

## **Philip F. Wells, “The Fox.” (1850-1947)**

Philip Wells was the grandson of Duncan Graham, a Scotsman who immigrated to Canada through York Factory as one of the Selkirk settlers. Lured by the profit to be made in furs, he traveled to St. Peters, at the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers to establish a post at Mendota. In 1796, he married Philip’s grandmother, Susan Pennishon (Istagiwin). Susan was a half-blood Sioux, the daughter of Wapasha I, Chief of the Mdewakanton Sioux. They established the first post at Devil’s Lake; he built a stockade on what later became known as Graham’s Island. The Indians called him Big Foot and the island was known as Big Foot’s Island. He went on to establish a post at the present day Grand Forks in 1812, and a few years later at Fargo.

Wells has a connection to Canadian events in that he became peripherally involved in the 1885 Northwest Resistance. In 1884, Philip Wells, a Metis interpreter and farmer-in-charge at Turtle Mountain Reserve was sent to Duck Lake by the U.S. government (Secretary of the Interior) to investigate Metis activities after the Sioux in the United States had received letters from Gabriel Dumont asking for their assistance. He reported back that many Sioux who had participated in the Minnesota outbreaks of 1862 were there. Upon his return the government directed him to effect the arrest of any Riel emissary entering the United States. When he had blocked off the more eastern routes he reported that the emissaries began to enter the United States through the Judith Gap in Montana.<sup>1</sup>

During the War of 1812, Philip’s grandfather, Duncan Graham, fought on the British side and during the battle of Credit Island (September 6, 1814, near Davenport, Iowa). With a force of thirty whites and Indians he defeated Zachary Taylor, the future president, and a force of 334 Americans. Duncan was granted land in Canada by the British for his service, but because of extensive litigation never obtained them. He returned to Grand Forks in the Dakota Territory at the end of the war.

In 1839, Bishop Loras baptized the couple’s children, Alexander and Sarah Marie. All told they had four daughters and one son. Daughter Sarah married Oliver Cratte, Lucy married Captain Buisson, Elizabeth married Alexander Fairbault and Jane married James Wells.

Jane and James married at Fort Snelling, Minnesota on September 12, 1836. They had ten children of whom Philip was the eighth. James Wells had fought in the Mexican War and was later a member of the Minnesota Legislative Assembly from 1848 to 1851. After leaving the assembly, he started a trading post at what became known as Well’s Lake. Later, at the outbreak of the Sioux wars in 1863, he moved to Okamon where he opened another post. In the spring of 1864, he set out on an expedition to scout for a trading post location in the Black Hills. He took with him his sons, Wallace, Aaron and Phillip along with a Sioux lad he had raised by the name of George and George’s wife.

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<sup>1</sup> Wells (1850-1947) was a Metis interpreter at the Fort Buford, Montana prison camp that held Sitting Bull’s band. In June of 1884, he was transferred to the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Reserve as farmer-in-charge then assistant agent.

They were attacked by a Sioux war party and his father, and George's wife were killed and Philip was wounded.

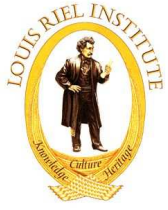
Philip Wells was born on December 5, 1850 while his parents were on a trading expedition. His mother had sent him to St. Louis for education. But he ran away because he was so much older than the other students and felt out of place. He worked his way home on a steamboat coming up the Mississippi. He did, however, learn to read and write and Sioux learned Ojibwa and Winnebago while living in Minnesota. He also learned German and French as well as Plains Indian sign language. This led to a long career as an interpreter as he could converse in seven languages. The Indians called him "The Fox," a name that the Santees had also called his father. It designates a man who is hard to corner and can escape death easily the Sioux equivalent is "Sun gi."

Philip left Minnesota in 1875 and went to the Dakota Territory where he was a hay contractor and interpreter at Fort Yates on the Cheyenne Agency. He then became an interpreter for General George A. Custer. He enlisted in the United States Army on May 5, 1879 at Fort Totten as an Indian Scout; this expired in May of 1880. He was then a government farmer and superintendent of patrol on the Standing Rock Reservation in the early 1880s. Wells supervised one of the last great buffalo hunts in which 2,800 Indians took part. He reported that they took 3,420 buffalo on this hunt. In March of 1881, Wells was an interpreter at the Fort Buford, Montana prison camp that held Sitting Bull's band. In June of 1884, he was transferred to the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Reserve as farmer-in-charge then assistant agent. Ironically, it was Wells who compiled the first tribal rolls there and excluded the Half Breeds. In 1884, the government (Secretary of the Interior) sent him to Duck Lake to investigate Metis activities after the Sioux in the United States had received letters from Gabriel Dumont asking for their assistance. He reported back that many Sioux who had participated in the Minnesota massacres of 1863 were there. Upon his return the government directed him to effect the arrest of any Riel emissary entering the United States. When he had blocked off the more eastern routes he reported that the emissaries began to enter the United States through the Judith Gap in Montana. Wells was the Army interpreter at Wounded Knee, South Dakota in December of 1890 when the well-known massacre of the Sioux took place.

In his later years, Wells ranched on the White River south of Kadoka while his wife taught school at Pass Creek. They were there until 1932 when they retired to Hot Springs, South Dakota. He died at the Pine Ridge Indian Hospital on January 2, 1947.

#### *References*

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