NEBRASKA STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTION RECORD

RG1082.AM: Helvas Canyon

Letters: 1934
Scotts Bluff County, Neb.
Size: 1 folder

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The collection contains six letters from 1934, five of which are between T.L. Green of Scottsbluff, Nebraska, and staff of the Nebraska State Historical Society. Through the letters, Green conducts research regarding the Helvas Canyon, Scotts Bluff County, trading post. The sixth letter, also concerning Helvas Canyon, comes from Carl Meek, Harrisburg, Nebraska.

Note: See Green, T.L., “A Forgotten Fur Trading Post in Scotts Bluff County,” *Nebraska History*, vol. 15, no. 1, 1934, pp. 38-46.

Subject headings:

Green, Thomas Lightfoot, 1884-1954
Helvas Canyon (Scotts Bluff County, Neb.)
Meek, Carl
Meek, Herman
Scotts Bluff County (Neb.) -- History

TMM 02-10-2017
Dear Sirs:

I received your letter and also the magazine and was very much pleased to get it and I will enclose Fifty cents for same.

The place I had in mind was the one Mr. T. L. Green described in the Wild Cat range of hills.

My grandfather, Herman Meek, went to California in 1849. He was with the wagon train that the Indians stopped at Raw-hide Butte, Wyoming and skinned the white man alive. He said that when they went through the North Platte Valley that the hills north and south were alive with Indians. He went through the Rumbidoux Pass and at that time Rumbidoux had a post and a blacksmith shop in the pass. He said up till the white man killed the Indian woman at or near Grand Island, they never had any trouble, but from then on clear through to California they had trouble often and all the way.

Herman Meek was the father to Seath Eugen Meek that fished for the United States for seven years and was at one time with the Smithsonian Institution at Washington, D. C. and at the time of his death in 1925 was with the Field Museum at Chicago, Ill. That is why I am interested in the parts along the old Oregon Trail.

I have a small collection that I have gathered in the last few years. At one time I had a large box full of arrows but have gave them all away. For 20 years ago they were very plentiful here and this winter has been a rather bad and windy. It has blown out the farm ground till we have found 35 or 40 good arrows head, but they are a different type than we found years ago.

I am sending a cap that I found over at the Helvas Canyon site. I have two or three and you may keep same if you chose.

I know Mr. T. L. Green and have had business dealing with him when he was in the bank at Scottsbluff, Nebraska. I wonder why Mr. Green did not mention the Brackhead Hill, south of Harrisburg, Nebraska. You can see the places there where they had their camp fires. There is a grave along the southwest face of the butte and there has been a large number of arrows head and hide scrapers. If your man comes up in this part of the country
I will show him around and tell him what little I know.

Yours respectfully,

Carl Meek

Harrisburg, Nebr.
T. L. Green  
SCOTTSBLUFF, NEBR.

September 15th, 1934.

Mr. A. E. Sheldon, Secretary.  
Nebraska State Historical Society.  
Lincoln Nebraska.

Dear Mr. Sheldon;

I have your kind invitation to present to the Historical Society a report on the trading-post site at its meeting on October 6th.

In reply will say that while I think possibly a report might be better delayed in the hope of definitely proving its origin and history from historical records which doubtless exist somewhere, I will try, if you wish it, to present a report, giving the meagre hearsay record, the data as to remains which exist including plans, maps, pictures and relics, and then give my hypothesis as to its origin. This theory may be later disproved, but it may at least set in motion investigation which might definitely prove what its history was. I can merely present evidence and let future investigation sift out the answer.

If I present this subject I believe a proper title would be, "A Forgotten Trading-post in Scotts Bluff County!"

Since you were here I have obtained possession of the bronze little medal found at this site by Mr. McClanahan the owner, and handed by him to Mr. W. J. Stafford of this city. Mr. Stafford is Vice-Prest. of the Scottsbluff National Bank. He very kindly has given the medal to me.

I am enclosing a rubbing of this little medal which may interest you. The date on it is 1830, and the inscription is in French and not in Latin. That date seems too late to have originated from Canadian French missionaries. And it seems too early a date for it to have a St. Louis origin. Father DeSmet the great Jesuit missionary among the Indians did not commence his work on the upper Missouri until 1838 and went first across the Oregon Trail in 1840. Moreover, I hardly believe this beautiful little medal was the kind which would be very apt to be bestowed on new converts.

I am more intrigued by the inscription being in French than I would be were it in Latin. Father DeSmet was a Belgian by birth, and French is spoken in Belgium. He came to
America in 1821, but made many trips to Europe to solicit funds for his work. Is it possible this little medal belonged to Father DeSmet himself and was lost when he visited this trading post on his return from the Horse Creek Treaty in 1851!

I have written to the President of St. Louis University, which institution has grown out of the one with which Father DeSmet was affiliated, and have sent him a rubbing of the medal with request for any information he might be able to give as to the Religious Order which might have used such a medal, and probable origin of the one we have found. I certainly hope he may be able to throw some light on the question, and I will let you know if such is the case.

While it is possible something might turn up to prevent my attending the meeting October 6th. I will do so if possible, and will in the meantime get together what I have in form for presentation.

Very truly yours

[Signature]

Thos. L. Green
Scottsbluff Nebr.
P.O. Box 473
TO SEE CLEARLY? HOLD UP TO A BRIGHT LIGHT.

Bronze medal found at trading post site.
Place for attachment broken. Vis M O

OBVERSE
Figure of Virgin Mary.
Date, 1830.
O Marie concue sans peche priez pour nous
Qui avons recoer a vous

REVERSE
Twelve stars. Cross with M at its base.
Two hearts, I apparently transfixed by sword. I encircled by crown of thorns or
wreath. A flower. (OVER)
Dear Miss Sandoz;

I wonder if you have any record of a fur trader or trapper named "Papan".

It seems to me I have in some of my reading run across that name, but I cannot recall where it was.

My reason for the inquiry is this: On a conical little hill about 400 yards from the Helvas Canyon trading post site there is a cedar post sticking out of the ground about 3 feet.

One of our old settlers tells me that he had been told there was once a board nailed to this post bearing a name but that all which could be read were the letters "PAPA". Also he says that many years ago the grave was dug up, bones of a white man being found - at least there were no Indian relics - and that the wife of the owner of the land at that time made them rebury the bones. All of this was back in the early 80s.

As all the letters on the board were not legible and as "PAPA" would seem rather an incomplete and strange word to put on a grave - most of those early graves are quite complete as to name and date and place of residence, I wondered if that was not an incomplete name.

As said before, the name "Papan" sounds familiar to me in connection with some of the fur trader days.

If you find anything in this connection, or have any suggestions, I would be pleased to hear from you.

Very respectfully,

[Signature]
"Pierre Didier Papin, sixth son of Joseph M. Papin and Marie Louise Chouteau Papin, was born in St. Louis March 7th, 1798. As a boy he had spent much time with the American Fur Company. When old enough he was sent to the mountains and there, after one or two years, he was invested with the charge of the important post of Fort Laramie, a considerable point for the distribution of Indian supplies and the gathering of furs, and later on a very busy wayside depot of supplies to the white emigrants on the Oregon Trail. This employment was his lifetime business. He died at Scotts Bluff, Wyoming, suddenly, while on an excursion from his fort.

(Hyde, William and Howard L. Conard, Encyclopedia of the History of St. Louis, vol. 3, p. 1693)

"Pierre Didier Papin married Catherine Louise, only daughter of Pascal Leon Cerre, Aug. 10th, 1826. He died suddenly in May, 1853, at the age of 55 years, and his widow in April, 1884, aged 77 years and 7 months. They left four children, Leon J., who married Medora C. daughter of Capt. John D. Daggett; Alfred J., who married Virginia McCord, of Georgia; Palmyre, who married Joseph P. Wilkinson; Armantine J., who married Henry T. Norcum.

(Billon, Frederic L. Annals of St. Louis, from 1804 to 1821, p. 185)

Miss Drumm says that sometimes the name was spelled Pappan."
Mr. A. E. Sheldon, Supt.
Nebr. State Historical Society.
Lincoln Nebraska.

Dear Mr. Sheldon;

Enclosed I hand for your inspection a report made by Mr. Gregor Norman-Wilcox, of the staff of the Los Angeles Museum, on the fragments of glass and china from the Helvas Canyon trading post site and which I sent to them.

These fragments were samples of every type and pattern which I had found up to that time.

You will see that the glass is from American made whiskey flasks of the period 1840-1855. And the china is all of English manufacture of periods 1835 to 1860. None earlier nor later than those dates.

Another report from Mr. Arthur Woodward of that museum on some additional brass trade goods from that site gives a dating of the period between 1830 and 1860.

It would seem that there is nothing in these reports to refute a theory that this trading post was established about 1840. And also, the evidence that china ware of such a quality was at least to some extent in use might indicate its occupation by a large, prosperous outfit, such as the American Fur Co.

I suppose china of any description might have been acquired by any trading post from emigrants on the Oregon Trail, but at this site decorated English ware seems to be about all that was used. Since the enclosed report was made I have found a few fragments of white, undecorated Ironstone china.

I thought you would be interested in seeing the enclosed report, and ask that it be returned for my files.

Very respectfully,

T. L. Green

P. S. You will notice that the report covers about 17 different plate types or patterns.
November 17, 1934

Mr. T. L. Green,
Scotts Bluff, Nebraska

Dear Mr. Green:

I've taken several days to think about your query concerning a fur trader or a trapper named "Papin". There is considerable information of a vague nature on the various Pappans and Papins of the Fur Trade in my mind but it has not been refreshed for years. However, I have a few definite notes for you which may or may not be useful as leads:


Parkman, p. 65, says "Papin was the bourgeois of Fort Laramie."

Nebraska State Historical Society Publications, Volume XX, p. 159, quotes the Daily Missouri Republican: July 7, 1846, P. D. Papin arrived at Ft. Leavenworth July 2, from Fort St. John, "at the junction of the Laramie and Big Platte rivers."

Publications, Volume XX, p. 122, May, 1847, P. D. Papin came in from Fort Laramie on the 24th, with a party of six. Left Laramie on April 20.

There are probably various other Papins and other spellings,
but just now I'm unable to produce any other sources. If it comes to me I'll write you.

Your article comes out in the Magazine about Tuesday. We were a little delayed through a congestion at the printers. I think it is very interesting and should arouse a great deal of reminiscing among old timers.

If you find anything further, will you let us know? We wish to keep our files as complete as possible on this matter.

Sincerely,

[Signature]
Dec. 14th, 1934.

Mr. A. E. Sheldon, Supt.
Nebr. State Historical Society.
Lincoln, Nebr.

Dear Mr. Sheldon;

I am enclosing copy of quotations sent me by Miss Stella Brumm, Librarian of Missouri Historical Society, which I thought might interest you.

You will notice that Papin of the American Fur Co. died in May 1853 at Scotts Bluff, "Wyoming", "While on an excursion from his fort!"

As Ft. Laramie was sold in 1849 this must have been the fort at Scotts Bluffs mentioned by Coutant. Also the word, "Excursion", might indicate a short trip rather than a long expedition. Also, an excursion of many miles might have been made in this neighborhood and his death have occurred at Scotts Bluff as the term was then understood.

You will remember my telling you of the grave a couple hundred yards from the Helvas Canyon trading post site on which was formerly a cross with the name, "Papa", or, "Pappan". This inscription seemed so unusual, as these old graves usually gave full names, and often dates, that I wondered if possibly the inscription might not have been Papan or Pappan, and the final letter become obliterated.

My informants (2) now tell me the name was carved on the cross piece of the wooden cross, which was about 5 feet high. They say it was not impossible for the final letter to have been a letter N and the condition of the wood making it unreadable. I'm inclined to think that unless the N were quite plain it would not have been noticed by these people. The word "Papan" or "Pappan" meant nothing to them, whereas Papa or Pappaw was something they did understand, and would remember.

This man was probably buried at his fort, and if that location was at the Ft. Mitchell site, they certainly did not carry him to Helvas Canyon for burial. If this grave should be the grave of Papin, it would seem to indicate the Helvas Canyon trading post was the American Fur Co. post.

At any rate, it is at least a peculiar coincidence that starting with a hunch that, "Papa", might have really been "Pappan" or "Papan", which name I remembered as somewhere being associated with the fur trade but not remembering how or when, I should now find that he actually was head man of the American
Mr. A.E.S.
Lincoln.

Fur Co. in this territory; that he died at Scotts Bluff in 1853, which date agrees with my theory as to time of occupation of the Helvas Canyon post, and that this grave should be right at that post. Its all so far nothing but circumstantial evidence, but I think its interesting.

Miss Drumm tells me she thinks the files of the "St. Louis Republican" of a couple of months after his death (it would take that long for the news to reach St. Louis) might give the particulars and throw light on this matter of the fort's location, because of the prominence of the family. She says they have several people who can be hired at .40¢ per hour or $3.00 per day to go through the files of the paper and report what they find.

I wonder if the paper was a daily or a weekly and how much time it would probably take to go through the files for say the 3 months of June, July and August, 1853. Have you any idea? If it wouldn't be too expensive I might hire this done. I would like to know your opinion.

By the way, I would like 3 additional copies of the last History magazine, if you will advise as to cost I will remit. Suppose price is on the cover, but I gave my copy to McMcClanahan owner of the site.

Very truly,

T. L. Green

P.S. Will you kindly call Miss Sandoz attention to the enclosed Papin accounts. She was so kind as to furnish me with some references in this connection.