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Adventure in Local History

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IN THE SPRING OF 1800 a young Vermonter passed through Grand Portage, then field headquarters of the North West Company, on his way to the Indian country, "there to remain, if my life should be spared, for seven years, at least." The young man was Daniel Williams Harmon. He remained not for seven years, but for nineteen, in the service of the Nor'Westers, and he became one of the company's most famous traders. Much of this time he spent on the west slope of the Rocky Mountains in what is now British Columbia, though he occasionally went as far east as Rainy Lake and Lake Superior. In the West he took a girl of the Snare Indians to live with him, and to her while still in the interior were born six of his children, including George, Polly, Sally, and John.

What sort of man was this Daniel Harmon? He left a record, published in 1820 as *A Journal of Voyages and Travels in the Interiour of North America*, that tells us much about the fur trade and a little about himself. We know that he was of old New England stock, that he was reared in a strict Puritanical faith, and that he viewed with abhorrence the liaisons that all traders—even the bourgeois—formed with Indian women.

We learn from the *Journal* of his succumbing, at last, to the inevitable, taking a fourteen-year-old "Canadian's daughter" as his wife *à la façon du pays*. We hear about his vast travels, about his association with such famous men as David Thompson, Simon Frazer, and John McLoughlin, and about a thousand fascinating details of the trade. But we learn little indeed about Daniel Harmon himself—except what we may read between the lines.

Now and then we get a brief, tantalizing glimpse of his background. We find that he comes from Vergennes, Vermont, that his parents are living, that he has brothers (one named Stephen) and other relatives.

We hear of the births of his children, and the deaths of three. In a remarkable closing entry of the *Journal* we read of Harmon's resolve to do what few other traders had ever done — take his "wife" and children back with him to the United States. We see his little family homeward bound, but we never learn whether they actually arrived, or what happened to them afterward. Strangely enough, Harmon never tells us the name of his wife!¹

Nor is there much to be learned about this interesting and rather mysterious Nor'Wester from other sources. Fellow traders, particularly Archibald Norman McLeod, mention him occasionally in their own fort journals. Histories, biographies, genealogies, and special works on the fur trade repeat, sometimes inaccurately, a few facts — mostly from Harmon's own *Journal*. And my search for accessible manuscript material — in the Canadian Archives at Ottawa and elsewhere — yielded nothing of importance.

As for the years preceding and following those covered by the *Journal*, they are almost complete blanks. There is almost nothing in print about Daniel Williams Harmon previous to his departure from Lachine in April, 1800, or after his arrival, homeward bound, at Fort William in August, 1819. And this, to any reader of Harmon's *Journal*, is most exasperating. For no one can read this very human record of a young man's struggle with himself and his milieu without wondering about a lot of things. What was his family like? What of his boyhood? What sort of town did he live in? What, in short, was Daniel Harmon's background — as a man and as a fur trader? And, even more interesting, what became of him and his family after returning to the United States — if indeed they actually returned? Where did they go? What did they do? How did Daniel Harmon spend his closing days as a retired Nor'Wester?

I mentioned all this to Esther, my wife. Naturally, she was interested principally in the "Canadian's daughter" who became the mother of Harmon's children.

"You mean you don't even know the girl's name?" she asked incredulously.

"No," I said. "Harmon just calls her, 'my woman,' or 'the mother of my children.'"

"Well!" Esther said. "Let's find out about this. Where did you say he came from, this Harmon?"

¹ Several writers of a later period give her name as Elizabeth. Nevertheless, asserts Mr. O'Meara in a letter of February 3, 1950, "it was not until I found the name listed" in a record "of Harmon's own time that I was willing to accept it as authentic." *Ed.*

"From Vermont," I said. "A little town called Vergennes — up near Lake Champlain."

"Well, let's start with Vergennes," Esther said. "It will be a lovely drive. Let's go up and see what they know about him up there."

So that's what we did. Never, I suppose, was there a simpler or more direct approach to history. We left New York on a bright blue November morning. Our quest took us to half a dozen towns, into scores of homes, churches, clerks' offices, and graveyards, and over a mountain where we found ourselves in serious trouble when our car stalled in a blinding blizzard.

Starting with almost nothing, we added clue to clue in perfect detective-story fashion. We picked up a wisp of information here, another there, and finally the pieces began to fit together — exactly like a jigsaw puzzle. After ten days, climaxed by the discovery of a diary kept for sixteen years by an intimate friend of Daniel Harmon's, we both felt that we knew Dan Harmon, his family and friends, almost as well as if we had been neighbors. In fact, so steeped did we become in our search that I began regularly to date letters and checks 1848. And on one occasion Esther lifted the telephone receiver and said, "Hello. This is Mrs. Harmon"!

How much wholly new information on Harmon has resulted from our trip, I am not qualified to say — but I suspect a good deal. Even if nothing new had been added, however, our adventure would have proved one thing: how thrilling history can be — particularly if you get it from faded records locked away in lonely farmhouses, off weathered gravestones, from diaries and account books hidden in antique bureau drawers.

Nobody, I suppose, could have done a job of historical research in a less professional manner. Instead of going first to the libraries and historical collections, we went to graveyards. Instead of interviewing authorities on local and state history, we talked with nice old ladies and quiet, friendly men in the Vermont hills. That made it much more fun — and, I suspect, more profitable!

We went first, of course, to Vergennes — the only town in Vermont mentioned by Harmon in his *Journal*. We had hoped that it would be a charming little New England village like so many others, but it turned out to be a rather ordinary small town with, however, an excellent inn. We judged from the height of the grass and thistles in the old graveyard that Vergennes was not particularly conscious or proud of its past.

We called first on the town clerk, a very pleasant woman, and wonderfully co-operative. (Where did that legend of New England dourness

come from? We have never met nicer people in our lives than Vermonters!) She dug some dusty volumes out of the vault — among them one simply titled, "Earliest Record Book of Vergennes." In this book everything was jumbled together — births, deaths, marriages, land transfers, election results. And in it we found our first reference to a Harmon, to three of them in fact — Daniel, Martin, and Calvin. They were all listed as freemen of the city of Vergennes in 1795.

In three other record books, covering the years 1790 to 1812, there were numerous other references to members of the Harmon family — Daniel, Martin, Calvin, Argalus, Stephen, Lucretia (apparently there were two different Lucretias). Even from the brief, faded entries in the old ledger-like volumes, it was obvious that the Harmons were a prosperous family and exceedingly active in civic affairs. They served many terms on the common council and held numerous other public offices; on the tax rolls they were revealed as people of considerable means. Argalus and Calvin were particularly active in land deals. All were prominent in church affairs which, at the time, were closely connected with town government.

But who were these Harmons? The presumption was strong, of course, that they were the immediate kin of Daniel Williams Harmon, and that the Daniel Harmon of these records was the father of the author of the *Journal*. But we had no proof. We had none, that is, until we came on an entry in the "Earliest Record Book." It was in Argalus Harmon's own big handwriting (he was at the time town clerk) and it recorded the death of Daniel on June 26, 1805. Referring to the *Journal*, we found that Daniel Williams Harmon had recorded his father's death on the same date! So the first two pieces of the jigsaw fell into place. We knew for a certainty that this Daniel Harmon of Vergennes was the father of Daniel Harmon the Nor'Wester. Over and over, more pieces were to fit together in the same exciting way.

But who were Argalus and Calvin? Were they uncles or brothers of the fur trader? We supposed them to be uncles, but we took nothing for granted. And who was Lucretia — mother or sister? For the answers to these and other questions we had to search farther — much farther.

We next examined the records of the Congregational Church in Vergennes. These records were kept in a vault of the National Bank of Vergennes — on the very spot, we found, where the elder Daniel Harmon had run a general store. The custodian was at first reluctant to let us see them, thinking that we wanted to examine the church's financial records! But once this misunderstanding had been cleared up, nobody could have been more pleasant and co-operative. We spent a whole afternoon pouring over the very earliest "Records of the Congregational Church in

Vergennes" and the "Proceedings of the Congregational Society of Vergennes." And from them we learned a great many things about the Harmons—and much that threw light on Daniel Harmon's strangely introspective and religious nature.

We learned that the elder Daniel Harmon went to Vergennes from Bennington, Vermont, and was admitted to the church in 1795. He was referred to in the records as Captain Daniel Harmon. A Lucretia Harmon was also admitted to the church in 1795, and in 1807 a church meeting was held in her house; but whether she was the wife or sister of Daniel, we could not determine. We put her in the "to be identified" envelope.

There was a lot more in the records about the Harmons—and about other people too. About poor Mrs. Sibil Bostwick, for example, who, "having at several times made an intemperate use of ardent spirits," made a voluntary confession of the offense before the whole congregation. And about Susan McKenzie, who was found guilty of falsehood, and "soliciting in an unchristian manner the attentions of a married man, and theft." Sometimes it was hard to keep one's mind on the Harmons!

As we studied our notes at the inn that night, the relationships of various members of the family gradually began to shape up. One Lucretia, it seemed clear, was the elder Daniel's wife; the other, his daughter. Argalus, Calvin, and Martin were probably his sons and the fur trader's brothers. But as yet we had no absolute proofs of this. And we had found no mention whatever of Daniel Williams Harmon, author of the *Journal!*

We next visited the town's old graveyard. There we found buried Daniel Harmon, Martin Harmon, and Clara, the wife of Calvin. Of all the Vergennes Harmons, only these three slept in the thistle-choked cemetery on the edge of town. We wondered why Lucretia, Daniel's wife, was not buried beside him.

"Maybe she died after Daniel—or while she was away somewhere visiting one of the children," Esther said with a woman's instinct. And, sure enough, we found this to be true. But that is another, and rather pathetic, story.

We decided to see if we could follow the Harmons who had left Vergennes. But first we combed every scrap of relevant material we could find in town—pamphlets, old newspaper clippings, yearbooks, church manuals, etc. And from these we learned a good deal about the town from which Daniel Williams Harmon came, and more about the Harmons themselves.

In a way, it was all rather startling. One did not quite expect to find

that a fur trader, content to remain for almost twenty years in the crude and brutal environment of the *pays d'en haut*, had come from so brilliant and cultured a family. For not only were the elder Harmons persons of character and accomplishment, but the children too, Daniel's siblings, had impressive records of achievement. Martin, for example, was a graduate of Dartmouth, a Phi Beta Kappa at the age of nineteen, and a brilliant lawyer until his tragic death at twenty-four — as is set forth in a *Sermon on the Occasion of the Death of Martin Harmon, A.B.* (Vergennes, 1798), delivered by the Reverend Daniel Clarke Sanders. And there was Reuben, who was a physician; and Stephen, the sensitive and high-minded scholar of whom Daniel speaks so often and affectionately in the *Journal*; and sister Lucretia, who married into a prominent Vermont family. One cannot but wonder if all this "family competition" might not have been a factor in Daniel's decision, at nineteen, to seek fortune, if not fame, as a Nor'Wester!

Next, because Vergennes in the early days had included the present town of Ferrisburg, we decided to visit the latter place. The town records were kept in a large, gaunt farmhouse, by a kindly woman who was a descendant of the earliest settlers. She produced great leather-bound tomes for us from a steel vault in her living room. And there a few more pieces fell into place. In a deed signed by Argalus Harmon in July, 1824, for instance, he is specified as "Argalus Harmon of Coventry, Orleans County, Vt." We put that down for reference, along with an entry from a Vergennes document containing the phrase, "I, Calvin Harmon of Burlington." We marked Coventry and Burlington on our road map as future stopping places.

The same day we moved on to the little village of Shelburne, Vermont. The town clerk in Ferrisburg had told us that some Harmons had once lived in Shelburne — it's amazing how *personal* historical research can be! We weren't missing any bets, so we ran down to Shelburne, and our persistence was rewarded. There, we found from the town records, Argalus had lived for a while, and there he had married the widow Patty Newell in June, 1811. It was to Argalus and Patty, we discovered later, that Daniel Harmon had sent his three-year-old son George on an incredible canoe journey back to the States in 1811. And it was there, as Daniel so touchingly relates in his *Journal*, that George died at the age of five.

And so a few more pieces of the puzzle were fitted together — but still no whisper in any record of Daniel Williams Harmon himself. Plenty about Argalus, Calvin, Martin, Stephen, the Lucretias, and, it seemed, dozens of other Harmons; but nothing whatever about the real object of our search.

We pushed on to Burlington, Vermont's metropolis, where the Reverend Daniel Haskel, who edited the *Journal*, had lived. Since Haskel was a friend and close collaborator of the author's, we reasoned, Daniel Harmon must have spent some time in Burlington after his return to civilization. And my wife contributed her own bit of feminine logic.

"Dan wouldn't have taken his Indian wife back to Vergennes with him," Esther said. "He'd have spared her the embarrassment of that. I'll bet we'll find them both in Burlington. And I *hope* we find out what her name was!"

Our search started off discouragingly. Hunting through the early town records, we still could find no reference to Daniel Harmon — it was almost as if he had never really lived. In the later files we found a record of the marriage of Cornelius Ryan of Montreal, Canada East, to Almina Amelia Harmon of Montreal. (We did not know that Almina Amelia was Daniel Williams Harmon's daughter, born after his return to the States.) And of William Harmon of Shelburne, Vermont, to Elizabeth Stanton, of Essex, New York. But these Harmons meant nothing to us at the time — we put them in the "to be identified" envelope and pressed on in search of Daniel.

Then, as I believe the mystery-story writers express it, the case "broke."

Applying at the First Congregational Church in Burlington for permission to examine the early church records, we were referred to Miss Mary Pease, custodian of the records. We went up to the high school, where Miss Pease taught history. She was most kind and helpful. Some of the records, she said, were in the basement of the public library, but others were in the possession of Miss Katherine Worcester. Couldn't she call Miss Worcester and make an appointment for us? She could, and she obligingly did. We drove up to Miss Worcester's house, marveling again at the hospitality of Vermonters. On the sofa in her living room a large leather-bound book was lying open.

"I'm so sorry," Miss Worcester said, "but I've looked all through it — and I can't find any Harmon in it except Daniel Williams Harmon!"

We both rushed to the sofa. And there, on page 18 of Church Registry No. 1 of the Congregational Church of Burlington, Vermont, we read, in the original ink, fresh and clear, just as the clerk had written it down more than a hundred years ago: "Daniel Williams Harmon admitted to Church, April 9, 1820, on profession. Removed April 20, 1823, to Coventry, Vt." And then, on page 368, was the baptismal record of Daniel Harmon's children, two of them born in the Canadian Rockies, the other on Lake Superior while the family was on its way to the States: Polly, Sally, and John Harmon, all baptized on April 12, 1820.

But Daniel Harmon alone was listed as a parent of these children. No mention of the Snare Indian girl, their mother! We now knew for certain that Daniel Harmon had returned to Burlington with his three children in 1820, and three years later had moved to Coventry. But we still were ignorant of his wife's name. We still had no proof that she had actually accompanied her husband and children farther than Fort William on the way "home."

After a thorough check of more church records in the basement of the public library, without turning up any additional new information, we decided to follow Daniel Harmon, so to speak, to Coventry. More accurately, we could hardly wait to get to this little village which, we hoped, would have the answers to all our remaining questions.

Coventry, once a thriving mill center, is now a sleepy hamlet on United States Highway 5, seventy-five miles from Burlington and only six from the Canadian border. It was, we discovered from local records, actually founded by Daniel Harmon and his brother Calvin in the fall of 1821, when part of the town was a dense forest.

By a lucky accident, we noticed a charming white frame house next to an old mill on Black River. A small sign at the gate said "Tourists," so we knocked at the door and asked for lodgings. And that is how we came to know Jack and Harriet Miller, two delightful youngsters who had decided, after the war, that the big city was not for them and had settled in Coventry to work out their own idea of what life should be like.

Jack had a wood-working shop in the old mill, where he was turning out yarn winders after an old New England model. A small advertisement in a magazine had brought in so many orders that the Millers were quite frantic trying to fill the demand. Esther and I helped them wrap and label and stamp, and while we worked we talked about Harmon. Soon our young hosts were almost as interested as we in Daniel — and particularly in the Indian girl who became the mother of his children. Despite the pressure of work, Harriet took time out to conduct us on a tour of the little town. She introduced us to practically every inhabitant, and we made an actual house-to-house canvass for any scraps of information that might exist in old family records.

Our first interview was a great, almost shocking disappointment. It was with a Mrs. Elliott, clerk of the local church, from whom we naturally had hoped to obtain a rich haul. But Mrs. Elliott blasted our fond expectations by placidly explaining that the old records had only the year before been burned up. She had left them behind in an old house when moving, it appeared, and the house had been destroyed by fire!

Our second disappointment was the discovery that a number of families

in Coventry by the name (we supposed) of Harmon, from whom we hoped to obtain valuable data, were actually Hermons or Heermans — an entirely different family. Given the Vermont pronunciation, the names sound almost identical.

But these setbacks were more than compensated for by the thrilling discovery, thanks again to the Millers, of a diary that had been kept for over sixteen years by one Elijah Cleveland, a close friend of Daniel Harmon's. Almost incredibly, this diary, in four leather-bound volumes covering the years 1827 to 1843 almost without interruption, is in the possession of the daughter-in-law of the diarist! Its brief entries give a concise, but vivid, day-by-day description of life, travels, business, social, and religious activities in Coventry (for a while called Orleans) in the early nineteenth century. More interesting to us, it gives occasional glimpses of Daniel Williams Harmon as a retired Nor'Wester and private citizen.

In some instances it controverts published data on Harmon's life. For example, the *Harmon Genealogy* edited by Artemas C. Harmon (Washington, D.C., 1920) gives the date of Daniel Harmon's death as March 26, 1845. But from Elijah Cleveland's diary it is clear that the actual date was earlier. For on August 17, 1843, there appears this entry, written in Montreal, where Cleveland was visiting: "This afternoon we rode out across the Island to see the Widow Harmon & family."

From Elijah Cleveland's diary, we learn that three Harmon brothers lived in Coventry — Argalus and Calvin, as well as Daniel. We read of their travels, the parties they gave, the land they sold, the houses they built. We learn of the deaths of their children, the marriages of others. Argalus is elected to the House of Representatives, "Old Mrs. Harmon" (Lucretia) dies, Daniel moves to Montreal and brings a load of salt from there to Coventry shortly before his death.

But still no clue to the name of Daniel Harmon's wife!

This we discovered at last, however, in an old pamphlet in the possession of Mrs. Henry C. Cleveland, owner of the Elijah Cleveland diary — *Manual of Congregational Church in Coventry, Vt.*, prepared by Pliny H. White, acting pastor, in 1868. Under "Admissions," we read: "1824, Sept. 19. Daniel W. Harmon Elizabeth Harmon Dis. Jan. 7, 1843 to Montreal C. E." This entry not only gave us the name of the Indian girl Daniel Harmon had "married" in the far-away Rockies (corroborating the *Harmon Genealogy* in this respect), but also gave us the approximate date of Harmon's move from Coventry to Montreal.

From the early records in possession of various Coventry people and in the public library we picked up a good deal of additional interesting and sometimes amusing information about Daniel Harmon and his brothers.

They gave, from all accounts, a "powerful impetus to the prosperity" of Coventry and were, by all odds, the town's leading citizens. They built a store, which was later sold to Elijah Cleveland, a blacksmith shop with trip hammer, mills, and houses. Daniel and Calvin donated land for a village common on condition that "anyone who became the worse for liquor should dig one stump." All in all, a lively and entertaining picture of a retired fur trader's life!

And in Coventry too, just as Esther had predicted, we found what we believe is the last pathetic record of Lucretia Harmon, the mother of these energetic and exuberant boys. It was a small, broken sliver of stone, stuck into the ground beside Argalus Harmon's rather beautiful gravestone. On it was scratched crudely, as if with a penknife: "Wid. Harmon."²

In this brief account I have not attempted to report everything we discovered about Daniel Harmon and his background on this exciting trip. We returned home well satisfied with the results of our little expedition into history, but with many questions still unanswered. Some of these we have since cleared up; others we are saving for future investigation. Perhaps some day I shall attempt a more sober and scholarly account of our researches — which have lately, by the way, led to the locating of what, I am certain, is Daniel Harmon's own manuscript copy of his *Journal* sent east from Frazer's Lake with John Stuart in 1816.

My hope is that what I have written will stimulate others to similar investigations of local history — for almost every community is rich in possibilities. It takes only a little digging to prove that history is fun!

² Mr. and Mrs. O'Meara located what were without doubt the graves of the wives of Calvin and Argalus Harmon — the former in Vergennes, the latter in Coventry; and Daniel's wife died in Montreal. Since the "wives of all three sons were accounted for," writes Mr. O'Meara on February 14, 1950, "the presumption is very strong . . . that the 'Wid. Harmon' buried beside Argalus in Coventry was the mother." This presumption is reinforced by Cleveland's mention in his diary of the death of "Old Mrs. Harmon." *Ed.*



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