

History of Fort Yates

By
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CHAPTER III.

THE NAME, Standing Rock, was given this Agency and the large reservation it serves, for the reason that since time immemorial the name was attached to this locality by the Indians. The identical spot where it belonged was about two miles north of the Agency, near where once the Missouri river flowed, and it was there that a rock once reposed, or stood, about which a pretty legend has been woven, and as may be readily surmised, by which the name originated.

This rock resembles an Indian woman with a shawl over her head. It has been claimed that it looks like she was carrying a papoose in the old time way in which the mother totes her child, but it takes a person with a strong imagination to find the papoose. If it is there it must have been very small at the time when the transformation took place. Standing on its pedestal today, the rock appears innocently fraudulent, but we venture the opinion that it should have been placed with the other end up—it must be upside down.

However, for many generations it has been venerated by the Indians as a stone of spirit, having potential qualities capable of governing the destinies of the superstitious and imaginative redman. There are several versions of the legend, but they all agree in the main essentials, and we are pleased to present the result of our researches as follows:

A long time ago there lived beside the Grand river an Indian and his wife. One version states that "a Ree Indian who already had a wife took a Sioux woman to live with him," another version has it that a Dakotah married a Ree woman, and by and by took another wife, but this much is certain, the man was married and pluralized his marital condition for reasons lost to history.

Wife number one had lived happily with her husband, and she was the proud mother of a darling baby, while her man was a warrior brave much admired by all in the camp. Things had gone well with them and she had nothing much to complain of, until one day she was attacked by a fit of jealousy. There was no sensible reason for it that her people could see, but then she was different from the other women. For one thing she was annoyingly beautiful, and therefore more susceptible to such an attack than they were. She tried valiently to fight it off for several days for she knew that no one sympathised with her. How could they? Her husband had always been true to her. He had provided well for the tent-hold by the strong arm of his hunting, and he had never done a thing that was not in accord with the time-honored practices of his people. The only thing he had done of late was to take another woman to wife, and there shouldn't have been anything about that to stir her up. It was the rule of her people for a man to take as many wives as he thought he could handle, and that would be useful in the matter of putting up the tepee or taking it down, or gathering wood and doing a hundred and one other chores about the camp while he was away pursuing the panting buffalo or the elusive white man.

But she remained idiotically dissatisfied, and when she found life under such circumstances was no longer endurable, she swung her baby on her back and with her favorite dog, probably a little yellow fellow, she started out on foot toward the north.

Now again the old versions glare at one another. One says she walked north and the other says she sat on the tent floor and refused to leave, while the tent was removed and her husband and her relatives pulled out and left her. But it seems nicer to think that she was not stubborn, and that she assumed the initiative and hit the trail.

Some of her relatives, wishing to protect her from harm, followed, and all through the long day they traveled north along the winding Missouri, and when night came on they made camp a few miles north of the present location of Standing Rock Agency. They had covered a distance of nearly 50 miles during the day, which was doing very well under the circumstances.

They pitched their tent in a sheltered spot in the woods beside the big river, while the sad-hearted woman sat down wearily upon the ground and watched them with a world of woe in her expressive, dark eyes. She refused to enter the tepee when it was ready, and she refused to eat or drink.

Thinking this but a passing feature of her strange performance that would soon wear off, her friends ate supper, and after smoking and discussing the days journey, and wondering how the folks were back in the camp, they sought their much needed rest.

As the night drew down, the heart-broken mother sat picturesquely silent, listening to the fretful breathing of her child and the sounds of animals and the sleepy twitterings of the birds in the woods, and the gurgling rush of the wild waters of the mighty river that flowed by in utter disregard of the sorrows of an Indian woman upon the bank. The little dog lay at her feet in the comforting way a dog has for his master in times of great distress, but no sound of the woods escaped him, and his frequent growl showed when some animal was prowling near.

The night wore on, the east grew gradually brighter and the sun arose. Daylight was once more upon the land, and those within the tent came forth to see how their poor, foolish sister fared. And they found her turned to stone—hard, unrelenting stone. And the baby was in the same serious condition, and the dog likewise. This indeed was somewhat of a surprise, and it wasn't long until the woman who turned to stone was alone with her babe and the dog, while fleeing towards the south were some Indians with no other expression on their healthy features but that of superlative amazement. They reached the home camp in safety, and after pinching themselves to be sure that they too were not becoming solidified, they told the strange story of what had happened to the jealous woman. Thus to this day the stone is looked upon with awe by the Indians of all tribes.

Soon after Major McLaughlin took charge of affairs here, the stone was removed to the Agency, and with ceremonies mysterious and complicated, in which the great chief Sitting Bull took part, it was placed upon a crude pedestal of sand rock erected upon its present location from which a splendid view of the Missouri river may be seen for twenty miles north and south. The little dog, too, was brought to the Agency, but, unfortunately, he was thoughtlessly left near a pile of stone which were being placed in the foundation of one of the new buildings, and a cold-hearted stone mason put him in a coating of plaster, that now holds him embedded far from prying eyes of the curious. He doubtless rests in peace.

(Continued Next Week)