

McConnell Family of Birch Coolie, Minnesota During The U.S.-Dakota War of 1862

July, 2012

Summary of the McConnell Family at the outbreak of the U.S.-Dakota War on August 18, 1862:

Ellen McConnell: Escaped to Ft. Ridgely never to return to live in Birch Coolie
David McConnell: Escaped to Ft. Ridgely never to return to live in Birch Coolie
Martha McConnell Clausen: Captured along with her two small children by the Dakota Indians and released at Camp Release and never to return to live in Birch Coolie. Her husband (Frederick) and father-in-law (Charles) shot and killed by Dakota Indians.
Joseph McConnell: Escaped to Ft. Ridgely never to return to live in Birch Coolie
Thomas Brooks: Shot and killed by Dakota Indians

Ellen Carson McConnell

Ellen Carson McConnell was born in Scotland on May 30, 1791. She married James McConnell. They had six children David, Jane, Martha, James, Alexander and Joseph. Ellen, and all of her children except James, immigrated to the United States in the 1850s. James immigrated to the United States in 1889. She arrived in the United States in 1858 along with her daughter Martha McConnell. She lived with her son, David McConnell, who had first come to Minnesota around 1857 and lived in Houston County, Minnesota. David soon moved to Birch Coolie, where they both resided on the north half of Section 33, Township 113N, Range 34 W, along Birch Coolie Creek.

According to a biography of Ellen's son, David, in the History of Houston County, on the late afternoon of August 18, 1862, Ellen was alone in the house she shared with him when two Indians broke into the house, destroyed or carried away all valuables and threatened to kill her with an axe. Her life was spared by one of the Indians to whom she had shown previous kindness. At the same time, Ellen's grandson, Thomas Brooks, age 13, son of Jane McConnell Brooks, was shot and killed bringing dinner to his uncle David McConnell who was working in the fields. On the same day, a short distance away, her daughter Martha McConnell Clausen and her two very young children were captured by the Indians and Martha's husband, Fred Clausen, and father-in-law, Charles, were killed. Martha and the children were later released at Camp Release in September, 1862.

The very next night after the attack, Ellen and David walked 12 miles to Fort Ridgely. She was 70 years old. When Ellen and David arrived at Fort Ridgely, they were reunited with her son, Joseph McConnell, who was working as a plasterer for the Lower Sioux Agency when it was attacked on the morning of August 18. Joseph escaped to Fort Ridgely the evening of the outbreak. For several days after they arrived at Fort Ridgely, it was attacked and under siege by more than 400 Indians. It was defended by only a small military force with 200 frightened settlers who had escaped huddled in a cluster of

buildings. The settlers joined with the soldiers to defend the Fort and they ultimately prevailed when the Indians left to pursue other targets.

There are various accounts of what happened to Ellen on August 18. See the profile of Martha McConnell Clausen McGowan that discusses a letter dated many years later from Martha's daughter discussing Ellen's experience.

Ellen never returned to her home in Birch Coolie. She filed a Depredation Claim (Claim #2559) with the United States government on June 6, 1863 and was paid \$112.00 for the possessions she lost when forced from her home in Birch Coolie. Among her possessions listed were many books including those of Scottish history, Byron's poems, a family bible and numerous yard goods. She and David moved back to Yucatan, Houston County, Minnesota in the Fall of 1862 where she resided until her death on November 30, 1868 at the age of 77 years. It was reported that her mind was "shattered" after her experiences surrounding the Dakota War. She is buried in the Sheldon Cemetery, in Sheldon, Houston County, Minnesota along with her son, David.

David B. McConnell

David B. McConnell was born in Twynholm, Scotland on October 12, 1817. At the age of 18 years, he went to Cambridge, England where he was employed as a clerk in a dry goods store which he later purchased and operated for 12 years. He immigrated to the United States in 1854 and lived in Dedham, Massachusetts for a year. He moved to Yucatan, Houston County, Minnesota probably drawn there by another native of Twynholm, Scotland, James Kelly, who resided in Yucatan at the time. Around 1859, he settled along Birch Coolie. He laid claim and improved 320 acres on the north half of Section 33, Township 113 N, Range 34 W in Birch Coolie Township where he lived with his mother, Ellen.

In the late afternoon of August 18, 1862, the Dakota Indians broke into his home, destroyed or carried off the contents and threatened to kill his mother, Ellen. David's young nephew, Thomas Brooks, age 13, was shot and killed. His sister Martha McConnell Clausen was captured along with her two children while at the same time her husband, Frederick, was killed along with his father, Charles. David and his mother, Ellen, walked to Fort Ridgely the next night where they reconnected with David's brother, Joseph, who had escaped from the Lower Sioux Agency the day before. For several days after they arrived at Fort Ridgely, it was attacked and under siege by more than 400 Indians. It was defended by only a small military force with 200 frightened settlers who had escaped huddled in a cluster of buildings. The settlers joined with the soldiers to defend the Fort and they ultimately prevailed. Shortly after, David and his brother, Joseph, began serving as Privates for three months under Captain Mark Hendricks' Battery of Light Artillery. This Company was organized at the commencement of the Dakota War and served with General Sibley's First Expedition and participated in all the engagements of that command.

David never returned to live in Birch Coolie but resettled in Yucatan, Houston County, Minnesota in the Fall of 1862 on a beautiful piece of land in the Yucatan valley along the Root River. He married Ann Messerall of Sheldon, Minnesota and had two children, James and David. His wife, Ann, died from complications of childbirth a few weeks after the birth of David Junior, who would also die young at the age of 4. The elder David died on November 18, 1887 and is buried at the Sheldon Cemetery, Houston County, Minnesota along with his mother, Ellen, and wife and son, David.

Martha McConnell Clausen McGowan

Martha McConnell Clausen (Clasen) McGowan was born in Scotland on April 11, 1826. She immigrated to the United States in 1858 along with her mother Ellen. She married Frederick (Fred) Clausen on April 21, 1860 in New Ulm, Minnesota and her brother, David McConnell, and father-in-law, Charles Clausen, were witnesses. Martha and Frederick were reported living in Birch Coolie with Martha's mother, Ellen, and brother, David, in 1860.

On August 18, 1862, Martha was captured by the Dakota Indians at or near her home in Birch Coolie, Minnesota along with her two small children, Ellen Jane and Mary Ellen. Her husband, Frederick, and his father, Charles, were killed by the Indians and lie in unmarked graves likely close to where they were killed. Martha and her children were released at Camp Release in September, 1862.

An Indian named Tehehdonecha was prosecuted and convicted during the trials of Sioux Military Commission of 1862 (Case #2) for the murder of Fredrick and Charles and rape of Margaret Cardinal, a neighbor from Birch Coolie. He was hanged in Mankato, Minnesota on December 26, 1862 along with 37 other Dakota Indians.

Tehehdonecha, Margaret Cardinal and Mrs. Harriet Valiant testified at the trial. Mrs. Valiant testified that they were at the Clausen's house and several Indians came along and two men and a woman and child ran into the woods. Mrs. Valiant testified that three Indians ran off after them and came back and said they had killed two. Tehehdonecha testified that he and nine others approached a wagon load of white people east of Beaver Creek and that he stayed by the wagon and prevented the other Indians from killing the women and children. He reported the white men ran off and the other Indians went after them. Ms. Cardinal reported that five Indians approached the wagon and three white men, a woman and a little child ran into the woods but that Tehehdonecha stayed by the wagon with another Indian. The men referred to in this account could have included the elderly Charles Clausen.

Ellen Clausen Door, one of Martha's daughters captured along with her, corresponded with Marion Satterlee (Marion P. and William W. Satterlee Papers, Box 1) during his research on the victims of the U.S.-Dakota War. In that correspondence she reported on

stories from her mother telling of her time during captivity. The following are excerpts from the correspondence from two letters to Mr. Satterlee:

“Mother had a few nice dresses and pieces of cloth in her trunk which she had brought over from Scotland. The Indians opened this trunk and tore the dresses and pieces of cloth into small pieces to tantalize her.

Later on, a friendly Indian who could talk English told her that she would have to wear a blanket and a kind of sack, which they wore instead of her dress, as the Indians intended killing her if she did not do so herself in another day. So she got a squaw to show her how to make it.

One night when it was raining hard she felt someone pulling at a buffalo robe that she had brought along with her, and upon waking up she saw two squaws pulling the robe from under her. (She used the robe for a mattress.) So she let them have it and held her three week’s old baby in her arms the rest of the night to keep it out of the water.” February 14, 1914 Letter to Mr. Satterlee from Mrs. N.A. Door.

“In reply to your letter of the 13th, my father Frederick Clausen and his father were killed the time of the Sioux Indian Massacre, also Thomas Brook, a boy of fourteen, and the entire Hire (Heur?) family. Mrs. Hire being father’s aunt. All of these people lived on adjoining claims along the timber known as Birch Cooley. The men were making hay in the valley, near where Morton now stands. The indians hitched up our team and put mother, my little sister, a baby of five weeks and myself into the wagon. Father came hurrying up from the field to get grandmother McConnell out of the house but she had escaped and was hiding a short distant from the house. Father had motioned for us to start on hoping to find her and catch us. Just before we went around a turn in the road we saw an indian shoot him. Mother said that she saw the indians holding consoltation many times and believed that they would have shot her if it wasn’t for friendly indians whom she had fed on many previous occasions. Mother and her two babies were indian captives for six weeks.” January 21, 1914 Letter to Mr. Satterlee from Mrs. N.A. Door.

These two accounts discussing Martha’s capture show some inconsistencies with other historical references such as the testimony during the trial of Tehehdonecha. There is also an account discussing her mother’s experience that needs to be reconciled with these two accounts. Reconciling these various accounts to be as consistent as possible suggests that a number of Birch Coolie neighbors had gathered at the Clausen/McConnell home to do haying. Haying was happening all over the valley at the time. When the Indians arrived in the late afternoon, most of the men were out haying in the fields and the women were gathered near the house. The Indians entered the house and found Ellen McConnell whose life was threatened by one Indian but spared by another when he interceded because she had shown him previous kindness. Ellen escaped from the house

and hid outside. The Indians plundered the house opening trunks and taking valuables. The Indians hitched up a team of horses at the farm to a wagon and put the plunder and the women and children in the wagon. A couple of men, possibly including the older Charles Clausen, and a woman and child ran into the woods near the Coolie. They were followed by a number of Indians who when they returned said they had killed two. Fred Clausen heard the shooting and came running up from the field and saw what was happening. He motioned for Martha to start, hoping to catch up. He ran into the house looking for Ellen, Martha's mother, but she had already escaped and was hiding a short distance away. As the wagon holding the women and children traveled down the road, they looked back and saw an Indian shoot Fred.

After the War in 1865, Martha Clausen made a claim on Section 28, Township 113 N, Range 34 W. This claim abuts Section 33 to the north, the section where her mother, Ellen, and brother, David, had lived. Martha also made a claim for aid under the Widows & Children Act in Nicollet County and was awarded \$65. Martha married Duncan McGowan in 1865 and he later claimed the property in Section 28 in Birch Coolie. Martha and Duncan settled on a farm in South half of Section 25 in Nicollet Township, Nicollet County, Minnesota. She had a daughter with Duncan named Margaret Isabella. Her daughter, Mary Clausen, died in 1880 of typhoid. Her daughter, Ellen Clausen, married Norman A. Door of Nicollet County, Minnesota. Martha died on January 7, 1914 in Nicollet County. Martha, Duncan McGowan and her daughters, Mary and Ellen, are all buried in Hebron Cemetery, Nicollet County, Minnesota. Margaret Isabella married James Hendley who died and then married Herman Heiser. She is also buried in Hebron Cemetery.

Joseph McConnell

Joseph McConnell was born around 1837 in Scotland. He immigrated to the United States in the 1850s and lived in Dedham, Massachusetts. He married Elizabeth Oakhem in Dedham on April 7, 1862. Shortly after his marriage in April, he came to Birch Coolie, Minnesota where his mother, Ellen, brother David, and sister, Martha McConnell Clausen lived. David had been improving a claim for him on his land in Section 33 and Joseph's plan was to return for his wife in Massachusetts when he became settled. He started work for Agent Galbraith at the Lower Sioux Agency (Agency) as a plasterer in May, 1862 and resided at a boarding house run by Shepherd Dickinson at the Agency during the week. He stored his trunk with his personal belongings including clothing and tools at David's house about two miles from the Agency. On Sundays, he would return there for a change of clothes.

On August 18, 1862, he was at the Agency when it was attacked by the Dakota Indians. He fled that evening around 7 pm to Fort Ridgely with Mr. Nairn, the head carpenter at the Agency, and his family. He was at Fort Ridgely when his mother, Ellen, and brother, David, arrived the next day. He and his brother, David, served as Privates for three months under Captain Mark Hendricks' Battery of Light Artillery. This Company was organized at the commencement of the Dakota War and served with General Sibley's First Expedition and participated in all the engagements of that command.

He reported that while serving in General Sibley's expedition that fall, on their way back from Camp Release, he stopped at his brother David's home in Birch Coolie and found it open and plundered of all valuables. He also reported that he saw the carpenter's shop at the Agency had been burned where he had left a number of tools. He made a Depredation Claim (Claim #200) in 1863 for belongings he lost in the Dakota War and was awarded \$200.00. In it he provided a detailed list of clothing, a watch, plastering tools and brushes that he had lost during the War.

After the War, Joseph is listed as making a claim on Section 33, Township 113 N, Range 34 W, the same section where his brother and mother had lived. He was reported living in Ramsey County, Minnesota at the time of his Depredation Claim in 1863 and it appears he never came back to live in Birch Coolie to live. He along with his wife, Elizabeth and four children were also reported living in Ramsey County, Ward 1, in 1870 and 1880. His occupation is listed as plasterer. His brother, Alexander, is reported living with him in 1870. Joseph died on March 6, 1872 at the age of 33. His death certificate lists cause of death as heart disease. He is buried in an unmarked grave at Oakland Cemetery, St. Paul, MN. His family appears to have left Minnesota after his death possibly to return to Boston where his wife, Elizabeth, came from. According to census records, his son Theodore appears to have lived in the Marcella Street Home in Boston in 1880 at the age of 10. The Marcella Street Home was a residence for orphaned and pauper boys.

Thomas Brooks

Thomas Brooks was born in England in 1850. He was the son of Jane McConnell Brooks (daughter of Ellen Carson McConnell) and Mark Brooks. He immigrated to the United States along with his parents and lived in Dedham, Massachusetts before moving to Minnesota with his parents.

On August 18, 1862 he was reportedly shot and killed by the Indians around the age 13 in Birch Coolie, Minnesota. Reports say he was bringing dinner to his uncle David when killed. David McConnell's witness statement for Joseph McConnell's Depredation Claim states that on the evening of August 18 his family was forced from their home in Birch Coolie and his nephew, Thomas Brooks, was shot. Some accounts list Mark Brooks as being killed but these reports are in error. Mark was the father of Thomas and records show he survived. Thomas Brooks lies in an unmarked grave likely close to where he was killed in Birch Coolie.

After the War, Thomas' parents moved to Houston County, Minnesota and lived with his grandmother, Ellen Carson McConnell, and uncle, David McConnell, in Yucatan. Thomas' parents later moved to Nicollet County where his father, Mark, and brother, James, are listed as owning adjacent farms in Nicollet County in 1901. These farms are adjacent to the farm his aunt, Martha, and Duncan McGowan lived on for many years. His mother, Jane McConnell Brooks, died in Nicollet County on February 19, 1903.

Alexander McConnell

Alexander McConnell was born on August 4, 1832 in Dumfriesshire, Scotland. He immigrated to the United States in 1858 and lived in Dedham, Massachusetts where he married Mary Archer in July 7, 1860. In 1870, he is listed as living in Birch Coolie in Section 33, Township 113 N, Range 34 W, the same land first claimed and improved by his brother David and Joseph. He lived there until his death in 1903.

Alexander was also listed as working as a plasterer in 1870 when living with his brother, Joseph, in Ramsey County and is listed as a mason in his obituary. Oral family histories suggest he frequently worked as a mason in St. Paul during the winter months on some large homes along Summit Avenue. Alexander had five children: Eleanor, George, David, Eva and Laura. He died on February 19, 1903 and the original 320-acre McConnell farmstead in Birch Coolie in Section 33 was held in the McConnell family by his descendants until at least the 1950s. Duane McConnell and his siblings, Alexander's grandchildren, told of playing in Birch Coolie Creek adjacent to the house when a child and finding Indian artifacts. Alexander is buried along with his wife Mary Archer and children Laura, Evelyn (Eva) and Eleanor high on the hill in the Morton City Cemetery in a family plot overlooking the Minnesota River Valley.

*Source materials for this account include citations to over 40 historical documents including obituaries, US and English census data; plat maps; Histories of Renville and Houston Counties, Minnesota; witness statements supporting U.S. Government Depredation Claims; witness statements from the Sioux Military Commission Trials of 1862; cemetery records; personal correspondence with Marion Satterlee (Box 1); and numerous history books regarding the Dakota War.