A PIONEER BURIAL

He stood there alone on a plot of ground in the wilderness of northwestern Minnesota on a warm day in August.

To the east of him were thickets of poplar and oak inhabited by large numbers of crows. To the west were prairie lands so far as the eye could see.

Erick John was not a robust man to look at as you would expect an early settler to be, but he was quick and wiry and what he lacked in weight and brawn he made up for in ingenuity and perseverance.

He looked down at the mound of damp earth to the right of him and measured the depth of the hole with his eye. He shook his head when he discovered it was not deep enough.

Perhaps the grave diggers didn’t have time for they had a small patch of oats ready for cutting or maybe they thought it was the right depth.

After a moment he turned and looked toward the wagon to the left and said audibly, as if the still figure in the wooden box could hear him,

“Well, Karl, I’ll see that you get buried right as far as it is in my power to do so. You bet I will! You helped me hew the logs and build my house this spring. And I’ll never forget how you helped me when Johanna and the children were seasick on our voyage to America last fall. Now it’s my turn to help you who are all alone in this new country.”

He reached into the wagon and pulled out a shovel. There was no time to lose. He must finish the burial and return the team before dark. Hoglund was going to cut his oats in the morning and had to have his horses properly taken care of that night.

Erick John jumped into the hole and began throwing shovels of clay to the surface. It was hard work for the clay was packed hard. He realized then why the grave diggers had not gone deeper. He kept on digging and wiping his brow until he struck a vein of sand. The digging became easier. Shovel after shovel of sand was thrown to the surface until he discovered that his head was about three inches below the surface of the ground. He knew then that he had reached the six foot depth. He thrust the shovel into the side of the grave in several places and made ledges in the clay, by which he climbed out.

It was pleasant to sit and rest on the damp cool earth and feel the wind waving him dry. He lit his pipe and inhaled deeply for he knew the most difficult work was still to be done. How was he to get the box into the grave? He had to do the work that six pallbearers usually do. He had a long rope and two planks. That comforted him. But there wasn’t enough manpower.

As he sat pondering a curious little chipmunk came closer and closer. He raised up on his haunches and seemed to wonder why everything had become so quiet. He wanted more activity. But he scurried away like lightning when Erick John rose up suddenly as though he had just solved the problem and was anxious to carry it out.

He knocked the ashes from his pipe and chucked it into his pocket. He picked up the shovel.

“It means more digging, Karl, but I’m going to do it,” he said, as he began to dig an incline at the end of the grave. When that was done he dug away some earth from the back wheels until the wagon box was at the right slant. He placed the planks on the incline just meeting the wagon box and there he had a straight gently sloping chute to the grave. Then we wound the rope around the box and holding the two ends in his left hand pulled with the other.

His plan worked! It was heavy pushing but he preferred that to the risk connected with steeper incline.

When the box was in its right place, he removed the rope and threw it into the wagon box. Then he lifted the planks and threw them in.

“Caw, Caw,” came from almost every tree as the crows protested against this unusual disturbance of their domain.

Erick John sat down for another brief rest. But thoughts of the religious rites of a burial came surging through his mind. The fact that the only minister in that section of the country had refused to conduct a service rankled in his mind.

There is a rumor that the minister had said, “that Karl might have been intoxicated when the accident occurred and he was not a religious man! No one knows whether he even had sent up as much as a sigh to God before he died. So you see, I haven’t the authority to bury him.”

“Well,” thought Erick John, “neither have I but I am going to do my best. Who am I to sit in judgment of any man. I believe God hears the prayers of any one if it comes from the heart. So I am sure he will hear me.”

Texts of funeral sermons he had heard came to his mind. There was the favorite one about “In My Father’s House are Many Mansions” and “Through Faith Ye Are Saved” and “The Hour Cometh Ye Know Not When.” Then he recalled the old one “The Wages of Sin Is Death” which ministers liked to use in order to frighten people into becoming religious.

He rose, picked up the shovel, and went to the head of the grave. Quietly he placed the shovel into the soft earth so that it stood upright. He removed his hat and with bowed head & fervently but softly repeated the Lord’s Prayer. Then he reached for the shovel and threw a little earth into the grave. It struck the box with a thud. “From dust thou art — another thud — ‘To dust shalt thou return’ — another thud — ‘Blessed be the name of the Lord, Amen.’

This ended the ritual and even as a minister would have done it.

Erick John looked around him. Everything was so still. The wind had died down, the crows were silent, and the little chipmunk was standing upright nearby unafraid.

A solemnness had come over Erick John, too. He felt that what he had done was evidently right.

He began his last task, that of filling in the grave. It was much easier to fill than to dig. When he had shaped the mound to suit him, he rested on the shovel for a brief moment and felt the satisfaction that comes with work well done and especially when facing such odds.

He hitched the horses to the wagon and they pulled the wheels up the incline. Then he leveled the ground, threw the shovel into the wagon and climbed in. The horses started on immediately for they were headed towards home, and it was near their feeding time.

As they sped away a big black crow flew down from a tree, swooped low and circled the grave, then silently returned to the tree. Erick John turned towards the grave for his last look and called softly, “Goodbye, Karl, I did the best I could. May you rest in peace.”
THE STORY OF HONEST SCOTTIE

One of Crookston's and the county's earliest settlers was a man by the name of McGowan, or McCavish or McBride, or McConnel, or McVay, or Scottie, or Benedict, or McCastle, or Douglas, or Ryan, or O'Toole, or French, or Holland, or Phillips, or Duchson, 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 Scottish 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 riles, bayonets, or army clothing. These items just somehow seemed always to be re-supplied 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 Crookston 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 (Huot) 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 eager 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 questionable 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 Lake 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 mercilessly. 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 "caught" by his wife. It was then that thePosts did themselves 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 his 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 (Honoroble 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 (Huot).

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 Huot. Here they turned the helpless Scottie over to them.