

The Old Milk River Indian Agency And Forts Browning, Belknap and Peck, Part of It

Old Forts Browning, Belknap and Peck and Something of Sitting Bull in Relation Thereto

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MILK RIVER, Indian agency, the earliest in Montana east of Fort Benton, was at old Fort Browning on Milk river. From it, by a series of changes, evolved the agency at old Fort Belknap and the one now at Poplar, whose immediate predecessor was at Fort Peck, the date of the great dam across the Missouri.

Having made a treaty with the Gros Ventres, about 2,000 in number, and the River Crows, about 1,000, in July 1868, Special Commissioner W. J. Cullen selected for an agency for those Indians a site on the south bank of the Missouri and on the west side of Peoples creek, two miles southwest of the present Dodson, Phillips county. In honor of Orville H. Browning, secretary of the interior, it was named Fort Browning.

Andrew Jackson was the great father at Washington, having succeeded the martyred Lincoln three years previously. Green Clay Smith was governor of the 4-year-old territory of Montana, whose 30,000 white residents lived in the vicinity of the mountains and in the mining regions. Fort Benton, where lived a few hundred, saw more steamboats the summer of 1868 than ever before or after. In the vast area stretching eastward to Dakota, at fur trading posts and wood camps along the Missouri, lived precariously a more or less nomadic class, unmarried males and a few squaw men, whose number probably did not exceed 150. Here and thereabouts was soon to be the last retreat and stand of the primitive natives who had and desired no other means of subsistence than the buffalo herds.

The great father this summer was abandoning the military road from the Platte via the Big Horn mountains to Bozeman. Two years only it had been established. The Fetterman massacre, the Wagon Box fight, the Hayfield fight, numerous demonstrations, and the constant menace of encircling warriors of the Sioux, Cheyennes and Arapahoes seemed more than the road was worth; so, to the chagrin of Montanans, the garrisons at Forts Reno, Phil Kearney and C. F. Smith, stalled and whiplashed, were being withdrawn. Along the Yellowstone, from its mouth to Tongue river, swarmed other Sioux; the Hunkpapas, Minneconjous, Blackfeet (Sioux), Sans Arcs, and Yanktonais—refugees, driven westward in 1862 and '63 by Sibley, and in 1864 and '65 by Gen. Alfred Sully, who five years later was to be detached for service as superintendent of Indian affairs for Montana. Also, in 1865, Gen. P. E. Connor had made a drive northward from the line of the Platte, destroying an Arapahoe village on the head of Tongue river.

The site selected, Cullen began the construction of crude houses which he had the optimism to hope the Indians would inhabit. "I have already built several houses for the Gros Ventres," he wrote on Sept. 2, "and will have 30 houses for them in a few weeks." To have charge, in the status of special agent, Alonzo S. Reed was employed, and entered upon his duties Oct. 1. (This was he who several years later was to become more widely known as the proprietor of Reedsfort, which became Lewistown).

Fort Hawley Abandoned

Later in the fall the chosen post traders, A. J. Smith of Chicago, James B. Hubbell of St. Paul, and A. F. Hawley, sometimes known as the Northwest Fur Co. but more often simply as Hubbell & Hawley, abandoned their Fort Hawley on the Missouri above the Musselshell and moved their merchandise 75 miles northward to Fort Browning. Transferred also was J. A. Wells, an employe who had been in the vicinity of Fort Hawley two years and who three years afterward was to move to Fort Benton, his home until he died during the winter of 1884-85.

While engaged upon an unofficial enterprise, in December, Agent Reed contacted a large number of Sioux invaders in the eastern part of his domain. During the summer the steamboat Amelia Poe had been wrecked at the mouth of Milk river. After salvaging most of her cargo,

the owners sold the remainder to Reed, Wells, Tom Campbell and two others.

At the time mentioned these gentlemen thought to go down and possess themselves of their purchased property, stopping first at Fort Peck, a trading post established a year or two previously by Durfee & Peck and named for C. K. Peck of that firm, sometimes known as the Northwestern Transportation Co. Having employed seven men to assist them, Reed and his associates, on the 8th of the month, left Fort Peck to proceed the 12 miles eastward along the Missouri to the stranded boat, some riding horseback and some in Reed's wagon, drawn by four mules.

Enroute the party encountered the band of ill-natured Sioux who attacked them. The whites took to flight. Full 30 minutes the wagon was pursued by Indians behind and on either side. When two of the mules were killed, Reed, Wells and Campbell abandoned the wagon, mounted the remaining mules and a horse tied behind the wagon, and escaped. Of the nine other members of the party, four were killed. It was not until the following summer that the enterprising agent and his co-partners were able to take from the wrecked hull its residue of cargo, which consisted principally of whiskey and rum.

The same summer (1869) the great father resumed his efforts to pacify the bellicose Sioux, a consummation for which he had been striving for some time. The Ogilias under Red Cloud, the Brules under Spotted Tail and other bands, had become reservation subjects at agencies to the eastward. Always, however, there had been and still was a large and over changing group of holdouts, whose leader it had been learned by now was Sitting Bull of the Hunkpapas, born in 1831 and for two years the elected chief warrior of the loosely confederated Sioux nation.

This time the commissioner of Indian affairs induced the veteran missionary Father Pierre J. DeSmet, to make a special trip from St. Louis, proceed to the camp of Sitting Bull and attempt to persuade him to meet treaty commissioners on the Missouri at Fort Rice, Dakota. At his camp on the south bank of the Yellowstone, six miles above Powder river, whose population DeSmet thought was probably 5,000 souls, the chief respectfully received and listened to the "black robe." A few delegates, including Chief Gall, accompanied DeSmet to Fort Rice. Gall was the first of the number to sign the proposed treaty, a ceremony and nothing else, as subsequent events were to prove.

Would Not Sell Lands

Sitting Bull remained on the prairie, along and on either side of the Yellowstone. While he desired peace, it was peace on the basis of his being left alone. He sent delegates to meet the agents of the great father at Fort Rice, but he wanted it understood that he did not propose to sell any of his lands; nor did he want the whites to make roads through his country, wantonly kill buffalo and game, or cut his timber.

At Fort Browning, improvements had been going forward. Being supplied with work oxen and some farming implements, Agent Reed had plowed 40 acres of ground; but, having no seed, the land lay idle that summer (1869). From green cotton-wood were constructed buildings usually found at agencies. Besides the numerous cabins designed as dwellings for the Indians, already mentioned, there were other structures; a warehouse, a blacksmith shop, carpenter shop, houses for the interpreter, the farmer, the physician and one intended for a school house. Surrounding them was a stockade with two bastions, and nearby, a corral.

In the fall, from the south, came 10 lodges of Arapahoes and camped among their kinsmen, the Gros Ventres. This was but a small part of the entire band which had started. The others, 150 lodges, stopped on the south side of the Missouri, in the Judith basin.

During the fall and winter 741 Gros Centres died of smallpox. The River Crows, camping for the most part in the Judith basin, did not contract the disease until the following June.

Reed promptly procured an army doctor to administer wholesale vaccination which kept the deaths among them to a minimum, only 80 of them dying.

It appearing that the Crows preferred to remain generally south of the river, 60 lodges of the upper band of Assinibolines under Chief Long Hair, sometimes called Whirlwind, took up their abode at the fort. The relation between the newcomers and the Crows was not entirely harmonious but they got along well with the Gros Ventres, as indicated by the marriage of about 100 of their women to Gros Ventre braves during the summer of 1870.

Reed had now become convinced that the agency should be moved to a more favorable location for farming.

"From my experience on Milk river," said he, in a report dated "Gros Ventres and River Crows agency, Aug. 31, 1876." "I am fully satisfied that it will be impossible to farm successfully, owing to scarcity of water. It seems when crops would need irrigation there is no water; the river becomes dry for miles, in dry seasons." Then, too, there were the buildings, now about two years old, which, he said, "are in bad condition, having shrank, need repair. The houses erected for the Indians were so shabby built that the Indians refused to live in them. I have torn them down, as they afford cover for the hostile Indians."

And, certainly, there was opportunity to observe the actions of hostile Indians thereabouts; for, in the 90 days preceding, bands of Sioux from the vicinity of the mouth of Milk river had made five several raids upon the agency. July 24 they stole from the Gros Ventres 28 horses, and six belonging to agency employes. In a foray six days later, the raiders were less successful. The Gros Ventres were able to get their horses into the corral, and, moreover, killed two of the Marauders. Upon a day in August they made off with eight horses belonging to employes. The Sioux, Reed remarked, are "very troublesome," which was a conservative way of putting it.

The pony express riders on the short-lived mail route from Fort Hawley via Judith basin to Helena, 1867-68, which had to be discontinued because of these same Sioux, and the settlers at Kercheval and then Musselshell City, who had several fights with them between 1868 and 1870, doubtless would have used stronger language.

Mismanagement Is Charged

But things were in a bad way for Reed in respect of his official and personal conduct. A new superintendent for Montana, Jasper A. Viall, removed him and on Nov. 7, placed in temporary charge C. L. Clark, a deputy United States marshal. Viall stated that under Reed's administration, "affairs at this agency were grossly mismanaged, it being made a rendezvous for whiskey dealers and illicit traders of all descriptions. . . provisions sent for issue to the Indians were traded to them for robes and furs, and whiskey openly traded at the post, and government property squandered and sold in the most disgraceful manner. I succeeded in seizing 21 head of work cattle belonging to the agency, which had been disposed of by the late agent, A. S. Reed," continues Superintendent Viall, "and they are now held by the United States marshal, subject to the decision of the courts. . . Reed found that he was so closely beset by affidavits of his former employes and others that he came forward and acknowledged by affidavit that he had embezzled the cattle and sold them, pointed out where they were. . ."

In one particular, however, Viall agreed with the discredited Reed—the Milk river agency was unfavorably located. "The truth is," he asserted, "influence was brought to bear in the interest of the whiskey trade when the place was built. . . The employes. . . have to boil and skim all water used for domestic purposes, and, besides, the location itself is totally unfit for an agency, being commanded by a long bluff within 200 yards of the gate where 10,000 Indians could conceal themselves and attack the post without fear of dislodgment."

Yet while Fort Browning continued as the Milk river agency; and never again was there complaint of graft or criminal mismanagement, for the next April 1 (1871) a new special agent took charge—Andrew J. (Jack) Simmons, well known and respected in and about Helena. Born in Indiana in 1834, he went to California when 17 years of age; then to Nevada, where he became speaker of the first state legislature. Later he located in Idaho, and then moved to Helena, where he married Miss Kate Chumamero, daughter of one of the most prominent lawyers of the territory. To sketch his subsequent career, at some cost to the continuity of this story, Simmons, like scores of other Montanans in whose blood was the mining urge, stampeded to the Black Hills of Dakota in 1876, was active in various enterprises in that region, became councilman and later, mayor of Rapid City, where he resided many years. His death occurred at the home of a son in Denver, Dec. 23, 1920.

In the reformation of Fort Browning, of importance almost if not quite equal to the appointment of Simmons as agent was the appointment of James Stuart as post trader. He was a man of known courage, integrity and intelligence. With his brother, Granville Stuart, he had come to Deer Lodge valley before the days of the gold rush, which began in 1862, and was widely known throughout the territory.

As of Aug. 31, 1871, says Agent Simmons, the Sioux immigrants included about 2,500 Santees under Standing Bull's brother, about 4,300 Yanktona, Yanktonais, and other Sioux, under Medicine Bear. Further west, and nearer the agency were Assinibolines, Gros Ventres, River Crows and a small number of Arapahoes and Cheyennes living among the Gros Ventres. In the aggregate, the various bands claimed about 30,000 square miles, an area which today includes most, if not all, of Hill, Blaine, Phillips and Valley counties, besides which they claimed hunting grounds and privileges in the areas of what are now Roosevelt and Sheridan counties, and, south of the Missouri, in Judith Basin and in Garfield, McCone, Dawson and Petroleum counties.

Indians Urged to Hunt

To care for his wards Simmons was able to issue small quantities of flour and bacon for hunting parties. The Indians were urged to exert themselves in the chase. During the season, it was estimated, 50,000 buffaloes were killed for meat.

"They appear to fully appreciate the fact," Simmons goes on to say, "that the game will in a short time disappear, as it did in the eastern country, which they (the Sioux) formerly inhabited, and that it will necessitate a change in the mode of life. Some of the chiefs have told me that they have now no other place to go, and will die here unless provided for by the Great Father."

Speaking for the Assinibolines, Chief Red Stone of the lower band desired his people to learn about the white man's farming so that, as the chief said, "my people may live after the game is dead."

About the middle of October, Superintendent Viall at Helena received information that a group of half-breeds from Canada had settled among the Indians and were engaged in illicit trade, probably selling arms and ammunition to the recalcitrant element under Sitting Bull of the Hunkpapas. Gen. John Gibbon at Fort Shaw, on Sun river, was requested to despatch an expedition to arrest the offenders and seize the contraband stores.

Maj. H. B. Freeman, on the 20th, set out with two companies of the Seventh infantry, and in 10 days reached Fort Browning. Learning there that the half breeds were camped about 70 miles east northeast, on Frenchman creek, they resumed the journey the same evening. By forced marches they were able to surprise the camp about 2 o'clock, the morning of Nov. 2.

Sixty families of half breeds, with 20 lodges of Santee Sioux, were found scattered along the creek for a distance of four or five miles. No resistance was offered. A trading establishment of five buildings, and an-