

Raft Baby of the Peace River

Trapper Blackfoot Jean had been paddling upriver all morning and he was ready for a break. His mission on the Peace River that late spring morning in 1872 was two-fold; he was looking for beaver sign and he hoped to meet his sister and her husband, Edward Armson, heading downstream with their fur catch from their winter trapline somewhere up the south Pine River in British Columbia. Seeing an open spot on the left bank, Jean turned his dugout canoe toward it, and soon had water for tea boiling merrily. As he reached out to dump a handful of tea into the pot, his hand stopped in mid-air. Upstream he spotted what looked like a raft of some sort with a red rag on a stick waving over it. Intrigued, he hastily put the tea back in its container, pushed his canoe into the river and swiftly paddled out to intercept.



Photo courtesy of South Peace Regional Archives

As he drew near he saw it was a raft, right enough. Moreover it carried a strange cargo – wrapped in a blanket was a tiny baby, obviously more dead than alive. Thus began an 18-year sequence of tragedy, mystery and amazing coincidence.

For instance as Jean picked up the nearly dead baby he had no way of knowing that it was his niece, or at that moment his sister whom he had hoped to meet was trying to comfort her dying husband and was herself dying of starvation as she knelt beside him.

Eighteen years later when their remains were discovered the raft baby was a beautiful young woman about to be married. Unknown to anyone, however, was the fact that her fiancé was a close relative. Only the discovery of a diary with the

Armson's remains prevented another tragedy. It revealed that Edward Armson was the father of both.

But as he paddled shoreward with the starved child, Trapper Jean was more concerned with saving her life than with wondering who she was. Once ashore he quickly dressed a mallard duck he shot that morning and dropped it into the water he had boiled for tea. When it appeared done enough, he clumsily set about getting the baby, a girl he estimated to be two months old, to swallow some of the broth. To his surprise she accepted each spoonful greedily, indicating with tiny whimpers she wanted more. Jean remembered that earlier that morning he had passed a Beaver Indian encampment downstream a ways. So when the infant seemed sufficiently recuperated to travel, he took her aboard his canoe and set off. Fortunately the Beaver encampment was still there. Moreover, a young mother willingly took the emaciated infant and began to nurse her. With the little one in good hands, Jean could do no more. He thanked them and continued on upriver. But not before an older woman pointed out to him a scar on the baby's left foot, which she said was "older than the baby".

The summer before Jean's startling discovery, Edward Armson, an Englishman, along with such well-known characters as Nigger Dan Williams, Twelve-Foot Davis and others, had been seeking gold along the river near Fort St. John. Armson had come to the Peace with his Blackfoot wife from diggings along the North Saskatchewan River. Mrs. Armson was a beautiful woman said to have but one physical imperfection – a vivid scar on the second toe of her



Photo courtesy of South Peace Regional Archives

left foot she had inflicted on herself while splitting wood in the Fort St. John mining camp.

Toward fall the gold sands near Fort St. John began to peter out and the miners began an exodus to more lucrative locations. Armson and his wife were among the first to leave, stating that they planned to spend the winter trapping along the South Pine River. In the spring, they said, they intended to return to the North Saskatchewan River via the Peace, Lesser Slave and the Athabasca River. That was the last anyone saw of the Armsons while they were alive.

Seven years later (1879) the Reverend C. Garrioch, Anglican missionary to the Peace River country from the 1870's to the 1890's, was on his way to Montreal. Sent by his superior, Bishop William Bompas, on a combination holiday-business trip, he was to acquire supplies for Unjaga Mission he had established on the Peace River, a couple of miles upstream from Fort Vermillion. Bishop Bompas had also asked him to try to locate a farmer interested in starting a mission farm at Fort Dunvegan, also on the Peace, some 300 miles upstream.

On the stage run from Winnipeg to St. Paul, Minnesota (the C.P.R. through Northern Ontario hadn't yet been built), Rev. Garrioch met a young couple named Vining who invited him to stay a few days with them as their hotel guest in St. Paul. He accepted, and while there learned that Mrs. Vining was Canadian. He also learned that their pretty, olive-skinned daughter, Lily, was not their progeny. They had adopted her from a free-trader who said he had got her from an Indian family while trading along the Peace River.

Garrioch could not help wondering at the identity of the little girl, but in the course of his travels she all but slipped from his mind.

On his way back from Montreal the following spring, Rev. Garrioch stopped to visit in Winnipeg at the house where he was born. He was pleasantly surprised when he got there to learn that his brother, George, and his wife were willing to accompany him to Dunvegan to attempt setting up a mission farm. A short time later they set out by Red River cart for Edmonton.

In Edmonton the Garrioch brothers were joined by none other than Blackfoot Jean. He was to guide them through the vast stretch of wilderness on the two-month trek to Dunvegan. While on the trail Jean told the Garriochs his fascinating story of finding the

baby floating down the Peace. He also told of the Armsons' disappearance. He often wondered about the baby, whether she might be his sister's and asked Rev. Garrioch if he would make some inquiries when he got back to the Peace.

By then Garrioch was sufficiently intrigued by the story that he hardly needed Jean's urging to make some inquiries. Could there, he wondered, be a connection between the Vining's lovely daughter and the raft baby? It seemed there might. However, it wasn't until the summer of 1881 while on a trip to Edmonton to acquire some cattle for the Dunvegan mission farm that he had a chance to make some earnest queries.

On the cattle drive back to the Peace, Garrioch's two hired assistants, Peter Ward and Louis Sizerman, both of Indian-white extraction, told of their having heard of the raft baby. As Sizerman was familiar with the country where the Armsons supposedly had wintered Garrioch asked him to watch for clues that might lead to the Armson winter residence. Sizerman promised to do better than that – he would try to solve the whole mystery. He did, too, but it took him most of 10 years.

Meanwhile, Rev. Garrioch accumulated enough evidence to establish Lily Vining as the raft baby beyond doubt. Before leaving Edmonton with Ward and Sizerman, Garrioch had talked with the Vining's who were visiting there at the time. He learned that Lily had a birthmark on her left foot that resembled a wound made by a sharp implement. Later, while rafting down the Peace from Fort Dunvegan to Fort Vermillion, Garrioch was accompanied by a young Welshman named Valentine James who had worked for Twelve-Foot Davis at his Peace River Landing trading post.

James, it turned out, had been at the Fort St. John mining camp in 1870 and '71 and knew the Armsons well. When camp broke up that fall of '71, he had moved to the coast and hadn't heard of the Armsons' disappearance until 4 years later. Later still, he also heard the raft baby story and when he did, he remembered that while he and a partner were searching for gold along the Finlay River some 4 years after leaving Fort St. John, they had seen a little girl about 3 years old of mixed white and Indian blood with a Beaver Indian family. They told James they got her from a Blackfoot trapper on the Oonchaga (Beaver name for Peace) on the east side of the Rocky Mountains. The family was to meet a

trader named Nelson, who was going to adopt the little girl and pay them for having raised her.

Garrioch later learned from a Mr. Elmore, a trader acquainted with both James and Nelson that Nelson did pick up the little girl and took her to his wife in Victoria who was unable to have children of her own. Twelve-foot Davis also knew the Nelsons well and he told Garrioch that because Mrs. Nelson was not well, the Nelsons moved to Calgary, hoping a change of climate would help. Mrs. Nelson, however, died in Calgary and Nelson then moved back to Victoria. But before he did, he turned over the little girl to a childless couple then living in Edmonton. Later while on his way to England, Garrioch again visited the Vinings and they quickly corroborated that the free trader they had received Lily from was named Nelson. Moreover, they told Garrioch they'd known the Nelsons for several months in Calgary before Mrs. Nelson died.

If by then Lily Vining was pretty firmly established as the raft baby, the dogged work of Louis Sizerman finally established her true identity and explained the mysterious disappearance of the Armsons. From time to time Sizerman had reported his progress to Garrioch. The first time he visited the area, he found where the Armsons had trapped that winter of '71 - '72. On his next two trips through, he established the length and breadth of their trapline but he was unable to locate their cabin. Each time he was in the area he continued to look for it and finally in 1890 his perseverance paid off.

He found the cabin almost completely hidden from view by a huge pine that had blown down many years before, crushing the roof. The dwelling consisted of a 12 by 14 foot excavation in a steep clay bank, fronted by a sturdy wall of spruce logs.

As it turned out, the fallen tree that made the cabin so hard to find preserved its contents from prowling animals. It took some hard digging for Sizerman to clear away the debris and enter the cabin. When he did, in the dim light filtering into the once snug quarters, a grisly sight lay before him. On a makeshift bed against the back wall lay the bones of a man, while in a kneeling position beside the bed was a skeleton of a woman. A second glance revealed a shattered gun and part of the man's left hand was missing. Sizerman also noted a baby's rattle and bottle, but no baby skeleton.

From Sizerman's observations and from a package wrapped in birch bark and containing a diary and a

Bible he'd found suspended from a ceiling joist, Garrioch and his friend were able to reconstruct what had taken place. The Armsons had worked together to build a warm and comfortable dwelling. Trapping must have been good for many mink, marten, fox and beaver pelts lay moldering about. According to the diary baby girl had been born in the spring for Armson had written: "Born this day, March 31, a girl with vocal cords in fine working order. It would seem that when Mrs. Armson hit her toe in the St. John's mining camp, she inflicted a hatchet mark in duplicate; for on the corresponding toe of her daughter's foot there is a perfect replica of the scar on hers."

A Hatchet Mark in Duplicate

By

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Photo courtesy of South Peace Regional Archives

About a month after the baby was born, tragedy struck. Somehow Armson's rifle exploded, blowing off part of his hand. Worse, infection set in and he was no longer able to hunt. Mrs. Armson's attempts at filling the larder met with little success and the

family began to starve. When the situation began to appear hopeless, Mr. Armson carried the baby to the Pine River, built a small raft (their dugout canoe had been stove in, Sizerman noted), tied a red rag to stick then pushed the raft and its passenger into the current. Then Mrs. Armson returned to the cabin to await death beside her husband.

The last entry in the diary was to save the Armson family from yet another tragedy. It stated: "May 15 1872: I am dying effects of accident. My first wife died in England, leaving son now five. Write Barstow and Blake, Solicitors, London, England. Wife and baby weak from starvation. The Lord will Provide."

As soon as he was able, Rev Garrioch turned the diary over the Vining family, then living in Calgary. In an attempt to learn more about Lily's half-brother the Vining's wired the London solicitors mentioned in the diary. Lily, now a grown woman of 19, was engaged to a young man named Herbert Melvin not long over from England.

Lily, her fiancé and her adopted parents were shocked by the reply telegram from Barstow and Blake: "ARMSON'S SON ADOPTED BY HIS OLDEST SISTER. SON'S NAME NOW HERBERT MELVIN."

By some strange miracle, Armson's diary had reached out over the years to prevent his daughter from marrying her half-brother! Thus the 18 year sequence of tragedy, mystery and coincidence came to a close – a saga difficult to believe, but well documented.

Harold Fryer

Note: This story was found in the files at the Grande Prairie Museum. The main source for the story was the book *Hatchet Mark in Duplicate* by Rev. Garrioch, printed by Ryerson Press, Toronto, Canada in 1929.

Editor's Note: On a recent visit to the Vancouver Public Library, I was able to quickly skim through Rev Garrioch's *Hatchet Mark in Duplicate* and found the following information we genealogists need to know:

- Mr. Armson's first marriage was in England in 1866. His son was born in 1867. Two years later, Mrs. Armson died and shortly after Mr. Armson entrusted his son to the care of the elderly sister of his

deceased wife, and promptly left for Canada. He wrote to England from Montreal a few months later. Early in 1871, he wrote a second letter this time from Saskatchewan. He had remarried, and was heading for the Peace River country. Relatives in England never heard from him again.

- The Vining's were well known in Calgary, and were involved with the Anglican Church and the Hudson's Bay Co. Lily, about a year later married Gerald Clive.
- Herbert had been adopted by his aunt when he was made her heir. Herbert also subsequently married. His bride was an Englishwoman new to North America.