

## **William Peter Hallett, (1811-1873): Chief Scout and Leader of the “49<sup>th</sup> Rangers”**

William Peter Hallett was born about 1811 at Fort Vermilion, Alberta, the son of Henry Hallett and Catherine Tenanse (the second of Henry Hallett’s four mixed-blood wives). William was Henry’s eighth child. Reverend David Jones baptized William Peter on October 18, 1824 after the Hallett family moved to the Red River Settlement and established themselves at Point Douglas.

William was a very interesting man whose various exploits were well documented in numerous histories of Western Canada. He was highly intelligent; a natural leader of men, and his prowess as a buffalo hunter was legend. He was an opponent of Riel during the 1869-1870 Red River Resistance and a leader of the “49<sup>th</sup> Rangers,” the Metis guards and scouts of the International Boundary Commission (1872-1873).

In 1872 the formal survey of the border between Canada and the United States began. Commissioner Donald R. Cameron chose William Hallett as Chief Scout to recruit a group to protect the British contingent from Sioux Indians or anyone else who might try to molest them. Captain Donald Campbell of the Royal Artillery had used Hallett as a guide when he accompanied the putative Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba, William McDougall to Manitoba in 1869 in an abortive attempt to take over the settlement without negotiation with the residents.

The boundary Commission scouts provided their own horses and were provided with Spencer carbines. They were intended to act as guides, hunters and herdsman. The budget was £4000 per year for the thirty men who were recruited. Hallett assigned Adam McDonald as deputy commander and Francois Gosselin, Guillaume Lafournaise and William Gaddy as sub-leaders. Hallett’s nephew, William Pruden, was also a member of the Rangers. D’Arcy East took over with Crompton as deputy when Hallett died in the winter of 1873.

The newspapers of the day were quite supportive of the use of Metis interpreters and scouts:

### **INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY COMMISSION<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> It took four separate treaties to establish the U.S.-Canadian border. The Treaty of Paris of 1783 ended the American Revolution and established boundaries between the U.S. and colonies of British North America. The boundary consisted of 17 segments, and extended only as far west as the Lake of the Woods. The Treaty of 1818 established the boundary from the northwest corner of the Lake of the Woods south to the 49th Parallel, thence west for 853 miles to the Rockies. The Anglo-Russian Treaty of 1825, between Russia and Great Britain, established an ambiguous 1,476-mile boundary between Canada and Russian America (Alaska), including the southern panhandle and north along the 141st Meridian. In 1846 the Oregon Treaty divided Oregon Country between British North America and the U.S. by extending the 49th Parallel to the Pacific Coast (From American Surveyor Magazine, Marc Cheves, July 1, 2006).

We understand that the English Boundary Commission have been in communication with Mr. Wm. Hallett, of this place, in relation to the raising of a number of Half-Breeds to go across the plains with the expedition. Their services would, probably, be required as guides, interpreters and scouts. Before reaching the Pacific, and finally locating the International Boundary line to that point, it is surmised that from two to three years may elapse, and persons going with the Commissioners are to be engaged for some such lengthened period of service. A force of between one hundred and two hundred men accompanies the expedition, as all may not be plain sailing across the plains. The presence of such a force, well kept in hand, will no doubt have a good effect on the tribes through whom they may pass. But more potent still will be the presence of men such as William Hallett, John Grant, George Flett, or some of the Leveilles, Delormes, or Gentons, who know every inch of the ground between this and the mountains, can converse with the Indians in their naïve Tongue, and are thoroughly conversant with their habits. Men like these we have named, and others we could name, will do more towards carrying such an expedition safely through, than all the troops that will accompany it; and for the sake of the speedy settlement of this boundary line dispute, we hope that an important point like the engagement of men familiar with Indian life and character, to navigate over the plains, will not be neglected.

*Manitoban and Northwest Herald*, January 18, 1873

### **The Boundary Survey**

The English Boundary Commissioner, Capt. Cameron, has engaged some thirty English and French Half-Breeds to go with the Boundary Commission, which is expected to start on the 25<sup>th</sup> inst. These men will be on horseback and under the leadership of Mr. William Hallett, who will, we are sure, prove most efficient in anything he undertakes. The party are under engagement for five months, about which time the Commission will probably be seeking its winter quarters.

The Commission will, necessarily, travel very slow, not making, in all probability, more than about 300 miles during the season.

*Manitoban and Northwest Herald, May 17, 1873*

William's his first serious love (in 1834) was Sophia McDonell, the orphaned daughter of deceased Chief Factor Allan McDonell. However, her guardian, Alexander Christie, Governor of Assiniboia, didn't think William was good enough for her, because Hallett was of mixed-blood and a buffalo hunter. Christie gave her hand to the son of a Selkirk Settler, John Livingstone. This caused a furor in the Metis community, as it was another example of the HBC's arbitrary control over the residents of Rupert's Land.

William was first married "a la façon du pays" in 1835 to Suzette Lunes. She died in 1840 and he then married Maria Pruden in 1841, at St. Andrews Anglican Church at "the rapids" below Winnipeg. Maria was the daughter of chief factor John Peter Pruden and Nancy Pruden, born at Carlton House in 1813. The young couple lived in his father's household until 1844. When Henry Hallett died in 1844, William and Maria had two children. Since he no longer had to consider his father's wishes, he and his brother James began independent fur trading with the Indians, at the time, a practice which was outlawed by the HBC.

It is no exaggeration to say that William Hallett was a very prominent citizen of Red River. An article in the *Nor'Wester* newspaper on June 20, 1863 said:

...the veteran chieftain of a hundred battles... Mr. Hallett is one of the first men in this country; he is universally beloved and esteemed; he has extensive and powerful connections among all classes; of a mild and peaceful disposition himself, he has ever exerted himself to preserve peace and order in this country; as against the Indian tribes around us his very name is a tower of strength.

Hallett was one of the elected leaders of the Hunt. Alexander Ross in the Red River Settlement (p.246) describes Hallett's duties as one of the ten elected "Captains of the Hunt."

On leaving the river Chienne, Parisien,.... Got into the dumps, and forked off to take a road of his own, contrary to the regulations of the camp, when Hallett, one of the captains, rode after him, and with a crack or two of his whip, turning his horses, brought them back to camp.

During the 1860s, William was still the elected leader of the English-speaking Half-Breed buffalo hunt out of the Red River.

William Hallett was in favour of bringing Red River into confederation, and on this, he and Riel clashed unreservedly. In July of 1869, William was signatory to a *Nor'Wester* advertisement calling for a meeting to deal with the Canadian intentions of annexing Rupert's Land. In 1869, he worked as a guide and interpreter for one of the John Dennis survey parties. He then helped Dennis, serving as a guide to evade the patrols of Riel's men between Fort Garry and Pembina. He was also hired to guide the "would be" Lieutenant Governor MacDougall when he was trying to cross the border into Manitoba

to take up his duties at Red River. When the party was stopped at La Rivière Salle William was held in custody then released. He was finally arrested and jailed at Fort Garry on December 7, 1869. His only son John was also imprisoned at this time when he went as part of a delegation to negotiate with Riel. Riel released William on \$450 bail on February 12, 1870.

In 1872, when the border between Canada was being formally surveyed, it was decided that the survey party needed protection from the Sioux and anyone else who might try to molest them. Captain Cameron immediately chose William Hallett to command and recruit a troop of native Manitobans to form what became known as the "49<sup>th</sup> Rangers." In his final report, Commissioner Cameron penned a tribute to the memory of Chief Scout Hallett:

The Corps of mounted scouts was composed, with few exceptions, of Half-Breeds. They provided their own riding horses; they were furnished with camping equipage, blanket, robes, arms, and ammunition.

They were employed in reconnoitering, hunting, herding, maintaining connections with depots, carrying letters, and in communicating with Indians.

The scouts employed in 1873 were engaged and commanded by Mr. William Hallett (since dead), of whom it is right to say that very few could be named who have so great a claim upon their county's memory.

Distinguished by honest manliness, renowned for activity and great power of endurance, and noted from his youth as a most successful and daring hunter, and for his bravery when in contact with hostile Indians, he commanded the friendship and respect of all his brother Half-Breeds, and was latterly elected chief of the English speaking section.

William Hallett died of a gunshot wound to the stomach, by his own hand on December 27, 1873. William had undoubtedly lived with great pain as a result of his imprisonment in 1869-70. The irons used to bind his legs and arms in the unheated jail had frozen the flesh and resulted in a chronic and incurable streptococcus infection (erysipelas). Descendant Granny Good stated in her later years "His legs were raw with erysipelas. ...and Hallett wished he were dead the pain was so bad." James McKay of Deer Lodge was a staunch friend, colleague and supporter of William Hallett. When he heard of his death, he sat down and sobbed, "He was my Best Man." Maria Pruden Hallett died on December 24, 1883, three days short of the tenth anniversary of her husband's death.

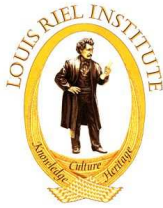
The newspaper gave the following account of his death:

### **Suicide Sad End of an Old Resident**

This morning, at about 10 o'clock Mr. William Hallett, of St. James Parish, came to his death at his own hands. We have not been able to gather the full particulars, but it appears the deceased had in some manner shot himself in

the abdomen with a fowling piece. Mr. Hallett was in the neighborhood of sixty years of age, and was highly respected by a large circle of acquaintances. Of late some pecuniary losses seemed to weigh on his mind, and friends began to notice the fire of insanity in his eye, and there can be no doubt that his reason had departed ere he committed the rash act which hurried him before his maker.

*Manitoba Free Press, December 27, 1873*



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Heather Hallett made substantial contributions.

Reference:

Heather Hallett. *Children of the Rivers*. Castelgar, B.C.: Author, 1999: 221-250