

BIG SISTER

I do not possess any documentation of their journey, nor proof of their lands and losses, but stories exist of a letter in the Upper Canada Sundries* — a microfilm collection of documents written by British Counsel, James BUCHANAN, Esquire from New York City.

*These sundries are located in the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa, Ontario, and a second set of can also be viewed (by appointment) in the Kathleen Mills Memorial Library of Queens University in Kingston, Ontario.

I have not been able to arrange to view them, but one such letter written by His Excellency excused my earliest ancestors from the Customs House, expediting their journey to York, Upper Canada — more commonly known now as Toronto, Ontario.

They had started off in February 1833 from Preston, Lancashire, England on an adventure that took almost a month. They paid their fares to Lt(N) LOWE. The monies paid out varied upon the age of each traveller. They were also responsible for their own provisions.

Six adults and six children started the voyage:

- John ATKINSON (56) and his wife, the former Elizabeth HODGSON (60)
- their bachelor sons, Thomas (25) and Robert (21)
- their very pregnant daughter, Mary (31) and her husband, Thomas BRUNSKILL (32), and their six little ones, ranging in age from just under a year-old to six-years-old.

But, before they reached New York City, tragedy befell them — three of the children died! Which ones? No one has been able to determine, but speculation is that Cholera took their young lives, as it was a wide-spread pandemic at the time.

My guess: is most likely the youngest one and the oldest two.

Strange reasoning, you say? Not really, if you ponder this:

Twelve persons on a voyage that no one has taken before. They must supply their own food – restricted only to whatever they can carry.

If not enough is brought, they will need to ration smaller amounts to avoid starvation.

And, then taking into consideration the time-frame of said event (1833), the women would have been put in charge of this critical task, because it would have been expected of them to do so!

But, travelling with small children is no easy task. Just ask any parent who has taken little ones on an air flight across the country; two hours is sheer torture to everyone aboard!

Now, I know some typical mothers, and when the food and money get tight, they choose not to eat. They ensure that their children do first, and then ... maybe ...

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their men. If anything remains, they will eat that. (Similar habits belong to a pride of lionesses after a hunt. These working moms also eat last.)

Another issue is fresh water to drink. It is not impossible to be well-fed and still die ... from dehydration. And drinking the sea water, laden with salt, would curb one's thirst for a short while, but also make the individual hungry again, far sooner than if they did not drink at all.

So, applying this reasoning, I have but one question:

When did Elizabeth and Mary tell the men that the food was still going to run out before they get to New York City?

My theory is the women told the men very early on, while they were trying to figure out how to make the food last. Thomas (Mary's husband) and her parents, would have insisted that Mary eat properly because of her pregnancy. Mary's two brothers would have agreed as well.

Now, Mary, **if** she was a typical mother, would have passed off most of her rations to her children, who were (no doubt) still crying that they were hungry!

But there is also something to be said about young school-age children. When they want to be, they are very observant; more so than most adults give them credit for.

Mary's oldest two children (I approximated their ages to be five and six-years-old), would notice after a few meals that Mummy and Daddy are not eating. They would have also noticed Grandma; Grandfather and their two uncles were not either.

It would not take a degree in rocket science for a six-year-old to figure out that there is not enough food to feed everyone in the family. I am also certain that this child (whom I believe was a girl) would have questioned her Mother as to why The Baby won't stop crying; although she already knew the answer before Mary could give it.

So, your next two questions are:

- (1) How do I know this six-year-old child was a girl? And,
- (2) that the five-year-old was a boy?

I don't. It is a simple case of gender profiling and a lot of reasoning.

Without thinking, married males rush into life-threatening situations resulting in immediate death (i.e. the family vehicle careening off a bridge, landing and slowly sinking in freezing-cold waters below), sacrificing themselves to save their beloved wives and children.

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Unmarried males are also known to do the same, regardless of their ages, for their frail or widowed parents and much younger siblings.

But, when it comes to married women, that's a completely different story: they tend to rationalize and think things out, because if they sacrifice their lives to save their families (which in some rare circumstances do happen), who will tend to the little ones? Who will do the cooking and kick her sons — and their father — out the door, just before sunrise, to tend to the fields?

And young daughters, from an early age, are taught everything from their mothers about homemaking. Even when Mum is not teaching, little eyes watch how she makes the beds, how she places the wood when she makes the cooking fire, etc, etc, etc.

No, women look at a crisis and think of the after-effects — the next crisis that would follow, and come to their solutions that way.

The relationship between this six-year-old and five-year-old would be taxing, but in this situation — the five-year-old would notice 'Big Sister' isn't eating and would share what little he has with her.

She won't take it.

When the persistent 'Little Man' finally gets an answer from her, he shares with his younger siblings too, like Big Sister has been since the day before. Little Man will also stay with his Big Sister because the men are consoling the women over the loss of The Baby, who died earlier that day.

Approximately, two or three days later, both Mary and Elizabeth would be overwhelmed with grief and inconsolable with the losses of Big Sister and Little Man.

So, here you have it: the most fearless female I know. She has no name, except for the endearing nickname I gave her: Big Sister.

Kale Liam Hobbes