

HISTORY OF SAN JUAN ISLAND.

[Charles McKay, the author of this article, was born in Nova Scotia, September, 1831. He came to the Pacific Coast in 1855, was attracted by the Fraser River gold excitement of 1858 and is now the only living survivor of the San Juan Island colony of Americans of the eventful year of 1859. He and his family enjoy the respect of the community at Friday Harbor, as well as of the other present settlements of the San Juan Islands. Though beyond the Biblical three score and ten years, he still enjoys the strenuous life of a successful village blacksmith.—Editor.]

W. D. Oakes and I, returning from the Fraser River mining excitement, arrived in Victoria, B. C., on our way back to California. There we got acquainted with some hunters and they told us about San Juan Island. They told us what a fine island it was, full of game. So we went there to see it. There appeared to be a lodestone on the island, for we got stuck there at once.

We found the Hudson Bay Company had a station on the island. They had 2,000 head of sheep and cattle and horses. There was also an American Customs Inspector by the name of Hubbs.

We took up farms and soon there came a number of other American citizens to the island. All took up farms, and among them there was a man by the name of Cutler who took a farm. This was in June, 1859, and we prepared to celebrate the Fourth of July. We hoisted a fine flagpole and got a large American flag, and on the Fourth we hoisted our flag and we had a glorious time. There were fourteen of us and we passed a resolution that each one of us had to make a speech. There was a Welshman in the number. When it came to his turn to speak he said we should not only be independent of Great Britain, but we should have a government of our own on such a beautiful island as this was. So we kept up our flag for four days. And there came a man-of-war steamer up in the Straits, and there was the commander of the Pacific Coast on board, by the name of Harney, a large man and very firm. He spied our flag with his glass, but was so far away he was not sure that it was an American flag. So he said to the Captain:

“Take this glass and see if you can tell if that is an American flag.”

So the Captain took the glass and said that it was the Hudson Bay Company's flag, when the General said: “Give me the glass.” After looking some time he said:

“Don't you know your own country's flag? Put the steamer in to the island till I see what this flag means.”

It was the first American flag ever hoisted on the island. So the General landed. Seeing such a strange thing as a man-of-war coming into our harbor, we all went to see him land. So he said:

“Are you Americans?”

“Yes.”

“Is that your flag?”

“Yes.”

“What are you doing here?”

So we told him. When we found out who he was we commenced to lay our complaints to him against the Hudson Bay Company and the Indians. We asked him if he would send us a company of soldiers to protect us from the Hudson Bay Company's threats to take us prisoners. They had sent a gunboat to take one of our men to Victoria, and we told him all about the hog scrape which I will give you later. The General said:

“If you will send me a petition with twenty-five signers I will send you a company of soldiers.”

He left and went straight to Bellingham, and there was one company there. He commanded Captain Pickett to move at once to San Juan with his command, and when Pickett landed with his sixty soldiers and the outfit, the Hudson Bay Company's manager sent to Victoria to Governor Douglas and told the story. So Governor Douglas sent a man-of-war to Pickett's camp and turned his vessel broadside on the camp and ran out his guns toward the camp, and sent an officer to Pickett and ordered Pickett to prepare to leave the island at once.

Pickett sent back word that he was sent here to protect American citizens by his commander-in-chief, and if the man-of-war would land every man on this island he would fire on them as long as he had a man left.

So the English officer got Pickett's answer and they pulled in their guns and went to Victoria. Captain Pickett sent a row-boat to Steilacoom where the commander-in-chief stayed until he heard from the result of the landing by Pickett. So they told the story to Harney, commander-in-chief, who commanded all the troops in this region to go at once to San Juan Island. Eight companies of soldiers landed on a foggy morning on the south side of the island. Then the man-of-war went into the harbor with fifteen guns and all the baggage. There they found three English men-of-war in the harbor. They commenced to land their guns. Then the fun commenced. They landed fifteen guns and had 800 soldiers working day and night heaving up earth fortifications, and when the news came to Victoria there were 1,000 miners ready to take Victoria when they heard the first gun fired.

All the banks in Victoria took all their money and put it on board the men-of-war.

The Governor of Victoria ordered the men-of-war to go and drive the Americans off the island, but the English Admiral was not there, so the fleet would not obey the Governor till he came. So when he came he told the Governor that he did not know the Americans as he did. They are like mosquitoes, kill one and there will be a thousand to take his place. The Admiral said:

"I will tell you what we will do. I would rather shed tears than shed one drop of blood. Governor, we will leave this to our government. If they order me to fire on those Americans I will obey, but not till then."

While this was going on we sent an express across the plains, which took one month to reach our government, and our government sent out Commander-in-Chief Winfield Scott with instructions to not land on any English soil and to make peace if he could. So he landed at Port Angeles and communicated with Governor Douglas. After a long time of communication, Scott was firm and finally made a treaty that each government could plant one company of soldiers on the disputed territory, and that each should rule their own people, and we remained under such rule for seventeen years. There never was a monarch in the world that had more power than they. The English Captain defied the English Custom House, seized a boat and would not return her to the English Custom House, so the Custom House petitioned Queen Victoria and had him removed. I have the first dispatch that ever went to San Francisco, which cost me \$45, and I had the American Captain removed.

Then we had peace and had lots of fun. The English company would invite the American soldiers to their camp and have great feasts. Then the American soldiers would invite the English soldiers to their camp and thought they would outdo them in feasting. So they filled the Englishmen with all that could be furnished until they knew they could not eat any more. Then they cleared off the tables and the waiters came in with piles of plates in their arms, and the Englishmen asked:

"What are you going to do?"

"We are going to serve the balance of our feast."

"Bloody my eyes! We can't eat any more."

"Well, if you can't eat any more the waiters will carry away the dishes."

The writer was invited to that feast and knew of the trick. There was not another thing to put on the table, but the bluff worked well.

I said I would tell you about the hog scrape that nearly caused a war between two great nations. The man by the name of Cutler had a farm with a small garden of potatoes. While we had to go forty miles across the Straits in a rowboat, you will see that potatoes were potatoes. This Cutler potato patch was growing fine. One day a hog belonging to the Hudson Bay Company broke into Cutler's potato patch. Cutler went to the Company's agent and told him if he did not take care of this hog he would kill him. The hog came and rooted all the potatoes. When Cutler came home the hog was still in his garden. He got his gun and shot the pig. Then he went to the Hudson Bay agent and offered to pay for the hog, but the agent refused to take pay and said he would send for the gunboat and have him arrested and taken to Victoria. The gunboat came to arrest him and I had to plead with Cutler to hide, for I knew that Cutler was a good shot and was going to kill all that would come to arrest him. If there was any shooting to be done we all had to take a hand in it, for we could kill all that could come, for we were all fine riflemen. We could hit a 10-cent mark at 100 yards. So you see it was not fear that caused me to coax Cutler to hide, but I did not want those men killed. So finally Cutler took my advice and when they came to arrest Cutler they could not find him. That saved bloodshed. This is the story we told General Harney when we got the soldiers.

In the course of seventeen years the Emperor of Germany decided, as arbitrator, in favor of the United States government, and the dispute over San Juan Island was settled.

The writer is now seventy-seven years of age and is enjoying the fruits of running the risk of losing his life while opening up this country and is the only one of the first settlers now left alive. He can do more work than the general average of young men. He helped to build the first Presbyterian church in this great State of Washington and was an elder in that church for twenty-two years. Twelve years ago I found a religion, a church that paid me a dividend at once by keeping me in good health. I am able to work when I wish as easy as when I was a young man. I have been in the best of health since I made this discovery and am happier than ever before in my lifetime. I would advise my fellow brothers and sisters to set all old prejudice aside and investigate Christian Science, which will teach you to be happy, healthy and prosperous, with good will toward all.

CHARLES McKAY.

Friday Harbor, June 29, 1908.