

## MONTANA PIONEER BIOGRAPHIES

### An Indian Trading Adventure

Told by Henry A. Frith  
1881

At the time of the following occurrence, Eastern Montana was still considered a "howling wilderness", and there were not more than a dozen bona fide settlers between Bozeman and Miles City, and few, if any, between Huntley on the Yellowstone and Fort Benton of the Missouri. Pelts furnished a satisfactory medium of exchange for the commodities of life at the widely separated trading centers.

On his homestead at old Huntley lived Henry A. Frith, the earliest settler of Yellowstone County still living within its confines and secretary-treasurer of the association of Pioneers of Eastern Montana for twenty years and, later, president. Soldier, miner, rancher, merchant and Indian trader, his life has been filled with adventure, and the incident here related is only one of many such told the writer in the intimacy of family life, with no thought whatever of publication. Coming to Montana with the military soon after the Custer fight, he has always sympathized to a certain extent with the Indians, among whom he ever made friends. Still, as with the pale face, there were incorrigibles among them, and it was such that made his last trading trip memorable.

On a crisp morning of the winter of 1881, he and one "Johnnie" Barlow, an Englishman who had been "wintering" at the Frith cabin, started for the Musselshell river in a four horse home-made sleigh, laden with the usual commodities acceptable to the Indians in exchange for skins. He acknowledges a small amount of "fire water" strictly for their own personal use, "in case of snake or frost bite."

The heavy snows had completely obliterated the trails, so that in starting they made no attempt to follow them, but, after making a few miles, a chinook set in, blowing the snow from the ridges and filling the coulees, and the men despaired of ever reaching their destination in this manner. They unhitched their horses, leaving the sleigh, and returned to the cabin where they procured a covered wagon. Returning next morning to the abandoned load, they transferred the goods, leaving the sleigh, which for a long time thereafter constituted a landmark,

They continued to travel on the ridges, digging their way from one ridge to another, requiring over a week to reach the musselshell crossing, (present location of the town of Musselshell) a distance of about fifty miles as the crow flies. They discovered that the Indians they were seeking had crossed the river two or three days before and that the crossing was now unfordable because of high waters. There was nothing to do but camp until the waters should subside/sufficiently for crossing at this place, which was considered the best ford. After two days' wait, they crossed in safety.



After the chief's departure, the men held a conference, deciding that this place was no place for them, and expressing uneasiness about the surrender of their horses. However, their was no alternative but to remain, unless they could recover them.

Later, they became so suspicious of the misbehavior of some of the Indians that they decided to break camp, hiring a quiet young fellow who had been especially useful during the trading to bring their horses. They hitched up, despite the objections of some who would hang onto the wagon and in some unaccountable manner repeatedly throw one of the leaders under the wagon tongue. Finally the men agreed with them that they would go only three miles before camping, and they were at last allowed to depart with some unwelcome escorts accompanying to make sure of the agreement being kept. Some rode in the wagon, others walked, and some squaws brought up the rear.

Arriving at camp, without warning, they all made a dash at the wagon, capturing the guns, the squaws being especially adept at throwing out goods. The buck who had possession of Frith's gun started to run, the owner following a short distance, making a feint of pulling a revolver. When the fellow raised the gun to his shoulder, Frith instantly showed his empty hands, upon which the buck lowered the gun, and Frith concluded it was not his life that was prized, only the gun. Johnnie, who had recovered his gun, pointed it menacingly at a buck, but his companion grasped it, exclaiming, "For God's sake, don't, or we'll never leave here alive!"

At this critical stage of affairs, the men noticed in the distance two figures running toward them one of whom proved to be the chief. In alarm, Frith called, "Johnnie, the chief is in it!" But Big Foot, learning the trouble, pursued and captured the buck who had the gun, snatched it from him, and knocked him down. Squaws and bucks stood awestruck, still clinging to their loot, however, until the chief ordered it returned. His companion, probably a sub chief, had possessed himself of Barlow's gun, doubtless for safety, and was sitting on it at the tail end of the wagon.

Frith then asked the chief to order his followers to camp, which he did, and these four men were left alone, the white man at the disadvantage of being unarmed. They conversed for awhile, and, upon presented with some tobacco, the red men grudgingly and reluctantly returned the guns. Throwing the guns into the wagon, the white men accompanied the others a short distance toward their camp, and, as soon as they were out of sight, they lost no time themselves in getting away. After going several miles, they pitched camp, as it was growing dark. Late that night, as they were putting out the fire before making down their bed, they were surprised to discern a lone figure approaching, which, upon arrival, proved to be a very old Indian, wholly unarmed. As nearly as could be understood, he told them that he had come from the camp. They fed the old fellow, expressing the opinion that there could be only one of two reasons for his presence. Either the chief wished to rid himself of the old man whom he regarded as an incumbrance, as was the attitude of Indians toward the aged, or, what was more likely, he was probably sent as a safeguard from any of his unruly tribe who might follow, as, without doubt, his presence would have a certain restraining influence.

After his supper, they took the old man well out of sight of where they wished to make their own bed, and, giving him blankets, ~~it~~ indicated that he was to go to sleep, remaining within sight until he was settled for the night. Then, stealing quietly away in the dark they made their own bed well out of sight in a shallow coulee. Despite the exciting experiences of the day, they slept well, although they had acquired the habit from other like trading experience of awakening at the least stir. As it was, they slept with one eye open and their hands on their guns.

In the morning they had some difficulty in finding their old man, so successfully had he been cached. After giving him some breakfast, they started him toward his camp.

As for themselves, they made all possible haste to Frith's cabin at Huntly, putting several counties as now constituted, between themselves and the Indian camp.

\*\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*

\*