

HERITAGE CORNER

Increasing cross-border raids and incursions raise concern at federal level

Part 2 of the St. Clair Raids as recorded in the 1839 British Parliamentary Papers

By Dr. John C. Carter

The first report of an actual attack on the St. Clair River was reported in a June 30 letter, which was published in the 1839 *British Parliamentary Papers*. It was sent to American General Hugh Brady by Colonel Henry Reid of the 32nd Regiment. As the officer in charge British troops in the Western District and commander of Fort Malden at this time, Reid warned of "...the intended movements of the pirates said to be scattered along the St. Clair frontier." He included specifics about the Sombra raid, saying "...that the pirates who plundered Govin's [sic] store were partly American citizen's; and having assembled and armed themselves within the territory of the United States, have by her laws subjected themselves to a heavy fine and imprisonment, even had not the crime of robbery been added to their other lawless movements and conduct."

Lieutenant-Governor Arthur's June 30 despatch to Lord Glenelg, noted that documents showed "...that from Cleveland in Ohio, to Fort Gratiot in Michigan, a general plan of invading the western part of the province, has been for some time past maturing, and that violence would be used about the time for celebrating the great anniversary of the American Union (July 4)." From other accounts reaching Arthur, it was reported, "...that the hostile force has made its first movement a little sooner than I was led to anticipate, and that a party of about 300 men, well armed, and with an abundance of ammunition, actually crossed the St. Clair River, at a place called Nugent's Inn, on the 27th instant, and planted the pole of liberty on the Canadian soil, where, it is not improbable [that] many disaffected persons already in the province will be found to swell their ranks." Arthur noted that he would be sending reinforcements to support the troops on the line who were defending the Western District. On July 1, Arthur confirmed to Glenelg that; "...the actual landing of about 300 men at a place called Nugent's Inn, on the River St. Clair, in the western district," had occurred.

In a July 2 response to Colonel Reid from Hugh Brady, the American general suggested that Reid was misinformed about the Sombra raid, pointing out that; "...only one or two were citizens of the United States, and the party equipped themselves and made ready for the expedition at some point near, Beldoon [sic], on the Thames river." Brady added that; "Col. [John] Clark's interference prevented the issue that was about to be tried; happy, not only because our soil [United States] was thereby preserved from violation and insult, but because such an act would have increased, very much, the excitement which already so unhappily exists in a certain part of the community on this border, relative to, the existing state of things in Canada."

Brady also noted that he had dispatched an armed American steamboat to reconnoitre the St. Clair River and to lend aid to the civil officers in the discharge of their duties. Brady confirmed that the vessel had returned to Detroit on July 1, "...with certain individuals on board as prisoners, said to have been engaged in the robbery [at Sombra] heretofore alluded, and who are now undergoing a trial, or rather examination for that offence." He concluded his correspondence by saying that he would soon be strengthening the garrison at Fort Gratiot, and that these efforts; "...I trust will put a check to the operations of those troublesome men, nine-

tenths of whom are Canadian refugees, and show them the utter folly of expecting to set our laws [American] at defiance with impunity."

In a July 10 message to Lord Glenelg, Sir George Arthur revised information he had previously sent. He suggested that accounts received from the London and Western Districts "...had been singularly magnified." Arthur wrote that Colonel John Maitland had confirmed that 100 instead of 300 rebels had crossed the St. Clair River at Nugent's Tavern, and that he believed that 20 men may have been taken into custody. Regarding the Sombra raid, Arthur said; "Of the brigands who crossed the River St. Clair, and were concerned in the pillaging of Mr. Govin's [sic] store, it is reported that



Sir George Arthur

12 or 13 of them have been arrested by the American authorities...it is my intention to demand from the Governor of Michigan their surrender for trial in this country."

In Colonel John Prince's July 3 letter to the Honorable John Macaulay, which was forwarded by Arthur to Glenelg on July 10, mention was made of the Bear Creek incident, and of the death of Captain William Kerry. Prince wrote that; "The disturbances on this frontier are, I lament to say, [are] increasing. One of our most loyal men on Bear Creek has been murdered, and property and persons plundered to a vast extent."

Lieutenant-governor Arthur provided his feelings about these events, in a July 10 despatch to Glenelg. In a positive report, Arthur wrote that; "I am perfectly convinced that the general disposition of the disaffected persons in the London and Western districts, to rise simultaneously about the 4th of this month has been completely defeated by the sudden turn-out of the militia; and there is nothing to be now apprehended from invasion, since the foreign brigands can no longer entertain any hope of effective co-operation from any considerable number of persons resident in the Provinces."

In early August, Sir John Colborne made a tour of inspection of the Western District, and came to a similar conclusion as Arthur had. His report was forwarded by Lord Durham to Glenelg on August 10, 1838. Colborne concluded that; "The best spirit prevails in all the townships on the river St. Clair, which I visited; and at Sandwich, Amherstburg, and in the townships in that vicinity. In fact, few instances of disaffection appear to have occurred in that section of the country; and I am inclined to believe that the information received by the local government respecting the encouragement held out to the

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American gangs on the United States frontier, cannot be depended on.”

The last mention of the St Clair Raids to appear in the 1839 *British Parliamentary Papers*, came in details included in the 1839 *Report of the Select Committee of the House of Assembly of Upper Canada*. In this assessment of the political state of Upper Canada in 1838, seven legislators wrote; “In the month of July, a party, supposed to consist of about 50 brigands, crossed over from a place called Palmer, in the United States, to the settlements on the St. Clair river, where they robbed and imprisoned several of the settlers, and then returned [to Michigan]. About the same time a loyal subject by the

name of Carey [Kerry], who was also an officer of the Militia, was shot in the night by a set of murderers, who it is well known were from the opposite [American] shore, although they were never clearly identified.”

In the future, the events and occurrences of the St. Clair Raids would be assigned to a relatively few Canadian and American history books, or completely forgotten. However they remain as part of the political record in the British Parliamentary Papers, and are an important part of the history of Lambton County.

Dr. John C. Carter is author of Piratical Doings on the River St. Clair, which will be published later this year by Heritage St. Clair.

Local baseball mysteries solved; identities revealed

The local baseball heritage exhibit currently on display at the Sombra Museum is yielding a wealth of information about some of the mystery photographs that have been contributed by township baseball fans. These two photographs are mysteries no more.

The St. Clair River League Champions of 1953

Front left: Bill Kimball; Keith Arnold; Ken Grant; Bob Grant.

Middle left: Jerry Grant; Clayton Roberts; Ron “Spider” Winder; Jack Swain.

Back left: Bud Morrison; Glen Morrison; Bill Arnold; Glen Scott; Simon Grant.



**Courtright Ladies team
1946 (or 1947)**

Kneeling left: Joanne Burns, Jeanne Ingles.

Standing left: Alva Bullock; Jackie Johns(t)on; Loreen Walton; Loraine Hiller; Shirley Hiller; Miza Hiller; Coach Lawrence Muxlow; Reta Lester.