

Harvest Home – The Lost Holidays of Fort Nisqually

By Jerry Eckrom

Fort Nisqually was a home for some, a trading post for many, an occasional refuge in troubled times, but above all it was a workplace. The work was hard and the hours were long, lasting ten hours Monday through Friday, with half a day on Saturday. Holidays were a welcome relief from the drudgery, and there were precious few of them. Many of the holidays that comfort beleaguered workers today had not arrived on the scene. Some holidays, such as Christmas (See *Occurrences Winter 2003-04*) and New Year, were as familiar then as they are today. Others are a reminder that the employees at Fort Nisqually were from a different time and place.

The little we know of holidays at Fort Nisqually comes largely from the *Journal of Occurrences*, the daily record of labor assignments and related events. This is primarily a work record, not a social diary, and it looks at holidays primarily as an addition to the work, or an explanation of why chores were not performed on a given day. One such entry came on September 4, 1846 reading “Gave all hands a holiday for harvest home, who enjoyed themselves in the evening by a merry dance at the waterside store, cleared for that purpose. Captains Duntze and Gordon and a good many officers and men from both ships attending. The band of Her Majesty’s Ship Frigate Fisgard were kindly sent to perform for us.”

On August 23, 1848 there was another entry, again connected with the visit of a naval ship, this time the HMS *Pandora*. The entry finishes with the line “Some expense was incurred today in anticipation of the Harvest Home holiday for the men.” For this event, there is a rare bit of detail from an outside source. Joseph Heath ventured out from the Puget Sound Agricultural Company farm he superintended near what is now the town of Steilacoom to witness some of the festivities on the 24th. He remarked in his journal that the supply ship *Cadboro* was also there, and that there was target shooting and horse racing. He had done a smaller scale celebration for the hands on his farm back on August 5th, remarking in his journal “Sent to the Fort for three sheep, with which and plenty of potatoes, gave all my people a Harvest Home.”

Harvest Home? What is this Harvest Home? The name sounds unfamiliar to modern ears in the United States, but it would have conjured up vivid images among those who had grown up in 19th century Britain. It was the great harvest festival of the year, somewhat akin to the American Thanksgiving or the German Oktoberfest. It was a day of feasting and celebration, when much of the heavy work of the harvest was finished.

In his 1826 work, The *Every-day Book: or everlasting calendar of popular amusements, sports, pastime, ceremonies,...*



HARVEST-HOME.

Example of a Harvest Cart. Image provided by Jerry Eckrom

William Hone waxed nostalgic about the holiday, which was apparently becoming a relic of the past even before Fort Nisqually’s time:

“The end of the harvest was celebrated in olden times in various ways. The last of the grain was brought home in triumph in a waggon called the “Hock cart” in which was a figure of sometimes living sometimes a mere “Dummy” adorned with wheat ears, so as to represent the Goddess Ceres. The cart was preceded by rustic music, made harmonious by the voices of troops of village children, who had contributed their share of work in the harvest field...” He summed up the ensuing feast as “a bountiful rollicking joyful meal.”

The celebrating could be quite rollicking or beyond, as the Reverend John M. Wilson observed in his 1850 work The *Rural Cyclopaedia, or a General Dictionary of Agriculture and of the Arts, Sciences, Instruments, and Practice, Secondary to the Farmer, Stockfarmer, Gardener, Forester, Landsteward, Farrier &c.* This extensive multi-volume work has recently been acquired for the collection of Fort Nisqually’s living history program. The good reverend was no supporter of Harvest Home, dismissing it as:

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"A saturnalian supper, in the barn, farm-house, or other building of the farmery, at the close of the grain-harvest. It is called in Scotland a kirm or quern. It seems to have originated in heathen times; and it was long observed, in a manner of wild frolic and drunken license, far more suitable to savages than to civilized beings. Dancing, drinking, boisterous merriment, and a general oblivion of rank, station, social decorum, and religious restraint were usually its essential characters; and injury to the moral feelings, degradation of mind, and brutalization of the elements of happiness, were more or less its consequence...."

"Happily," Reverend Wilson concludes, "for the improved morality of the present day, this abomination of heathen times is now very generally suppressed."

Active suppression probably never reached Fort Nisqually, but it is also true that no mention of Harvest Home appears in the *Journal of Occurrences* after 1848.

Other holiday mentions are even briefer. Waterloo Day shows up one time only:

"Thursday, 18 June 1846. Showery. A Brigantine day for work. Waterloo Day celebrated by horse-races and other English diversions on the round plain immediately south of the establishment."

Coming 31 years after the final climactic victory over Napoleon and the French, this holiday was likely already on the decline. Perhaps this observance was coupled with the visit of a crew of sailors from England and was as good as any for a party.

The birthday of the reigning monarch is a highly observed occasion in Britain, and there are at least a couple of observances mentioned in the *Journal of Occurrences*. On August 21, 1836 someone, presumably Chief Trader William Kittson, noted "Mr. (Charles M.) Walker and I took a glass in honor of the King's Birthday. Our Sailor King William is now in his 71st year." This was clearly a personal observation, with no mention of a post-wide holiday. A more extensive observance came in 1846, during the reign of William's daughter, Queen Victoria.

On May 20, 1846, during the long tenure of Chief Trader William Fraser Tolmie, the fort's journal noted: "Captain Duntze has requested that Monday, next should be observed as a holiday, when the anniversary of Queen Victoria's birthday is to be celebrated." Captain Duntze was the commanding officer of the visiting Warship HMS Figgard and his wish was cheerfully granted. On the rainy 25th of May, the entry reads: "A holiday by request of Captain Duntze who was to have had a review on shore had the weather permitted. In the Evening most of the people from the Fort entertained on board Her Majesty's Ship Frigate Figgard."

Religious observances accounted for at least two other longer-lived holidays at the fort. All Saints Day was proclaimed in the 7th century by Pope Gregory III when he dedicated an oratory in St. Peter's in Rome as a place for the relics of the holy apostles and of "all saints, martyrs and confessors, of all the just made perfect who are at rest throughout the world." The chosen date of November 1 is seen by many historians as an attempt to eradicate the pagan practice on Samhain, a Celtic festival of the dead. October 31st thus became the Eve of All Hallows, and gradually morphed into Halloween.

Dr. Tolmie apparently had a fondness for Halloween, as it was practiced in Scotland. On October 31, 1832 the twenty-year-old physician confided to his diary in the midst of his long sea voyage to Northwest America "This is Halloween, and in 'bonnie Scotland' the scenes so admirably described by Burns are now being enacted at many a cozy ingleside. I hope the good people at Glasgow & Campbelton are enjoying themselves – I daresay tonight they will be thinking of those who are wandering on the ocean."

A year later, residing at Fort Nisqually, he again addressed his diary "...this being Halloween, my thoughts have reverted to my fatherland & I have roused the 'dull ear of night' with auld Langsyne &c on the flute." If Halloween was observed at all, it appears to have been informal and personal, since we find no mention of any sharing of festivities. Not so, with the following day. A bit farther in the same paragraph, Dr. Tolmie makes the observation that "the men have informed me that it is customary to observe tomorrow as a holiday."

All Saints Day was an important holiday to the predominantly Catholic French-Canadian employees of the fort. The details in the *Journal of Occurrences* are sparse, but relatively frequent:

Friday, 1 November 1833. According to custom this has been observed as a holiday. (All Saints Day).

Tuesday, 1 November 1836. All Saints. No work done at the place. The weather cloudy.

Sunday, 1 November 1846. Rainy all the day, with a strong wind. No work for the men observed All Saints Day as is their tradition.

Friday, 1 November 1850. Changeable. A holiday for all hands. All Saints Day, a day of much holiness amongst the Canadians.

Cowlitz Farm, a large Puget Sound Agricultural enterprise many miles to the south, apparently also observed the Holiday. A surviving fragment of the journal kept there by superintendent George Roberts contained the note for November 1, 1847, "This is All Saints Day and according to custom a holiday."

The records of Fort Nisqually are silent as to exactly how the holiday was observed. November 2nd became All Souls Day, which remembered all the dead, not simply the saints, but the Fort Nisqually holiday apparently ended with the saints on November 1st. Among the Irish and French, this period was generally a time for remembering lost loved ones and decorating their graves with flowers. Another widespread custom associated with the interval from October 31st to November 2nd was the baking and distribution of a pastry called soul cakes. These were often given to the poor, and the custom of begging door to door for the cakes spread across much of England. The beggars became known as Soulers, and in the Midland and Western parts of the isles the cry was often heard:

Soul! Soul! for an apple or two!
If you have no apples, pears will do.
If you have no pears, money will do.
If you have no money, God bless you!

If the *Journal of Occurrences* is vague about the nature of the observance, it is more specific about its eventual ending:

"Saturday, 1 November 1851. Rainy. Only 6 bushels housed, remainder given out for rations. Mr. Huggins worse. There is only one Canadian here. All Saints Day was not observed as a holiday – an unprecedented departure from custom."

Good Friday, commemorating the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, prior to his triumphant resurrection on Easter Sunday, was another often observed religious holiday at Fort Nisqually. The first mention appears in the *Journal of Occurrences* two years after the founding of the fort, during the administration of Chief Trader Francis

Herron:

"Friday, 17 April 1835. This being Good Friday, I did not order the men to work excepting a little duty about the house."

Two years later the entry, this time by Herron's successor, William Kittson, became more detailed and far more strident:

"Friday, 24 March 1837. Good Friday. The men did no work excepting for three hours owing to some of them eating meat with grease while they had something else to eat on such a day. We should by all means observe this day as one of rest and fast, but in this country scarcely is Sunday, taken into consideration. Where ever I am in charge the men shall be made to observe the Sabbath as recommended by our creed."

The journal volumes are missing for many of the next ten years, but by 1847, under the guidance of William Fraser Tolmie, Good Friday had become just another workday, unmentioned and apparently unobserved as a holiday. Sunday was not a workday, so nothing is said of Easter in the journal. It seems clearly to have been no communal time of gathering, and whatever observance took place must have been a matter of individual choice and initiative.

Another holiday, often observed in England and early America was Guy Fawkes Day, commemorating the November 5, 1605 day when Guido (Guy) Fawkes, a Catholic revolutionary, was caught before he could blow up Parliament and Protestant King James. One of the high points of this holiday was a bonfire gathering in which a straw effigy of "The Guy," often stuffed with fireworks, was consigned to the flames. English children often collected money for the fireworks with the plea "A Penny for the Guy." It was clearly not a holiday likely to sit well with Catholic French Canadians, and there are no mentions in any of the fort and farm records suggesting that the 5th of November was ever anything other than an ordinary work day.

While English and French holidays began to wane, something new and unmistakably American began to come into play. In 1841 the employees of Fort Nisqually stood by and watched as visiting sailors from the U. S. Navy held the first Independence Day celebration on Puget Sound. The loss of the American colonies was certainly nothing for the British to celebrate, and July 4 was nothing other than an ordinary workday in the immediate years that followed. By the middle 1850s, American settlers had arrived in large numbers, and the towns of Steilacoom and Olympia, not to mention the American Army post at Fort Steilacoom, had come into being. The Fourth of July was a major celebration all around

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Example of Autumn Harvest time. Image provided by Jerry Eckrom

Harvest Home ... continued

them, and by July 4, 1854, Fort Nisqually bowed to the inevitable. The *Journal of Occurrences* marked the occasion with a laconic and cryptic note:

"Fine warm day. All hands not at work."

The entry the next year was equally laconic, but the entry for 1856 finally elaborated:

"Friday, 4 July 1856. Fine day. Holiday. McLeod and Thomas Cooper and the Indians afternoon killed an ox, weight 777

pounds of (a work o.'d. brown, with dark head). Dr. Tolmie and family went on an excursion on the plains. Mr. Huggins and Mr. Kennedy accompanied. Cush drunk."

The holiday tradition continued in July of 1857 and 58. Inexplicably, July 4, 1859 appears to have been a traditional workday, but the trend was constant and irreversible for the years that followed. The owners of Fort Nisqually might still be British, but the men who worked here, some for much of their lives, were becoming Americans.

2007 Association of Living History Farms and Museums Conference

By Lane Sample and Peggy Barchi

June 1–5, 2007 — Fort Staff members Lane Sample and Peggy Barchi had the opportunity to attend the annual Association of Living History Farms and Museums (ALHFAM) conference in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The annual conference is its largest single gathering. Hosted by member institutions

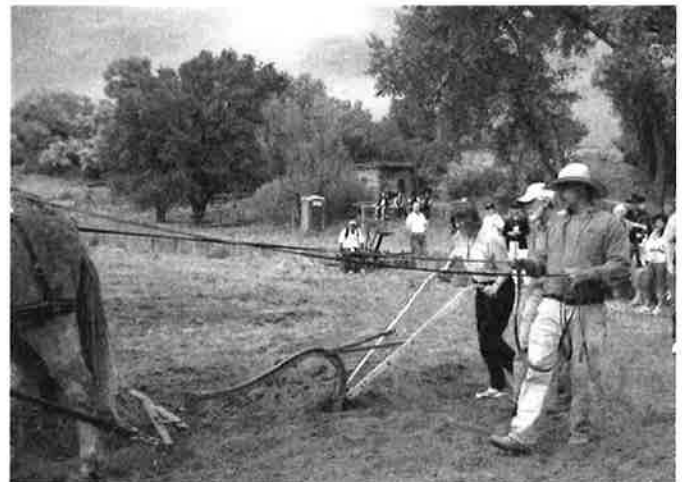


in the United States and Canada, the format includes formal papers,

interactive workshops, site visits and multiple opportunities for informal discussion. Sharing, fun and learning go hand-in-hand at this meeting, considered by many living history staff and volunteers, to be one of the most useful museum conferences available.

As conference participants, we were able to attend various workshops including: "Happy Trails? Interpreting Emotions of Women Going West", "Connecting Rural Crafts & the Community – the English Experience", "Sure, that can be an Interpretive Program!", and "Introducing Bela Hubbard, 19th Century Naturalist". In addition to attending the conference, our proposal entitled "Moving, Doing, Touching... Hands-On Programming on a Shoestring Budget" had been accepted. Our presentation was attended by approximately 20 people and included follow-up communications with staff members from a number of other historic sites including a visit by one attendee to Fort Nisqually's Brigade Encampment.

Visits to this year's host site *El Rancho De Las Golondrinas – The Ranch of the Swallows*, were also part of the conference. This historic *rancho*, now a living history museum, dates from the early 1700s and was an important *paraje* or stopping point along the famous *Camino Real*, the Royal Road from Mexico City to Santa Fe, New Mexico. Conference attendees visited the site several times throughout the week, talked with its volunteers and interpreters, participated in a plowing contest



Peggy Barchi participates in the ALHFAM plowing contest. Photo by Lane Sample.

and other hands-on activities, enjoyed a southwest dinner and fiesta, and of course visited the museum store!

The conference also included visits to downtown Santa Fe and its historic buildings including the Palace of the Governors which was built starting in the 1700s. The nomenclature "palace" can be a bit confusing to newcomers expecting a large British-style palace (we walked right past it while looking for it!) Instead this is a low, one-story, block-long adobe building on one side of the square in downtown Santa Fe. Another stop near the square was to one of Santa Fe's most familiar landmarks, the St. Francis Cathedral (officially the Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi.) This beautiful cathedral is still used for religious purposes, but guests are welcome. Visits to a number of other local Santa Fe history and cultural museums enabled us to learn more about