

FORT BABINE: THE UNWANTED TRADING POST

When the fur traders arrived in Western Canada they quickly established sovereignty over the Indians in the areas near their forts. One of the reasons the white man was able to affect his rule over the native inhabitants was that he was a "professional" in dealing with Indians by the time his outposts were being erected west of the Rocky Mountains. The first white men on the North American continent held the Indian in awe and tried to learn the skills needed to wrest a living from the wild country. But the Europeans learned quickly; and as they mastered the techniques necessary to control their environment, they began to lose their awe and often their respect for the aborigines. As those first representatives of western civilization, the fur traders, pushed westward, they may not have learned to understand the Indian as well as the early settlers; but they had learned to "handle" him. As a result the Hudson's Bay Company and its former rival, the Northwest Company, moved into British Columbia prepared and equipped to carry out its bloodless conquest - bloodless as long as the Indians didn't resist too strenuously.

A second factor that contributed to the ability of the fur traders to establish their hegemony over the area was the desirability of their manufactured goods in the eyes of the natives. The dependency of the Indians on the wares of the Hudson's Bay Company soon bound them to the white men.

Thirdly, the Indians of the interior of Western Canada did not have highly centralized tribal governments. Even though the natives often resented and resisted subordination, they were rarely able to concentrate their authority and their power to the extent that they could curtail the activities of the fur trader. As a result the establishment of a trading post was usually accepted and often welcomed by the Indians of Western Canada.

There is, however, at least one exception to this general rule. Although the history of the trading post established on Lake Babine, the largest lake in British Columbia, is very obscure, it seems that the Indians were not pleased with the founding of the post and were less inclined to assume the subservient role which the white man thought proper for the Indian at that time.

The fact that the Babine Indians of today are considered something of a problem, just as they have been considered a problem by the fur traders and the missionaries who have dealt with them during the last 100 years, may in

some way be related to the fact that Fort Babine was the unwanted trading post.

The Fur Traders First Come into Contact with the Carrier Indians

The Babine story goes back to 1806 when Simon Fraser, a North-West Company man, entered the interior of British Columbia and established a trading post on Stuart Lake. Because the terrain reminded him of his homeland in Scotland, Fraser called the area New Caledonia. The trading post at Stuart Lake became Fort St. James and was the center of trading activities which reached the Carrier Indians who populated the larger lakes of central British Columbia. The Carriers were so named because of the custom which required widows to carry the charred remains of their husbands in an earthen jar on their backs for a period of a year or so after the cremation of the corpse. The Babines are a part of the Carrier speaking Indians. The name Babine (The Lippy People) was given by early French Canadians and comes from the custom of stretching the lower lip of the women of nobility by means of a wooden labret placed between the teeth and the lip.

When the fur traders arrived on the eastern shore of Stuart Lake they quickly impressed the Carrier Indians there with the noise of their weapons and with the variety of their wares. Of course when the Indian began chewing on the bars of soap thinking it was fat and began blowing soap bubbles there was some consternation, but the marvels of these new objects were soon explained to the satisfaction of all. The plastic thimbles, buttons, and ribbons seen on the dance blankets of the Carrier Indians of today may be some indication of the popularity of the various items which the first traders brought into New Caledonia. In the following years the relations between Indian and white at Stuart Lake were sometimes strained, but the demand for the white man's goods and fact of his domination became undisputed realities.

While the traders were trying to attract Indians to the westward to bring their furs to the trading post on Stuart Lake, they became aware of competition from either American or Russian fur traders sailing along the Pacific Coast. The Tsimshian Indians controlled the territory to the west of the Carriers; and because of a more developed political structure, they were able to control the trade moving from the coast and up the Skeena River. These tribes were strong enough to prevent the white traders on the coast from establishing a foothold on land but maintained a vigorous trade acting as middlemen for the inland tribes. Relatively few of these goods reached the Carrier Indians at Fraser

and Stuart Lakes, but those Carrier tribes along the Bulkley River and at Babine Lake enjoyed a better rate of exchange for manufactured articles than the Carriers further east who were trading with the Hudson's Bay Company.

The first white man to visit the Indians whose villages were located on the northwestern portion of Lake Babine was Daniel Williams Harmon. In January 1812 he set out for the land of the Natche-tse-tains and after seven days of travel, largely over the frozen surfaces of lakes, he and his companions came to one of the Babine villages. Harmon's journal reads, ". . . the men, women, and children came out to meet us all of who were armed, some with bows and arrows, and others with axes and clubs. They offered no offence; but by many savage gestures they manifested a determination to defend themselves, in case they were attacked."

Amicable relations were soon established and the traders continued toward the west visiting four more villages. Harmon had heard the story of the traders from the seacoast. At this time he was shown items purchased from the "Atenas" or Atnahs (Tsimssian) who traded directly with the white people.* Harmon estimated the population of the Babines at 2,000 which seems a little high unless he managed to reach the Bulkley River Indians and was including them in his count.

While the activities of the Hudson's Bay Company did not extend very far past the trading post at Stuart Lake, the competition from the sea coast was readily apparent; but when Governor Simpson of the Hudson's Bay Company made a trip through this territory in 1824-25 he felt that the area would not be profitable until the competition from the coasting traders was eliminated. (W. Kaye Lamb, "The Advent of the Beaver," British Columbia Historical Quarterly, July 1938) A few years prior to this publicly stated concern over the situation, efforts had been made to divert the stream of trade back into its "natural" channels. In 1822 a trading post was established on Lake Babine near the Indian village which is now referred to as Old Fort. The problems of this establishment and the problems of the succeeding fort which was moved to the far northwest corner of the lake in 1836 provide some dramatic and often tragic

*Actually the inland Tsimssian traded with other Tsimssian on the coast, but Morice tells us that the Carriers referred to other Indians who acted as traders with the white man's goods as "white" people.

scenes when a determined trading concern finds its presence undesired by the native inhabitants.

Babine and Its Abundant Supply of Salmon

But still another factor motivated the establishment of the new post at Lake Babine, which was first called Fort Kilmaurs.* The most important source of food at the Stuart Lake post was the salmon which came up the Fraser and Stuart Rivers to enter the lake every fall. Since the trip up the Fraser was almost a thousand miles long and the hazards along this swift river were numerous, the numbers of fish which reached Stuart Lake were often small. When slides blocked the river or the young fish that went down the river to the ocean suffered casualties, a shortage of food would result in that year or in one of the later years. Lake Babine, however, drained into the watershed of the Skeena River, and the number of salmon entering the northwest corner of the lake every fall was greater and more constant than the supply entering Stuart Lake. Even Indians who took salmon in Takla Lake, which is upstream from Stuart Lake, regularly made the overland trip to the outlet of Babine Lake to share in that bountiful harvest and then carried the dried fish back to their winter encampments on Takla Lake.

This fishing industry was a great boon to the Babine Indians during the following eighty years. The Carrier Indians in the surrounding areas visited each fall, adding to the festivities and increasing the prestige of the chief of the Laksemasyu clan. This clan was the largest of the five clans at Lake Babine and controlled the fishing rights in the river. The dried salmon were in constant demand by the Hudson's Bay Company posts in New Caledonia. For example, Fort Kilmaurs purchased 20,000 salmon in 1836 and distributed them to other posts in the area. In 1905 a fisheries inspector visited the fishing weirs which the Indians had constructed in the river to trap the fish and estimated that the Babines took approximately one million fish in that particular season. *(see other side)*

Establishing Fort Kilmaurs at Lake Babine

With this setting in mind we can better appreciate the first journal kept by William Brown at Lake Babine. Brown was in charge of the small group

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seems when a determined trading concern finds the presence unobtrusive by the native inhabitants.

Babine and the Abundant Supply of Salmon

But still another factor motivated the establishment of the new post at Lake Babine, which was first called Fort Klappan. The most important source Since the Babines could fill their needs with the Hudson's Bay Company by selling fish and could trade their furs to a greater advantage with the Tsimshian Indians, they were in an advantageous position compared to the fur traders who were struggling to maintain their hold in this unfriendly area.

When travellers began to pass through the Babine country on the way to the newly discovered gold mines to the north, the salmon provided an item of trade needed by anyone travelling with a dog team. As a result we can see that the Babine Indians were far from dependent on the white trader from the east, at least early in the nineteenth century, and, unlike most of the other Carrier tribes, were in a position to resist domination by the fur trader and the missionary activities of the priests.

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of Hudson's Bay Company employees that raised a flag with "Kilmaurs" on it on October 31, 1822. During the next five months this journal was to record some events which may show that Brown was a capable leader, but it also suggests some reasons for the unpopularity of the white man among the Babines.

In October 1822 one Indian had traded moose skins for furs, evidently with some of the other Indians. Brown told him that "he was not in [the] future to come amongst the Babines to trade their furs - Or if he did I would make it a point to get hold of him, and take every skin he might then procure, without giving him anything in return."

In November someone took a handkerchief from one of the tents. Brown said that if it was not returned, "I would go to the village in search of it where I would not be satisfied with the Handkf., but strip the thief of every article he had, and if I did not find the guilty person I would sieze the first property I met with." The handkerchief was returned.

On Christmas Eve Brown writes that an Indian stole fifteen rifle balls from a shot pocket. One of the Company employees gave him a kicking and took his blanket. The Indians returned the balls and asked for the return of the blanket. "Not sufficient satisfaction to receive our own property after it has been stole. . . . Therefore I would not give them the blanket unless they brought me something as atonment for the theft." They brought seven martin skins. Brown took four and traded three.

Brown mentioned that the Babines do not want to trade because prices are too high and that they planned to trade with the Tsimsian the following summer. In January he stated that the Babines are now harder to deal with. He wrote that a chief's son "has a fine half breed dog of the slut Mr. Farris lost two years ago - According to an arrangement Mr. Stuart made with them last winter, the dog by rights belongs to us." The chief refused to give up the dog. Brown said that he would take him, but if he was given quietly he would make the chief a present.*

A few days later an Indian who attempted to steal a fox fur was knocked down and kicked, and in the month of February another Indian entered a room uninvited. Brown immediately put him out forcibly. The Indian threw the door open. A few blows were thrown, the father of the Indian pulled his knife,

*Although the Carriers do not eat dogs and some of the coastal tribes consider them poisonous, the white men evidently found them a tasty diversion from the diet of dried salmon. Of course dogs were also important for pulling sleds during the winter.

it was taken away, and a small fight ensued. Brown wielded a broomstick administering a few random blows to other Indians in the establishment. The white men feared attack later on.

During its first five months of existence the Fort Kilmaurs post did not experience a very auspicious introduction. Although most of the later records are lost, those that do exist seem to indicate a continuation of problems among the Babines. In a Report on the Babine Country dated April 18, 1826 Brown states that the Indians want high quality Moose leather in exchange for furs. They give these hides away at funerals and will not accept poorer quality skins which are used by other Carriers for leggings. Since the Company was very short of leather the Indians were displeased and would not trade.

During the succeeding years the problems continued. In 1828 Duncan Livingston, an interpreter, was killed by the Babines. He was avenged by another interpreter in the employ of the Company. In February 1829 Chief Factor William Connoolly wrote to Sir George Simpson complaining of the "almost entire failure of the Babines. I am now so fully persuaded that the latter place can never be of any advantage, that I have come to the determination of abandoning it this Spring." But the fort was not abandoned; it was only moved. In 1836 William McBean, then commanding Fort Kilmaurs, was ordered to prepare materials for a new fort near the fishing industries in the northwest corner of the lake, but in 1838 these materials had not been lifted from the ground. The new fort, called Fort Babine, was finally finished despite the difficulties, and in 1842 it was the setting of a drama that ended in tragedy for both the Indian and the white man. William Morwick had succeeded McBean and was negotiating with a Bulkley River Indian named Lekwe over the price of a caribou which the Indian had killed for the larder of the Hudson's Bay Company fort. Hot words followed and a "forcible encounter ensued." After the Indian left Morwick was said to load two muskets with powder and rock salt. On the following day the haggling continued. Charles Toin, interpreter for the Company, called the Indian insulting names and challenged him to a duel handing him one of the muskets. The native said that he was not used to fighting with guns, but if he must he would defend himself with his knife which was hanging around his neck. Toin then retreated a step or two and fired the musket, the vad lacerating the left arm of the Indian. Lekwe rushen on Toin and stabbed him twice in the arm as Toin was trying to escape the room. Morwick and a Canadian named Bonin were able to hold Lekwe. Bonin's story is recorded in Father Morice's History of the

Northern Interior of British Columbia.

Meanwhile Lekwe's father-in-law had heard that Morwick had killed Lekwe. He made for the fort swearing to wash out blood with blood. Although the gate of the fort was securely fastened, Grand-Visage, as the Indian was called, was able to look through the interstices of the palisade and saw Morwick walking to and fro in front of the window of the fort. Taking careful aim he fired, killing Morwick with a shot in the head.

Toin escaped to Stuart Lake and returned with William McBean and eleven armed men. Meanwhile Grand-Visage had built a type of blockhouse which the Indians use under such circumstances and the men from Stuart Lake were unwilling to risk their lives attacking this stronghold. They sent word to Grand-Visage that if he would surrender his gun and deliver his daughter to them, the matter would be compromised, without bloodshed. Twice he refused to listen. The third time one of the Indians who was friendly towards the whites submitted the proposition, assuring the Indians that it was made in good faith. Grand-Visage then came forth with his daughter carrying his musket and proceeded to the fort. Merice writes: "As the Indian passed by one of the bastions standing in a corner of the palisade, two fatal shots brought him to the ground. William Morwick's death was avenged, and the Company was satisfied."

Since the Babine area had proved to be unprofitable for fur trading, why did the Company persist in maintaining this ill fated trading post? Perhaps the main reason is illustrated by a letter by Eden Colville written to the officers of the company in July 1852 saying that no salmon had been taken by the posts on the Fraser River and that consequences would have been disastrous had it not been for a large quantity from the post of the Babines.

The contact between the white man and the native inhabitants of British Columbia quite often resulted in friction, but rarely has the white man been so unwelcome as he was at Lake Babine. It is not surprising that echoes of the past can still be heard among the Babine Indians today.

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The Hudson's Bay Company first entered Carrier Indian country via Stuart Lake. They later established Fort Kilmaurs on Lake Babine and then moved it to the far end of the Lake where it was called Fort Babine. The Babine Indians had been trading with the Tsimisian Indians who in turn had been trading with ships on the seacoast. As a result the Babines did not wish to trade with the Hudson's Bay Company who charged higher prices than their Tsimisian neighbors.

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