THE STORY OF HONEST SCOTTIE

One of Crookston’s and the county’s earliest settlers was a man by the name of McGowen, or McTavish or McBride, or McConnel, or McVay, or Scottie, or Benedict, or McCastle, or Douglas, or Ryan, or O’Toole, or Frenchie, or Holland, or Phillips, or Dichson, 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 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 Chipewas 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 Park, which is located 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 (Huo) 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 forced to leave by the presence of the police and was 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 was a Sioux war drum. It was some time during this otracizing 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 (Huo).

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.
At a later date they turned the much wanted Scottie over to the English at Winnipeg, Manitoba.  

An English army report made in Manitoba in 1852 states that a Justin Benedict McConnell died of pneumonia during the winter of 1851, in an army hospital while waiting trial on several counts of illegal possession of army stores. His age was listed as fifty-five.

The late Judge William Watts of Crookston, Minnesota had papers taken from Honest Scottie's Trading Post, on which were recorded the birth date of a Justin Benedict McConnell as being October 11, 1796. It appears that the McConnell who died in Canada is and our "hero," were one and the same.

The fate of Scottie's wife is not known. It is believed she lived at the Post for several months, but later she returned to Red Lake with a band of her own people. Some of the early settlers claimed that she returned to her family living near Blackduck Lake.

The Post was abondoned, and was occupied by various tenants over a period of years that followed.

In the 1920's the property was occupied by the Moses Giller Hide and Metal Company and the old Post building was still standing at the back of the property. Giller used the old shack as a storage building for hides and metal.

During the 1940's this property was obtained by the city for the extension of Central Park. It was during this period that the old Post building was torn down and the land cleared for a road that connected Central Park to Riverside Avenue.

Just as Honest Scottie returned to the dust from which he came, so did one of Crookston's early establishments, and gone into dust of time is THE MC CASTLE TRADING POST, operated by HONEST SCOTTIE, whose real name appeared to be Justin Benedict McConnell***

STAGE COACHES IN THE RED RIVER VALLEY

by Albany Capistran

The first stage coach arrived at Fort Abercrombie in 1859 and carried the mail and passengers from St. Paul to the Fort.

The stage coach lines in Minnesota and North Dakota Territory were very well organized. They had a network of main lines that the company stages traveled and then a number of smaller and sometimes individual lines that connected up with almost all the small towns and settlements.

The stage coach and pony express had the government contracts for the United States Mail. Stamps and money orders could be purchased from almost any stage coach. The stage coaches would run out of stamps many times. One quotation from early Crookston history reads: "The stage coach came in but they are out of stamps."

The biggest lines in northwestern Minnesota and northeastern Dakota Territory were Burbank and Blakely and Company. Their lines and the lines that connected with them covered all of what we now call the Red River Valley and extended going north from Pembina to Fort Gary, now Winnipeg. The Burbank and Blakely Stage Coach Company had Concord coaches which were drawn by four horses. The stage coach weighed about 3,000 pounds and cost from $1,400 to $1,500. The coaches were made of seasoned oak and ash wood. Some of the coaches were made so that the wheels could be taken off and bobsled runners put on for use in winter. The coaches could carry from six to nine people inside and from five to nine could ride on top if there was no freight.

The stage coach main line went from St. Cloud to Breckenridge, to old Georgetown, and a trading post of the Hudson Bay Company at Frog Point (which is close to where Climax, Minnesota is today). Other main lines connected to go to the Grand Fork and points west to the fort and trading post where Wahalla, North Dakota is today. Stage coaches ran out of Crookston going east and north for a number of years until trains, buses, and cars took over the business. There was a stage that ran out of Crookston seven days a week carrying mail and passengers going to Gentilly, via Louisville, to Red Lake Falls on the east side of the Red Lake River. This route was made every day, weather permitting.

There are many heroic tales about stage coach drivers and about some of the wonderful horses that were on the stages. One such account is of a stage coming south from Pembina to Grand Forks in the winter. That stage was about five miles out of Grand Forks when a terrible blizzard caught them. The wind was at their backs but visibility was zero. The driver could not see where to go so he let the horses go by themselves. The horses would stop and the driver would clear the frozen ice from the horses' eyes and nostrils. Then the horses would go on again. This was done four times and the horses, by natural instinct, took the stage to its destination and stopped right at the barn.

Stage stations and rest stops were about 15 miles apart. It would take about 15 minutes at a stop to change horses. Mosquitoes and gnats were usually bad on stage coach runs north from Grand Forks to Pembina. The horses had to have their eyes, ears, and noses greased so they would not stampede and run away because of the bugs. Many of the stations had to keep smudges of smoke going to keep mosquitoes out.

The price of a meal at a stage coach station was about 50¢ to $1 per person. The menu consisted of bacon or side pork, corn bread, beans, dried apples or peaches, coffee or black tea. Some stations served good meals and others not so good.

The Turtle River Station was noted for beans — morning, noon, and night. Going north, stations served Rababoo which is lean buffalo pemmican or dried venison cut into strips and boiled with salt and flour in water. Other stations served boiled, dried catfish every meal. Indian women manned most of the stations going north and all of the stations from Pembina to Fort Gary. They served a lot of fresh dog meat and most people liked it until they found out what they were eating. Stage coach passengers slept on the floor and paid 50¢ per night. In other places they were jammed five to a room.

The stage's speed of travel was about six miles per hour on dry ground or good sledding. The fastest time recorded for any stage was ten miles in one hour with a selected driver and specially picked horses.

Stage fare was 10¢ per mile per person with 50 pounds of baggage free. It was a spectacular sight to see a stage driver on his throne seat speed into a town with his galloping horses and cracking his whip. Sometimes the stage had an armed guard who would ride alongside the driver and carry a double-barreled shot gun or rifle. There were usually no armed guards unless a sum of money or other valuables were being carried on the stage. There are very few accounts of stage coaches being robbed of their strong box or having a shoot-out with robbers in Minnesota or Dakota Territory.

In 1864 the stage coach lines had 1,300 miles of stage lines in Minnesota and North Dakota Territory. The stage lines also had 300 miles of Pony Mail Express in the same territory. Over 300 men and women were employed in the stage service and they used over 700 horses.