

## DETROIT IN 1814

*Extracts from Articles Written in 1853 by Hon. B. F. H. Witherell*

[Written for the Bay City Tribune, by Albert Miller, 1886]

There are published in the third volume of the "Wisconsin historial collections" a series of very interesting articles entitled "Witherell's Reminiscences," written by Judge B. F. H. Witherell and published originally in the Detroit papers at different periods between 1850 and 1856. As the articles are a relation of incidents that transpired during the time of the last war with Great Britain, and mention names familiar to the early settlers of the Saginaw valley, perhaps some extracts may be interesting to your readers. The Rileys, John, Peter, and James mentioned in the reminiscences, had each a section of land reserved to them at the treaty of 1819. The writer met Judge Riley of Schenectady and his son John in the summer of 1826 at the time they were negotiating the sale of John Riley's reservation to the Saginaw Bay company. Judge Riley, I should think, was then between seventy and seventy-five years old, a large, portly, fine looking old gentleman,

with hair as white as snow. John was a large muscular old gentleman, over six feet in height.

Peter Riley's reservation was the tract upon which Carrollton was located. The first letters of administration I issued, as judge of probate for Saginaw county, over fifty-one years ago, were to Gardner D. Williams, on the estate of Peter Riley. James Riley's reservation was on the Saginaw river, directly opposite Saginaw City. I never knew the fate of James Riley till I learned through the source referred to.

In 1814, Gen. Cass, then a general officer in the army, was in command of this frontier, with a body of troops to protect the country. Our army on the Niagara frontier was hard pressed, and the general, unsolicited, sent Gen. Brown all his force; only a dozen or so of invalids unfit for service, remained. Gen. Cass had become acquainted with our people, and knew their courage and patriotism, and determined with them alone to defend the country; and they did not disappoint his expectations.

Mr. McMillan, whose widow and children after the lapse of forty years are yet with us, had joined Capt. Andrew Westbrook's company of rangers. Capt. Westbrook was a native of Massachusetts and had been taken in his childhood by his father to Nova Scotia. He afterwards found his way to Delaware, on the Thames in Upper Canada, where he was living when the war of 1812 broke out. He was too much of a Yankee to be quiet, and they drove him off.

He came to Michigan, raised a company of rangers, and proved an exceedingly active partisan soldier, and seriously annoyed the enemy. He made frequent incursions into the Province, as far up as Delaware. He was at the time a man of considerable wealth, had a fine large house, distillery, etc., at Delaware. On his first visit with his rangers, he called them around him at his own place, and, swinging a fire brand around his head, said: "Boys, you have just fifteen minutes to plunder my premises, after that I give them to the flames;" and true to his word he applied the brand and burned the whole concern.

Capt. Westbrook afterwards settled on the beautiful banks of the river St. Clair, where we have often experienced the generous hospitality of "Baronial hall;" we usually called him Baron Steuben.

Mr. McMillan belonged to this corps. He was a gallant soldier, and did good service to his country. On the 10th of September, 1814, the morning after his return from an expedition to the Rondo, in Upper Canada, he, with his young son, Archibald, then eleven years of age, went out upon the commons to find his cows. What follows, I have from an eye witness, William McVey, of the Rouge. He says: "David and William Burbank and myself

were sitting down at the deer park on the Macomb (now Cass) farm, near where Lafayette street crosses it, watching our cows. Mr. McMillan and Archy passed us. We spoke to them about some apples they were eating. They passed on towards some cows that were feeding near some bushes (the bushes came down to near where the capitol stands.) We kept our eyes on them thinking danger might be near. When they approached within gun shot of the bushes, we saw three or four guns fired, and McMillan fell. The Indians instantly dashed upon him and took his scalp. Archy, on seeing that his father was killed, turned and run towards us with all the speed that his little legs could supply. A savage on horseback pursued him. As he rode up and stooped to seize him, the brave little fellow, nothing daunted, turned and struck the horse on the nose with a rod which he happened to have in his hand. The horse turned off at the blow and Archy put forth his best speed again. Again the Indian came up but a second blow made the horse sheer off again; and this was repeated several times, until fearful of losing his prize, the savage sprang from his horse, seized the boy and dragged him off to the woods, and thence he was taken to Saginaw."

The Indians were constantly beleaguering the town, sallying out occasionally and driving off and killing all the cattle, etc., that approached the bushes. Determined to put a stop to this, Gen. Cass called upon the young men to arm and follow him. They were ready at the first blast of the bugle, mounted on ponies, such as could be had (for there were but few left), and armed with all varieties of weapons—rifles, shot guns, war clubs and tomahawks, swords and spears, and whatever instruments of death could be had—they mustered for the fight. As the woods and underbrush were very dense, they expected to have a hand to hand fight and were prepared for it. The company consisted of Gen. Cass, Judge Moran, Judge Conant, Capt. Francis Cicotte, James Cicotte, Edward Cicotte, George Cicotte, Col. H. J. Hunt, Gen. Larned, William Meldrum, John Meldrum, James Meldrum, James Riley, Peter Riley, John Riley, Lambert Beaubien, John B. Beaubien, Joseph Andre *dit* Clark, Louis Moran, Louis Dequindre, Lambert La Foy, Joseph Riopelle, Joseph Visgar, Jack Smith, Ben Lucas and John Ruland.

I knew nearly every one of them personally, and a better lot of fellows, for the business they were on, could not well be got together. They were then young and full of spirit.

After assembling, they rode up along the borders of the rivers, to the Witherell farm, and rode through the lane to the woods. They soon came upon an Indian camp; the Indians had fled, leaving their meat roasting on sticks by the fire. Here they found Archy McMillan's hat, and were in hopes of finding him. The Rileys discovered the tracks of the enemy, and a hot pursuit com-

menced. They were overtaken on the back part of the Cass farm, and a hot fire instantly opened, and kept up till the word was passed to charge, and on the whole body went pell mell. It was hot work for the Indians, and after awhile they fled. Peter Riley, who was in advance when the firing commenced, suddenly reined up his horse across the trail, sprang off, and firing over the horse's back brought a warrior to the ground, and in a twinkling took off his scalp, and bore it away on a pole in triumph. How many Indians were killed is unknown. A squaw came in with a white flag a few days afterwards, and reported that several of their people had been killed. Their chief Kish-kaw-ko, was carried off in a blanket, but whether scared or wounded, was not ascertained.

Ben Lucas had a personal encounter with an Indian, by the side of Gen. Cass. After the fight the company came out upon the common, except two, who were missing. They were the late William Meldrum and Major Louis Moran, now of Grand Rapids. Much anxiety was felt on their account. It was feared they had been killed. However after a long while, the brave fellows appeared. They had been in hot pursuit of the enemy, and brought back a scalp, as they said, in token of victory.

During the whole affair Gen. Cass rode at the head of his men, and when advised by Major Whipple to fall back to the center, as should he be killed it might create confusion, he said: "O, Major, I am pretty well off here, let us push on," and he kept his post. The venerable Judge Conant, who, as I have before mentioned, was among the volunteers, and to whom then, as now, a squirrel's eye at forty rods was a sufficient target, states that Gen. Cass, and every other man of the company, behaved with perfect coolness through the whole affair. They were nearly all accustomed to the woods (and the enemy knew it) or they might have been cut off to a man.

After coming out of the woods the company formed on the common, and marched to the river Rouge, drove a band of savages out of the settlement, and in the evening returned, having performed a good day's work, one that gave quiet to the settlement until the end of the war.

Before the return of the company to the town it had been rumored that the whole party had been killed. On their way up from Springwells the young men raised a tremendous war whoop. This confirmed the rumor, and numbers of women and children rushed to the river, and in boats, pirogues and canoes put off to Canada for safety.

I have mentioned the three Rileys, James, Peter and John; they were half-breeds. The latter is yet living on the St. Clair. They were educated men. When with white people, they were gentlemanly, high-toned, honorable fellows; when with the Indians in the forest, they could be perfect Indians, in

dress, language, hunting, trapping and mode of living. They were the sons of the late Judge Riley, of Schenectady, who was formerly in the Indian trade at Saginaw. The three were thoroughgoing Americans in every thought and feeling; and were thought by the British, after they had possession of the territory, too dangerous persons. They sent an officer and a few soldiers to St. Clair, seized James and sent him to Halifax, where he was kept till peace. He was afterwards blown up and killed by a keg of gunpowder, at Grand Rapids. Peter remained about Detroit. He (as well as his brothers) was a great favorite with the Indians, and used occasionally when a little "corned," to annoy the British authorities by putting on the uniform of an American officer, and with twenty or thirty Chippewa warriors at his heels parade up and down Jefferson avenue, every now and then giving the war whoop. The warriors were of course in the British service, but Riley was their favorite, and of their own blood, and they would not have suffered him to be injured without a fight; they were proud of his courage and his frolics amused them, so that Peter remained unmolested.

Some months after Mr. McMillan was killed and his son carried off, Capt. Knaggs seized three Indians, relatives of those who made the boy a prisoner, and they were placed under guard, and John Riley was sent to Saginaw to propose an exchange. The terms were agreed to, and on the 12th of January following his capture, Archy was brought in and delivered as one from the dead, to his excellent mother.

There were many sufferings endured and dangers encountered in those days which no mortal tongue will ever utter, and no pen record.

Judge Witherell, the writer of the foregoing, was a resident of Detroit from his childhood, and passed through the scenes he so graphically describes; the writer of this remembers him very well as a gentleman of the old school, always neatly dressed, with his fob chain ornamented with keys and seals.

Jack Smith, mentioned by Judge Witherell as one of the volunteers, was the first sheriff of Saginaw county, appointed at the time it was organized in 1835.

The Mr. McMillan who was killed by the Indians, and the brave lad Archy, who was taken prisoner, were respectively the grandfather and father of A. McMillan, late of the Bay City *Tribune*, and now of the Bay City *Evening Press*.

Captain Knaggs, the person mentioned as having captured the Indians that were exchanged for Archy McMillan, was the grandfather of J. W. Knaggs of Bay City.