

TWO KOOTENAY WOMEN MASQUERADING AS MEN? OR WERE THEY ONE?

Mr. J. Neilson Barry, in the July *Quarterly*¹ of last year, again calls vividly to our attention the Kootenay woman who in Astoria days masqueraded as a man. From journals of both fur trader and missionary we have, as I shall show, a later record of a Kootenay woman who from soon after Astoria down to her heroic death in June, 1837, masqueraded as a man. Mr. T. C. Elliott, in a note concerning her appearance in John Work's *Journal*² in 1825, suggests that this later woman may be the woman of Astoria days. It is my purpose in this study to discuss this probable identity of the Kootenay woman masquerader, described by Thompson, Irving, Franchere, Alexander Ross, and Sir John Franklin, with the Kootenay woman masquerader described by John Work and W. H. Gray.

To place all the data before the reader it is necessary to make excerpts from seven journalists and authors, all of whom except Irving and Franklin knew her personally.

I. *The Astoria Record*

Franchere, just one month before Thompson's arrival, gives us our first glimpse³ of the Kootenay woman:

"On the 15th [June, 1811], some natives from up the river, brought us two strange Indians, a man and a woman. They were not attired like the savages on the river Columbia, but wore long robes of dressed deer-skin, with leggings and moccasins in the fashion of tribes to the east of the Rocky Mountains. We put questions to them in various Indian dialects; but they did not understand us. They showed us a letter addressed to "Mr. John Stuart, Fort Estekataidene, New Caledonia." Mr. Pillet then addressing them in the Knisteneaux language, they answered, although they appeared not to understand it perfectly. Notwithstanding, we learned from them that they had been sent by a Mr. Finnan M'Donald, a clerk in the service of the Northwest Company, and who had a post on a river which they called *Spokan*; that having lost their way, they had followed the course of the Tacousah Tessah (the Indian name of the Columbia,⁴ that when they arrived at the Falls, the natives made them understand that there were white men at the mouth of the

1 "Ko-Come-Ne Pe-Ka, the Letter Carrier." Vol. XX, pp. 201-203.

2 *Washington Historical Quarterly*, V, p. 190.

3 Franchere, Gabriel. *Narrative of a Voyage to the Northwest Coast of America*. (Huntington Translation). pp. 118, 119.

4 Franchere's error. The Indian Tacouche Tesse was the Fraser.

river; and not doubting that the person to whom the letter was addressed would be found there, they had come to deliver it.

"We kept these messengers for some days, and having drawn from them important information respecting the country in the interior west of the Mountains, we decided to send an expedition thither, under the command of Mr. David Stuart; and the 15th of July was fixed for its departure."

Of the month intervening between their arrival and Thompson's, Alexander Ross writes:⁵

"Among the many visitors who every now and then presented themselves, were two strange Indians, in the character of man and wife, from the vicinity of the Rocky Mountains, and who may probably figure in our narrative hereafter. The husband, named Kocome-ne-pe-ca, was a very shrewd and intelligent Indian, who addressed us in the Algonquin language, and gave us much information respecting the interior of the country."

Irving's account,⁶ being second hand, is colorless:

"Not long after their return, however, further accounts were received, by two wandering Indians, which established the fact that the Northwest Company had actually erected a trading-house on the Spokane River, which falls into the north branch of the Columbia."

Franchere, for the day of Thompson's arrival, July 15, writes:⁷

"He recognized the two Indians, who had brought the letter addressed to Mr. J. Stuart, and told us that they were two women, one of whom had dressed herself up as a man, to travel with more security. The description which he gave us of the interior was not calculated to give us a very favorable idea of it, and did not perfectly accord with that of our two Indian guests."

Ross enters for the same occasion:⁸

"Mr. Thompson at once recognized⁹ the two strange Indians, and gave us to understand that they were both females."

For the day of departure for the interior Ross writes:¹⁰

"Accordingly, Mr. David Stuart, myself, Messers. Pillette and M'Lennan, three Canadian voyageurs, and two Sandwich Islanders, accompanied by Mr. Thompson's party and the two strangers, in

5 Ross, Alexander. *Adventures of the First Settlers on the Oregon or Columbia River, 1810-1813*. p. 85.

6 Irving, Washington. *Astoria*. Chapter X.

7 Franchere. *op. cit.* p. 122.

8 Ross. *op. cit.* p. 85.

9 Both Franchere and Ross are thus directly at variance with Mr. Barry's statement (*op. cit.* p. 202) that "she was able to maintain her disguise until the expedition reached the Cascades of the Columbia."

10 Ross. *op. cit.* p. 102.

all twenty-one persons, started from Astoria, at eleven o'clock on the 22nd of July, 1811."

Irving writes regarding the same occasion:¹¹

"He was to be guided by the two Indians, who knew the country, and promised to take him to a place not far from the Spokan River, and in a neighborhood abounding in beaver."

II. *Up the Columbia to Okanogan*

Four days later, July 26, Thompson¹² gives a full account of the Kootenay woman and her "wife":

"A fine morning; to my surprise, very early, apparently a young man, well dressed in leather, carrying a Bow and Quiver of Arrows, with his Wife, a young woman in good clothing, came to my tent door and requested me to give them my protection; somewhat at a loss what answer to give, on looking at them, in the Man I recognized the Woman who three years ago was the wife of Boisverd, a Canadian and my servant; her conduct was then so loose that I had to request him to send her away to her friends, but the Kootenays were also displeased with her; she left them, and found her way from Tribe to Tribe to the Sea. She became a prophetess, declared her sex changed, that she was now a Man, dressed, and armed herself as such, and also took a young woman to Wife, of whom she pretended to be very jealous: when with the Chinooks, as a prophetess, she predicted diseases to them, which made some of them threaten her life, and she found it necessary for her safety to endeavour to return to her own country at the head of this River.

"Having proceeded half a mile up a Rapid, we came to four men who were waiting for us, they had seven Salmon, the whole of which they gave us as a present; I was surprised at this generosity and change of behaviour; as we were all very hungry, at the head of the Rapid we put ashore, and boiled them; while this was doing, the four men addressed me, saying, when you passed going down to the sea, we were all strong in life, and your return to us finds us strong to live, but what is this we hear, casting their eyes with a stern look on her, is it true that the White men, (looking at Mr. Stuart and his men) have brought with them the Small Pox to destroy us; and two men of enormous size, who are on their way to us, overturning the Ground,¹³ and burying all the Villages and Lodges under-

¹¹ Irving. *op. cit.* Chapter X.

¹² Thompson, David. *Narrative*. Champlain Society, Toronto. pp. 512-513.

¹³ Evidence of the quick and widespread circulation of these dire prophecies is seen in Daniel Harmon's entry in his journal in New Caledonia for June 11 of this same year: "Three Indians have arrived from Sy-cus [Sycamus], a village lying about one hundred and thirty miles down this river, who say that it is reported by others, from farther down, that there is a very extraordinary and powerful being on his way here, from the sea, who, when he arrives, will transform me into a stone: as well as perform many other miraculous deeds; and the simple and credulous Natives fully believe this report." Harmon, D. W. *Journal of Voyages and Travels*, p. 202.

neath it; is this true, and are we all soon to die. I told them not to be alarmed, for the white Men who had arrived had not brought the Small Pox, and the Natives were strong to live, and every evening were dancing and singing; and pointing to the skies, said, you ought to know that the Great Spirit is the only Master of the ground, and such as it was in the day of your grandfathers it is now, and will continue the same for your grandsons: At all which they appeared much pleased, and thanked me for the good words I had told them; but I saw plainly that if the man woman had not been sitting behind us they would have plunged a dagger in her."¹⁴

Three days later Ross records¹⁵ how the two parties separated:

"On the 31st, after breakfast, Mr. Thompson and party left us to prosecute their journey, and Mr. Stuart, in one of our canoes, accompanied him as far as the long narrows, nor did he return till late in the afternoon, and then, thinking it too late to start, we passed the remainder of the day in camp, enjoying the repose which we had so much need of. The two strangers remained with us."

Two days later, August 2, Thompson¹⁶ has this final entry:

"It is with some regret we proceed past several parties of the Natives, they are all glad to smoke with us, and eager to learn the news; every trifle seemed to be of some importance to them, and the story of the Woman that carried a Bow and Arrows and had a Wife, was to them a romance to which they paid great attention and my interpreter took pleasure in relating it."

Irving's statements¹⁷ concerning the doings of the two rival traders, Thompson and David Stuart, are significant historically, but shed little light upon the Kootenay woman:

"Mr. Stuart, who distrusted his [Thompson's] sincerity, at length pretended to adopt his advice, and taking leave of him, remained as if to establish himself, while the other proceeded on his course towards the mountains. No sooner, however, had he fairly departed than Mr. Stuart again pushed forward, under the guidance of the two Indians; nor did he stop until he had arrived within about one hundred and forty miles of the Spokan River, which he considered near enough to keep the rival establishment in check."

¹⁴ Thompson's account of this in his *Journal* (distinct from his *Narrative*) is as follows: "July 28th, Sunday. Here we met 4 men with 7 Salmon, we put ashore and boiled do. They, as well as the others enquired about the Smallpox, of which a report had been raised, that it was coming with the white men, and that also two men of enormous size to overturn the Ground etc.; we assured them that the whole was false, at which they were highly pleased, but had not Kootenaes been under our immediate care, she should have been killed for the lies she told on her way to the Sea." Thompson, David. *Journal. Oregon Historical Quarterly*, XV, p. 111.

¹⁵ Ross. *op. cit.* pp. 113, 114.

¹⁶ Thompson. *Narrative* cited.

¹⁷ Irving. *op. cit.* Chapter X.

Ross, upon his arrival at the Okanogan, concludes his entries by the following¹⁸ rather helpful information:

"In the account of our voyage I have been silent as to the two strangers who cast up at Astoria, and accompanied us from thence; but have noticed already, that instead of being man and wife, as they at first gave us to understand, they were in fact both women—and bold adventurous amazons they were. In accompanying us, they sometimes shot ahead, and at other times loitered behind, as suited their plans. The stories they gave out among the unsuspecting and credulous natives as they passed, were well calculated to astonish as well as to attract attention. Brought up, as they had been, near the whites—who rove, trap, and trade in the wilderness—they were capable of practising all the arts of well-instructed cheats; and, to effect their purpose the better, they showed the Indians an old letter, which they made a handle of, and told them that they had been sent by the great white chief, with a message to apprise the natives in general that gifts, consisting of goods and implements of all kinds, were forthwith to be poured in upon them; that the great white chief knew their wants, and was just about to supply them with everything their hearts could desire; that the whites had hitherto cheated the Indians, by selling goods in place of making presents to them, as directed by the great white chief. These stories, so agreeable to the Indian ear, were circulated far and wide; and not only received as truths, but procured so much celebrity for the two cheats, that they were the objects of attraction at every village and camp on the way: nor could we, for a long time, account for the cordial reception they met with from the natives, who loaded them for their good tidings with the most valuable articles they possessed—horses, robes, leather, and higuas; so that, on our arrival at Oakinacken, they had no less than twenty-six horses, many of them loaded with the fruits of their false reports."

III. *The Letter Delivered at Fort Estakatadene*

Up the Okanogan River guiding Stuart and two men to Shu-swaps, Irvings "neighborhood abounding in beaver," the two women with their twenty-six horses richly laden made their way. At the Thompson River we lose sight of them except for the statement in the following narrative that the tribes were hostile and that the one who played the man was wounded in the breast. The following account,¹⁹ from Sir John Franklin's *Narrative of a Second Expedi-*

¹⁸ Ross. *op. cit.* pp. 144, 145.

¹⁹ Franklin, John. *Narrative of a Second Expedition to the Shores of the Polar Sea, in the Years 1825, 1826, and 1827.* London, 1828. pp. 305, 306.

tion, though it gives us information at second and third hand, should not be too critically questioned, unless in regard to its indefinite conclusion:

"I mentioned in my former *Narrative*, that the northern Indians had cherished a belief for some years, that a great change was about to take place in the natural order of things, and that among other advantages arising from it, their own condition of life was to be materially bettered. This story, I was now informed by Mr. Stuart,²⁰ originated with a woman, whose history appears to me deserving of a short notice. While living at the N.W. Company's Post, on the Columbia River, as the wife of one of the Canadian servants, she formed a sudden resolution of becoming a warrior; and throwing aside her female dress, she clothed herself in a suitable manner. Having procured a gun, a bow and arrows, and a horse, she sallied forth to join a party of her countrymen then going to war; and in her first essay, displayed so much courage as to attract general regard, which was so much heightened by her subsequent feats of bravery, that many young men put themselves under her command. Their example was soon generally followed, and at length she became the principal leader of the tribe, under the designation of "Manlike Woman." Being young, and of a delicate frame, her followers attributed her exploits to the possession of supernatural power, and therefore received whatever she said with implicit faith. To maintain her influence during peace, the lady thought proper to invent the above-mentioned prediction, which was quickly spread through the whole northern district. At a later period of her life, our heroine undertook to convey a packet of importance from the Company's Post on the Columbia to that in New Caledonia, through a tract of country which had not, at that time, been passed by the traders, and which was known to be infested by several hostile tribes. She chose for her companion another woman, whom she passed off as her wife. They were attacked by a party of Indians, and though the Manlike Woman received a wound in the breast, she accomplished her object, and returned to the Columbia with answers to the letters. When last seen by the traders, she had collected volunteers for another war excursion, in which she received a mortal wound. The faith of the Indians was shaken by her death, and soon afterwards the whole story she had invented fell into discredit."

²⁰ Stuart, John. He must not be confused with David Stuart, who led the Astorian expedition to Okanogan and Shuswaps. John was the Stuart up in New Caledonia to whom the letter was addressed.

IV. Bundosh

No information positively identified with the remarkable Kootenay woman just described is recorded subsequent to John Stuart's account to Franklin in 1827. But we do have for consideration a Kootenay woman named Bundosh who for at least twelve years masqueraded as a man. John Work was Hudson's Bay Company trader at Flathead Post (where Kootenays had to come to trade) in the winter of 1825-26. His entries²¹ referring to her during December, 1825, follow:

"Monday 12—The Kootenay chief with about a dozen of his men arrived and smoked but brought no furs with them as they said they intended to trade tomorrow. The chief it seems has been occasionally accustomed to get a dram on his arrival, and on asking for it got a glass of rum mixed with water, which little as it was, with the smoking, took him by the head and made him tipsy. A woman who goes in mens clothes and is a leading character among them was also tipsy with $\frac{3}{4}$ of a glass of mixed liquor and became noisy, some others of the leading men who got a little were not affected by it. Gave them some tobacco to smoke when they went off in the evening.

"Tuesday 13—The Kootenay chief with 60 to 80 of his people arrived in the morning and after smoking and conversing to about 11 o'clock a brisk trade was commenced and continued on to night, when all their furs and leather was traded, the Chief got some tobacco for his people to smoke in the night besides a small present of Ammunition and besides 4 Pluis. A present was also given to Bundosh, a woman who assumes a masculine character and is of some note among them, she acted as interpreter for us, she speaks F. Head well."

Silence (so far as records have whispered to me) for twelve years, when W. H. Gray, missionary agent returning to the States in 1837, traveling with Francis Ermatinger, H.B.C. trader with the Flatheads, has three entries²² in his journal that indubitably refer to her. His first words are almost an echo of John Work's last entry twelve years previously:

"June 3rd. . . The three Black Feet that arrived during the

²¹ Work, John. *Journal of*. Edited by T. C. Elliott. Washington Historical Quarterly, V, p. 190.

²² Gray, William H. *The Unpublished Journal of*. Whitman College Quarterly, XVI, No. 2. Note particular dates cited for the month of June 1837. This has recently been reprinted; it comprises pp. 627-679 of a privately printed book entitled: "Gray, Kamm, and Allied Families, with W. H. Gray's Journal and History of Oregon." Privately printed by the American Historical Society, Inc.

dance are two young men and one woman. The woman speaks good Flat Head.

"June 7th. . . About three hours after we had arrived in camp were told the Black Feet are coming. A few minutes after a Mr. Bird and three Black Feet arrived, bringing us the intelligence of the friendly disposition of the two camps, which they left about twelve o'clock today. . . .

"June 13th. . . We have been told that the Black Feet have killed the Kootenie woman, or Bowdash, as she is called. She has hitherto been permitted to go from all the camps, without molestation, to carry any message given her to either camp. She was with the Black Feet that came to our camp on the third, and also came with Mr. Bird on the seventh."

V. *The Problem of Their Identity*

The written record is before us. What evidence points to identity for these heretofore separate Kootenay women? What evidence indicates their separate existences? Is this evidence valid? What has later report to say?

A. The Tribe—They were both members of the same tribe, Kootenay. This is made plain by the various journalists. They were both women masquerading as men. This was not a temporary masquerade; in both cases it extended over several years.

B. The Name *Ko-come-ne-pe-ca*—Of the five writers who describe the Kootenay woman of Astoria days, only one, Ross, uses her supposed name, and he uses it but once, the first time he mentions her. Mr. Barry says that *Ko-come-ne Pe-ca* (the division of the word is his) in the Kootenay language means manlike woman, that the Kootenays called her this, and that she proudly adopted it as her own name. How this meaning can be derived Mr. Barry nowhere explains. It seems an impossible interpretation. The Kootenay word for man is *te-tqat*, for woman *palke*, and for like *qaps*. Not more than one syllable is much like any part of Ross's *Ko-come-ne-pe-ca*. Mr. Barry should separate the parts thus: *Ko-come Ne-pe-ca*. Then the meaning in Kootenay becomes plain: *Ko-come*, Fringed; *Ne-pe-ca*, Manitou, or Fringed Manitou.²³ As no one but Ross uses it, he may, as a part of his life was devoted to studying Indian languages, have asked her the Kootenay for her fringed garments and for Great Spirit (because of her prophecies), and received the answer, *Ko-come Ne-pe-ca*, Fringed Manitou. To Thompson, who knew her best, she was merely the Kootenay wom-

²³ Boas, Franz. *Kutenai Tales*. Washington Government Printing Office, 1918. Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 59.

an, Kootenaes. Even if *Ko-come Ne-pe-ca* can be proved to be her only name at Astoria, she may, as Indians were prone to do, have changed it to Bundosh, or to any other name that happened to strike her fancy.

C. The Woman Bundosh—Bundosh appears at about the time the Astoria character fades away, and her age and position in the tribe correspond to that of the earlier Kootenay woman, if we conceive of the earlier woman as living on. Bundosh, judging from records by Work and Gray, was a woman of influence, a leading character, associating with white men and chiefs, not only chiefs of her own native tribe, but chiefs of Flatheads and Blackfeet. She was shrewd, as was the earlier Kootenay woman. Her man-like role is taken for granted, as if fully established. She speaks Kootenay, Flathead, Blackfeet; she is a recognized peace messenger, going from Flatheads to Blackfeet and return even when, according to Gray,²⁴ the two tribes "are in a perfect state of anarchy." Gray speaks of Bundosh exactly as does Thompson of Ross's *Ko-come-ne-pe-ca*, simply as the "Kootenie woman." She was brave, as was the woman Stuart described to Sir John Franklin. When two Blackfeet arrive in the Flathead camp in the midst of a scalp dance (five Blackfeet scalps!), Gray says,²⁵ "On arriving at this moment a death paleness is on their countenances." But Bundosh seemingly goes about her mission, delivers Bird's letter to Ermatinger, and counsels Flatheads to peace.

D. Heroic Death of Bundosh—Bundosh had been galloping back and forth, back and forth between Flatheads and Blackfeet during the moon for digging the bitter root (May) and well on into the moon for going to the buffalo hunt (June). Three separate bands of Blackfeet had a single band of Flatheads virtually surrounded. Ermatinger, for a few paltry peltries, had foolishly sold abundance of ammunition to the three Blackfeet bands, enemies of the tribe of Flatheads with which he was traveling. By going stoically on that last journey to the Blackfeet (the Beaver-head band under the half-breed chief, Bird) Bundosh deceived the Blackfeet while the Flatheads, as she knew, were making their only possible break-away to Fort Hall and the Rendezvous, where they would be safe. She died voluntarily to save a Flathead tribe with which she had long been on intimate terms, especially in the capacity of peace envoy.

E. Francois Saxa's Account—In 1916, on St. Ignatius Day, I

24 Gray. *op. cit.* p. 44.

25 Gray. *op. cit.* p. 37.

visited at his home near Arlee, Montana, an old Indian, Francois Saxa, then 91 years of age, son of Grand Ignace (Ignace Saxa), Iroquois apostle of the Flatheads. The one purpose of my visit was to find out all I could about Francois's illustrious father, martyred at the Ash Hollow massacre two months after the death of Bundosh, while he was with Gray's party on the way to St. Louis. My notebook for that visit contains only what Francois told me of Grand Ignace; but as Mr. T. C. Elliott had two years previously suggested that Bundosh might be *Ko-come-ne-pe-ca*, I remember asking the aged Indian about that, and the substance of his reply. He knew Bundosh well; she was a great friend of his father; she was about his father's age; she helped his father teach religion to the Saleesh (the tribe that white people call Flatheads); she was a peace messenger; she was killed because she purposely delayed the peace talk while the Saleesh were escaping. He was sure that she was a strong woman; surely she was a great prophetess. He did not think that she had ever been named *Ko-come-ne-pe-ca*, but she had formerly called herself Ignace Onton, at the time when she was a great warrior, before she became a peace messenger. She was, he said, an inter-tribal peace court.

His account tallied so well with Gray's journal (published in the *Whitman College Quarterly* three years previously) that I did not take down his words verbatim, as I should have done. I did, however, take down all that he told me about his father, and because one part differs from Gray's account, I here note it, to the effect that Gray betrayed Grand Ignace and the sons of Chief Big Face at Ash Hollow, because of "jealousness for the blackgowns that my father wished to bring back." Gray's version was that Gray and the white man escaped massacre merely because they were white men, as the Sioux had made a treaty with President Jackson.

F. Counter Considerations—These center around Franklin's narrative, which, as before noticed, was second, third, even fourth hand. According to Franklin the manlike woman died from a wound received in battle sometime prior to 1827. Also, according to this account, she was of a delicate frame. But John Stuart may have seen her but the once, when she was suffering from a wound in the breast; he may have over-emphasized here a quality which none of the others noted. Ross speaks of her and her "wife" as "bold adventurous amazons." The account of her death was fourth hand—from natives to traders to John Stuart to Franklin. The report may therefore, like the premature announcement of the death of

Mark Twain, have been "greatly exaggerated." In this case the story of the Kootenay woman whom Thompson knew so well would most naturally merge into the story of Bundosh, "Kootenie woman," who, according to both Work and Gray, masqueraded as a man and could speak the Flathead language so well.

Unpublished journals may throw further light on Kootenay masculine masqueradings. The case as it stands now is, it seems to me, rather strong for Mr. T.C. Elliott's surmise that the two known cases are in fact one.

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