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One-Shot War With England

It lasted for years and the outcome was decided by the Kaiser. The total casualties: one dead pig

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Perhaps the best, if silliest, war this country ever fought was caused by the death of a rooting pig. Though tediously long—it persisted, with extended periods of inactivity, for nearly thirteen years—it had one outstanding virtue: the pig was its only casualty. In addition, when this war (if so it can be called) was finally terminated, the nonbelligerent belligerents settled down to a century of remarkable peace and harmony.

It is difficult to exaggerate the tensions that time and again brought British-American relations to the boiling point in the half century following the War of 1812, or the skill and patience of responsible officials who managed to control the militant popular sentiment on both sides of the Canadian border. The bitterness resulting from a largely unresolved conflict was aggravated by the expansionist tendencies of the United States. Few politicians could withstand the temptation to draw cheers with the promise of annexing everything "from Tierra del Fuego to the Aurora Borealis." Meanwhile, the annexationists in the United States were successively abetted by malcontents among the Scotch-Canadians, the French-Canadians, and the British-Canadians, who used the issue to further their own political intrigues. Canada could hardly be blamed for feeling it might be swallowed up at any moment by its American neighbor.

The so-called Pig War began, as hostilities often do, over an affair of total insignificance. One day in the spring of 1859, a farmer killed a trespassing black pig with his musket. From this single rifle shot came volumes of diplomatic correspondence, countless threats, and nearly twenty years of anxious marching-up-the-hill-and-down-again.

The battlefield of this bloodless conflict was San Juan, one of a group of ruggedly attractive but economically worthless islands located at the southern end of the Strait of Georgia, between Vancouver Island and the Territory of Washington.

Behind the controversy was a long period of commercial rivalry between the British Hudson's Bay Company and American pioneers and fur traders in the Pacific Northwest. No violence mars the record, but would-be rivals to the company's monopoly in the area were quickly driven out by the basic tactics of outbidding, underselling, and pressure on the Indians not to do business with the intruders. At the same time, the antagonism of the Hudson's Bay Company had its limits. When American settlers caught by the Oregon fever of the 1840's straggled into Fort Vancouver at the mouth of the Columbia River, starving and destitute after their long trek across the continent, they were not turned away. Company officials tried to prevent them from settling north of the river but did not refuse the desperate travelers food and shelter while they recovered from their ordeal. The English seemed motivated less by the spirit of mercy than by the realization that cold-blooded treatment of the newcomers might incite them to violence.

It was not until 1845 that American settlers penetrated to the shores of Puget Sound. At the time, there were fewer than one thousand of them in the entire area north of the Columbia. This number was sufficient, however, to support the claims of the United States in the negotiations leading to the Treaty of Washington in 1846, which established the Forty-ninth Parallel, from Minnesota to the water's edge, as the international boundary between this country and Canada.

But the treaty makers, who had been so precise in their delineations thus far, fell victim to abysmal vagueness when they prescribed the disposition of the islands dotting the Strait of Georgia. They agreed that the line along the parallel should be projected "to the middle of the channel which separates the continent from Vancouver's Island; and thence southerly through the middle of said channel." Their ignorance of geography led the framers of the treaty to imply the existence of one main channel, recognized by all, when in fact vessels plying the strait had a wide choice of routes. The upshot was a flat dispute as to whether "said channel" lay east or west of the San Juan Island group. The Americans assumed that the line fell to the west; the British just as firmly believed that the boundary brought the disputed islands into the province of British Columbia.

It was not a pig but a flock of sheep that first brought this difference of opinion into locus. In 1853 the Hudson's Bay Company, sensing that the straggling flow of American squatters from the mainland might raise a future question of ownership, had moved to manifest its interest in San Juan by bringing a flock of 1,300 sheep to the island. In this remote outpost the local U.S. Collector of Customs, Isaac N. Ebey, could scarcely overlook the fact that the English had imported the sheep "without paying any attention to our revenue laws." His resolve to collect the duty was sharpened by the belief (which later proved unfounded) that the British had highhandedly imprisoned one of his inspectors.

At this point Ebey uttered what was perhaps the greatest understatement of the San Juan boundary dispute. In a memorandum to the Secretary of the Treasury, he wrote of maintaining the authority of the United States government "over the Territory which I think is justly ours but which doubtless now will become a matter of Negotiation."

Ebey's principal antagonist was James Douglas, governor of Vancouver Island and an official of the Hudson's Bay Company. "By letters from Nisqually," Douglas told his London office, "I was informed yesterday that Mr. Ebey had left Nisqually on the 21st inst, with two Boat Crews to seize the British property on the Island of San Juan, and I immediately despatched a force of Whites & Indians."

Ebey pulled in his horns in the face of superior forces. He had, however, succeeded in calling the attention of his government to the existence of the territorial dispute. As winter loomed, virtually all the pioneers who had attempted to homestead on the island retreated to the mainland, leaving the British sheep, their attendants, and a few uncommitted Indians in possession.

But Governor Douglas noted in January of the following year, 1854, that the war of nerves persisted. San Juan, he wrote, "has never been free from alarms." He blamed the constant tension, in part, on the American press. "The most atrocious calumnies were printed in the newspapers," he complained.

Two months later the sheep on San Juan suffered a hit-and-run attack. The formal incorporation of Whatcom County (on the American mainland to the east) held San Juan and its neighboring islands to be an integral part of the newly created political entity; the sheriff of Whatcom County was empowered to collect eighty dollars from the Hudson's Bay Company in property taxes.

The sheriff did not duplicate Ebey's mistake of telegraphing his punches. Organizing a posse, he descended on San Juan Island without warning. Each of his men was armed with a brace of revolvers, and when the eighty dollars was not forthcoming, the sheriff directed them to seize enough sheep to satisfy the levy. Thirty-four violently struggling breeding rams were bundled aboard the boat, while Hudson's Bay Company employees stood by protesting.

Governor Douglas was doubly chagrined. Not only did he resent the loss of the sheep, but he was ashamed of his servants' mild behavior. "This," he observed, "is an exceedingly annoying affair."

Douglas, however, did not permit his irritation to overcome his judgment and his anxiety to maintain peace. Hc endeavored to obtain a settlement, and arranged with the American authorities in the Territory of Washington for a temporary joint civil occupation. Under Douglas' uigings, London and Washington named their respective boundary commissioners, who examined the physical and documentary evidence, consulted and negotiated, and finally turned in totally conflicting reports.

The incident that lit the fuse to the powder keg and gave the Pig War its name occurred on June 15, 1859. Contradictory versions of it were supplied by Charles Griffin, owner of the pig, and Lyman A. Cutler, who shot the beast.

In his report to Governor Douglas, Griffin, who was the company agent on San Juan, hotly and somewhat incoherently described "an outrage committed here today by a man by the name of Cutler, an American, who has very recently established himself on a prairie occupied by me and close to my establishment, he has dug up about one third of an acre in which he planted potatoes and partly and very imperfectly

enclosed, my cattle & pigs had free access to the patch."

Griffin then went on to relate with equal emphasis how his valuable pig had been wantonly slain while peacefully rooting some distance from Cutler's potatoes. Subsequently, Cutler had appeared at Griffin's door and offered "remuneration which was so insignificant it only added insult to injury, and likewise used the most insulting & threatening language."

Cutler, with comparable reluctance to bring a sentence to an end, saw the incident somewhat differently:

> For some time passed I have been greatly anoyed by one of the Hudson Bay Co. hogs (black Boar) entering my potatoe patch and destroying the crop, he was repeatedly driven off by myself back to the Hudson Bay Co (a distance of one and a half mile) and the Hudson Bay Co was aware of this fact. In the morning of the 15th Inst I was aroused by some person riding by on horseback and upon going out the door found it to be Jacob, a colard man one of the Hudson Bay Co servants, I immediately glanced toward the potatoe patch (which is directly along side the road) and seen the Hudson Bay Co hog at his old game. I immediately became enraged at the independance of the negro knowing as he did my previous loss and upon the impulse of the moment seazed my rifle and shot the hog.

Far from using "the most insulting & threatening language," Cutler stated in his affidavit, he had then proceeded to Griffin's house eager to apologize for his burst of temper, only to be met by "supercilious manners," a threat of arrest, and a demand for a staggering one hundred dollars in damages, which he flatly rejected.

The following day the British warship Satellite hove into view, carrying to San Juan a special envoy with orders to bring Cutler to Victoria for trial. Cutler, still fuming, refused to surrender. Flourishing his rifle, he made it plain that he would blow the emissary's head off rather than submit to arrest.

The commanding general of United States forces in the area at this time was Brigadier General W. S. Harney; his headquarters were at the former Hudson's Bay Company post, Fort Vancouver. Harney, who appears to have had all the instincts of a fire horse, was already darkly suspicious of British motives in respect to San Juan Island. The presence of three ships of war in the nearby waters made him uneasy, and he accepted at face value the rumors that the English were plotting to unleash a horde of hostile Indians against the American settlers.

Harney was convinced that San Juan was an outpost of major strategic importance, not to be given up under any circumstances. In his view, the bay on the southeastern shore of the island was the best location for a naval base on the entire Pacific Coast. He was also aware of the difficulty that the English had encountered in their efforts to promote colonization of their holdings in British Columbia. With the promise of ten acres of land, the Hudson's Bay Company had induced many families to migrate from the barren Orkney Islands north of Scotland. Through the grapevine, however, these settlers quickly learned that less than a day's journey distant, the United States was giving away 640-acre parcels, and many realists among them coolly picked up and moved to take advantage of the better deal.

This led General Harney to include in his reports to the War Department the observation that the British were unable to colonize their holdings, being "too exacting," and to propose that Vancouver Island, as

well as San Juan, might properly be part of the U.S.

When he learned of the attempted arrest of Lyman Cutler, Harney went into a frenzy of activity to counter what he regarded as an act of aggression, as well as to remove further question as to the rightful ownership of San Juan Island and to establish a bridgehead for any future operations that might be authorized.

The U.S. Army unit nearest San Juan was Company D, 9th Infantry, stationed at Bellingham under the command of Captain George E. Pickett, who later won immortality as a Confederate general at Gettysburg. Harney ordered Pickett to San Juan without delay, alerted the rest of his command to move to Pickett's aid, and called on the Navy to "send such force as you can render available."

On July 27, Pickett landed on San Juan with his fifty men and pitched camp near the southeast tip of the island. He had two primary missions: to protect the inhabitants against further "outrages" by the British and to warn off the Indians. "Should these Indians appear peaceable," he was told by Harney, "you will warn them in a quiet but firm manner to return to their own country; and in the event of any opposition being offered to your demands, you will use the most decisive methods to enforce them."

As it turned out, the Indians steered clear of the excitement, and Captain Pickett's full attention was reserved for the British. Their first move came in the form of a written communication from Charles Griffin—who, as a justice of the peace, was the resident authority—notifying the troops that they were on Hudson's Bay Company property and pointedly inviting them to depart. Pickett reported "tremendous" excitement around his campsite. An estimated five hundred persons came to see the soldiers, and several who had brought their weapons with them volunteered as reinforcements.

Communications of warning, remonstrance, and protest were at this point flying back and forth at all levels of authority. But Governor Douglas' past experience told him that he would be foolish to rely on the professional diplomats for a quick and satisfactory solution. He resolved to dislodge Pickett—if this was feasible—and to preserve the status quo if it was not. Douglas reasoned that the bigger the American forces on San Juan and the longer they were dug in, the harder it would be to drive them back to the continent.

Sending the H.M.S. Tribune on reconnaissance, the Governor soon learned that Pickett's men were so disposed that it would require a sizable force to round them up in an orderly fashion. The Americans held a piece of ground flanked by heavy scrub growth into which they might easily scatter. Ruling out direct action against Pickett, Douglas attempted instead to prevent reinforcements from reaching him.

A succession of parleys ensued. Governor Douglas' various representatives sought to impress Pickett that he should withdraw, but Pickett stood on his orders to remain. On August 3, after a polite but disquieting conference with the captains of all three British warships, the American commander rejected a proposal for a joint military occupation, and sent a plea for reinforcements. Receiving Pickett's message, Harney ordered five companies waiting on the mainland to charter the necessary steamers and move to San Juan Island, taking all field guns and every bit of ammunition they could muster.

By mid-August, the U.S. force on the island had swelled to nine companies, backed by eight 32-pounders. At the northern end of the island were arrayed 2,140 redcoats, including 600 Royal Marines and engineer

troops, supported by five warship and 167 guns.

Meanwhile in Washington, Lord Lyons, the British minister, haunted the State Department, pleading for information. But Secretary Lewis Cass offered him only slight comfort by expressing the “regret of the President at the recent difficulties” and the hope that no serious consequences would result.

There were some who later suspected Harney, Pickett, and other pro-Southern Democrats in the Washington Territory of deliberately seeking to draw England into open conflict, with the hope of diverting their fellow Americans from the issues that threatened to provoke civil strife between North and South, and thus of helping to save the Union. According to General George B. McClellan, who served as member of an army survey mission to the Territory in the late 1850’s, the Harney-Pickett element was ready to fight the British if that could avert disunion. In the years after the Civil War, McClellan and Pickett’s widow circulated this story widely. If, however, any such conspiracy existed, the plotters left no documentary traces.

Washington finally decided that a firm hand was needed at San Juan. The Chief of Staff of the Army, seventy-three-year-old Lieutenants General Winfield Scott, was picked to dash across the continent and exert a calming influence. There was always the chance, of course, that Scott, upon his arrival, would find the opposing forces locked in combat. If such was the case, he should not “suffer the national honor to be tarnished. If we must be forced into a war by the violence of the British authorities, which is not anticipated, we shall abide the issue as best we may without apprehension as to the result.”

Fortunately, when the elderly peacemaker arrived he found the antagonists still merely glaring at one another. Giving the order to stand fast, he quickly got in touch with Governor Douglas for the purpose of arranging a withdrawal of the bulk of the troops.

Agreement did not come easily. Douglas strenuously opposed continued occupation by a single U.S. soldier, while Scott came under pressure from San Juan’s American civilians to provide a guard adequate to repel marauding Indians. Douglas, after extended negotiation, agreed to the presence of a token force.

Meanwhile, General Harney was rebuked for his hotheadedness. He was relieved and sent back to Washington.

Came the Civil War and whatever happened on San Juan Island during that period went unrecorded. The “temporary” occupation by the small detachment of U.S. troops was maintained, however, and after Appomattox the impasse persisted, once more to plague the diplomats.

Actually the British-American ownership dispute was not alone responsible for the final solution of the San Juan problem. It seemed that the American civilian authorities and the military on the island had become engaged in an acrimonious conflict over who had paramount jurisdiction. Tension reached a climax when a resentful farmer stretched a wire fence across the road leading from the army camp to the landing. The captain in command promptly ejected the man from the island, whereupon the U.S. district court ordered the captain’s arrest.

Warned by the U.S. marshal that trouble was in store unless the issue was quickly resolved, the federal government sent word that the Army should continue to be the dominant authority, lest the territorial claim against Britain be prejudiced.

This failed to cool things off. Repudiating the longstanding arrangements made by General Scott, the government of Washington Territory assumed all fiscal and judicial powers, managed to arrest an army major, and levied a staggering $5,000 fine against the offending captain. Alarmed by these developments, the Department of State hastily obtained British agreement to lay the boundary dispute before the President of Switzerland for arbitration.

But the time was not yet opportune for a compromise. In the years following the Civil War, Northern tempers still raged over the depredations of the British-built Confederate raider *Alabama*. Anglophobic members of Congress not only demanded huge indemnities in payment for the *Alabama* claims, but the surrender of all British Columbia as well. The British reacted by backing away from the boundary negotiations with great rapidity.

By 1871, however, the atmosphere seemed ripe for another try. As British and American diplomats came together to settle the Alabama claims and other outstanding matters, the dog-eared problem of the San Juan boundary was quietly handed to Kaiser Wilhelm I of Germany to arbitrate.

On October 21, 1872, "Authenticated by our autographic signature and the impression of the imperial great seal," the Kaiser's decision, based on a fat volume of documentary evidence, placed the final border to the west of San Juan, upholding the United States claim.

The American minister in Berlin, George Bancroft, sent a memorandum to Von Balan, the Kaiser's foreign minister, applauding the end of Anglo-American friction. "After an unrelenting strife of ninety years, the award of His Majesty the Emperor of Germany closes the long and unintermitted, and often very dangerous, series of disputes on the extent of their respective territories, and so for the first time in their histories opens to the two countries the unobstructed way to agreement, good understanding and peace."

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