

MAG – 058 – Trail Rations

Content Warnings:

- Murder
- Graphic injury
- Cannibalism

Discussions of: Religion, emotional abuse, corpse

Mentions of: Knives, guns

SFX: Low drone

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode fifty-eight. Trail Rations.

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro *Continued*]

[Tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

Unsigned statement regarding potential cannibalism while attempting to travel the Oregon Trail. Original letter dated November 10th, 1845. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I have accepted I shall not survive this. The cold bites through my skin and feels as though it cuts into my very soul and I am so hungry that I can barely stand, but I shall not give in. I can hear him taunting me still, tempting me, but I shall choose to die rather than take part in such an unholy meal. Nor shall I take my own life, whatever extremity my suffering may reach. I am certain my final reward will come soon and I shall face my Saviour with a clear conscience and a heart full of faith. Pastor Lawrence once told me that there are no empty bellies in Heaven, and I am sure that he is right. I wonder if I shall see Benjamin there. I should hope so, for all his faults and his incessant chatter, and, together with all those we have lost, I am sure we shall look down upon perdition and watch Eustace Wick writhing in agony among the well-earned flames.

Speaking of flames, I must apologise about the state of the paper to whoever may be discovering this message. I am having to write this close to what fire there is, both for light and to stop the ink from freezing. There will likely be some scorching, but I should hope it remains legible.

We should never have attempted the Oregon Trail; I see that now. I should have stayed in Savannah and built what life I could, maybe accepted the proposal of Adam Hawthorne. He was a decade my senior, but I heard no complaints from his previous wife while she lived and it would have been a better fate than to freeze to death in these mountains, listening to Benjamin's incessant taunting. But my life before had been hardship and travel and there was a part of my soul that felt that such a thing was simply my lot. So when my father joined my mother in Heaven, not three years after moving us to the small town of Savannah, Missouri, it felt as though moving again was what the good Lord intended for me.

It was then, as I had to choose between trying to scrape a living from 20 acres of Missouri soil that my father had left me, or forge out on my own, that Benjamin Carlisle kindly asked permission to repair his wagon on my land. I will not deny he was a handsome man. Even now, the cold has preserved that pleasing cast of his face, gaunt though it may be. I was somewhat taken with him, but had no further thoughts about it, being somewhat plain in my own appearance. It took me quite aback when I brought a jug of water to his fire that evening and he asked me directly if there was anywhere in the town of Savannah where he might find a wife.

Well, this seemed to me something of a strange request, though I myself knew little of courting. Benjamin explained that he was set to be travelling up out of St Joseph along the Oregon Trail towards the Willamette Valley, a lush paradise of the frontier. The settlers of Oregon Country, he said, had offered land to those who might follow. 320 acres of land for the unmarried, he said, but a married settler could claim 640 acres. That, and the prospect of another pair of hands to help with the work of farming, was a great incentive. All told, he said, if he was able to find himself a wife before he reached Oregon Country, he very much intended to do so. Well, after he told me this, I explained my situation to him, and we were married by Pastor Lawrence the following day. Even now, I can't fully bring myself to regret that part of the events that led me here and, had we reached the Willamette Valley as planned, I believe we would have been far happier than most.

I had few real possessions to pack and little food left, but I took what I could into Benjamin's wagon. It was late May when we began our trip and, had I known more about the route we were to take, I might have known that this was dangerously late to be starting such an expedition, but I did not. In many ways, Benjamin was as impulsive in his travel plans as he was in choosing a wife, and it was only after we had been on the road for some time that I

realised how ill-prepared he was for many of the hardships of the trail. I never asked him exactly where he was from or why he wished to settle in Oregon.

Those few times I broached the subject, he would talk all sorts of circles around it, and I had some inkling that he might have been fleeing trouble back east. I never pressed the matter. I had a lot of gratitude to him for taking me along, sharing his food and his bed with me and rescuing me, as I saw it, from a life of grief and Missouri dirt.

It became apparent as we travelled that the blessings were not entirely one-sided. It turned out I was far more suited to the hardships of the trail than him and far more skilled at keeping the wagon moving than he was. I nursed him through a fever as we crossed through Colorado and more than once I even managed to avoid an attack by natives, securing the wagon in a small ravine until the war party had passed by. All told, I feel I more than earned my bacon.

I still remember the first time Benjamin saw skulls near our campsite, those travellers before us who had not fared as well as we had. Poor man almost fainted and I could not help but reflect that, were it not for me, he would likely have joined those poor departed souls. I decided not to share that particular reflection.

We reached the Laramie River and Fort John in October. It was a squalid little fur trading post in Wyoming, with thick wooden walls that were solid enough

to keep out any war-minded natives, and there were all the signs that a great many people had recently passed through the place. The manager, an officious man, who introduced himself as Bruce, told us that we had missed the chance to safely cross the Rockies and that the passes would be snowed up within the month. He said we could winter at Fort John if we had the food and money for it, or we could turn around and leave. From his tone of voice, it sounded like he had not much care for which of the options we chose. We were, of course, devastated, and spent several days discussing our options and trying to make a decision as to the wisest course of action, though we knew that for every hour we spent in such conference, our choices became fewer and the consequences sharper.

It was at that point we were approached by a man who introduced himself as Eustace Wick. He was a short, squat figure, broad of shoulder and with the rough, dark skin of one who has spent most of his life under the sun's unforgiving glare. His long, shaggy beard was shot through with grey, but his eyes sparkled with a cunning and intelligence I would not have expected to see from such an unkempt face. He also possessed one other attribute which surprised me, though in hindsight it takes on a somewhat sinister light; he had in his mouth a full and healthy set of teeth.

Now Mr Eustace Wick enquired as to our purpose in Fort John and, speaking far more candidly than I was truly comfortable with, Benjamin explained to him our journey and our dilemma. At the mention of the words ‘Willamette Valley’, the short man’s eyes lit up and a smile practically split his face in two, for he was, so he said, the best guide since Sacagawea and could get us through the Rockies long before the snows hit with any force. For a price. When he said this, he smiled, and all the square and shining teeth in his mouth seemed to catch the light.

I was hesitant, as I had met plenty of hucksters and bandits who were keen to pass themselves off as guides and, as Benjamin haggled the price, my misgivings grew, for Eustace Wick seemed to offer little in the way of resistance and we secured his services for only \$20. Plenty of money, to be sure, but for the services he was offering, and the dangers involved, it was practically nothing.

Unfortunately, for all my consternation, it soon became clear that Benjamin had made up his mind to hire the man. To be fair to him, we did not have the resources to winter in Fort John and were we to try and make our way back, there was every possibility the weather would still turn deadly on us. We were caught between the devil and the sea and Benjamin had determined that,

guided by Eustace Wick, we were going to try and swim. The poor fool had no idea that the devil was the one leading us into the water.

Nobody tried to stop us leaving, though it was clear from the looks upon them that they believed us to be dead already. My own hopes for us were scarce higher, but the little man who now rode with us cackled and joked as we travelled, keeping Benjamin in higher spirits than I had seen him in months. This began to fade as the cold air began to hit us and the paths through the Rockies became steeper and narrower.

The journey was hard, but we pushed on for almost a week. Eustace Wick seemed to be as good as his word, keeping us on those trails that the wagon could use without too much danger. The cold robbed us of sleep though and after those first days, the once beautiful vistas and rolling peaks of the mountains seemed to become jagged and vile – ribs jutting from the carcass of the world and picked clean by vultures. Benjamin became quiet. I became sullen. Eustace Wick became more aggravatingly jovial than before and, by the time the first snowflakes began to fall, he was practically hooting with joy. My suspicions about his motives had begun to freeze into an icicle within my chest – hard and focused. When we woke up one morning, a week and a half into the journey, to find one of our wagon's wheels smashed and destroyed beyond repair, I could not find it in myself to be surprised.

The snow was falling thickly by this point and we had already used all our replacement wheels over the many months of the journey. We were trapped there and would surely die. It was then that Eustace Wick appeared, standing on a nearby rock, that same big grin on his face. He told us that there looked to be a snowstorm coming, but he had found a nearby cave where we could wait it out. He didn't even pretend to dismay at the state of the wagon. Benjamin and I followed him and, sure enough, there in the side of the mountain was a shallow, but well-hidden cave.

It's hard to say at exactly what point I realised specifically that Eustace Wick was planning to eat us. It may have been that he made no mention of retrieving any food from the wagon when he led us to his den. It could have been the piles of firewood already neatly stacked up against the far wall, cut into logs. It might just have been the way he looked at Benjamin, with his square white teeth bared in a mirthless smile. But somewhere between the wagon and the cave, I became convinced that our so-called guide had lured us up here with no intention short of killing us and eating our flesh.

I had no time to communicate this thought to my husband, however, who still seemed woefully oblivious of the situation, and once we were inside the small cave, there was no privacy in which to discuss it. So, I just had to sit there, watching Eustace Wick building a fire, as Benjamin tried to suppress his shivers

and make conversation with the man who he still did not realise had turned from our guide into our captor. I simply watched and waited as the storm began to descend outside and the warmth of the fire was quickly overcome by the icy chill of the wind. Night began to fall, and the fire was the only light, casting long, dancing shadows upon the walls behind us. I could feel hunger gnawing at me and was sure that I was not the only one, but I had a strange thought that the bearded man squatting the other side of the flames was waiting for someone to mention it, so I refused to do so.

My husband, of course, had no such reservations and began to bemoan our forgetfulness at leaving what little food we still had in the wagon. At this, Eustace Wick's smile – if it were even possible – got wider and he said that we had all the food we needed. He stared into the fire and began to mutter something. It sounded like a prayer. I think he was, in his own demented way, saying grace. I remember the words exactly. He locked eyes with Benjamin and said, "Come, meat, be my guest and let thy gifts to me be blessed."

As he said this, a silence fell across the cave. The wind died and the shadows on the wall stopped moving, as though they were watching the scene in rapt attention. Eustace Wick withdrew a long, sharp knife and stalked over to Benjamin, who made no move to defend himself. His eyes were wide, staring at the mad cannibal approaching him with a look of both fear and rapture. The

whole scene was so utterly unreal that it took me almost a full second to remember and draw my gun.

All through this journey I had kept my father's caplock pistol hidden, tucked inside my crinoline. Benjamin knew about it, of course, but had obviously never mentioned it to Eustace. Had I had a possibility of reloading it, I might have drawn it earlier, but with only a single shot, and I a barely passible shooter, I knew that I needed to be sure of my moment. As it turned out, I left it too late, for even as I placed the barrel to the temple of the foul murderer and pulled the trigger, he drew the blade across my husband's throat. There was a terrific bang, a splash of brain and a spray of blood. The two men fell dead upon the floor, and I found myself alone in the silence of the icy night.

I'm sure I need not tell you the tears that I shed that night, tears that were ice even before they touched the ground. I wept for my beautiful, stupid Benjamin and I wept for my own life, now most certainly lost to the cold and snow. And to hunger. It was as this last thought passed unbidden through my mind that I heard it. Very faint, calling softly, was the sound of Benjamin's voice. I crawled over to him, for a second overjoyed that he might be alive, but as soon as I touched his ice-cold skin, already beginning to turn blue, I knew that it could not be so. Despite this, his head began to turn towards me and his frozen eyes

opened. His lips parted above the gaping red slash across his throat and he spoke.

“Eat me,” he said.

I leapt back, shaking my head, praying the Lord to rid me of these terrible visions, but his voice came again, clearer and louder this time, begging me again to eat him. He told me how good he would taste, better than any salted pork. I could cook him over the fire, he said, and the cold would keep him fresh for as long as I needed. I yelled at him, screamed at him to be quiet, for whatever devil had taken up inside to go back to hell, but it made no difference. Still he pleaded to be eaten.

It has been five days now and Benjamin still entreats me. He taunts and curses me by turns, calls me a coward who would rather die than be part of something greater than myself. The entrance to the cave is all but blocked with snow and, even if I were to dig my way out, there is nowhere for me to go. I don't even know where whatever's left of the wagon would be. I think I might try though, now I have finished this account of the events that led up to my fate.

I hope whoever finds this does not judge us too harshly. We were simply seeking a better life. I leave this here, in the oilskins of Eustace Wick, in the

hopes it may be protected from the depredations of winter. As for myself, I will try to dig my way out and get as far as I can. I will not survive, but I hope the Lord understands it is not suicide, it is simply that I can no longer stand to be trapped here, where the corpse of my husband begs me to make it meat.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Certainly, a grotesque tale, but I don't have access to the sort of information required to verify any of the details provided by the unnamed Mrs Carlisle.

There is no record of any Eustace Wick that I could find. There is a Benjamin Carlisle mentioned in a 1838 census of Burke County, North Carolina, but that's about it. The prayer apparently spoken by Mr Wick is a perversion of the old Lutheran grace, "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest and let thy gifts to us be blessed."

There was a noted Lutheran preacher by the name of Horatio Wick that is mentioned briefly in several histories of Massachusetts as rather violently falling out with his colleagues in the church over the Sacrament of the Eucharist, but he apparently drowned in 1832. What interests me most is how this unsigned letter, if it is to be believed, made its way from an icebound cave in Wyoming or Idaho, all the way to the personal collection of Jonah Magnus.

End recording.

[Tape clicks off.]

TIM (DISTANT)

Look, I've tried talking to Elias about it. It doesn't seem to do any good.

MARTIN (DISTANT)

He's just under a lot of pressure; you know how messed he's been since Prentiss.

TIM (DISTANT)

How messed up *he's* been?

MARTIN (DISTANT)

Of course. I'm sorry. Sorry, I didn't mean that you weren't, just—

TIM (DISTANT)

No, because I didn't start stalking my co-workers.

MARTIN (DISTANT)

Maybe try talking to him.

TIM (DISTANT)

Sure, like he doesn't already look at me like I'm a murderer.

MARTIN (DISTANT)

Look, okay, we've just got to let him work through this. I suggested therapy, but he just says no, so—

TIM (DISTANT)

Well, we need to do something.

MARTIN (DISTANT)

Yeah, maybe.

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

The preceding conversation was overheard on 19th November 2016. It reaffirms my current worries about Tim, though does go some way to reassure me that Martin is unlikely to be the culprit, especially following our earlier conversation. **(Sigh)** I need to be more careful.

[Tape clicks off.]

The Magnus Archives is a podcast distributed by Rusty Quill and licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial Sharealike 4.0 International licence.

Today's episode was written by Jonathan Sims and directed by Alexander J Newall.

It featured: Jonathan Sims as The Archivist, Alexander J Newall as Martin Blackwood and Mike LeBeau as Tim Stoker.