

WILLIAM BURNETT.

A REPRESENTATIVE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY AMERICAN TRADER, PIONEER AND HOME
BUILDER.

BY EDWARD S. KELLEY.¹

There is an old story of the Scotch minister, who announced that his text for the morning service was "The Devil," adding in his quaint vocabulary that he would consider the subject under three sub-heads, namely: Firstly, "Who the Devil He Was." Secondly, "Where the Devil he was going." And, thirdly, "What the Devil he was doing." If we add to this a fourth sub-head, entitled "What the Devil he finally succeeded in doing, we will have covered almost the entire range of his-

¹Mr. Edward S. Kelley was born at Dixon, Lee County, Illinois, on October 8th, 1859 and was left at the age of twelve to carve his own way to fame and fortune. He came to St. Joseph on a visit to friends on August 23, 1873, and was so well pleased with the place and the people that he remained. For thirteen years he travelled in western Michigan representing a wholesale hardware house in Chicago. He was married in 1882 to Miss Lillie A. Cooper of St. Joseph. In 1892 he began the practice of law in St. Joseph and has been a candidate for several offices. He is still practicing his profession.

torical research so far as it might relate to that one individual, and when we desire to investigate the life of any personage of the past, we ask first, "Who was he?" We ask this question concerning William Burnett, the first permanent white settler at the mouth of the St. Joseph River and I have reason to believe the first permanent white settler in Western Michigan, and after a search through a number of the principal public and private libraries of the West, after reading every document and book that came to my hands, which seemed to promise the slightest reference to the matter; after an extensive correspondence, including among those inquired of every person of whom I could learn who might throw some light on the subject, I have been forced to close the inquiry by saying to myself that he was William Burnett; that like Topsy he was sans ancestors, sans genealogical connections of any kind and just "grewed."

Picture to yourselves, if you can, a great desolate waste of forest and sea. People the forest with the shiftless, unreliable Indian, savage in his disposition and character; cruel and treacherous in his nature and training; unfriendly from his associations and environments. Look away over the waters and see nothing more friendly than the shimmering of the water in the sun-light. To few of us has it been given to see a picture of this kind; to none of us has this view been given with the added knowledge that more than a thousand miles, longer, harder miles than any of us know, lie between us and our old home; to none of us has this view been given with the still added knowledge that the old home, dear to the heart of every man, has been left forever, and that here in the wilderness is our future; that here we must achieve whatever of success life may hold for us, or meet the failures and discouragements that may overtake us.

I do not know, unless it was the tales of fabulous riches to be gained, what it was that incited William Burnett to leave his home in New Jersey and make his way into what was then the Canadian northwest. About the year 1776, during the struggle for American independence, William Burnett, whose birth made him nominally a New Jerseyite, but whose character made him every inch an American, landed from his canoe at the mouth of the St. Joseph River. Major General Guy Carleton, the fifth of the British Canadian governors, controlled this wilderness of the west as a portion of the British Colonial possessions, which was, in times of peace, looked upon as a source of revenue by reason of its rich trading possibilities, and an outer bulwark of defence in time of war. It is uncertain when Burnett first saw Michigan. Certain

it is that for a time after his coming, he lingered at Detroit, for he had some connection with James May, at that time a leading citizen of the place. He afterwards went to Mackinac Island, where for some time he conducted a trading business. An old document, without date or signature, found among the Woodbridge papers in the library of Mr. C. M. Burton, while of little value as to dates, throws considerable light on the inner mechanism of the Indian trade of that time and what is more to the purpose in this paper, throws a strong light upon the character of Burnett. We can safely assume that the men who hew their way into the forests are in no wise effeminate, nor are they easily deterred or turned from any well formed purpose. When we consider the country and the times, we can easily believe that stout hearts were a necessity under the most favorable circumstances. Burnett was associated during the first year of his operations at St. Joseph with one John Sayers, and brought into the country from Montreal, then the supply station for all the traders of this district, a large assortment of goods for trading, which he carried on with the Potawatomies.¹ At the close of his season, he journeyed to Mackinac to sell his furs, after which he again returned to St. Joseph, where we are informed he "continued in trade peaceably" until the officer commanding the post at Mackinac requested him to come to that place and there proposed to him to form a connection with one McBeth & Grant for a monopoly of the St. Joseph trade. Burnett showed his independence by declining to enter into any such arrangement; whereupon he was informed that he would not be allowed to return to St. Joseph at all. It goes without saying that at that particular time a commandant of a British post did not have any great love for an independent American trader, and it is equally certain that the American trader saw no reason why he should go out of his way to oblige the British. In this case, however, Burnett was settled at St. Joseph, his profits were invested there, and he made a virtue of necessity and agreed to the proposition for one season. At that time the post had been demanded by the United States, a new concern which had begun business since Burnett left home, and he doubtless believed that one season would be the limit of British authority. At the end of the season, however, the British still controlled the post. Burnett might have lost faith in the new American government, but he lost none in himself, for after settling with McBeth & Grant, he refused peremptorily to have any further dealings with them.

¹ In the name of this Indian tribe we have followed the spelling adopted by the United States Bureau of Ethnology and the Indian Bureau.

His former partners then informed the Commandant of his decision, adding that Burnett had received wampum belts at St. Joseph from Mr. Butler, the Indian agent for the United States of America. This was a mortal offence in the eyes of the British, and Burnett was at once confined in the guard house at Mackinac until the first vessel sailed south, when he was shipped to Detroit and afterwards to Montreal, where, to quote the document referred to, "he remained until he found an opportunity to come over to the United States and from thence returned to St. Joseph, where he found his property destroyed by his clerks and what little remained he was obliged to give to the Indians, as the most part of them had taken part with the English." The record further says, "and then he commenced trading anew."

There were British traders on the ground then, and the strife between them and Burnett was fierce. He evinced a diplomatic spirit in giving the Indians the remains of his wrecked property. If one of us were placed in his position, we would probably, first, take one rueful look at the wreck, and, secondly, take a canoe and paddle straight for home. Burnett was built of other material, which I sometimes think must have been in the nature of rubber. The harder he was thrown down the higher he seemed to bound. When he returned to St. Joseph and found his property destroyed and wasted and apparently himself a bankrupt, he was only at the beginning of his resources. Away up the river, about fifty miles from its mouth, and near where the city of Niles now stands, was the great Potawatomie village, ruled over by Aniquiba, the great chief of the Potawatomies. Aniquiba had at least two children who have left their marks on the history of Michigan. One of these was Topinabee, a son, who afterwards became the war chief of his tribe, and the other was Kakima, a daughter. I sometimes wonder if in the gratuitous distribution of the wreck, the good old Aniquiba did not receive the lion's share. Whatever he may have received, Burnett got the fair Kakima, to whom he was married with all due pomp and ceremony by the Rev. Father La Vi Deaux, the Roman Catholic missionary in charge in the year 1782, which would be about the time of, or shortly after, his return from Canada. This gave him a standing among the Potawatomies that no trader, British or otherwise, could undermine and from that time forth his person and property were secure.

The average trader who married among the Indians, looked upon the transaction solely as a matter of convenience, a sort of storm-coat as it were, a garment to be worn only so long as the skies were cloudy or the rain fell, and to be cast aside when the weather favored. Burnett

had no ideas of this sort, for when he married, he did it as he did everything else, in sober earnest. If he ever had any intention of closing out his business and returning to the east, the opposition of his British competitors must have driven all such thoughts from his mind, for in a petition drafted for presentation to Congress and executed by six of his children after his death, it is stated, that after his marriage, he "cleared large fields, erected a valuable mansion house, barn, store-houses, &c., and cultivated the earth, and traded with the Potawatomes and other nations of Indians, and that he never removed from thence except when he occasionally departed about his necessary business or for the purpose of advancing the interests of the United States of America and increasing their influence with the Chiefs and others of the Indian nations—interest which he greatly promoted in a variety of ways." So far as history shows, no man had the temerity to again interfere to the injury of Burnett or his family during his life time. He had his successes and business reverses; but in his own section of the country, he was supreme. A deposition executed after the death of Burnett, by Margaret May, wife of James May of Detroit, gives an interesting glimpse of the home of Burnett. This was less than two miles from the mouth of the river, and on the western bank. His home cabin nestling at the foot of the hill about three or four hundred feet from the river, looked squarely out upon the stream, and between the house and the river, stretching away on either hand for a considerable distance, grew a magnificent orchard. As late as 1855 or 1856 there were growing apple, quince, peach and cherry trees. The labor and expense of planting this orchard, (which for years past has been locally known as the old Indian orchard) may be imagined when it is understood that the plants were transported for hundreds of miles with neither railroad nor steamboat as a means of conveyance and nearly all the way through a trackless wilderness. A rugged old apple tree, probably a shoot from one of the original trees, still yielding its annual crop of fruit, and not far away the stump of a quince tree covered with wild grape vines, mark the spot where he lived.

Burnett led in person some of his trading expeditions among the Indians on the St. Joseph and Kankakee rivers and made an annual journey to Mackinac or Detroit to dispose of his furs and replenish his stock of merchandise, and his books and letters bear witness to the fact that he was connected by social and commercial ties with the men who led the way, such men as John Kinzie and Jean Baptiste, Point Au Sable, both prominent in the early settlement of Chicago, and James

May and others, who started Detroit on the high road to fame and prosperity.

Burnett had seven children, five of whom were sons, named, in order of their age, James, John, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and two daughters, Nancy and Rebecca. Good old scriptural names, which show to us that Burnett not only had a biblical training in his youth, but that when he was old he did not forget it. He is said to have been a college-bred man. In any event he appreciated the benefits of education, as his children were all sent to Detroit for their schooling, where they were given the best facilities the place afforded. James, the eldest son, destined to succeed the father in business, remained at school for five years, a liberal schooling for the time, and Rebecca, the youngest daughter, remained in the family of Mr. May for twenty-three years.

An evidence of the fact that Burnett, by inclination at least, favored the interests of the United States, is given in a letter to Mr. May under date of January 20th, 1804, twelve years after his marriage. Feeling still ran high between America and England, and the citizens of the two nations were not particularly given to taking what is popularly termed "back talk" from each other. It seems that no place was so remote from civilization, or so wild and savage, that the few white men who ran across each others' trail, could forget, for the time being, their national differences. Some time in 1803 fate, (or to look at it from Burnett's standpoint, a contrary wind) blew an Englishman named Pattinson into the mouth of the St. Joseph. He evidently liked the locality, for he proceeded to build a house. He was also possibly ignorant of the fact that Burnett, with good reason, had a large stock of wrath laid up for use against anything with a British look or accent. Unfortunately Pattinson brought with him his British prejudices and an apparently foolish brother. When they began to sing the praise of the "right little, tight little isle," the American eagle began to scream. He screamed in such an unpleasant fashion that Mr. Pattinson made complaint to his friends at Detroit, many of whose citizens at that time were British sympathizers, that Burnett had ridiculed his government and called his house a hog sty, and promised at the same time that he would not forget Burnett in a hurry. Here is what Burnett has to say in relation to the matter in the letter referred to:

"As speaking disrespectfully of his government, I do not rightly comprehend what he means. If mere words, in asserting facts, held upon a subject which passed here between his brother and me, be construed by them as an insult to their government, I am sorry for it, as I did

not expect that what might have been said by me should have hurted their tender feelings as it has done. What passed between his brother and me, was relative to the unparalleled greatness of the British Empire—which, Pattinson said, enjoyed much greater happiness in laws and liberty, than any other nation on the globe, that their armies by land and sea, conquered in every part of the world; that their manufactories furnished clothing to all the nations on the continent of Europe; that England exported every year to the amount of fifty millions sterling; and as far as the continent of America, they would be in a miserable situation if it were not for the London merchants, and a great deal of such stuff."

Had General Guy Carleton still held the reins of government, possibly Burnett might have been more quiescent, but a gentleman named William Henry Harrison was then the ruler of the territory, and Burnett, breathing the free air of the Union, had nothing but contempt and derision for anything British. If anything better calculated to raise the ire of an American citizen could have been said at this particular time, it is difficult to imagine what it would be. Burnett stood not upon the order of his going, but went after his bombastic neighbor with no further loss of time. Continuing his account, he says:

"I told Mr. Pattinson that there were some exceptions to the greater part of what he had advanced; and what I knew to, I very freely took upon me to contradict this high-flies, which I suppose settled him pretty much. And telling all what had passed to his brother, this little great gentleman thought what I had said must certainly amount to blarney. As to the second article of high misdemeanor, that of calling his house a hog sty, it is very true I made use of the expression. The circumstance relating to this is as follows: Ducharme who was formerly in my service and now in that of Mr. Pattinson, was building a house next door to mine. Going one day past his house, Ducharme asked me how I liked his building. I answered him that it appeared to me more like a hog sty than a house. This I said without ever thinking of offending Mr. Pattinson. However, their displeasure is of very little importance to me, as I care but very little what construction they put on what words that might have fallen from me." The spirit of '76 had spread even then to the very limits of the Union, and had touched the sturdy soul of Burnett, and although it seems that he could crack a joke, it was probably a good thing that Mr. Pattinson limited his stay at that time to eight days.

Mr. Burnett's daughter, Nancy, married a John H. Davis and removed

with him to his home on the Wabash river in Indiana. She had two sons, William and Richard, both having died unmarried. Davis seems to have possessed the faculty of making himself unpopular with the Indians. Among his other exploits, he was captured by the Indians in Detroit in February, 1813, and was about to be burned by them in the front yard of a farmer named Godfroy, when Mrs. Godfroy purchased him for five gallons of whiskey and sent him in disguise to Mr. May at Detroit. Mrs. Godfroy says that when Davis left, he promised to write to her, and with a quaint touch of humor closes her account by saying that if he did, she never received the letter. Davis and his wife died within six months of each other, in the year 1830, the wife being forty-eight years of age at the time of her death.

Rebecca Burnett, who resided at Detroit, where she finally died in April, 1841, at the age of 50 years, had two daughters, Mary and Martha. Martha was married to Francis Palms, the founder of the Palms family of our day, who still reside at Detroit, and who are the only living representatives of the Burnett family.

None of the sons of Burnett left any papers by which their characteristics might be traced, save James, the eldest. On August 24th, 1832, he addressed a letter to the Hon. John Tipton, at that time Indian agent, and who was also at the time United States senator from Indiana, from which it appears that by reason of his Indian blood, he had interests in the hands of the agent. He berates that gentleman roundly for alleged misconduct in the management of his affairs, and whatever may have been his standing as an Indian, his father's determination crops out in the closing paragraph of the letter where he says: "From the date of this letter, I do not wish you to act as agent for me any longer, and for the future I shall do my own business." James, like all of the sons, was never married. He lived a roving, dissolute life, and was at the time of his death a bankrupt. The late B. C. Hoyt, who came to St. Joseph in 1829, met the younger Burnett often, but at that time he was exceedingly dissipated, his earthly possessions consisting entirely of the lands which had been allotted to his family in the various treaties with the Potawatomes, with whom, it seems, he was particularly intimate when lands were to be had from the government. In 1812 to 1815 he served as lieutenant in the military service of the United States. He conducted the business at St. Joseph after the death of his father, and died in 1835. The late Colonel Taylor of South Bend administered his estate and a considerable number of his papers are now in possession of the Historical Society at South Bend.

The elder Burnett died in 1812, I do not know how or where. The only reference I can find touching upon the subject is in Mrs. Kinzie's account of the Chicago massacre of that year, where it is stated that an Indian with a tomahawk in his hand claimed to know that Burnett was there and was looking for him with the express intention of killing him; bringing to mind the grewsome thought that like many another good man, he finally met his death at the hand of those who should have been his friends. Of the other four sons, comparatively little is known. John, the second son, served in 1805 as ensign in the first regiment Wayne County militia.

In 1821 or 22 Abraham became interpreter for Daniel McCoy, the founder of the Carey mission near Niles. Isaac, like his namesake of old, was the loved son of his father. In 1811 and 1812, during the second war with England, British traders began to encroach upon the territory of Burnett. Four of them were captured and taken out of the territory. At a court of inquiry in 1815 concerning the alleged misconduct of a British officer, Coursolle, a British trader was under examination and was asked this question: "Were you not a trader in that part of the country when the other traders were surprised and taken prisoners to Detroit and by whom were they taken?" To which he replied: "I was; they were taken by Jean Baptiste Chadronet and Isaac Burnett." The fact that the Indians were bribed to use their rifles on Burnett rather than suffer him to escape, is sufficient evidence that he had inherited not only his father's force of character and determination, but his dislike of British traders as well. Charles Bailey, one of the captured traders, testified to Burnett's loyalty to the Union. After testifying to the fact of his arrest and removal to Detroit in the year 1813, he was asked "Who were the principal persons concerned in taking you?" "Jean Baptiste Chadronet, Isaac Burnett and B. Ducharme." "In what manner were you taken?" "Chadronet presented his pistols at me and Burnett told me I was his prisoner in the name of the United States."

I have been keenly interested in an effort to learn something of Kakima, the Indian wife of Burnett. While we can find traces of the father's peculiar characteristics in the sons, we must not forget that for a considerable portion of each year, the little fellows were under the exclusive care of the mother. For two or three months in the summer, Burnett was absent at Mackinac or Detroit, besides which in the winter and spring he often took upon himself the personal management of one of his trading expeditions. During these times, to Kakima, the Pota-

watomie Indian woman, fell the task of training five sons, who, by right of inheritance from one parent looked with interest on the social and political development of their country; while at the same time there was coursing through their veins the blood of that mother to whom the wilderness was home, where the wild life of forest and stream which had for centuries been the abiding place of her people, furnishing all that was needful for the development of bodily strength and manly vigor; where the chase, the feast and the dance furnished amusement; and diplomatic and political differences were referred to the arbitrament of tomahawk and arrow. My personal experience with Indians, covering a period of more than twenty years, and including nearly every tribe of any note from the Chippewas in northern Canada to the Black Feet country in Idaho, has rather served to confirm in my mind the saying that the only good Indians are dead Indians. But Kakima, like her husband, must have been made of better material than the average, for aside from the inference which we may draw as to her character and ability from the actions of her boys there is evidence from the chief men of her tribe that she was not only a princess and chief among them, but that she used the influence coming to her from that position for the advantage of her children. During the summer of 1815, some three or four years after the death of her husband, she appeared before a council of the chief men of the tribe at Saginong, one of the chief towns of the Potawatomes, and asked that a grant of land be made to her children, naming them all, except her older son James, who seems to have been left out. As a result of this request, the tract of land lying between the St. Joseph and Gallen rivers and Lake Michigan, a princely domain fifty miles in length, was ceded by the tribe to the Burnett children. A liberal action from which they never received any benefit as the government failed to confirm it. Kakima was living for some years after 1815, but the place and time of her death are like that of her husband, shrouded in mystery. It is safe to assume that she spent her last days among the scenes and among the friends of her early life. The love of the Indian for his home land is proverbial, as was witnessed in 1838, when the Indiana authorities finally removed the Potawatomes of their state from the land of their inheritance to a strange country beyond the Missouri river. Many and pathetic are the recorded appeals of the Indians to escape removal from the homes of their fathers and the graves of their children. I do not know if Kakima was still alive when this enforced exodus took place.

Her brother Topinabee was alive in 1833, and his signature appears

on the treaties of 1828, 1832 and 1833. If she was living, there is no probability that she was a figure in the removal, but she was certainly an old woman and the chances are that she was poor and without friends with ability to minister to her in her declining years. Only two of her children were at that time living, James, the dissolute elder son, who would probably do nothing for her, and Rebecca, the youngest daughter, so poor that she could not. Under these circumstances what is more likely than a return to the old friends and the old life. She was with them in 1815 at the council of Saginaw, why not there to the end of her days. They were her people, her tribe, her friends and relatives. The bones of a considerable portion of the Potawatomic nation living at the time of the exodus lie mouldering in a long wavering line reaching from the St. Joseph river to southern Kansas. Broken in spirit, discouraged, heartsick, as she must have been, if Providence decreed that she should live so long, the tearing asunder of the ties of home and friends, the final dissolution of her nation by an armed force, must have appeared to her as an act of questionable gratitude on the part of the Nation that she, through her sons, had helped to save.

The Burnett children were granted large tracts of land at the treaties of Chicago, Saginaw, Tippecanoe, and other places, six sections of which were located in and near the city of St. Joseph. Land was cheap in those days and their patrimony from the Great Father slipped away from them by piecemeal, until in 1838, Rebecca, the survivor of them all, deeded away the last remaining vestige of this princely estate upon the consideration that the wants of herself, her daughter, and the son of a deceased daughter be provided for during her life time.