THE STORY OF HONEST SCOTTIE

One of Crookston’s and the county’s earliest settlers was a man by the name of McGrown, or McCrinish, or McLeod, or McVey, or Scottie, or Benedict, or Mount, or Douglas, or Ryan, or O’Toole, or Frenche, or Holland, or Phillips, or Dickson, or Smith, or Jones, or just about any other name that comes to mind.

All of the above names were at one time or another used by an early settler in the Crookston area. He used the above names, along with perhaps a few hundred others thrown in, as the time for the place demanded.

It is believed that the “Hero” of our story was in reality, Justin Benedict McConnell, and that he was born in Montreal, Canada.

Papers found after his departure; believed to be his, listed this name, and the place of birth as Montreal, Canada on October 11, 1796.

For the purpose of our story we shall use the name by which he was better known, and incidentally it was also one of self creation. He called himself “Honest Scottie”.

Honest Scottie was accompanied throughout his “adventures” by his child bride. She was a very young Indian girl, perhaps Chippewa, or Sauk, who was described by early settlers as “just a child”.

Honest Scottie made his appearance in this area sometime around 1826 or 1827, passing through this valley in search of pelts and the like. He was a well educated man, and from the stories he told, obtained his education from priests in Montreal and Quebec City. He spoke English, French, Chippewa, Sioux, and a dab of Spanish, and in doing so displayed a thick Scotch accent.

Honest Scottie made many journeys into the Dakota territory in the early 1830’s, obtaining furs and like items from the Indians in exchange for whatever he could offer as trading materials. These “materials”, offered by Scottie, were mostly in the form of English or French army rifles, bayonets, or army clothing. These items just somehow seemed always to be resupplied in quantities, after Scottie met with English or French supply officers. It was also apparent that his supply of pelts and furs were slightly less in numbers after these meetings.

Honest Scottie came to the Crookston area in the summer of 1834, according to his own dating. Near here, he hired several Metis and Chippewas to help him build a TRADING POST. It became known as MC CASTLE’S TRADING POST, which was another name used by Scottie. His post was built on a site at the bend of the Red River Lake, just north of the present day Riverside Park, adjacent to the present day Riverside Avenue. Scottie figured that his post was located at the most advantageous spot in the whole area.

In the early days the Indians traveled down the river in boats loaded with pelts and furs to trade, while others came overland following the Old River Trail, which passed close to this point, as the trail made its way from Louisville (Hut) to Grand Forks, North Dakota. Here on the height of the land sat the EMPIRE OF HONEST SCOTTIE!

It was of great advantage to Scottie to have an Indian for a wife. It was this fact, along with his ability to speak two Indian tongues, that put Scottie in a special place between the Indians and the white settlers. These facts were taken full advantage of by the eagle beaver, Scottie.

Scottie operated his business for several years, making deals with all sorts of persons who passed through the valley. His reputation spread over the area and he became known far and wide as Honest Scottie.

The secret of his success lay in his ability to supply the needs of his customers. For the white settlers he had the items on the “hard to obtain list”, and for “special” compensation he offered an inside track between the Whites and the Indians. On the other side of the coin, Honest Scottie got certain “favors” from the Indians in exchange for “certain items” that were on their “hard to get list”. No matter how the trades were made, somehow old Honest Scottie always seemed to be in the middle counting up the profits!

Scottie supplied liquor, along with guns and ammunition, to the Indians. By some odd coincidence the liquor bore the seal of the British Crown, and by some odd chance, so did the guns. Honest Scottie built his business between these two camps.

Over what period of time Scottie operated his enterprise is not known, but it is believed that it lasted to about 1845 or 1850.

The honest one journeyed far and wide doing business “on both sides of the street”. It was during the years of his question-able operations that Scottie was forced to change his name just about as often and he changed the direction of travel. Needless to say, the name changing was dictated by the dealings in which he became involved. As Scottie built his business, he also built a list of enemies, among them were the United States Army, the English Army, some of the native Indians, and above all, a certain little Indian girl, known as Mrs. Honest Scottie. His “Child Bride” grew tired of doing the main stay of Scottie’s work. As the story goes she tried to manage the Trading Post for months on end while Scottie was away on his business ventures. On many occasions, when he returned he would beat her senseless for making what he called “bad deals” during his absence.

Slowly a fire was being built under Honest Scottie. As the story goes, Scottie was building a sizeable trade with the Red River Indians, supplying them with large amounts of red wine, English rum, as well as whiskey, all in exchange for pelts and furs.

On one occasion, when Honest Scottie was “out of town” a group of Indians came to the Trading Post looking for liquor. Scottie’s supply had been exhausted and his wife tried to explain this to the Indians. They weren’t looking for excuses, their minds were only on the fire water supplied by Honest Scottie.

They turned the place upside down looking for the supply of liquor and finding none, they beat the Indian girl unmercifully. Later, when Honest Scottie returned, he found his castle in complete disorder, and he then administered another beating upon the girl.

Several months later, a group of Indians came to the Trading Post, and Scottie’s wife recognized that among the group were several of those who had beaten her earlier. Scottie’s wife slipped into the back room where the Kegs of Happiness were kept, and poured into the casks a goodly portion of “salts” used by the settlers for the relief of constipation as well as for other medical treatments. Scottie’s Indian friends spent several hours drinking his spirits and making deals for goods. They completed their dealings and left, taking with them several containers of liquor. When the “salts” had done their intended duty, the Indians returned looking for Scottie, but he had been found by his wife and the place hid himself beneath the floor of his Trading Post. The Indians made their entry into the Trading Post and quickly made their intention toward Scottie known. Scottie’s wife in a loud voice denied knowing the whereabouts of Scottie, while all the time she was pointing to the floor, beneath which Honest Scottie was hidden. Scottie’s wife made signs to the Indians and several of them went outside of the Trading Post. Inside the shack one of the remaining Indians, or perhaps even Scottie’s wife, obtained a shovel of hot coals from the fire and sifted them through the cracks in the flooring. It was evident that the coals had found their mark as Honest Scottie made an egress with the speed of a startled deer. Once outside of his hiding place the Indians set upon Scottie and beat their message on his body with sticks, which resounded as if it were a Sioux war drum. It was some time during this ostracizing ceremony, according to the original teller of this tale (Honorable Judge Watts) that Mrs. Scottie joined the party and as Judge Watts expressed it — “Caught Honest Scottie squarely between the horns with an ax handle.”

Scottie was thrown down the river bank with his assailants going along for company. Scottie was dunked in the river and after several minutes was pulled from the water. His hands were tied and he was led off in the direction of Louisville (Hut).

Scottie was never seen again in the Crookston area, but the teller of this story said that the Indians took Honest Scottie eastward until they were met by some United States soldiers near Hut. Here they turned the helpless Scottie over to them.