

KO-COME-NE PE-CA, THE LETTER CARRIER

It would be a difficult feat for any man to deliver a letter to a vague address, distant many hundreds of miles, across an unexplored wilderness infested by hostile savages. It would be twice as difficult to deliver a letter and then return with the reply. Yet this doubly difficult feat was actually accomplished, but not by a man—it was done by a woman. It required a remarkable woman to perform this surprising achievement, and the woman was most certainly remarkable, although her story is only known by piecing together fragments of information recorded by early travelers.¹

Mr. Finnan McDonald of the North West Company was in charge of Spokane House in 1811. He had an important communication for Mr. John Stuart who was stationed at Fort Fraser in the northern part of New Caledonia, now called British Columbia. The letter required a reply, yet the intervening wilderness was utterly unknown, even whether it could be crossed at all. So McDonald sent the letter by a woman who returned with the answer, the remarkable woman, Ko come ne Pe-ca.

The first recorded of her was in 1808 at David Thompson's post on the Kootenay river, now western Montana, when she was taken as wife by Boiseverd, a Canadian. She belonged to the Kootenay tribe, which is noted for the modesty and docility of the women, but Madame Boiseverd was neither modest nor docile, since she suddenly became possessed with a desire to become a man and a warrior, which resulted in very greatly disturbing the routine of that trading post. Her fixed determination could not be changed, and David Thompson insisted that she be sent to her people. However, the Kootenays did not approve of a manlike woman, a Ko-come-ne Pe-ca as they called her. She immediately adopted the opprobrious term as her name, and having dressed herself in the costume of a man she joined a war party in a foray against their enemies, probably the Blackfoot Indians. Although she was frail and of delicate frame, yet she succeeded in distinguishing herself for courage, with the result that she was able to induce a number of young men to place themselves under her command, and had soon attained considerable reputation for her bravery.

¹ Sir John Franklin, *Narrative of Second Expedition*, Lea and Carey, Philadelphia, 1828, pages 251-2. David Thompson, *Narrative*, Champlain Society, Toronto, p. 512. Washington Irving, *Astoria*, Chapter X.; Hudson edition, pages 142, 154. Gabriel Franchere, *Narrative*, 1854, pp. 118, 121. Alexander Ross, *First Settlers*, 1849, pp. 85, 102, 144.

The disapprobation of the Kootenays probably caused her to leave her former home, and the next known of her was three years later when at Spokane she was entrusted with the important letter to Mr. John Stuart. Beyond the fact that Fort Fraser was on the Fraser, or Tacootche River, she appears to have had no more definite direction, so it was natural that when she reached the Okanogan region and there saw the Columbia River that she supposed that by following it she would reach her destination, an error which entailed fifteen hundred miles of weary journey; since she only found her mistake after reaching the shores of the Pacific Ocean, when she arrived at the newly established post of Astoria.

In order to accomplish her purpose and successfully deceive the Indians as to her sex, she obtained another young woman whom she passed off as her wife, and by pretending to be a prophet with magical powers she was able to pass from tribe to tribe, telling marvelous stories of giants who would overturn the earth and change people into stone. These stories were spread by the superstitious natives and had reached northern British Columbia long before she arrived.²

At this period her prophesies appear to have been of evil that was to come, which created a feeling of enmity against her, so that she narrowly escaped being killed on her return up the Columbia. However she was clever enough to change her prophesies into good predictions which resulted in her being the recipient of many presents.

The Asorians were astonished at her arrival, in the costume of the plains Indians, with long fringed leather robe and high leggings and moccasins.³ By means of the Cree language which she imperfectly understood, she was able to give them very valuable information in regard to the interior, so that it was determined to fit out an expedition under Mr. David Stuart to go to the Okanogan country, to which she offered to guide them.

The unexpected arrival of David Thompson apparently did not disconcert her, as she was able to maintain her disguise until the expedition reached the Cascades of the Columbia, where the Indians were about to assassinate her on account of the evil she had predicted on her way down the river. She then appealed to David Thompson for protection, and he was at first perplexed until in

² David Thompson, *Journal*, Oregon Historical Quarterly, XV, June 1914, p. 111. Daniel W. Harmon, *Journal of Voyages and Travels*, Reprint, Allerton Book Co., New York, 1922, pp. 167-8.

³ Ross Cox, *Adventures*, 1831, p. 240. Daniel W. Harmon, *op. cit.* 273-4.

astonishment he recognized this "young man, well dressed in leather, carrying a bow and quiver of arrows" as Madame Boisvard of the old Kootenay post.

From this time the prophesies of Ko-come-ne Pe-ca were of good that was to come and not of evil as previously; and although she accompanied the party to Okanogan, she was sometimes far ahead and again far in the rear. When they finally reached the Okanogan River she had acquired twenty-six horses from the grateful natives.

It had been David Stuart's intention to remain there at the Okanogan River, but possibly her desire for protection by the whites may have been the cause of his deciding to journey to Kamloops, which was on the route for the long delayed letter. When he made his camp on the Thompson River Ko-come-ne Pe-ca and her "wife" once more set out alone, where among hostile savages she was attacked and wounded in the chest, yet nevertheless she continued and having found Fort Fraser the letter was finally delivered to Mr. John Stuart, who wrote a reply which she succeeded in taking safely to Spokane House.

Little is recorded of her after this time, except that her prophesies were believed and had spread throughout all the tribes of the Northwest, and may possibly have been the origin of the ghost dance religion which developed in later years.

Her desire for warlike fame did not cease and some years later she collected volunteers for another war excursion, in which she received a wound which caused her death.

The similarity of natures between this remarkable woman and Smohalla who was born on the upper Columbia River in a tribe among whom she had gone, may possibly suggest that she was his mother, which might account for his extraordinary gifts and propensity for wandering and his ability to make other Indians believe the stories he told.⁴

Whatever shortcomings Ko-come-ne Pe-ca may have had, yet her success in delivering that letter and returning with the reply was truly a most marvelous accomplishment.

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⁴ *Handbook of American Indians*, Bureau of Ethnology, II., pp. 602-3. Bureau of Ethnology, *Fourteenth Report*, Part 2, p. 717.