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On the Trail of “Old Jim Bridger’s Daughter”

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ON THE TRAIL OF "OLD JIM BRIDGER'S DAUGHTER"

By Dr. R. W. Reynolds, Lincoln

A few weeks ago while on my vacation, my travels took me to Kansas City, Mo. Knowing that the only living offspring of "Old Jim Bridger", Mrs. Virginia Bridger Hahn, lived somewhere within the confines of Kansas City or its suburbs, I made myself a self appointed scout to trail her down.

First, I searched the city and telephone directories for her name but this gave no clew. I learned by casual inquiry that she had lived in Kansas City, Kan. So I hired a taxi cab and betook myself across the river to this suburb of Kansas City proper. No one in this place, of whom I made inquiry, knew anything about such a person. It seemed that I was on a blind trail. But the thought struck me that some information might possibly be obtained at the court house, as this was the county seat and the tax assessor is noted for finding his prey. A man at the court house of whom I made inquiry said that Mrs. Hahn had lived there, but he thought she had left town and did not know or have any idea where she might have gone. A girl in this office hearing a part of the conversation said she knew about where Mrs. Hahn had lived. I thankfully received this address, thinking that perhaps some one in this neighborhood might know where she had moved.

I now visited the neighborhood indicated and by inquiry on all sides did find that she had lived there. The lady who gave me the information asked me if she wasn't the "Indian woman who had sued the picture company?" On being informed that she was, she said "Mrs Hahn left this place quite a while ago and would not tell anyone where she was going, but I know the lawyer who has her case." She gave me the name of Judge Grady.

I lost no time in finding Judge Grady's office. I found the Judge in and he informed me that he did not have Mrs. Hahn's case, but that his partner, a Mr. Railsback, did and that Mr. Railsback was in court. I got on Mr. R's trail at once and after a long wait in the courthouse I concluded, as the hour was growing late, to return to my hotel for the night and pick up the trail at sunrise.

The next morning it occurred to me that I might get in communication with Mr. R. by telephone and save myself much travel. I phoned him. He informed me that he would give no address or other information unless I returned to Kansas City, Kan., and talked with him, as he said moving picture representatives had been pestering Mrs. Hahn trying to get her to settle her law suit against them for defaming her father's character. So as there was no other way I returned to K. C., K. Again I waited in the lawyer's office three long hours but was finally ushered into his august presence, stated who I was, what my business was, and was cross questioned. I convinced him, evidently, that I was myself and nobody else and had nothing to do with moving picture corporations, as he gave me the sought address.

The address proved to be in Kansas City, Mo., in a certain part of Old Westport, not far from the old stamping grounds of "Old Jim Bridger" himself. As this day, the second one on this trail, was now almost spent I returned to K. C., K., with the firm resolve to be out bright and early the next morning on the now hot trail.

When I arrived at the house I was met on the veranda by an elderly lady whom I knew to be the party I sought with this inquiry, "Whom do you wish to see?" I replied that I wished to see Mrs. Virginia Bridger Hahn. Then with a quick appraising glance from a pair of sharp black eyes, "What is your business with Mrs. Hahn?" I then explained who



Mrs. Virginia Bridger Hahn in Her Father's Chair at
Kansas City — as found by Dr. Reynolds

I was and that I was looking over Old Westport from a historic standpoint and wanted especially to see and talk with the daughter of "Old Jim Bridger." She then said "I am Mrs. Hahn. Come in and I will talk with you."

The next two hours were spent in most interesting conversation with this link between the early pioneer days of the west and modern times. She was very kind to me and took great pains to go into detail regarding little things about which I asked her and I think was very pleased to find someone who knew something of her past life and was interested. This lady, whose mother was a Ute woman, and whose father was "Old Jim Bridger", of whom it is said no one knew the

country west of the Mississippi river to the Pacific Ocean so well, is now well past 75 years of age, I think 76. She is rather well preserved and shows very little of her Indian ancestry, but greatly resembles pictures of her illustrious father. She says that people who knew her father always commented on her resemblance to him, both in features and actions. She told me she was born at Ft. Bridger in the southwest corner of Wyoming, the historic trading post established by her father for the purpose of trading with emigrants and Indians; that she resided there until 5 years of age.

Her mother died at or shortly after her birth and she was raised partly on buffalo milk and mares' milk. At the age of 5 her father took her to St. Louis, Mo., and placed her in a Catholic convent where she was raised to womanhood and educated. She explained that her father was married to her mother, first in the Indian way, that is her father gave to her mother's father, so many ponies, so many blankets, etc., but later was married in the white man's way by Father De Smet, that early and faithful religious pioneer of the west, who spent so many years among the Indians and after whom many historic places have been named. Lake De Smet is one. Mrs. Hahn has never returned to her native mountain home and has never seen any of her Indian relatives. She owns land in Utah a short way across the state line from where she was born. This land was allotted to her by the government through her Indian rights. She has always wanted to return to the land of her birth and still hopes to be able to do so before she passes on. She has a granddaughter, Mrs. Helen Mead, who now resides at Casper, Wyo., who wishes her to pay a visit, but her attorney will not agree to have her do this until her pending law suit against the moving picture people for portraying her father in an improper light, has been settled. She can distinctly remember when "Old Westport," now a thickly settled part of Kansas City, Mo., was covered with timber and only a bridle path running through it.

I inquired if she retained any relics from her father, such as rifles, bowie knives, etc., At first she said she did not. Later she said she did have a couple of little things, one of them a small pair of merchant's shears with which the old trapper used to keep his beard trimmed. The other and more interesting of the two is a gold pin with a rather sizable head on it which he had made and used for the purpose of removing the wax from his ears. It is rumored, she said, that a man living in Wyandotte, another suburb of Kansas City, has an old rifle which was once the property of her father. She intends investigating the authenticity of this report, and if possible gaining possession of it so that it may be placed in its proper channel.

In a book recently published on the life of James Bridger by Mr. J. Cecil Alder and put out by the Shepard Book Co. of Salt Lake City, Utah, is a picture of Mrs. Virginia Bridger Hahn, seated in an old willow chair. This chair is owned by an old lady who now lives on the old Bridger farm in Westport and is of interest because Old Jim in his declining years was wont to sit in this chair. Mrs. Hahn said he always wanted to sit facing the west in this old chair, as if he might get a view of his beloved mountains with his dim and failing eyesight.

Although only 5 years of age when removed from the land of her birth, Mrs. Hahn can remember several little incidents that occurred while she was still there. One is as follows: It seems that there was a desire on the part of her Indian relatives to secure possession of her and keep her (they may have had an inkling of the "Old Scout's" intentions of removing her to the white man's country). She recalls that this day her father came in search of her and found her in a tepee, that there was some reluctance on the part of the Indians to give her up and in the

general melee which followed her "pappy" up with his rifle and shot an Indian and she ran out of the tepee and grasped her father about the knees. Another thing she recalls that it was her habit to climb up on the walls of the old fort and watch for her father's return from the hunt. On seeing him coming in the distance she jumped down from the wall and ran through the yard of the fort to meet him. In the fort yard was a fire which was being used for some blacksmith work and in her excitement she stepped in this fire which badly burned the hair moccasin on one of her feet as well as the foot. Her father gathered her up and took her to the river where he allowed the moccasin-covered foot to soak until it became soft and pliable and could be peeled off without pain.

Her father was a tall, raw boned man, so tall that he could not sleep with comfort in an ordinary bed. On this account he dreaded very much making the trip to St. Louis with his furs as he could not sleep well in the city beds and usually had to take his blankets on the floor. At his home on the farm at Westport he had a carpenter construct an extra long bed for him.

Most trappers were inveterate users of tobacco, especially smokers. Not so her father. He could and did chew, but he could not take more than a whiff or two from the pipe without becoming nauseated. Mrs. Hahn's first husband, a Capt. W., once said to her father, "Dad, if I buy you a fine meerschaum pipe don't you think you could learn to smoke?" Bridger replied "I would give anything if I could and I'll try." The pipe, a fine one, was purchased and presented to the old trapper. He lit it and took a couple of whiffs and laid it down with the remark, "It's no use, I can't do it." Mrs. Hahn well remembers when her father's body was dug up from the hill facing the west on the old farm and removed to Washington Cemetery in Kansas City, where Gen. Dodge provided a fine monument. At that time the coffin had disintegrated completely, also the clothing, and only the skull and a few of the larger bones remained for removal.

Although the trail after Mrs. Hahn was to me as difficult to find and follow as perhaps were some of the trails followed by "Old Jim Bridger" himself, at the end I found that for which I sought. I feel well repaid and have that sense of satisfaction which no doubt, the old trapper felt when he blazed a new trail where no white man had ever been before or when he first gazed upon the waters of Great Salt Lake.