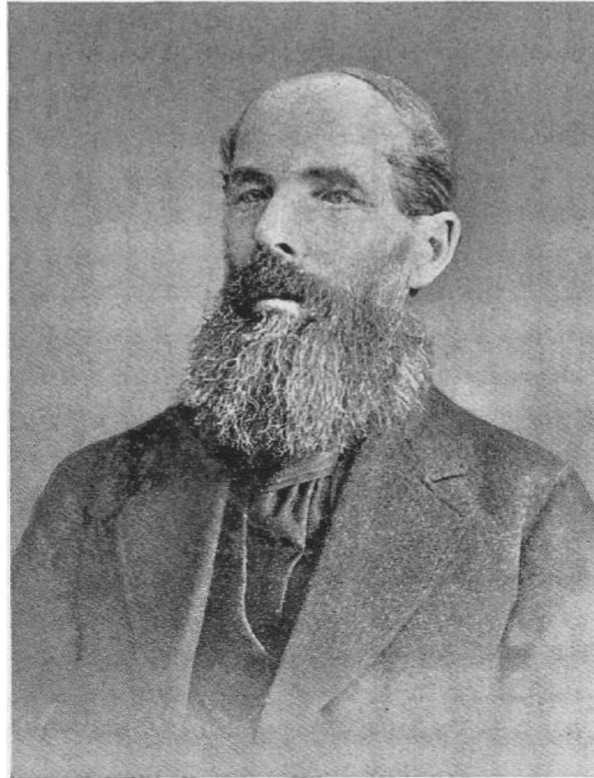


Lower Fort Garry in 1868

By
MRS. A. T. COWLEY

Only surviving member of the family of the Late William Flett.



Chief Trader William Flett, 1880

Mrs. Cowley, the writer of this article, is a true daughter of the old fur trade. Her father, Chief Trader William Flett, was in charge of Lower Fort Garry 1867-1882 and her childhood was spent at the Lower Fort.

It was a lovely sunny afternoon, September 1st, 1868, when the Late William Flett and his family drove in to Lower Fort Garry in an old spring waggon after a long journey from Edmonton House. They had come by York boat from Edmonton to Carlton House, and then across the plains with the brigade of carts to Fort Garry.

I will go back to 1862, when Mr. Flett was ordered from the Red River district to Edmonton House, where he remained till 1867 under Chief Factor W. J. Christie, the officer in charge of the Edmonton district.

When the longed-for winter packet arrived at Edmonton, Christmas 1867, there was a letter for Mr. Flett from the Late Governor William McTavish, stationed at headquarters (Fort Garry), ordering Mr. Flett to report for duty at Fort Garry without delay.

It was the dead of winter and Fort Garry was almost a thousand miles away, and there were no means of transportation except by husky dog team and Indian guides. These things did not for a moment prevent the carrying out of orders. So preparations were started immediately, and before

the dawn of the New Year Mr. Flett, his two Indian guides and eight huskies were on their way.

It took them well over a month to make the trip. From Edmonton they went to Fort Pitt, then to Fort Carlton, both on the banks of the Saskatchewan river. At each post fresh dogs and food for man and beast were provided.

From Carlton House they struck across the snow and wind swept plains to Fort Pelly, then to Fort Ellis, and then on to Fort Garry.

On reaching headquarters, Mr. Flett immediately reported to the governor, who ordered him to proceed to Lower Fort, where he was given office work until early in June.

Again came orders from the governor which told Mr. Flett he had been appointed to take charge of Lower Fort. But first he must go back to Edmonton with the brigade of carts that was taking out the annual supplies for the Northern department, and he was to return on the incoming brigade that brought in the annual catch of furs destined for the London fur store rooms.

Mr. Flett was only six days at Edmonton. Chief Factor Christie had everything in readiness and

was only awaiting the arrival of the carts to send his York boats down to Carlton, the cargo going down the Saskatchewan was a precious one, so the greatest care was taken to protect these packs of furs from rain or any moisture. Stout ducking was sent out from England, and it was sewn together by the Indian women in the proper sizes; then it was painted on both sides with linseed oil and dried in the sun, which made the sheets quite waterproof. These sheets were very much in use, both in the boats and to cover the carts in wet weather.

On reaching Carlton, which took nine days down stream, the late Lawrence Clark, chief factor at Carlton, had all the carts in readiness and was awaiting the arrival of the boats. Then the task of unloading the cargo from boat to cart went forward.

The packs of fine furs were in regulation size so that an Indian could carry two packs on his back when they were moved. When everything was in readiness, the long train of carts left Carlton, and across the plains they went, reaching Fort Garry about the 30th of August.

This was the third time in less than nine months that Mr. Flett had made the journey back and forth from Edmonton to Fort Garry, so I imagine both my father and mother on the day they drove into Lower Fort (their new home) had a feeling that for the time being their wanderings were over.

The life at the fort was a simple but happy one. The business in a way was conducted on military lines. At six a.m. when the fort bell rang, everyone started out to their several occupations; at seven-thirty the bell rang and everyone went to breakfast. (Mr. Flett made his round of inspection between six and seven-thirty a.m.) The bell was again sounded at eight-thirty and everyone returned to work. One o'clock the dinner bell rang; two o'clock work again. At five o'clock Mr. Flett again made his rounds. At six o'clock the bell rang and everything was closed for the day.

On Saturdays the bell rang at five o'clock, the closing hour for that day, so as to give the men time to get their supplies.

There were a grist mill, saw mill, blacksmith shop, carpenter shop, sale shop, provision stores (for all employed were provided with free food), stables and a big garden. The garden was in charge of an old English gardener, who got all his seeds from England, and he was a master in his work. Beginning with asparagus, he gave the officers'

mess and fort everything as it came in season, but woe betide anyone who touched anything without his permission.

Mr. Flett's idea was to have his fort self-supporting as far as possible. With that in view he employed an old fisherman, whose sole duty was to set the nets just below the fort and provide the fort with fresh fish. So from spring to late autumn, old John was kept busy; and there was always a large ice-house full of ice so that everything brought in could be kept fresh.

In the late fall two Indian fishermen were sent down to Lake Winnipeg, twenty miles distant, with nets and equipment, and they caught the winter's supply of white fish, which was brought in by dog-team after the snow fell. Between 2,000 and 3,000 was the winter's supply, for part had to be sent to Fort Garry, and when the dog-teams came from Norway House, Fort Alexander, or any of the Lake Winnipeg posts, there had to be fish for the dogs. But everyone in the fort enjoyed those beautiful fish too.

In the summer the native women brought in quantities of wild fruits, such as strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, plums and, late in the fall, wild cranberries. No money ever passed: they were just exchanged for flour, tea or small supplies.

We had the privilege of meeting many noted people, but space will only permit me to mention two. Governor Colville came from London. I think he was on the London board, and I believe was later knighted (Sir James Colville). He was very kind-

ly in manner. It appears he had been stationed at Lower Fort; I fancy in the 30s, because when he was on his visit he was quite an elderly gentleman. He expressed a wish to go all through his old residence; and when mother took him through the house, he showed her his wine cellar and told her he lived like a prince at a very small expense, for the streams teemed with fish and the land with game, all of which he could get for a song.

In 1877 the Earl and Countess of Dufferin—he was governor-general of Canada at the time, and they were on their official western trip—came and stayed at the fort. It was in this wise. When Lord Dufferin was a young man he went to Iceland, and on his return he wrote "Letters from High Latitudes," a charming book in diary form. He was very much impressed with the people of Iceland, their honesty and thrift—no jail on the whole island. When he became governor-general he in-



R. Flett, eldest son of William Flett, in 1874 wearing a Blackfoot chief's suit now owned by the British Museum.

duced the Canadian government to set aside a tract of land on the west side of Lake Winnipeg, and a large colony of Icelanders came to Manitoba to Gimli and New Iceland; and there many of them remain to this day, and have proved to be what Lord Dufferin foretold, very desirable citizens.

When the governor-general made his western trip in 1877, and expressed a wish to visit the Icelanders at Gimli, the Hudson's Bay Company put the steamer *Colville* at his command. The whole vice-regal party arrived at the fort one afternoon and left at noon the next day for Gimli. On their return two days later, they again spent a night at the fort as guests of the Hudson's Bay Company. Of course Mr. Flett had been notified some days before to have the *Colville* in readiness, and also to provide everything possible for their comfort. They were all so charming and nice, and looked upon the outfit as a big "picnic." His Excellency gave me an autographed copy of "Letters from High Latitudes," which of course I greatly prize.

I am sending rather an interesting photograph with this article. It is a picture of my eldest brother, William Robert Flett, taken in a Blackfoot chief's warrior suit. It is made of deer skins, and there is a breast plate of coloured porcupine quills. But the chief feature of the suit is the ermine fringe. There are supposed to be over one hundred and fifty ermine skins used, for the fringe goes across the back and front, down the sleeves and down the leggings. It was given to my brother in the early '70s by a western friend. In 1876, when my brother went to Sidney College, Cambridge (from which university he graduated with honours in 1880), he took the suit with him and in due time presented it to the British museum. Years later,

when my late husband and I were in London and poking around the museum, I thought of this chief's suit, and we went to one of the officials, who was most kind in looking up records. He was able to locate it for us, resplendent (ermine tails and all) in a glass case, and I think I can be pardoned for a little thrill of pride which came over me when I realized that something a member of my family had presented was worthy to be put in a glass case in our wonderful British museum.

Mr. Flett was in charge of the Lower Fort from 1867 to 1882, when he passed to his "rest," mourned by all who knew him.

He was a very humble man, simple in all his tastes, kindly and just in all his dealings, and loyal to the core to the interest of the Hudson's Bay Company, a studious reader when time permitted.

Mrs. Flett was a little "Mother in Israel," always ready to assist the mothers from the North who brought their children in to school or college, and was ever ready to lend a helping hand when it was needed.

When the editor of *The Beaver* asked me to write something about the daily doings at Lower Fort in the early days, my first impulse was to refuse, but I finally decided to add my humble bit to "back history."

Hanging in my breakfast room in far away California is a much prized picture—the historic photo group of the Hudson's Bay Company's officers from 1872 to 1881. Very few of them are with us now, but each one in turn did his bit to help lay the solid foundation on which the Hudson's Bay Company now stands, and the officers who are in command now cannot do better than follow the example of the noble men who blazed the trail.



Recent photograph of the Residence at Lower Fort Garry, which is today the Club House of the Winnipeg Motor Country Club.