

1812-15, WAR OF MILITARY MISCHANCES

By EUGENE HATCH

Scattered through the pages of our county's histories, some of the incidents of the Second War with Great Britain, especially in the earlier stages, though doubtless serious enough at the time, seem at this late date to have comic opera overtones.

For instance, there was the naval battle in the St. Lawrence river off Morristown in early 1812, fought between the United States schooner "Julia" and the British "Earl of Moira". The two ships ran alongside each other and began a steady and furious cannonade which raged for three hours. There were no casualties and no serious damage to either and at nightfall each vessel retired to her own shore, leaving the situation quite unchanged.

On land, too, there was the action at St. Regis. In direct violation of an agreement made with the United States in 1812, a small company of British troops took post there. Major Young, head of the American force at French Mills (later Fort Covington) made a surprise attack on St. Regis before dawn on Oct. 21, 1812. The British soon surrendered, losing five men. The victorious Americans took forty prisoners back to French Mills, and captured a stand of colors. This flag was taken in triumph to Albany, as the first British colors captured in the war and received at the capitol with elaborate ceremonies. But if a British historian may be believed, this same flag was found in a citizen's house during the St. Regis raid.

The sequel to the victory at St. Regis was a British raid on French Mills and the capture of forty-four Americans. These were exchanged for the British prisoners captured at St. Regis again leaving affairs much as they had been before.

It should be remembered that northern New York was predominately Federalist in politics, from the great land holders to the settlers. They had seen their chosen candidate John Adams beaten by Jefferson in the 1800 election, a great catastrophe to them, in those days of bitter politics. Ogdensburg had been evacuated by the British only about 20 years before and the owners of great tracts of land were absorbed in selling land to settlers, building mills and making roads to develop their interests.

The only products, besides furs, that brought in cash money were potash and lumber floated down the St. Lawrence to Montreal. Our settlers had found the Canadians fair to deal with; each held the other in mutual respect. In river towns like Louisville it is recorded that families exchanged visits to friends across the St. Lawrence "as if the river was but a common street," and during the war



When war threatened with Great Britain, the state legislature passed an act in 1809 to build several arsenals in the state. Governor Thompson selected for one site a commanding hill above Russell village and presumably the building was erected soon after.

The walls were constructed of native stone 30 feet by 50 feet in size. Originally it was surrounded by a high stone wall, bristling with iron spikes. During the War of 1812, Corporal Horace Dickinson, with a small company of soldiers was stationed there.

In 1850 the arsenal was sold by the state together with 400 stand of arms. The building became the village school-house in 1860. It was ruined by fire in March 1945 and torn down.

these visits, held now at night, were common.

In 1807 Jefferson's Embargo Act legally stopped all this busy trade with Canada, and a brisk smuggling business began. News travelled slowly to our frontier and mail took four weeks to come from Philadelphia, Pa. The British seizure of American sailors, one of the war's chief causes, seemed to make only a faint impression on this inland region. The Federalist party lost again in 1810. Their candidate, Pinckney, was overcome by the Democrat, James Madison, and many northern New Yorkers gave a cool response to "Mr. Madison's War".

The first United States troops, records state, were sent to Ogdensburg under Captain Anderson to check the smuggling. They were charged with being overly officious in searching persons crossing the river, and they were accused of being adept foragers of the citizen's chickens and garden stuff. Some of the dislike for these troops, however, may have been caused from the curtailment of the dearly held right of some of the people to carry on smuggling. The embargo was removed and the troops left. In early 1812, scarlet coated British officers might be seen on the streets of Ogdensburg, shopping or going to be entertained at Mr. Parish's elegant mansion. In a recently published letter giving instructions to Lieutenant Ingram, General Pike writes, "British officers of rank are frequently seen at Ogdensburg. Conceal your march (to that place) and you may seize them."

Strangely, on the eve of the war, there was a great fear, not of troops from Canada, but of Indians. Many of the settlers had come north by way of the Mohawk valley, and had heard of the Indian raids, of homes burned and settlers scalped through the valley and at Cherry Valley only 30 years before. It was firmly believed by many that the British would incite the St. Regis Indians to wipe out our settlements.

The sight of a single Indian was enough to cause alarm and they dared not travel without a pass signed by some well known citizen. This paper they would hold in sight when still at a distance.

In the river towns many settlers fled. In Lawrence only five families remained and the panic spread as far

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inland as Fowler. Judge Ford wrote in 1807 to his employer, Samuel Ogden, that fear of the Indians, starting with the women, "puts the devil into some of the men and some are becoming as old womanish as the women themselves." The growth of Parishville was augmented by refugees from Ogdensburg and other towns.

But the Laurentians who remained were not going to be massacred without a struggle. At Gouverneur, Rossie and Massena formidable block houses were erected, surrounded by a stout palisade of logs. The Gouverneur fort was manned day and night until Isaac Austin, noticing how guard duties were causing settlers to neglect their crops, dryly observed that they might be faced by a worse enemy than Indians, and that, starvation. The Stockholmers erected a double line of pickets around Dr. Pettibone's house and another a mile east of the village. These fortifications were of timbers sixteen feet tall, sharpened at the top. Muskets were hastily obtained by pack horses from the stone arsenal which Governor Thompson had built at Russell shortly before the war started.

The Indian panic tempted a young jokester to gallop on horseback through the DePeyster settlement, shouting to the alarmed inhabitants that the Indians were coming. The people hurriedly fled to the woods. No Indians came and after an uncomfortable wait they returned to their homes. They were not amused. A year later the author of the prank was caught and severely flogged.

Dr. Hough narrates the story of an American who lived on a point of land by the St. Lawrence in Louisville. He decided to hearten his timid neighbors, so one clear night, with the help of some accomplices, he built a great number of fires along the river bank, then shouted loud military orders for an imaginary army to take positions. They were answered by his aides at suitable distances, and could be clearly heard across the water. A rattling of wagons was heard, indicating that the Canadian settlers were fleeing to the woods, where it was later revealed, they spent a night of terror.

The next year, a detachment of thirty British troops appeared at Hopkinton. An American spy had informed them that the United States army had stored a large amount of flour there. They found 300 barrels in Judge Hopkins' barn. Finding they could not carry away more than half this amount they began to destroy the rest but the settlers persuaded them to divide the rest of the flour among themselves. During this raid the soldiers searched the homes. They found and carried away twenty stands of muskets, probably the ones brought from the Russell arsenal.

Captain Forsythe arrived in Ogdensburg with two companies of troops late in 1812. There the militia joined him. On October 2, British gun boats took up positions and began bombarding the village. The scattered houses were but little damaged. Two days later a naval assault by the British was beaten off by our troops.

A severe winter arrived early, and the river iced over firmly. A horse patrol of four started up river on the ice one eve. Returning, they were met in the darkness by a body of fifteen men. These called out, "Who comes there?" "Friends," the horsemen answered. "Friends of whom?" pursued the challengers. The horsemen afraid the mysterious troops might be British answered, "Friends of King George." It was the wrong answer. There was a prompt volley of musketry from the challengers, killing two of the horses and wounding a horseman. A quick shouted explanation by one of the horse patrol satisfied the attackers and the firing ceased. This redoubtable company was of volunteer Revolutionary veterans and they considered themselves, by reason of their superior war experiences, to be independent of military rules.

The enterprising Captain Forsythe, hearing that a number of Americans were lodged in the Brockville jail, on Feb. 6, 1813 led his force on foot across the ice bound St. Lawrence and released fifty-two prisoners. This action brought down the vengeance of the British on Ogdensburg and two weeks later they crossed and made a two-pronged attack on the town.

One British column of 300 men were repulsed, but the other of 500 successfully got past the eight cannon Forsythe had posted in strategic spots -- except for one piece which forced them to run to cover. There they began such a galling fire on the Americans that the Captain was forced to retreat. Eighty Indians are said to have joined the British in this battle, but evidently they were no more atrocious than their allies. After Forsythe's withdrawal from the town British soldiers and civilians began looting the houses, except three, it was later noted. The British officers afterward claimed the looters had gotten out of hand. With the exception of the sacking of Ogdensburg, the British were generally scrupulous in paying for the provisions which they greatly needed.

The battle of Ogdensburg was the major action of the war within the bounds of our county. Fort Oswegatchie, which Gen. Brown had ordered built at Ogdensburg from plans by M. Ramee, who had been an engineer in Napoleon's army, was never finished and both sides abandoned the town for the rest of the war. The forty-five prisoners captured by the British were exchanged for the prisoners Captain Forsythe had taken in his raid on Brockville.

A letter has come down to us, written by a Mrs. York, an Ogdensburg lady. She was at her home when the British took the town and she states she snatched her money and her table spoons and ran as fast as she could, retreating fifteen miles. Next day, the lady returned to find her house plundered. Undaunted, she got permission to cross the river and confronted the British commander. He courteously told her she could have her plundered clothing if she could find it. That proved impossible and she had to leave without it, but she did succeed in bring back her husband, who had been taken prisoner.

Another spirited woman was Mrs. Stevens of Rossie. When the British Col. Frazer's party took the village, searching for horse thieves, he called the settlers together and told them if his men had taken anything it would be returned. She later found that a set of silver teaspoons were missing. Table silver was prized and handed down through generations of a family. She took prompt measures. A man of her acquaintance was sent to Kingston. He told the Colonel of her loss. The Colonel located the silver and he brought it back in triumph.

In the summer of 1814, British agents were openly buying cattle from farmers. This was a little too much for some of the Americans, however apathetic they might be. The cattle were seized and scattered among the farmers. Later however British soldiers returned and got back their cattle.

There were troubles with American troops, too. Young Daniel Hoard, the Parrish agent, was having supplies hauled with teams of horses for the building of Parishville, a pet project of the proprietors, over the same road, probably the Russell turnpike, that the American troops were traveling. The troops frequently "pressed" the horses and wagons into service, dumping the loads by the roadside.

In war time Canton, the "Great Vendue", was long remembered. There Dr. Campbell who was also the owner of the tavern, received secretly a sloop load of goods captured from the British. The British heard of this hidden loot and planned to recover it, but a furious snow storm providentially foiled their plans. The goods, said to be valued at \$50,000, were sold at auction. The chance to make a dollar and at the same time frustrate the British was not to be missed.

Part II

In early November 1813, the few settlers along the American shore of the St. Lawrence saw a great flotilla of three hundred small craft coming down the river. It carried Gen. Wilkinson's army on their way to Montreal. He had arrived at Sackets Harbor late in August to take command, but the expedition had not got underway until Oct. 29. But at last here it was and no American, Federalist or Jeffersonian, could doubt that his country meant business, and that serious times were ahead.

That night 1800 weary soldiers disembarked and camped at Morristown. The next day the fleet arrived near Ogdensburg and the army landed on shore. The battery at the

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British fort at Prescott was a threat, so the army was to march past it on the American side under cover of night while the fleet was to attempt to sail by. The fleet was discovered, but the British bombardment was without effect.

Gen. MacComb's 1200 troops were assigned to cross the river and engage the British shore batteries and disperse British troops, and he did good work there.

On November 7 a thousand troops from Kingston began to harass Wilkinson's army's rear. Gen. John Armstrong, the Secretary of War, had strongly urged that the Kingston fort be taken as the first step in the campaign, but Wilkinson had finally decided against it, and now the results of his bad judgment were becoming apparent.

On November 8 our cavalry and more troops crossed over. The enemy's forces continued to dog our troops, then eight British gun boats appeared in the river and began a cannonade. On the 10th the Americans came to Chrysler's Farm and there were numerous skirmishes with the enemy. On the next morning, the army found itself facing 1600 British. An engagement began and the British fell back about a mile into position. There they stood fast, and delivered a heavy fire for two and a half hours. The American dragoons attempted a flanking attack but that failed under a withering fire. The army had lost 339 killed and wounded by nightfall.

Next day the flotilla embarked. It passed through the Sault rapids and joined General Brown on Barnhart Island.

In the plan for the Canadian invasion, Gen. Wade Hampton's forces were to join Gen. Wilkinson. A dispatch from Hampton was received that day. He blandly stated that his troops were marching east to Lake Champlain. This blow decided the council of officers to select French Mills (Fort Covington) for the army's winter quarters.

General Wilkinson had been seriously ill during the battle, as was General Lewis Lewis, his second in command.

The winter of 1813-14 began with intense cold. Most of the soldiers had lost their blankets and the many sick could only be put in tents. Provisions were scarce and poor, and most of the medicines and hospital stores had been lost. The bitter cold continued and on Feb. 9, 1814 orders were given to leave. Gen. Brown led one division of troops to Sackets Harbor. The other division was to go to Plattsburgh. The march to Sackets probably passed over the Russell Turnpike and the troops with the many wounded or sick must have excited the pity of the settlers along the way.

Certainly thoughtful people began to believe Canada could not be invaded. Their people, instead of joining us, seemed to want no part in a single American country.

In Europe Napoleon surrendered on April 4, 1814 and he was exiled to Elba. Now England was free to turn all her armed might against America. The victorious Duke of Wellington was offered the command of a British expedition. However, he had his government withdraw the offer. He stated that Britain would have to gain a decisive victory if he took the field and he did not think that would be possible.

Gen. Packenham, Wellington's brother-in-law, was placed in charge of 12,000 seasoned veterans of the Napoleonic wars with orders to land at New Orleans.

A treaty was signed on December 24, 1814 with the British. The same boundaries were agreed upon as were held before the war. Nothing was said about the seizure of sailors or goods. With Napoleon's defeat the great blockade of Europe was over, and the British had no further shortage of sailors.

The battle of New Orleans was a smashing victory for the Americans and under Gen. Andrew Jackson. It was fought, unknown to both sides two weeks after the treaty was signed. That circumstance might be said to be characteristic of this war of military mischance.

LETTERS

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sure we could never make it up."

Papa told them - "It is quite a piece around to another road, and much deep sand on that road."

So the chauffeur managed to get us turned around in Mr. Goodenough's yard, and we went back home.

I made up my mind that day that "Someday I am going to own a car - AND DRIVE IT MYSELF!" I had been driving a horse for a little while and I was sure this would be a great improvement. In 1925 that dream came true - when my husband and I purchased our first car.

Last May 24 was my 75th birthday and on May 28 I started in my car - alone - for northern Vermont. Of the three weeks away from home I spent a few days in Potsdam.

Another of my girlhood dreams was to go to Malone, but 20 miles, Papa said, was too far to go in a day with a horse. We went every month to see Grandma Gibson in West Stockholm - 14 miles - but the extra 6 miles (12 miles round trip) - the difference between 28 and 40 miles, was just too much.

I find in a hand-written notebook, ambitiously entitled "Original Poems" an account of that first ride.

Best wishes for continued success.

Mrs. Abigail S. Cole (John M.)

23 Highview Ave.,
New Rochelle, N.Y.

Oct. 31, 1963

AN AUTO RIDE

I had an invitation

The other day to take a ride

And surely now I tell you

My pleasure I could not hide.

For I knew that of all fast riding

This surely would top the list

And without any extra exertion

Not even so much as a twist.

So I stepped quickly into the auto

And leaned back on the cushioned seat

Prepared to enjoy the experience

Which all previous ride would beat.

So off we went in a hurry

As though we were on business sent

Right straight out into the country

To surprise the natives we went.

As past houses we did go spinning

People peeked out at window and door

And judging at least by their actions

'Twas a sight they'd not seen before.

One woman seemed intently working

In a chair by the open door

But when she heard us coming

The chair fell back on the floor.

And she stood there like a statue

With her mouth open wide in wonder

'Till I almost feared her brain

With excitement might crack asunder.

Her husband up the road a bit farther

Ran up a bank in affright

And stood there staring, staring

His eyes sticking out round and bright.

Still on we went in our hurry

Till we ran right into a shower

That had passed before us

With a start of nearly an hour.

So we then turned 'round in a twinkling

Retracing our backward way

And thus completing our journey

That we took on this summer's day.

July 8, 1907

--Abigail Smith Cole