

Witness To A Revolution
Excerpt Of John Joseph Henry's Account

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This evening some of our companions, whose stomachs had not received food for the last forty-eight hours, adopted the notion that leather, though it had been manufactured, might be made palatable food and would gratify the appetite.

Observing their discourse, to me the experiment became a matter of curiosity. They washed their moccasins of moose skin in the river, scraping away the dirt and sand with great care. These were brought to the kettle and boiled a considerable time under the vague but consolatory hope that a transformation to edible food would take place. When the boiling period had ended the poor fellows chewed the leather, but it remained tough leather and was not to be macerated. My teeth, though young and good, succeeded no better. Disconsolate and weary, we passed the night.

On November 3rd we arose early, hunger impelling, and marched rapidly. After noon, on a point on the bank of the river, someone pretended he descried the "first house" ten miles off. Not long afterward another member of our group spied a boat coming toward us and turning a point of land. Within minutes cattle were driving up the shore. These circumstances gave occasion to a feeble huzza of joy from those who saw these cheerful and enlivening sights.

We were now treading a wide and stony beach of the river. Smith, our captain, who at this moment happened to be in company, elated with the prospect of a supply of food in the joy of his heart, perhaps thoughtlessly said to me, "take this Henry." A package was gladly received.

Opening the paper, which had been neatly folded, there appeared a hand's breadth and length of bacon fat, an inch thick. Thoughtlessly it was eaten greedily, inattentive to all former rule and thanks to God it did me no harm.

Here it was that for the first time, Aaron Burr, a most amiable youth of twenty came to my view. He then was a cadet. It will require a most cogent evidence to convince my mind that he ever intended any ill to his country in later years by his various speculations. Though differing in political opinion from him, no reason has yet been laid before me to induce a belief that he was traitorous to his country.

We marched as hastily as our wearied and feeble limbs could admit, hoping soon to share in something like an Abyssinian feast. The curvatures of the river had deceived us in the calculation of distance. It was many hours before we came to the place of slaughter. We found a fire but no provision except a small quantity of oaten meal, resembling in grit, our chopped rye.

Simpson warmed some of this in water and ate with gusto. To me it was nauseous. This may have been owing to the luncheon from Smith's hoard. The Frenchmen told us that those who preceded us had devoured the very entrails of the cattle. One of the eastern men, as we came to the fire, was gorging the last bit of the colon, half rinsed, half broiled. It may be said that he ate with pleasure as he tore into it as a hungry dog would tear a haunch of meat. We soon encamped for the night, cheered by the hope of rest and tidbits of food.

November 4th. About two o'clock in the afternoon, we arrived at a large stream coming from the east, which we ran through, though more than mid-deep. This was the

most chilling bath we had hitherto received: the weather was raw and cold. It was my seventeenth birthday and the harshest one of my life. Within a few hundred yards of the river stood the "first house" in Canada. We approached it in ecstasy, sure of being relieved from death by the means of famine with food.

Many of our compatriots were unaware of that death which arises from sudden repletion after starvation. The active spirit of Arnold, with such able assistants as John M. Taylor and Steele, had laid in a great stock of provisions. The men were furious, voracious, and insatiable. Three starvations had taught me wisdom. My friends took my advice. But notwithstanding the irrefutable arguments the officers used to ensure moderation, the men were outrageous upon the subject: they had no comprehension of such reasoning.

Among these was one of our company, a good and orderly soldier, who from my affection toward him, I watched like another doctor Pedro Positive; yet all representation and reasoning on my part had no influence. Boiled beef, hot bread, potatoes, boiled and roasted, were gormandized without stint. He seemed to defy death for the mere enjoyment of present gratification and died two days after his glutinous feast.

Many of the men sickened. If not much mistaken, we lost three of our company by their imprudence on this occasion. The immediate extension of the stomach by food after a lengthy fast operates a more sudden extinction of life than the total absence of sustenance.

At this place, we for the first time had the pleasure of seeing the worthy and respectable Indian, Natanis, and his brother Sabatis, with some other members of their tribe {the Abenakis}. He, his brother Sabatis, and seventeen other Indians, the nephews and friends of Natanis, marched with us to Quebec and were in the attack of that place on the morning of the first of January following.

This is the first instance in the course of our Revolutionary War of the employment of Indians in actual warfare against our enemies. To be sure, it was the act of a junior commander, unwarranted, so far as has come to my knowledge, by the orders of his superiors. Yet, it seemed to authorize in a small degree upon the part of our opponents, that horrible system of aggression, which in a short time ensued and astonished and disgusted the civilized world.

Our severest personal sufferings for want of food were over. The march through the wilderness to this point had been dreadful. One day when near the head of the Chaudiere River, a mountain putting into that stream compelled us to pass its margin upon a log, which had been brought there by a freshet.

The bark and limbs of the tree were worn away by ice and the trunk lay lengthwise along the narrow passage, smooth and slippery, and gorged the pass. This difficulty had collected here a heterogeneous mass of the troops who claimed the right of passage according to the order of coming to it. The log was to be footed, or the water at a depth of three or four feet, must be waded. There was no alternative.

An eastern man, bare-footed, bare headed and thinly clad, lean and wretched from abstinence, with his musket in hand, passed the log immediately before me. His foot slipped and he fell several feet into the water. We passed on regardless of his fate. Even his immediate friends and comrades, many of whom were on the log at the same moment, did not deign to lend him an assisting hand. Death stared us in the face at all times.

I gave him a sincere sigh at parting, for to lose my place in the file might have been fatal. This pitiable man died there in the wilderness. The hard fate of many others might be recapitulated, but the dreadful tale of incidents, if truly told, would merely serve to lacerate the heart of pity and harrow up the feelings of the soul of benevolence.

Tears many years since have often wetted my cheeks when recollecting the disasters of that unfortunate campaign: the memorable exit of my dearest friends and of many worthy fellow-citizens, whose worth at this time is embalmed solely in the breasts of their surviving associates. Seven died solely from the effects of famine; and many others by disorders arising from hard service in the wilderness.