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## COLD WAR on the Fraser

by B. A. McKelvie

Illustrations courtesy B.C. Archives

**The Yucultas near Fort Langley were dreaded by all the tribes along the river—until the day when, for a brief spell, the cold war became a hot war.**

PLANS are under way for the reconstruction of a considerable part of Fort Langley on the banks of the Lower Fraser River, the first permanent British establishment on Canada's Pacific Coast and the birthplace of British Columbia on November 19, 1858. One of the log buildings of the last of several forts of the same name has been preserved as a museum. Other structures and a replica of part of the palisades will be erected in time for the centenary celebration to be held at the historic site in 1958.

From its very inception Fort Langley played an important part in the colourful drama of white settlement on the Pacific Coast. It was built upon instructions of Governor George Simpson in 1827. Three years before that time the dynamic little "Emperor" made a spectacular dash across the continent from Hudson Bay to Fort George (Astoria) at the mouth of the Columbia River. It was his first visit to the Pacific Slope, and he was seized with the importance of preparing for the eventuality that the Columbia River might be allotted to the United States when the boundary line between the Republic and Great Britain, west of the Rockies, was fixed. Despite the fact that it was November before he completed his continental dash, Simpson at once despatched a strong party under command of Chief Trader James McMillan and Clerks John Work, François Noel Annance and Tom McKay to find the mouth of the Fraser River and report upon the suitability of a trading post for that locality.

It was a terrible journey; through the sleet and rain, mud and quagmires, and over wind-swept icy waters, but McMillan succeeded. His perseverance and courage won

for him a chief factorship, and of greater moment, led to the planting of the British flag over the lower reaches of the stream and the holding of the country for the Crown.

So, in the summer of 1827, three years after that first grim trip, Chief Factor McMillan returned to construct an establishment that might, if necessary, serve as a western headquarters for the Company. He was again accompanied by Annance, an educated half-breed with a taste for classical literature, who was noted for his courage and resource. Donald Manson and George Barnston were other young clerks. This time McMillan and his party came on board the schooner *Cadboro*. It was with difficulty that Captain Aemilius Simpson, a former naval officer, managed to get his vessel into the Fraser River. On the slow trip up from the sea, when opposite the present city of New Westminster where the stream broadens, a fleet of Indian war canoes drew up as if to block the passage. Simpson, following an eccentric custom when danger threatened, drew on a new pair of white kid gloves, and sailed boldly ahead. The native armada gave way and the schooner passed through.

This was the first incident of a cold war that was to continue for the next two years until, near the same spot, the whitemen—*Whaneetum*, the natives called them—performed the impossible in the opinion of the Indians, and achieved a great victory. In the intervening months the newcomers had to endure a veritable war of nerves maintained by their wild neighbors, the Kwantlens and other savage tribes between them and the distant headquarters of the Hudson's Bay on the Columbia River.

\* Bruce McKelvie is one of British Columbia's most celebrated historical writers.



Fort Langley in 1858. From a drawing by E. Mallandaire.

It was July 30, 1827, when work started at the chosen site upstream and around a big bend called by the Indians, *Slikwhinna*—Big Horn. As the laborers worked at clearing the location for the post, skulking Indians set the forests on fire, but the fort builders continued their efforts. Each night they retired to the safety of the *Cadboro*.

The Fraser is a muddy stream, breaking from the mountain gorges a hundred miles from the sea, and meandering peacefully through the flat valley lands of its own making. Each summer it was choked with silver salmon on their way up to distant lakes and creeks to spawn and die. To take part in harvesting this great crop of fish came thousands of tribesmen from distant villages—from Vancouver Island's populous and sheltered bays; from the islands of Puget Sound; from the mainland shores of the Gulf of Georgia and its deep inlets; and from the interior valleys. Fierce, suspicious strangers most of them, who glowered and muttered and fingered their knives when they first saw the *Whanectum*, they prowled about the place pilfering what they could.

Once the fishing was over, these visitors camped along the San-a-sant (Pitt River). While the squaws dug in the mud and ooze with their toes for succulent wapato roots, the braves held games, tribal dances and secret society meetings. They argued and boasted of their prowess and individual accomplishments and proved to be a constant menace to the little band of whites. It needed only a fancied insult or less—the bombastic declaration of an excited and irresponsible young brave, that he dared to kill one of the *Whanectum*—to start a war.

At last the defences of Fort Langley were completed, and the *Cadboro* drifted down the river, leaving the little garrison alone in a savage wilderness. Simpson intended to sail around the Gulf of Georgia to inform the different

tribes that they could find trade at Fort Langley. He had not gone long before an Indian came gleefully to relate to McMillan how one of the *Cadboro's* crew had been killed and another wounded in a clash with natives near Comox—and what was significant, to boast that the schooner had failed to retaliate. This was attributed to cowardice, and because of the occurrence, the cold war at Fort Langley was stepped up.

Even as the Kwantlens sought to frighten the whites, so they themselves lived in constant fear. They dreaded the Yucultas, the fierce, piratical warriors who dwelt beside the swirling waters of Johnstone Strait, and where Yuculta Rapids boiled to white foam. Scourges of the inner waters were these merciless vikings who swept as far south as the limits of Puget Sound in their long war canoes. And now the Kwantlens sought to intimidate the whites by saying that the Yucultas intended to destroy Fort Langley.

Not only did the Fraser Valley Indians threaten the fur traders with the approaching wrath of the terrible Yucultas, they themselves boasted of their own power of destruction. War parties of the black-painted braves often shouted and waved their weapons threateningly as they passed on their way up the river to raid unsuspecting and weaker bands, and return later with hideous trophies and weeping women and children as slaves.

Just when the people of Fort Langley were feeling their isolation keenly—at the first Yule season—Alexander McKenzie with four men from Fort Vancouver arrived to spend the holidays with them. It was a truly festive occasion. Early after New Year, McKenzie bade them goodbye and started on his return trip.

Weeks passed, and then Indians reported that McKenzie and his party has been killed on Whidby Island. The



news was shocking, but it had to be believed as details of the butchery were brought to the fort. This crime was duly punished by a strong expedition from the Columbia River that bombarded and burned one of the largest Clallam villages. (*Beaver*, Autumn 1954, p. 52.)

The cold war went on, as natives used the massacre of McKenzie in an effort to instil fear into the minds of the *Whaneetum*—and they, in turn, continued to cringe at mention of the Yucultas. Chief Factor McMillan commented in the fort journal, February 12, 1828, in telling of the movement of Kwantlens to the Upper Pitt River: "The cause of their moving off is a dread of being cut off by the Yucultas, who, they are told, are in the neighborhood with the avowed intention of paying a plundering visit to their River as soon as the navigation becomes open."

Another entry: "A Seshal, from beyond Burrard's Canal, came to the fort. He informs us that the Yucultas are preparing to come and take our Blankets from us *sans ceremonie*. As this is rather a cheap way of getting goods, we will not likely come to terms amicably. In that case our iron interpreters will have to settle the dispute."

So it went on, week after week and month after month—the Yucultas were always coming. And there was just sufficient justification to make each report bear the aspect of possibility. There was the time, for instance, when the raiders actually attacked the Musqueam village at the mouth of the river, murdering three and taking some 30 women and children away into captivity.

Again, there was the sly approach of Indians in the night: "Kennedy & Sauve, who stood the second watch, saw Indians skulking about the fort," McMillan wrote, "but seeing we keep a strick [sic] guard they did not venture too near. They thru a couple of Stones at the men who were walking on the Gallery, but from the duskiness of the night they could not see to fire at them." McMillan gave orders that any further insults of the kind were to be answered with bullets.

Dynamic little Governor George Simpson, defying the impossible, came unexpectedly down the Fraser on one of his transcontinental dashes. He stopped to look at Fort Langley, that had been established the previous year. He decided to move McMillan to a less strenuous post at Fort Garry, while Barnston was also transferred. In their places he left Chief Trader Archibald McDonald, a tried and trusted man, and Clerk J. Murray Yale—"Little Yale," and Donald Manson. Annance explained to the newcomers the paralysing fright that mention of the northern marauders brought to the Kwantlens and other Fraser tribes, and how they could not understand why similar terror did not grip the whites at the sound of the name.

McDonald soon discovered that Annance had not exaggerated the fear that the mention of "Yuculta" caused. "Not the appearance of a Beaver from the wretched Indians of the vicinity," he wrote on March 10, 1829. "Indeed, if others didn't bring them this way, hunting them themselves is perfectly out of the question: their

dread of the enemy is incredible. They even desist from appearing in the water in any manner, at the risk of starvation, when the Yucultas are reported to be near, & that is not seldom."

Still, McDonald—recalling the fate of McKenzie—was just a trifle worried when he had to send a boat off to the Cowlitz Portage, at the distant extremity of Puget Sound, with the returns from Fort Langley. "Little Yale" volunteered to go, and so did Annance, "the Learned," and the ten most expert paddlers were chosen to accompany them in a newly constructed boat. The trip had to be made, not only to carry the returns to a point where a safe messenger could be secured for the trip to the Columbia, but also to test the safety of the route. It was hoped that the lesson given to the Clallams for their killing of McKenzie had been learned, not alone by that tribe, but by all the natives of the Coast.

"Until their return," McDonald wrote, "I shall be here with Six Men, viz., the Cook, Gate-keeper—one that will assist a little to speak with the Indians—Arquotle, who is building Chiminies, and two Iroquois—one of them unwell." It was a weak garrison with which to face possible attack. "Our little artillery was hardly fresh loaded," went on McDonald, "when the Big Bear, the Yucultas, were announced—no less than 30 canoes!" By next morning the Kwantlens, as they came crowding about the fort for protection, were sure that there were at least 50 canoes bearing their enemies.

"Among our home guard here everything was made snug," observed the Fort commander, and he went on to tell of the manner in which the local Indians were acting. "Only a few resolute fellows kept passing at a distance so as to have one glance at the enemy before an actual flight should be commenced." Then, around the bend of the river appeared five small canoes—of friendly natives!

But at the time that the chief trader was recording the alarms and rumors that were exciting the vicinity of Fort Langley, Yale and Annance and their men were actually engaged in battle with the dreaded Yucultas, only a few miles down the river (opposite the island that was named for Annance, but has been misspelled "Annacis") just where the stream broadens below New Westminster. The invaders had entered the north arm of the Fraser, and after killing several Musqueams (near modern Marpole), had at last made their long-threatened foray upstream.

The Hudson's Bay Company's boat was returning to Fort Langley by the southern arm of the river, had passed Tree Point on the south shore, and was making the end of Annance's Island on the north, when Yale and Annance saw a fleet of some nine large war canoes confronting them. Each one of the long, bird-beaked cedar dugouts carried 20 to 35 warriors. They were stretched across the river. It was a sight to really arouse fear, but "Little Yale" and bold Annance did not hesitate; a whispered word, a crisp command, and the ten paddles dug deep into the muddy water of the stream. The boat sprang forward—straight at the centre of the Yuculta line! Not a sound was uttered, as the crew—the best the fort could provide—put every

ounce of strength and skill and experience into their work. The boat raced forward; and now it was amongst the canoes, and the Indians were scrambling to avoid collision. Right through and beyond the surprised red vikings the boat went before the astonished Yucultas thought to fire at the white men. Precious seconds were lost to the warriors in swinging their craft about. Then they sent a volley after the figures in the boat, but the aim was not good in shooting from the dancing dugouts.

On shouted instructions, several war canoes close to the shore spurred ahead and their warriors landed, the better to aim at the *Whaneetum* from the bank. Annance and Yale saw the manoeuvre, and the boat was swung sharply towards the shore and run up on the beach. Loading their muskets as they ran for the cover of the brush, the little band opened such a hot and accurate fire that the vaunted Yucultas faltered. How many were hit by the deadly aim of the hunters was never revealed, but the loss to the raiders must have been heavy, for one after another of the big canoes turned and raced for the open sea.

The *Whaneetum* had met the Yucultas and had defeated them. Twelve whites had put 200 of the terrible sea raiders to flight!

Re-entering their boat—and not a single man had been hit—the paddlers resumed their work, and the voyage was continued. The few Kwantlens and Musqueams and other trembling natives who had witnessed the battle

from their hiding places in the woods, could hardly credit their eyesight. It was almost supernatural!

Archibald McDonald was more than delighted when the boat came around the bend, with the men bravely singing an old chanson, as was customary. He was almost speechless with joy and amazement when he learned of the fight. The next day, Sunday, March 22, 1829, there was pride in the soul of McDonald as he recorded in the Fort Journal; "All the Indians hereabouts collected in today, and seem amazed at the victory gained over the invincible Yewkultas; & that too by a hand full of men—they wish very much to be in league with the Whites, & if possible to be under their wing in case of battle. . . . It unquestionably has had two good effects," he commented, "to convince our people of the necessity of a vigilant lookout, & of their own Strength when properly Shewn, even before a great number of Indians."

The cold war was over.

The people of Saiametal (the site of New Westminster) and of Kikait (directly opposite), were so impressed by the manner in which the little band of whites had achieved the impossible, that they abandoned their villages and moved en masse to the vicinity of the fort on the banks of Kanaka Creek on the opposite side of the river.

From that March day in 1829, the Hudson's Bay Company and the British flag were firmly established on the lush soil of the great Fraser Valley. ♦

**Beyond the last Fort Langley and the steamer can be seen the great curve of the Fraser known as the Big Horn, where the first fort stood.**

