

A Stone at West Chehalem

By Mikel Warner

"Born at York Factory, Hudsons Bay, 1805." Long ago and far away indeed, yet so it is carved on a stone in a small hilltop cemetery on the slope of Chehalem Mountain. The stone marks the grave of a fur trader's wife, which is an unusual circumstance, since wives of native descent were rarely so remembered unless they lay beside their more notable husbands. Catherine Pambrun's thrice buried husband has finally come to rest in the military cemetery at Vancouver, while she, who outlived him by forty-five years, lies under a fir tree remote from everything he had seen and known.

"Born at York Factory." The young clerk Robert Ballantyne, writing about York Factory as he had known it in 1840, had little to say for it that was good.

"The country around the fort is one immense level swamp, thickly covered with willows, and dotted here and there with a few clumps of pine trees. The only large timber in the vicinity grows on the banks of Hayes and Nelson Rivers, and consists chiefly of spruce fir. The swampy nature of the ground has made it necessary to raise the houses of the fort several feet in the air upon blocks of wood; and the squares are intersected by elevated wooden platforms, which form the only promenade the inhabitants have during the summer, as no one can venture fifty yards beyond the gates without wetting his feet. Nothing bearing the least resemblance to a hillock exists in the land. Nelson River is a broad stream, which discharges itself into Hudson Bay, near the mouth of Hayes River, between which lies a belt of swamp and willows, known by the name of Point of Marsh. . . . Nature has here put on her plainest garb, and flowers there are none."

Yet he had an eye for the myriad wildfowl in the marsh and berries in the woods.

It may be that the same scant pleasant features of her birth-place came first to the mind of Catherine Pambrun whenever she recalled her girlhood at York Factory, though she had been born a long generation before Ballantyne's day. Much water had gone under the bridge, or down Nelson River, since 1805, but the old Post on its mud flats was entering its third century and seemed

as imperishable as the reeling generations of water birds. Berries ripened, mosquitoes swarmed, and long bitter winters rolled down from the north as they had from the beginning. In her old age she sat in her rocking chair by the fire, not helping much now about her daughter's house, which was full of lively girls, and turned over in her mind the things she had known. She was of average height and had never grown stout, and all her life wore her hair parted to hang in little curls to her shoulder; both body and mind belied her age. Her Grand-daughters ^{learned} history first hand from her.

"My father was an Englishman," she would tell them more than once, making sure they would remember in the ancient way of oral tradition, "named Humphreville. You must know that the Humphrevilles were in English history. My father was said to be a baronet, but I don't know about that, and why he came to Canada I don't know. He was stationed at Fort York. My mother was named Ann. We lived in one of the Post houses.

"Then one day a letter came; it must have contained bad news of some sort, or important news about death or an estate. My father walked up and down the floor all evening as if he were trying to make a difficult decision, and his sword kept slapping against his high leather boots as he walked. The next day he went away; I never saw him again.

"He stayed in Scotland, I think it was, but he always sent money to Mother and the children. I was the eldest; I remember how his sword kept slapping on his boots."

In due time, about the age of fourteen, Catherine Humphreville married bubbling, generous little Pierre Pambrun in a civil, or "contract" rite conducted by Governor Swan of Fort York. The service of the fur trade brought them westward by stages, as Pambrun was assigned to posts beginning with Cumberland House and ending at Fort Walla Walla, where he was eventually promoted to Chief Trader. The family increased on its westward progress with the births of Andre Dominique, Pierre Chrysologue, Maria, and Alexander. During the nine years at Fort Walla Walla five more children were added, Thomas, Adele, Harriet, Jean Baptiste, and Sarah. These nine years were perhaps the happiest period in the lives of the Pambrun couple, for along with promotion and a fine family of bright children, there were explorers, missionaries, and immigrants finding the Fort an oasis of comfort and pleasure. Pambrun was extremely hospitable and his wife no less so; their establishment became widely known as a center of geniality, welcome, and fine courtesy.

The happy years at the fort came to a sudden end in 1841 with the death of Pierre Pambrun, killed when thrown by a fractious horse. His good friend Doctor Whitman could do nothing for the hole in his side where the saddle horn had gored him, and four days later the merry little Frenchman made an end of it and was buried near the fort. Catherine Pambrun, with six-weeks-old Sarah in her arms and her eight others around, went down the Columbia to Fort Vancouver, which was a haven for all who found themselves in dire straits.

At Fort Vancouver the older sons appear to have entered the service of the Company, sixteen-year-old Maria shortly married Dr. Forbes Barclay, Company Physician, and the younger children were put into school. It had been a constant concern for their father that all his children should be well educated; immediately after their arrival at Fort Walla Walla in 1832 he had sent his eldest, Dominique, ten years old, down to enter John Ball's school at the Fort. Their mother continued this concern, supporting herself and the younger children by turning out fine needlework on order for personnel at the Fort.

At the arrival of the Catholic Fathers in 1838, Pambrun had seen to the baptism of his children and the church marriage of Catherine and himself. Now he was buried in unconsecrated ground at Fort Walla Walla, and his family far away. Father Blanchet arranged some two years after Pambrun's death to have his body brought down to Fort Vancouver and reinterred in the Catholic Cemetery north of the stockade. A few weeks later little Sarah was also buried there. During ensuing years the "peripatetic cemetery" was twice shifted and the location of no old burial is any longer certain.

When the children were well grown, Catherine Pambrun went to live with her eldest daughter, Maria Barclay, in Oregon City. "Good old Dr. Barclay, he must have had a heart as big as all outdoors!" (Thus the family recollection down through the years.) "Not only his own family but his wife's mother and her brother's daughter lived in the big house by the river, and anyone else that happened to need a home at the moment. The house was always full."

Maria had grown into a handsome and gracious woman, fully competent in managing her complex household. Almost imperceptibly the supervision of her brothers' and sisters' affairs slipped from the shoulders of their mother Catherine to those of their sister Maria. From the Barclay house the second Pambrun daughter Adele, now called Adah, was married to Captain Edward Beard of Bosten. His bark Vandalia was lost in a storm

Baltimore

at the mouth of the Columbia the following winter, and his body washed into a rocky cleft on the Washington shore that is still known as Beard's Hollow. Adah's son Edward was born ~~and died~~ the same winter, her seventeenth.

During her Oregon City years Catherine Pambrun received a letter that she cherished all her life, and sometimes showed to her grand-daughters. They still keep it in the same little double case of woven grass in which it came, addressed to "Mrs. P. C. Pambrun, Fort Colville!" It was from her mother at Moose Lake, Manitoba, and seems to have been brought to Fort Colville by some brigade and forwarded to Oregon City by messenger. Ann Humphreville could never have written so flowery and pious a letter in delicate script; she probably could not write anything, and had got the parish priest to pen it for her.

"Moose Lake, 1855

"My dear Daughter--" Interspersed among pious phrases, bits of personal message come through. She spoke of going to "your sister" at Cumberland House when summer came, about a hundred miles to the north and west of Moose Lake. She had not seen "your son", one of the Pambrun boys, when he came through with the brigade, but would see him on his way back west, since she would be at Cumberland House by that time. She related her spiritual renaissance, or one the good priest thought fitting, in finding "the true faith" at last. "I have been in the grasp of Satan for many years," she wrote. "I will never again see you in this world, but I beg you to think seriously upon these things, and I hope to see you again before the throne of Christ."

Ann Humphreville

Four years after Captain Beard's death Adah married a second time. Her husband was John McCracken of London, a young merchant with magnificent sideburns that spread as he prospered and aged until "Our Uncle John McCracken" became a venerable figure indeed. Adah's wedding was an affair of high social order, supervised by the capable Maria. Her dress, still in family possession, was gray silk with a tight bodice and sleeves wide at the wrist, banded with pleated silk, and a full skirt with puffs and bows at the back. Four pairs of silk hose had been ordered from Paris at twelve dollars a pair. Fifteen-year-old Harriet was shocked at her sister's extravagance, as

she considered the trousseau in general and the hosiery in particular: "We don't have money like that in our family!"

The years passed by; Catherine's sons were about their own affairs widely. One had been in a Civil War prison camp, wounded, he wrote, but had been later freed. One was dead in the gold fields in the Rockies, another was teaching night school in Oregon City.

When daughter Harriet in 1871 married an upright Welshman, Linus Harger, Catherine Pambrun went with them to the farm on the west foot of Chehalem Mountain where she would end her days. Three little girls were born to Harriet in three years, Helen, Ruth, and Catherine. There was also an adopted daughter Amy, a relative on the Harger side. These are the granddaughters who recalled to me the image of their grandmother Catherine with her stories of Fort York and Fort Walla Walla and Fort Vancouver, of their beloved Aunt Maria Barclay, their Uncle John McCracken, and the swarming cousins at the Barclay house.

"We visited there, and they visited here," said grand-daughter Catherine in a gaily reflective mood, for in her the old Pambrun geniality persists along with the well-known Pambrun nose. "Once, I remember, Amy got badly scalded when she upset the coffeepot on her foot. The pot was on the hearth of the cookstove, and her hoops upset it somehow. It seemed too bad a burn for Mother to cope with, or maybe she needed moral support. However it was, she sent for Aunt Maria, who had learned a lot about nursing from being married to Dr. Barclay. She dressed Amy's foot and leg every day. She stayed a week; we all adored her.

Catherine Pambrun lived fifteen years on the foothill farm in an atmosphere of much family unity. Across the river to the south lay French Prairie; to the east rose the flanks of Chehalem Mountain, stretching in a long ridge toward the crest called Bald Peak, over which ran the ancient trail from Fort Vancouver. In all other directions she looked out on hills and rolling farm land from which the great fir trees were re-treating year by year, just as the old ways of the Fur Company

and the tragedy of her husband's death were receding into the mist. She was ready, when the Lord willed, to follow without regret.

"Died at West Chehalem, Oregon, September 18, 1886," continues the sandstone marker, "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord."