors of both the buildings before they left.

“My army comrade, William Houser, suggested that somebody should be allowed to go to the saloon and get whatever they might find that would alleviate hunger and thirst. Sergeant Kelly then permitted him and me to go. The door being locked, my comrade had to break it in with an ax. We procured within one dozen bottles of English porter, one decanter of brandy, the same of whiskey and wine and a small box of oyster crackers. We failed to get water, but the articles mentioned satisfied every requirement except surgical aid.

“We knew relief was close at hand by hearing the report of Phil Sheridan’s guns, firing upon the enemy at the Lower Cascades. We relax some of the vigilance we had kept for the purpose of allowing a portion of the guards to take a little rest and sleep. We were greatly fatigued at night during the siege by the service which a vicious bulldog at one of the deserted neighbors homes rendered us. He barked and gave warning to us of any attempt the Indians made to get toward the blockhouse. If they had been allowed to get close enough to the building, they would, without doubt, have tried to burn it, by throwing burning pitchwood on the roof.

“The next morning Brevert Lieutenant-Colonel Steptoe, Ninth U.S. Infantry, Commanding Companies A.E.F., in all 120 men and officers, came to our relief. The sergeant told them how we had made the defense, and the Colonel then complimented all of us for our admirable conduct.”





Note: Map identifies store as "Seymour's Store", but is was actually named "Palmer's Store".