

THE ATTEMPT TO CAPTURE THE BRIG OTTER

In the story of the Northwest Coast there are records of many attacks by the natives upon the trading vessels. Some of these were, unfortunately, successful; but, usually, the trader was able to beat off his assailants. Amongst these incidents the capture and looting in 1803 at Nootka Sound of the Boston Ship, *Boston*, and in 1811 at Clayoquot Sound of the New York ship, *Tonquin*, and the unsuccessful attack in 1805 at Milbanke Sound on the American ship, *Atahualpa*, are well known; the details can be found in almost any history of the coast.

In 1811 at Chilkat Inlet, Lynn Canal, Alaska, an attack which fortunately failed was made on the Boston brig *Otter*. The only reference to it, so far as I know, to be found in any of our histories is contained in Bancroft's *History of the North West Coast*, vol. I, p.326: "The *Otter* is said to have been attacked by the natives of Nootka, several of the crew being killed." This sparse and incorrect information was taken from the MS. *Memoranda* of Henry Peirce, whose brother Joseph was, as will appear later, wounded in the affray.

On the return of the *Otter* to Boston in July 1812 her master, Samuel Hill, wrote and published in the *Columbian Centinel* an account of the tragic occurrence. It is reproduced later in this article and is offered as a contribution to the detailed history of our coast and of its maritime traders.

In his MS. *Autobiography* Captain Samuel Hill says:

"In the beginning of 1809 I was appointed to the command of the Brig. *Otter*, owned by Messrs T. C. Amory & Co. and Oliver Keating Esqr. of Boston, destined for the Coast of North West America to collect furs. I sailed on the 1st of April 1809 from Boston and having touched at the Sandwich Islands, arrived on the N.W. Coast on the 1st Novr. following in safety."

Though he does not mention the fact, the *Otter* at the Hawaiian Islands fell in with the ship *Hamilton*, of Boston, and together they sailed thence to the coast. In her log, which is still preserved, there are many references to the *Otter*.

It is interesting to pause here and recall the fact that the *Boston* which had been captured and whose crew had been massacred belonged to the Messrs. Amory and that the two survivors, Jewitt and Thompson, had been rescued in July 1805 by the *Lydia*, under Captain Samuel Hill on his preceding voyage. I have already given in

this *Quarterly*¹ his account of the rescue as published on his return. Now we find him on his next voyage to the coast attacked by the Indians, but the victor in the struggle.

The old ideas of trading during the season and then of wintering amongst the Hawaiian Islands had broken down under the stress of competition and decreasing numbers of furs and as a result of the clearer knowledge of coastal climatic conditions. The maritime traders now usually remained on the coast from the time of their arrival until their cargo was completed. The whole intervening period they spent in visiting and revisiting the Indian villages in search of trade; and if they sailed to "the islands" it was, not to live a lotus-eating life, but to obtain some needed supplies or refreshment, and return with the least delay to the scene of their labours.

In 1811 some fifteen vessels were in the sea-otter trade. There are in existence the complete logs of two of them—the *Hamilton* and the *New Hazard*.² In their pages the brig *Otter* is frequently mentioned, and therefrom the outlines of her story could be obtained. But as this paper is primarily for the purpose of reproducing in its setting the newspaper item telling of the attack on her, it will suffice to say that the *Otter* spent from November 1, 1809 till September 16, 1811 in the sea-otter trade, flitting from place to place, from village to village, on the shores of Queen Charlotte Islands, of the opposite mainland of British Columbia, and of southern Alaska.

In the autumn of 1810 the *Otter* visited Lynn Canal and traded without incident with the treacherous Tlingit. Returning southward she in company with the ship *Hamilton* and the brig *Lydia* spent the winter of 1810-11 amongst the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian villages in southern Alaska and northern British Columbia.

About the middle of March, 1811, the *Otter* sailed to the northward again, trading as she went, and on 11th April anchored near the entrance of Chilkat Inlet, Lynn Canal. While she was there occurred the attempt to capture her which is described in the accompanying account. It has the appearance of an unprovoked attack; but, unfortunately, we have not the Indians' side of the trouble. We do not know what may have occurred on the first visit of the *Otter* to this locality, nor even what misconduct some other vessel may have committed in the interval, which to the Indian with his views of vicarious responsibility may have justified the attack. Moreover, no one can read the story without feeling that there must

¹ See *Washington Historical Quarterly*, Volume 17, Pp. 280-288, October, 1926.

² These manuscript logs are in the Essex Institute and the Peabody Museum, Salem, Mass.

have been some jealousy or enmity between Captain Hill and his first officer, Mr. Hughes. One readily obtains from it the impression that in the captain's mind was the conviction that the officer was desirous that such an attack be made—to the extent, at any rate, of an assault upon him. None of the materials presently available throw any light upon the internal situation on the *Otter*. In Captain Hill's MS. *Autobiography*³ the incident is mentioned but without any reference to ill-feeling. Perhaps the captain's conversion may have influenced his pen. He says:

“Previous to my leaving the N.W. Coast, on the 12th of April 1811, the Indians, natives of Lynn Canal in Latitude 59° North Attacked me with their daggers in the most treacherous & unexpected manner. Treacherous, because I had at all times treated them with Kindness, & unexpected because I knew of no affront or cause of enmity between them & myself or my Ship's Crew. About 50 men of them were on deck for the purpose of Trade & with daggers concealed under their Garments they Commenced the attack by Seizing hold of me on the quarter-deck. My Second Officer & Boatswain were killed, & Six of my men dangerously wounded. Of the Natives I believe all that were on deck at the Commencement of the Affair except one were killed.

“At the Commencement of thir Affair to all human Appearance my Death was inevitable. Seized & held fast by two Stout men, & Surrounded by 48 or 50 more with drawn daggers, on the quarter deck; & the transition from this Situation, to that in which the charge was ordered, which terminated in their entire destruction, is extremely difficult to describe; through the whole of that transaction with the Circumstances which preceded & followed it the directing & preserving hand of the Almighty is apparent. May I render Unceasing Praise and Grateful thanks, to his long suffering Mercy & Grace to an Undeserving & Rebellious wretch like me, in thus permitting me to live and be made Sensible of the extreme danger of my Situation.”

On the return of the *Otter* to the vicinity of Queen Charlotte Islands she met the ship *Hamilton* and the brig *New Hazard*, each of which in her log makes short reference to the sad event. The *New Hazard* met the *Otter* near Kaigahnee, Dall Island, Alaska, May 10, 1811 and the entry in her log runs:

“We learnt from them they had had a skirmish with the Indians up Chatham Strait at a place called Chilcaht in which they lost their

³ Captain Samuel Hill's *Autobiography* is a manuscript in the Public Library, New York.

second mate and boatswain and six wounded, but none I believe dangerous. They killed 40 Indians, 13 of whom were Chiefs. The Indians followed them to the distance of 50 miles."

A few days later the *Hamilton* met the *Otter* near Taddis Cove,⁴ in Kaigahnee Harbour and records under date, May 24, 1811, the following short note upon the attack:

"The former (i.e. the *Otter*) had been attacked up Chillcart by the Nativee and unfortunately lost his second officer and boatswain but he killed 40 of the Natives and 13 of whom were Chiefs."

The captain's belief that the attack had been made possible by the criminal negligence (or worse) of Mr. Hughes, his first mate, naturally made it impossible for him to remain in office. He was, says Captain Hill, "accordingly discharged from any further duty on board." This seems to mean that he was degraded and sent to the forecabin. But how was he finally disposed of? In 1794 when Captain Hugh Moore of the barque *Phoenix* disagreed with his second mate, Mr. Dumarez, he simply put him ashore at Kaigahnee and left him to shift for himself—a not altogether uncommon action on the coast at that time. To answer the question the *New Hazard's* log comes to our aid. Under date, May 13, 1811, it states:

"Rumor says that Iverson (her first mate and apparently a coarse and brutal bully) and Hewes⁵ will change places."

Then on the 15th comes the sequel:

"At 7 Mr. Hewes came on board as chief officer; Mr. Iverson repaired on board the *Otter*, whether as an officer or a passenger at present I am unable to say."

Whatever may have been the difficulties on the *Otter* one can feel sure that in exchanging to the *New Hazard* Mr. Hughes found a far worse home than that which he had left. If ever there was a ship in the American merchant service ruled with a rod of iron it was the *New Hazard*, under Captain David Nye. Her log abounds with records of floggings and personal corporal abuse: Captain Nye flogs the steward "for letting a lantern get broken," and a seaman "for not keeping the steerage clean." The following entry shows how matters were on the *New Hazard*.

"Dec. 24, 1811. . . . Heard the Capt. had ordered the meat off the supper table from the mate (i.e. Mr. Hughes). pleasant night.

⁴ The South Harbour of Kaigahnee Harbours. The above form is a corruption of the Indian name: Taddiskey. It was a favourite trading place of the maritime fur-traders.

⁵ This is the first mate of the *Otter*, Mr. Hughes. In these old logs of the maritime traders many of the proper names are spelled phonetically. Though called the log of the *New Hazard* the book was probably kept by Stephen Runnels or Reynolds, who was one of the seamen.

morning set coalpit men and woodmen ashore. breaking out hold to get out a large anchor. Mr. Hewes went to get breakfast to relieve Mr. Gale. I went to work in Fore hold. heard a noise on deck, jumped up, saw Mr. Gale with his face bloody, sitting on the arm chest & the Capt. hold of him calling for Irons, shaking of him & then ordered both 1st and 2nd Mate below, called the boatswain to get the Irons.—the Boatswain the tailor & walked forward. What this attack was for I could not tell. He flogged Cook & Steward before breakfast. Mr. Lang now chief officer.”

There are no indications in the log as to how Mr. Hughes fared in that terrible brig with that flogging captain; in fact his name is only mentioned once or twice until the *New Hazard* reaches the Hawaiian Islands in October. Two days after they anchored in Kawaihee Bay, Hawaii, (October 25, 1812) the log says:

“Capt. jawed Mr. Hewes because the F.T.G. Sail an (word uncipherable) were not set. he told him he was almost ashore & he would not be troubled with him much more. Mr. Hewes was silent.”

On October 29, 1812, the *New Hazard* reached Honolulu Harbour and the trials and tribulations of Mr. Hughes on that brig came to an end. The log under dates November 1 and 2 records as follows:

“News by Mr. Foret (?) Capt. Nye asked him yesterday to go Second officer down to Canton & home; he should discharge Mr. Hewes.”

“Mr. Hewes went ashore, discharging ballast. I was planing M T G mast. Morning Mr. Hewes came on board, asked for his discharge. Capt. told him he never belonged to her he might go to the Devil if he liked.”

And so Mr. Hughes passes off our little stage. His subsequent life does not enter into this study.

A word may be added in regard to Captain Samuel Hill. He has left a MS. *Autobiography* which has already been mentioned. According to that work he experienced a complete change of heart while in Canton, on this voyage, full details of which are set forth therein. Before that change Hill, by his own account, was a very wicked man. The *New Hazard's* log shows that the *Otter* arrived at the Hawaiian Islands in October, 1811. The entry of 10th says:

“Capt. Hill came on board. challenged Capt. Nye to fight him, which he refused. they had a long talk & parted in anger. . Mr. Williams⁶ went with four of our people in the boat on board the *Otter*

⁶ This man seems to have been an officer on the *Otter*, who desired to become one of the crew of the *New Hazard*.

after his chest. Capt. Hill got on board just as he was going away, ordered him back, his things on board again. gave him a severe caning, detained him all night but sent boat back—in morning Williams came on board. entered his protest against Capt. Hill's proceedings."

At present there is no light on the origin of the disagreement, though surmises may be made. Captain Hill returned to Boston in the *Otter* on June 14, 1812. Later he is found in the service of the well-known firm of Bryant & Sturgis. In their letter book⁷ under date, June 30, 1815 will be found a letter from them to Captain Samuel Hill of their vessel, *Ophelia*, whereby it appears that he was held in high regard by that firm and entrusted not only with her command, but also with the duties and responsibilities of a supercargo.

Every effort has been made to ascertain whether Mr. Hughes ever put forward in the press a reply showing his side of the case; no such statement has been found. In any event the dispute or ill-feeling between captain and first mate scarcely touches the attack upon the ship, which after all is the great thing.

SAVAGE ATTACK MADE ON AMERICAN BRIG OTTER

Account of the Attack Made By the Indians of Chilcadht On Board the Brig, *Otter*, Samuel Hill, Master.—April 12, 1811.

(From the *Columbian Centinel*, July 8, 1812.)

On the 11th of April, 1811, I arrived and anchored near the western arm of Lynn Canal in lat. 50° 9' N., long 135° 22' W.—On the 12th many of the principal chiefs of Chilcadht with their people visited us.—they brought some furs for which they demanded a very high price. According to my constant custom with these people I did not urge the trade, not doubting they would accept of more reasonable terms in the course of the day.

Towards noon their numbers had gradually increased to about fifty men, besides some slaves and boys in the canoes alongside. The general behavior of these people gave me no reason to suspect any ill intentions on their part, and I had visited and traded with them in the preceding autumn on the most amicable terms.

About noon a dog was observed swimming alongside and making the most dismal howlings imaginable; the poor animal had a large wound in his side, and as he attempted to get into the canoes the Indians beat him off. I desired Mr. Hughes to have the stern boat lowered to take him up; the boatswain and three men came

⁷ The letter books of Bryant & Sturgis are in the Widener Memorial Library, Harvard College, Cambridge, Mass.

aft to lower the boat; at that instant the Indians seemed to make a general move to go farther aft. I suspected some mischief, but on looking forward I observed our forecastle guard at their stations, and as I had no idea of the Indians having any arms on board I considered our situation as secure.⁸ I spoke to some of the Indians near me and desired them not to go aft, when two of them instantly seized hold of me and pressed me backward on the base of the after gun.

I perceived an attack was their object, and not wishing to give a general alarm I called for assistance in a moderate tone of voice and was immediately relieved by Mr. Thompson, carpenter of the *Otter*, who struck one of the Indians that held me and both of them let go immediately. On looking around I observed their daggers in motion on all sides, and some who stood abaft me brandished them in a menacing attitude. Mr. Hughes, Mr. Pierce, and the boatswain, with two seamen, were several paces abaft me; they had lowered the boat halfway down and belayed the falls, two men were in the boat; my object was to gain a moment's time for these men to get forward before I should order our fire from the forecastle, otherwise they would have been exposed to certain destruction.

I asked the Indians why they drew their daggers and with whom they were going to fight? I told them I wished not to fight but to trade. As I spoke to them I had stepped in a sidelong direction across the deck towards the larboard side, but the Indians perceiving my intention, determined on sure work, and brought down the boatswain by plunging a dagger in his head. I then sprang toward the main deck and ordered those aft to jump forward; at the same time directed the forecastle guard to fire and rake the quarter deck; the fire took place instantly and did great execution on the quarter deck.

I then ordered my men to advance upon them with their pikes, with the carpenter at their head; they advanced upon them on a full run; the Indians gave way in every direction; many of them who were wounded severely jumped overboard, while others faced our men and contended until they had received two or three thrusts with our pikes. In five minutes after our operations commenced the decks were cleared, and in fifteen minutes the Indians were cleared from alongside, and I believe but one escaped on shore alive, of all those on board at the beginning of the affair, and he had two balls in his body. He has since recovered.

⁸ In this, as in almost every case of attempted capture, the Indians had been allowed to gather on the ship's deck to trade. In the early days, before the competition became keen, the trade was always carried on from the canoes alongside and only the chiefs or other great men permitted to come on board.

Our loss was Mr. Robert Kemp, 2d mate, and Mr. John Smith, boatswain—both killed in the beginning of the attack. Wounded: Mr. William Hughes, 1st mate, Mr. Joseph Pierce jr., three seamen, and the cabin boy. Of the Indians twenty-five were killed, as ascertained by me; but their own account states their loss at 50 men, among whom they reckon thirteen principal chiefs. I have no doubt their account is tolerably correct, as I observed many who threw themselves overboard on finding themselves severely wounded. Before our decks were cleared of dead Indians and our wounded men dressed, a party of Indians had collected on shore, and commenced a brisk and continued fire of musketry on us; they were dispersed by a few cannon shot.

Much credit is due to my men for their particular attention to, and prompt execution of, my orders on this occasion—to their good conduct under Divine Providence I owe the preservation of my vessel, as I was deprived of every assistance of my officers from the very beginning of the affair.

When I came to take Mr. Hughes, my first mate, below in order to dress his wounds, he informed in presence of the carpenter and several of the men that he had expected the attack early in the forenoon as he had then seen many of the Indians on board with their daggers concealed under their left armpits. I was much surprised at this intelligence and asked Mr. Hughes why he had not informed me of that circumstance or made it known to some other person. He replied: "If I live I will tell you; but if I die it is no matter." I know not how to account for Mr. Hughes's strange conduct on this occasion. His particular duty had been to attend to and examine the Indians, as they entered the gangway in order to prevent them from bringing arms on board, ever since our arrival on this coast. For this purpose Mr. Hughes had always been stationed on the quarter deck, entirely at leisure to observe their motions, and as he had at all times executed the trust with the utmost vigilance, I had no reason to doubt his attendance on the present occasion. Mr. Hughes had removed our arm chest containing blunderbusses to the fore-castle early in the morning, but he had kept the chest containing the muskets on the quarter deck, contrary to custom, and had not locked it although he had the key in his pocket; but he had remained on the quarter deck in his station all the forenoon.

It was likewise a most extraordinary circumstance that no boarding pikes were on the fore-castle on that occasion, as they had at all times been kept there since our arrival on the coast; they were

now between decks. However, all this might have arisen from inadvertency, except the material circumstance of having seen the Indians' daggers concealed under their arms on board, and I had been most of the forenoon in the midst of them, entirely ignorant of the impending danger. Yet Mr. Hughes forbore to inform me—although had even the cabin boy discovered a single Indian with a dagger on board or even a knife he would immediately have told me and every one else of it. Such was the impression on every one's mind respecting this most dangerous of all weapons.

Mr. Hughes could not, I am well persuaded, wish the Indians to capture the vessel, as he must have suffered with the rest; and he was morally certain they could not effect it under the established regulations, as our dependence was always on the fore-castle guard, which consisted of half our crew, and no Indian had ever been allowed to go forward of the gangway, where Mr. Kemp and two men were stationed to prevent them. To this part of the duty Mr. Hughes had attended on this occasion, as he had twice prevented some who wished to go forward during the forenoon. But Mr. Hughes very well knew that whenever these people drew their daggers, I must certainly be the first and surest victim, as I was the only person who always necessarily remained in the midst of them on the quarter deck to attend to my business of trade.

As to himself it should seem he would be equally exposed, being aft in his station on the quarter; but he certainly had on this occasion planned a mode of retreat altogether new and singular, and he came very near losing his life by it; for though he stood near me, when I first called for assistance, he did not even step towards me, but climbed up the topsail topping lift where he received his wounds, and there remained until the affair was over, when he came down by the way he went up—and had not the Indians' attention been closely occupied by the points of our boarding pikes they would undoubtedly have brought him down by a second shot. Mr. Hughes was taken every possible care of until his wounds were recovered, when he was again interrogated by me in the presence of Mr. Thompson and two seamen as to the motives he had in concealing the circumstance of the daggers; but he refused to give any particular reason, although he owned himself guilty of the fact; and still positively declared he had seen many of them armed as before stated, and expected the attack—was very sensible he had done wrong but could not now help it, and on the whole said he was glad to be discharged from office. He was accordingly discharged from any further duty on board.

At eight in the morning of the 14th we sailed from Chilcadht, bound down the straits. When abreast of Berners Bay,⁹ met a gale from S.E. This induced me to anchor about two miles north of Point Bridget¹⁰ on the bottom of soft sand in eight fathom water; the neighboring Indians visited and traded with us daily, although they informed us they were acquainted with our affair at Chilcadht, distant about 25 miles from this place. On the 19th the S.E. wind ceased, and was succeeded by light airs from the N.E. We immediately weighed anchor and every effort was made with the assistance of all our boats, to get out of the bay, but in vain—a swell setting in rendered our efforts useless.

We anchored again and at daybreak the next morning a sudden and violent gale commenced from the N.W. with which our anchor was dragged, and the vessel beginning to strike aft, precluded the possibility of letting go another with success; to carry out was impracticable with the swell then rolling in. Within us an extensive sandy beach and the tide of flood just making. After a few minutes consultation with Mr. Thompson, the only person I had then to assist me as an officer, I determined to veer out our cables and let her drive on, which was accordingly done—the measure succeeded beyond my most sanguine expectations; the sand being soft formed a bank within us, and when the tide fell she remained upright in her bed. Not a sheet of copper was started nor the least apparent injury sustained.

On the 22d the gale having moderated and wind shifted, discharged our ballast and laid out anchors, and hove off at midnight. With a favoring breeze sailed for Huhsenkoo,¹¹ where we anchored and again commenced our trade with the natives.

F. W. HOWAY.

⁹ A bay on the easterly side of Lynn Canal, about twenty-five miles from the entrance of Chilkat Inlet.

¹⁰ The southerly point at the entrance to Berners Bay.

¹¹ A well-known trading place on the west side of Admiralty Island, Chatham Strait, Alaska. The name is spelled by the traders in many forms. The most usual is: Hootsenhoo. It is a corruption of an Indian word: Kenasn'hu, meaning, "near the fortified place."