

The Story of “Sandy” McLauren Who Married a Piegan Princess

**Her Untimely Death Caused Him to Live the Life of a
Hermit at Foot of Mount Powell for Years**

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PRIOR TO 1857, that part of the of great Northwest now known as Montana and northern Idaho was practically unknown save for the report of the Lewis and Clark expedition which was meager as it covers only that part along the Yellowstone and Columbia rivers.

It was known that the Missouri river and the Columbia each found their source In the high mountains lying between the Pacific slope and the Mississippi valley.

The federal government had established military posts in the Puget Sound country for the protection of the settlers in Oregon and Washington. The only way of supplying these posts was shipment by water around the "horn" and up the Pacific coast. This was expensive and the time employed in making the voyage made it impractical in times of emergency.

It was evident that if a wagon road could be constructed connecting the head of navigation of the Missouri and Columbia rivers, the military posts could be supplied to better advantage.

In the summer of 1857, Captain Stephens was sent out to reconnoiter and take cognizance of the contemplated route. He reported the plan feasible and in the spring of 1859, Captain John Mullan with one hundred men and equipment was sent out to construct a wagon road from the head of navigation on the Missouri river—now called Fort Benton—to a point on the Columbia river, now called Walla Walla.

The building of this road was an enormous task with the tools then employed, which consisted principally of axes, saws, picks and shovels. Three years was required to complete the work. The route led from Fort Benton over the rolling prairies of northern Montana passing the great falls of the Missouri through the rocky gorges of the main range of the Rocky mountains at a point where the Northern Pacific railroad crosses by a tunnel 3,700 feet in length, with an altitude of 6,000 feet, thence striking the Little Blackfoot river, one of the tributaries of the Columbia, continuing down the Hell Gate canyon to where the city of Missoula now stands. Just outside of the city of Wallace, Idaho, stands an enormous pine tree reaching up some 200 feet high. On the side of this tree the bark was removed for a small space on which is inscribed by carved letters, the name of "John Mullan, July 4, 1864." Of such importance was this road to the early development of Montana that life-size statues in marble have been placed at intervals along the way by a wealthy lady, born in Montana.

There were no white men inhabiting this part of the western country. It was a most beautiful land, with lofty mountains covered with a thick growth of evergreen trees. Sparkling streams dashed down rocky defiles with now and then a beautiful lake in which speckled trout leaped from its glossy surface.

Deer, elk, moose, bear and mountain lions were seen in abundance. Mountain sheep and snow-white goats looked down from the highest mountain peaks. Numerous bands of Indians wandered back and forth in search of game for food. Indians, unlike the white man, never slaughtered game for sport. They only killed for food. This accounts for the abundance of game animals at that time.

The newness of the country and the spirit of adventure induced many young men to join the Mullan party, acting as scouts, guides, hunters, etc. Among these was a young Scotchman, named McLauren. His long red hair which hung in clusters upon his shoulders and a luxuriant beard of the same hue suggested for him the sobriquet of "Sandy". He was tall and broad of shoulder. Straight as an arrow shaft and he knew the mountains as no other man of the party did. He had previously been employed by the Hudson Bay Fur company in the far North. He had a string of pack horses and camp equipment. It was Sandy's duty to reconnoiter in advance of the construction crew to look out for the most feasible locations for crossing streams, ascending hills and to locate favorable camping grounds. His skill at packing utensils on the pack horses and general knowledge of overcoming mountainous country made him a valuable assistant to Captain Mullan.

Among the many bands of Indians wandering the mountains along the route was a group of Piegan Indians, who inhabited the Milk river country. They were wont to go in the fall of each year down to the lower country in search of Bitter Root and camas, which, in their simplicity, they supposed contained medicinal qualities.

Accompanying one of these wandering bands of Piegans was a young maiden of about 16 years. She was tall, slender and willowy of form and action, and had not the high cheek bones and coarse features so common among the North American tribes. She rode a beautiful horse of the Indian pony breed. He had a variety of gaits ranging from a running walk to a foxtrot, or a pace and gallop, changing from one to another with ease. This Indian maiden handled him with all the skill of a finished equestrienne. She called him Minnetonka, which in Piegan language means fire water, on account of his hot, nervous disposition. This interesting maiden was the daughter of a Piegan chief, and her name was Wannatuga, which in Indian vernacular means beautiful one. Many a young brave had looked upon her with love-lorn eyes and fond anticipations. But the wily old chief knowing the value of his beautiful daughter, had scorned all offers of purchase.

Sandy was smitten at first sight. He sought the chief with offers Of purchase, but he had not enough horses, wampum, and tobacco to consummate the deal.

The Mullan party went into winter quarters in Hell Gate canyon, Just above where the city of Missoula now stands. Sandy disappeared. The winter was a severe one and the party, as well as the native Indians, lost many of their horses.

During the following summer, Sandy returned well equipped with ponies, wampum, and other bric-a-brac, sought out the Piegan chief, and consummated the deal for Wannatuga.

Together with his Indian wife, he repaired to the region of St. Mary's river where game and fur-bearing animals were plentiful. Frequently during the years that followed while the Captain Mullan party was completing the military road, Sandy and Wannatuga would appear with pack ponies laden with skins and furs enroute to the mouth of the Little Blackfoot river, where Garrison now is, and, where Joe LaBarge kept a trading post, and exchange their hides and furs for beans, bacon, tobacco and other

commodities which were freighted or packed in from Fort Benton. Sandy was devoted to his Indian wife and his affection was reciprocated.

Large numbers of Indians from various tribes were accustomed to camp during the winter season in the upper Deer Lodge valley in the vicinity of Warm Springs, it being a locality where very little snow lies and abundant bunch grass grew on the foothills upon which their ponies subsisted.

The marshes and willows of the upper Deer Lodge and Warm Springs creek abounded with thousands of white-tail deer, making it altogether an attractive place for winter quarters for those children of Nature. Also the mound formed by the deposit of the waters of the warm spring as it overflows from its dome looks not unlike an Indian lodge. The steam arising in cold weather is like smoke rising from a teepee. The Indians held in legendary lore, the superstition that it was the "Lodge of the Spirit of the Whitetailed Deer",—hence the name Deer Lodge.

During the winter of 1863, large numbers of Indians occupied the upper valley and Sandy and his squaw not caring for the intimacy of the Indians, pitched their camp on Tin-Cup-Joe creek, which rises at the base of Mount Powell and empties into the Deer Lodge river near the present site of Deer Lodge City. Numerous beavers and muskrats abounded on the upper waters of this stream and Sandy reaped a rich harvest of furs that winter.

When springtime came again, and the Chinook winds had cleared the snow from off the northern ranges, and the hills took on their verdant hue, the Indians of the upper valley gathered their ponies and started for the buffalo ranges of the north and east. Characteristic of the great American horse thief they not only took all of their own ponies, but stole the greater part of Sandy's equine equipment. Sandy knew too well the futility of following them himself as the Indians held a jealous hate for the "red man with white inside". But Wannatuga still being a favorite and speaking the language of the Piegan, the Blackfeet, and Crow tribes, it was decided that she follow and try to persuade them to give back the stolen horses.

So, mounted on her favorite pony, Minnetonka, she started for the (well-known to her) favorite camp on Sun river. Minnetonka was a most remarkable horse. He had a combination of gaits which enabled him to cover long distances without fatigue. He would change from the running walk to the fox-trot, then break into the easy gallop to return to the fox-trot, each succeeding change seeming to relieve the exertion of the former one. Using neither saddle nor bridle, with but a lariat looped around the lower jaw, and wrapped in a blanket of scarlet hue, with her long straight hair hanging down her back, this simple child of the forest starting on a journey wrought with hardship, danger, and doubt, displayed a courage and fortitude rarely evinced by those of the more highly-civilized conventional race.

Sandy watched her departure with many misgivings, but no other course seemed open to them. Without his horses his future would be seriously crippled. As before stated he knew that such force as he had at command would be of no avail against

such large numbers. Only the bewitching influence of his devoted wife would bring results.

Straight as the crow flies, rode the Indian woman, guided only by instinct inherited from generations of ancestors who traversed trackless forests, she rode. Mountains rose before her and valleys faded away to become mountains again, and still the faithful little horse with his "muscles of steel and sinews of brass, and a heart that knew no defeat" kept on his never-wearying gait. And when the sun began painting the horizon over behind the Cadotte pass, from an adjacent hill, Wannatuga saw the camp of the Blackfeet on the Sun river, having covered a distance of 84 miles without food or rest.

Midst the barking of dogs, the frowns and grunts of braves and giggles of squaws, who knew too well her mission, Wannatuga rode to the lodge of the Blackfoot chief. No salutation of any kind was given, but the usual stoicism of the Indian prevailed.

Wannatuga made known the purpose of her visit and the wily old chief offered to give up the horses in exchange for Minnetonka. But give up her favorite pony? Never! Wannatuga would as soon have given her life.

After much parleying and pleading and supplication from Wannatuga the stony-heart of the old chief was touched and he ordered the stolen ponies released.

After one day rest, Wannatuga, on the morning of the third day from home, started back over the same trail for her home on Tin-Cup-Joe creek. Having a number of horses to drive before her, her progress was less rapid than on her trip over two days before. Nightfall found her at the head of Greenhorn gulch at the top of the main range near where Mullan tunnel now is. Here she camped for the night, bunching her horses in a small park and tethering her pony nearby. She made a small fire with her flint and steel, as only an Indian could do, partook of a scant meal of jerked venison and awaited the coming dawn.

When the first grey streaks appeared on the eastern horizon, she gathered her ponies and crossed over the divide onto the Pacific slope and following what is now called Meadow creek, down to its junction with the Little Blackfoot river near where Elliston now is, she found the river overflowing its banks. It being the month of June and the warm rains having melted the snow in the mountains, the rivers assumed enormous proportions.

Wannatuga, knowing the country perfectly, skirted the hills north of the river, driving her ponies before her and ere night had overtaken her, she found herself at the mouth of the Little Blackfoot river where it empties into the Hell Gate river near the present site of Garrison.

Sandy, anticipating her movements, betook himself down to the forks of the stream and awaited the arrival of his courageous wife. But he could only go so far as the south bank of the river which is high and allowed him to overlook the whole scene. The north side, being low ground, was covered entirely with water for nearly one-half a mile.

Wannatuga left her loose horses on the foothills nearby, and having great faith in her pony who had carried her over many a turbulent mountain stream, rode into the still water on the flat. The faithful little horse breasted the water with all his usual vigor,

plunging into the sink holes to scramble out on the opposite side with his Intrepid rider clinging to his mane and shouting encouragement.

Sandy watched the whole proceedings from the high bank on the opposite shore, with straining nerves and beating heart, powerless to render assistance. Yet he had perfect confidence in the endurance of Minnetonka and the skill of his daring rider. But when they reached the current of the main stream which rolled and surged like a mighty cataract he saw the little horse rise far out of the water, plunge forward and disappear, to arise many, many yards down the stream, but riderless. Relieved of his burden, he swam straight for shore and scrambled up the steep bank and shook his wet hide. Sandy's agony knew no bounds. He ran hither and thither, straining his eyes in vain for a glimpse of Wannatuga. All night long he walked along the bank of the stream, but no call reached his ear. The sun rose bright and clear. The rain having ceased, the water began to recede. For several days, Sandy searched the willows and sloughs in vain. Finally, far below on the opposite side among a raft of driftwood, he found the object of his search.

Opposite the point where Rock creek empties into the river, a rocky ledge or promontory extends out into the river. This point is now called Cedar Point. High up on the side of this ledge, Sandy dug a cavity some distance into the loose rock and deposited the remains of Wannatuga securely, closing the opening with tightly wedged rocks. Taking his horses and other belongings, he disappeared for several years from mortal ken.

In the spring of 1882, the Northern Pacific railroad was being constructed and the contractor, Mr. Nelson Bennett had a contract covering this part of the line. As before stated, Cedar Point extended perpendicularly to the north bank of Hell Gate river. The workmen drove a tunnel into the point and by the aid of a large charge of powder, blew the entire end of Cedar Point away. In clearing away the loose rocks a skeleton was found, which was pronounced by an engineer to be the bones of an Indian woman. The event was published throughout the country in the various papers as a news item. One day, soon after, an old man with long snowy white hair and beard, dressed in white goatskin garments, appeared and after closely scrutinizing the skeleton and the location, took the remains, wrapping them in a blanket and departed.

The Northern Pacific railroad followed the Mullan road through the mountains and the tide of immigration followed the Northern Pacific line. Captain Mullan's prophecy was fulfilled. The fertile valleys were converted into farms with homes on the hillsides, and the flocks and herds grazed on the mountain sides. Prospectors and miners scoured the mountains and gulches in search of gold and other precious metals.

Mount Powell rears its head 10,500 feet. Near its base lies a beautiful lake surrounded by lofty peaks covered with a heavy growth of evergreen timber. This lake is used as a reservoir for storing water for placer miners and irrigation projects. Around its shores are many summer homes and picnic grounds.

Stories began to be circulated of hermit who inhabited the rugged country above the lake. Prospectors reported of seeing an old man with long hair and beard white as

the snow. He was non-communicative and evaded them whenever possible. Others said he inhabited a small cavern on the sunny side of the mountain, consisting largely of granite boulders. He had enclosed the entrance with small fir boughs. A little stream of water trickled from beneath a huge boulder and ran leisurely through a patch of alluvial soil in which grew the hardy vegetables such as carrots, turnips, and similar garden stuff.

It was said that an old man sometimes appeared in Philipsburg, with mink skins, pine marten and muskrat and exchanged them for provisions.

The winter of 1903 was a severe one, with a heavy snowfall in the mountains. Two young Norwegians who had faith in the hermit story were wondering how he could withstand the severe cold. So, equipped with snow-shoes, they climbed the rugged canyon to the supposed habitation of the hermit. Deep snow covered the approach with no tracks or signs of life visible. They parted the fir boughs and entered the cavern. Lying on a couch made of bearskins was the remains of the hermit.

A few crude cooking utensils were near a rude fireplace. Farther back in the cavern hung strips of jerked venison and dried fish. On a shelf of projecting rock was a rude chest made from roughly hewn cedar slabs with a lid fastened on with elk skin hinges. In the chest were a pair of elk-skin moccasins ornamented with porcupine quills, a few strings of beads, a lock of long, black hair and the bones of a human skeleton. On the inside of the lid was carved in rough letters the name WANNATUGA.

The Ted K Archive

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The Augusta News (Montana). <www.mthspublic.newspapers.com>

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