

Paleface Cannon Demonstration Fails; Chief Not Impressed

By SU-SITNA

My Uncle Roy Gale, who was my great uncle, told this story many years ago when he was a scout and buffalo hunter, and the story ran something like this:

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Two Plumes was that Indian chief's name and the place was Fort Benton, Montana Territory, and the time was around 1870 or so. I showed up in town from over on the Red Deer River up in Canada looking for fun.

The place was as lively as a hot carcass for the nabobs of the fur companies had come up from St. Louis like they did every year. There were steamboats along the levees and there were bullwhackers, muleskinners, prospectors, trappers, traders from over across the border, gamblers, crews from the boats, and a new crop of girls all being merry. And to boot, there was a big bunch of Injuns mostly Piegans, half bloods too and many other kinds.

Their teepees were pitched out a ways, God knows why, for morning, noon and night they all crowded around town. People were a little scared seeing all them and there were so many.

"Give them Injuns too much firewater and we will have a

real war on our hands," was the usual expression.

THE FEARSOME WEAPON

Then from the trading post, a packtrain showed up. Tied on one of them mules, with the muzzle pointing same as the mule's, was a little brass cannon, or what they called, a Mountain Howitzer.

It took a little time to see that this was the biggest thing ever to hit Fort Benton in some time. Printed on its butt in big letters was, "FIRE THAT GUN."

"Make big boom, make d--- hole in that hill across the Missouri," roared Bulldog Red, "Show Injuns real medicine—scare h--- out of them d--- Redskins!"

There wasn't any argument on that notion. It just had to be put to a majority vote. This done, the boys went out to round up the Injuns, telling them by tongue and by sign to come and see the big show.

Meantime, others said that they would cut the mule from the packtrain and plant him close to the river. Them with no special duties kept circulating to be sure no one missed the big show.

Everyone came around. The Injuns in bearskins, buckskins, bare skins, and blankets. Also a gogdly assortment of frontier whites and a lot of ladies that weren't so d--- ladylike that they couldn't enjoy themselves. And you never saw such a big crowd.

On the front street were half-faced buildings on one side and the river on the other. The mulemen led the mule to the shore. On yon across the river was a cut-bank they figured would make a good target.

The crowd pushed around close forming a half circle, the heathen element on one horn and us refined folks on the other horn. But there was some mixing up as it was them heathens that needed the education.

Now in the front row of Indians, I spotted this old Chief Two Plumes that I smoked with a time or two. He had his arms folded and the look on his face that an Injun can wear which says nothing will ever surprise him, in particular the White men and their doin's. The other Injuns were wearing it too. You can't beat an Injun for lookin', like he wouldn't let on that you stink.

NONCHALANT MULE

The men with the mule got the cannon loaded. A man standing on a box so as to reach the muzzle and feed in a whole hatfull of powder and then poke the cannon ball home.

So then, all was ready for the sightin' and aimin' the gun. It also meant aimin' the mule then attending to the refinements. There wasn't any trouble with that sleepy old mule. He was agreeable and was led around and whoa'd with his tail on the target and went to sleep with one man at his head while another climbed up on the box and squinted over the sights and fiddled with the doodads. He got down claiming that the big gun was a sight finer than a frog's

hair.

The ramrod of this frolic, whoever he was, made a little speech telling the Injuns to look-see across the river where the White man's terrible medicine iron would blow the dust tall. With that, he turned to his rough looking crew.

"Ready!" he shouted. The crew sighted again and nodded.

"Fire away, men!" he told them.

One of the men touched a match to the fuse. The fuse fizzed and fizzed. Mr. Mule opened one eye and then the other. He wiggled his long ears and then let out a snort. The muleskinners began hollering, "Whoa, whoa! You so and so," and hung on tight to his head.

The mule humped his back and began buck jumping around in a big circle while the gun bobbed and pointed at each and everyone of us innocent bystanders while the fuse et down to the powder charge.

For a shake, no one could move but just for a shake. Me, I found myself lying behind a pile of driftwood. Some feller was trying to scratch under me like a mole and he was praying, "Mule, don't shoot—don't shoot!"

That feller tunneled me up and over my fort while the mule was wheelin' the fuse, fussin' while the cannon picked up targets all over the place. I tell you, we were dead flat on the ground or flying high through the air or deep in the muddy old river diving like helldivers praying for the muzzle to swing past us and explode.

All the while, the Injuns stood still, their arms folded just waiting for the big dust to blow up across the river.

Then, like a close clap of thunder, the great gun went off but it didn't hurt anything what with the mule's back all humped up, it slid back to his rear, down the slope of his rump and the cannon ball skinned his tail up considerable and the ball went into the ground.

Men began coming out of cover trailing up through the dust and powder smoke and looking darn silly.

I walked over to Two Plumes who stood with his arms still folded but with nothin' in his face that showed me anything.

"HOW," I said. "How Chief likum?"

He answered, "HOW," and let the rest of it wait, but in that Injun's eyes was a gleam. Then he said:

"Paleface Jackass POOP!"