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"The most terrible gale ever known" -Tampa and the Hurricane of 1848

Canter Brown, Jr.

Having weathered yet another hurricane season, Tampa Bay area residents have breathed sighs of relief that, unfortunately, may mask the very real danger of future calamity. While fears of what commentators often describe as a "hundred year" storm occasionally assert themselves in headlines and into public discourse, our tendency has been to believe that it could not happen to us. The fact is that it has happened, and that should disturb us. One hundred fifty years ago raging winds, piercing rains, and rising tides lashed the region to a degree almost beyond modern understanding. One survivor, still stunned by the storm's ferocity one month later, summed up the experience so painfully endured by many. "Everywhere may be seen the same destruction," she bemoaned, "and could you see it you might well say, 'Tampa is no more.'"

Tampa's tragic destruction occurred in the early fall of 1848, but happenings of previous decades set the stage. The town, then as now, enjoyed an atmosphere filled with promise. The optimism, though, constituted a fairly recent phenomenon since Tampa's development had lagged from persistent problems owing their origins to the area's inaccessibility and military heritage. The community traced its birth to the founding of a United States army post in 1824. Called Fort Brooke after its original commanding officer, it centered on land lying east of the Hillsborough River below today's Whiting Street and north of Hillsborough Bay. Thanks in good part to Judge Augustus Steele's efforts, a small village had emerged during the Second Seminole War of 1835-1842 on land just to the north of the garrison grounds. When the conflict ground to a halt in 1842, the settlement regressed for a time as the garrison's size quickly dropped to minimal levels and the village's founding father departed for greener pastures at Cedar Keys.

For several years after the Second Seminole War's conclusion, military authorities stymied attempts to foster Tampa's growth. They controlled a military reservation that included the town's site, as well as territory stretching for several miles beyond it. Occasionally, the military brass threatened to oust all "squatters," while refusing to reduce the reserve to more-modest bounds. Meanwhile, two Congressional initiatives, the Armed Occupation Act of 1842 and the Military Bounty Act of 1846, encouraged frontier settlement at some distance north, east, and south of the village. Even that growth came slowly, as the threat of a renewed Indian war dissuaded many potential immigrants from locating near Tampa Bay.

The turnaround for Tampans began in 1845, when Florida achieved statehood. The legislature soon reaffirmed and legitimized Tampa's role as Hillsborough County's seat. The new state government also threw its weight behind attempts to compel federal authorities to grant title to the land upon which the town stood. An elected county government organized under state law in January 1846, just as most regular Fort Brooke troops departed for service in Texas preparatory to the Mexican War. The county
commissioners ordered surveyor John Jackson to replat and expand Judge Steele's village plan, and it set in motion efforts to erect a courthouse on the town block circumscribed by Franklin, Madison, Monroe (now Florida), and Lafayette (now Kennedy) Streets. Delays and frustration proved the order of the day for the next two years. Still, in January 1848 the county accepted contractor James McKay's courthouse building. Six months afterward, on July 25, President James K. Polk inked legislation granting Hillsborough County title to the necessary 160 acres. By early September, teacher William P. Wilson had opened Tampa's first organized school. Classes convened in the village's principal building, the new courthouse.

The excitement surrounding these advances kindled hopes in 1848 that Tampa faced a bright future. A number of additional families, some of relatively substantial means, established residence. New stores appeared to cater to the military and to frontier settlers. In May, Tampa Bay navigation passed a milestone when the Egmont Key lighthouse first flared its beacon of safety. Prospering Manatee River sugar plantations seemed poised to channel riches into Tampa merchant houses, and Mexican War victories heralded the return of army troops and government spending.

Nonetheless, by September the community, while growing and hopeful, remained a modest one. Perhaps 150 to 200 civilians graced the immediate vicinity. West of the Hillsborough River, a few Hispanic individuals and families lived on Spanishtown Creek in present-day Hyde Park. To their north near today's University of Tampa resided the Robert Jackson family. Their home stood a short distance from boat repair facilities situated on the river's west bank. Several other families inhabited the Interbay Peninsula at locations between the Jackson homestead, Ballast Point, and Palma Ceia.

A few houses dotted the landscape inside Tampa's surveyed limits east of the river. Among them, widow Mary Stringer occupied a dwelling where Tampa's city hall now stands. The A. H. Henderson family lived on Florida Avenue at Whiting Street, while surveyor John Jackson had erected a home on Tampa Street, between Jackson and Washington. The Darling & Griffin store (later called Kennedy & Darling) sat at the corner of Whiting and Tampa Streets. East along the north side of Whiting Street near the river (Water Street) rested the town's principal hostelry, the Palmer House Hotel, operated by Port Collector John M. Palmer and his wife Margaret F. Palmer. A walk of a "few hundred feet" north brought visitors to the L. G. Covacevich home. At or near the foot of Lafayette Street close to the river came Judge Steele's former residence, a Seminole War blockhouse, and the Simon Turman and William Ashley homes. A "trail" connected the heart of town lying along the riverside and Whiting Street with the remote courthouse site.

Most local civilians lived on the Fort Brooke garrison grounds. There, a myriad of facilities and structures reminded onlookers and townsmen of the post's former wartime prominence. On the bayside, officers' quarters lined the shore. Northward near the garrison's center and on higher ground, a headquarters building, adjutant's office, parade ground, and hospital adorned the scene. To the west, at the river's edge below Whiting Street, came a cluster of buildings including the post commissary, warehouses, sutler W. G. Ferris's home and store, merchant John B. Allen's residence, the post chapel, and the home of chaplain and Presbyterian minister Henry Axtell.
Barracks, more homes, and miscellaneous additional structures appeared at various other points about the grounds.

It should also be remembered that, although few in number, free blacks and, more commonly, slaves helped to pioneer the village in the 1840s and shared in the terror of events soon to occur. The names of most of these individuals are lost to us. Perhaps the most well known was Sampson Forrester, a one-time slave freed by General (later President) Zachary Taylor for his services as an army guide and interpreter. Forrester and his wife Rose resided on the garrison’s grounds, where he continued to work for the government and, apparently, merchant Thomas P. Kennedy. Young Isaac Howard, only eight years of age, offers an additional example. Brought to Tampa in 1846 with the James McKay family, he survived the hurricane to work on McKay’s ships. Howard remained in the town following the Civil War to become a prominent political and community activist.4

Such was the village of Tampa, Fort Brooke, and vicinity when nature intervened in September 1848. The signs first appeared on Saturday, the twenty-third. The sky turned overcast, and the atmosphere soon felt "sultry" and "oppressive." Shoppers in from the countryside "grew uneasy about the weather" and hurried their returns home. That night, the bay glowed with a phosphorescent sheen. Come Sunday morning, winds commenced gusting from the east, followed by intermittent showers. The winds blocked the schooner John T. Sprague, owned by W. G. Ferris, from approaching the post. The vessel had delivered needed supplies and the Fort Brooke payroll from New Orleans. Men left church services, either Presbyterian at the post chapel or Methodist at the Palmer House, to brave the elements in order to "kedge" the ship to the wharf. The work took until nightfall. By then, the bay once again glowed. According to one resident, "the light there from was almost bright enough to read by."5

The blow arrived in earnest at about 8:00 a.m. on Monday, the twenty-fifth. A shift in the wind from the east to the southeast heralded the change. Likely, Egmont Key lighthouse keeper Sherrod Edwards, his son and apprentice lighthouse keeper Marvel Edwards and his family knew first the dangers in store for Tampa Bay residents. The tide rose so quickly at the key that two feet of water surrounded Edwards’ home before he realized the need to take action. Having few options in his isolated location, Edwards did what he could to protect his loved ones. "He placed his family in his boat and waded with it to the middle of the island," recalled pioneer John A. Bethell, "and secured it to the palmettos until the gale was over."6

Most Tampans similarly failed to react quickly to the threat. As the winds grew in intensity, they looked on from their homes as live oaks and shrubs took the brunt of the early going. "In the morning before the [storm] came to its full height," recorded an Axtell family member, "we watched from the front windows the falling of some of the most beautiful trees that ever graced Tampa." An important exception to the general languor involved Fort Brooke’s commanding officer Major R. D. A. Wade. Sensing the peril, he ordered his men to begin moving post property to higher ground. Soon, he diverted their efforts to alerting civilians of the danger and assisting them in moving furniture and personal possessions. "The command was turned out early in the storm," he reported, "but such was the violence of the wind and restless
force of the waters that no property could be saved.  

The soldiers’ failure resulted from the speed with which the storm picked up force. Within two hours after 8:00 a.m., the winds had swung around from the southeast to the southwest. Then, at 10:00 a.m. the tide commenced to rise. A young woman who endured the storm insisted that "at one time it rose five feet in fifteen minutes." The water quickly submerged the shore, blown toward the post and village with terrific force by the hurricane winds. Meanwhile, the barometric pressure dipped to unprecedented levels, a fact that emphasizes the powerful natural forces that were battering the community. At 11:00 a.m. it stood at 30.122. Three hours later it bottomed out at 28.181. By then water stood fifteen feet above the mean low watermark.  

Caught unprepared, local residents panicked, especially those who lived near the water. Schoolmaster Wilson dismissed his students at 10:00 a.m., adding to the equation seared children trying to reach their homes in the face of the storm's force. "Our house was blown down in part, and the waters from the bay swept around it in fearful violence," declared Juliet Axtell. "We escaped from it in the midst of the fearful tempests," she continued, "the roofs of buildings flying round us and the tempest raging at such a rate that we were unable to keep our feet or wear any extra clothing such as a shawl, to protect us from the piercing rain."

Others joined the Axtells in flight from their homes. John B. Allen almost waited too long. "Mr. Allen remained in his house till the lower story gave way," explained a neighbor, "sliding the upper one down to a level with the water in which he was obliged to wade up to his arm pits some distance in order to reach dry land." Nearby, W. G. Ferris attempted to relocate his family to the safety of his store, but "he could not reach the building from the southeast, and he no longer thought it advisable for anyone to remain there."

Inhabitants of the Hillsborough River's western side fared no better. At the Robert Jackson home, wife Nancy Collar Jackson witnessed what she called a "tidal wave of alarming proportions." A friend preserved her story. "The waters overflowed the banks as never before known, and the immense steam-ways near their house were washed off their piers and were floating," described Cynthia K. Farr. "Mr. Jackson, an invalid at the time, had taken the older children to a little store nearby, to divert them and to relieve their mother of their care, but realizing that danger was threatening her in the home, sent an employee to bring her and the babe away."

The details of Nancy's escape illustrate the immediacy of the storm's threat to life and limb. "On nearing the house the man saw the 'ways' floating and surging to and fro, and made all haste to tell Mrs. Jackson, who had not yet noticed how imminent was her danger," Farr continued. "She snatched her babe—asleep on the bed—and with it in her arms the man steadied her down the steps, lest she be blown off her feet, she entreating him to return and save if possible, a trunk which contained money and valuables." She added, "But before he could re-enter the house it was struck by the heavy timbers of the 'ways' and knocked off its foundation and sent whirling into the raging waves like a spinning top and in an incredibly short time was out of sight down the bay."

As the waters erupted from the bay and river, refugees struggled for havens on higher ground. The Axtells stayed at Fort Brooke in "a low building . . . where we
remained in our wet clothes on a muddy wet floor from eleven o’clock till sundown, without fire or change of clothing." The Ferrises, McKays, and others who did not enjoy military or quasi-military standing headed into the village to the Palmer House. Many arrived between 11:00 a.m. and noon to discover that "dinner" had been laid out on tables in the hotel’s dining room. That semblance of routine and order emboldened W. G. Ferris to return to his store for his account books and the money brought in on the Sprague. As he and his son Josiah remembered, the merchant waded in water "up to his armpits." Their account noted further, "Taking the currency and books with him he climbed, or floated, out through a window and waded to higher ground, a short distance east of the store."13

At about the time Ferris reached safety, likely just after 1:00 p.m., the tempest reached its full power. An account echoing Nancy Jackson’s recollections suggests that a tidal surge or "wave" hurled the flood waters to new levels, Ferris witnessed the results. "Looking southward he saw the commissary building floating directly towards the store, and it was apparently coming ‘end over end,’” the Ferris account related. "Part of the time it seemed to ride the big waves, then it would sink away between them, but all the time, and that means only a few seconds, it rolled and tumbled straight on towards the doomed buildings." The story continued: "Finally it struck the warehouse. There was a great crash, and an instant later all three of the buildings were floating northward, a mass of wreckage." Ships, including the Sprague, found themselves forced up the Hillsborough River. As the waters grew deeper, the hulk of an abandoned steamer rammed the Sprague, breaking its cables and setting the schooner adrift into the pine woods to the east.14 As the tidal surge or wave sped the flood toward Tampa’s higher elevations, the panic originally felt by those who resided near the water spread generally. For example, an estimated fourteen or fifteen persons had gathered at the newly constructed and sturdy John Jackson home. Ellen Jackson, a bride of only one year, made them comfortable in the absence of her husband, who was away with a survey crew near today’s Pasco County community of Elfers. The refugees’ sense of comfort and safety soon proved false, however. The rising tide surged under the house, and its waters poured into the building.15

Events at the Jackson home then proceeded at a maddening pace. One elderly woman, likely Mary Stringer, expressed the terror that she felt by voicing an acute fear of getting her feet wet. "When the water began to come into the house this lady and others got up on the chairs and from there to the tables," recalled son Thomas E. Jackson. "When the house began to rock on the blocks, a change to some other refuge was contemplated," he added. "The old lady selected old Captain Paine, a large portly gentleman to bear her out and keep her feet dry." Jackson concluded, "This Captain Paine consented, but, unfortunately, when he left the porch, he became entangled in a mass of drifting fire place wood, and the couple were soon prostrate in the surging waters." Subsequently, the house floated off its blocks and "crossed the street and bumped into three large hickory trees that barred its way for hours.”16

The Palmer House’s inmates experienced a similar dilemma. As W. G. Ferris looked on, the wind and water hurled the wreckage of the Fort Brooke commissary and warehouse toward the hotel. "At that moment the Palmer house seemed to be doomed," the Ferris account noted. "The water soon filled the dining room and the tables began to float.
around," it went on to declare. "Then there was a stampede to get out of the building."17

Chance thereupon intervened, almost certainly saving lives. "The wreckage just mentioned had met with some obstruction immediately in front of the hotel, forming a barrier that protected the building, but the hotel was speedily vacated, and while the people were wading and swimming out through the doors and windows, timbers, planks and logs were crashing against the house and floating through the south doors and windows into the dining room," the account specified. Another incident of heroism followed. "Josiah Ferris distinguished himself by swimming out through the north door with a young girl in his arms," the reminiscence revealed. The others followed in Ferris's wake.18

"The refugees went from the hotel to the Kennedy store," the account added, "thence to higher ground at the corner of Washington and Franklin streets." James McKay, Jr., one of those present, recalled the evacuation with supplemental detail. "Our family was moved to the Palmer hotel," he wrote, "and when driven out of there on account of the tide, to the Darling and Griffin [Kennedy & Darling] store, and then to the military hospital on the reservation." Commented one local man to a Savannah newspaper, "It was truly distressing to witness families hurrying from one supposed place of safety to another—vainly hoping their neighbors more secure than themselves."19

After 2:00 p.m., the winds began slowly to subside as they shifted from southwest to west-north-west. Still, according to Major Wade, they "ragged with great violence until past 4 P.M., after which [they] lulled very much toward 8 P.M." An Axtell daughter related, "Towards night however the wind changed and somewhat subsided and father with one or two other gentlemen and a party of soldiers succeeded in getting out some of our most valuable things among which our little family clock and the piano were the first—it was found indeed in its old place but dancing up and down with the floor & up to the keys almost in salt water."20

The brave souls who stirred from their refuges in the late afternoon and early evening encountered mostly water and debris. "Darkness found Tampa completely surrounded by water with only the tops of trees around the present post office and business section visible," an onlooker revealed in an account published early in the early 1900s. "By this time the bay had overspread the Garrison[,] and Davis Islands, then low marshlands, were out of sight." The account added: "The bay had been swept out of its banks along [what would become] Bayshore Boulevard and all the section of what is now Ballast Point, Palma Ceia and Bel-Mar was under water. The entire Interbay peninsula was submerged." A second man confirmed the onlooker's story. "The islands in Hillsborough bay were out of sight under the water," he recorded, "and in places the tide rushed across the peninsula west of the river to Old Tampa bay."21

The destruction disheartened strongest of spirit. "In the garrison the little church on the beach, the soldiers' residence near it, [J.] B. Allen's boarding house, the Indian agent's office, and Mr. Ferris's residence, store and warehouse had been wrecked, and all other buildings had been more or less damaged," lamented a resident. "North of Whiting Street Major Wade and other officials assessed the scene at Fort Brooke. "[The] storm . . . destroyed all the block house, and the Turman and Ashley residences, had been swept away." Another wrote, "Every
building on the Bay and river, public and private, (except Mr. Palmer's Hotel and that much injured,) is destroyed." He continued: "All the vessels in port were driven up the river and lodged in the pine-woods—far from their natural element. Iron safes, a fire engine, kegs of nails, &c., were driven from the places they occupied, and not a frame left to tell where the building in which they were stood."22

Major Wade and other officials assessed the scene at Fort Brookes "[The] storm … destroyed all the wharves and most of the public buildings at this post," the commanding officer informed superiors. "The commissary and quartermaster storehouses with all their contents were swept away, and a few damaged provisions, etc., only can be recovered." He went on to note that "the officers' quarters (except headquarters) are destroyed or very badly damaged, and the barracks are beyond repair." Even the hospital, where many soldiers and civilians eventually had gathered, suffered damage. "The roof ... was completely carried away, the doors broken," described assistant surgeon B. P. Curry, "the windows destroyed and the property otherwise lost or materially injured, with the exceptions of the medicines, and stores, which received but little damage."23

Perhaps one Axtell family member best conveyed for posterity Tampans' emotions upon viewing the storm's aftermath. "But what a scene of destruction Tampa is," she commented, "there are but five habitable houses left & these more or less injured." The young woman then painted a word picture of her former neighborhood. "The row on which we lived, the Chapel, the Commissary building, the Settler's store, Mr. Allen's house—all gone! " she detailed. "Not a vestige of them remaining, and in their place for two or three miles up the river are piles of rubbish leading one to ask where did it all come from."24 Miss Axtell concluded, "Everywhere may be seen the same destruction."25

Night brought relief. The winds subsided, and stars appeared in the clearing sky. Tampans attempted to find dry places to sleep, while taking the toll of casualties. Almost miraculously, the storm damage had limited itself to property loss. "Many hairbreadth escapes, both serious and ludicrous, might be related," a correspondent explained to an out-of-state newspaper, "but fortunately no lives were lost." In the aftermath of the hurricane's terrific din, the absence of noise offered comfort. Commenting on the quiet, a grateful chronicler recorded that "the elements seem[ed] to say 'we are satisfied.'"26

Tuesday's dawn brought a return of earlier depression, feelings of thankfulness for survival having passed to thoughts of financial devastation and hunger. "Yesterday we had the equinoctial," penned a villager. "This port and the neighboring towns are utterly wrecked." He added: "The public storehouses and their contents were carried off by the breakers, and but little ... has been recovered. Most of the poor people here have only the clothes on their backs." The man continued, "I do not see how food is to be procured, except beef. Nearly all the buildings are beyond repair."27

As the villager suggested, reports of destruction in other places began filtering into town. "We learn that the fishery, dwellings, &c., on Old Tampa [Safety Harbor], were totally destroyed—the people, with difficulty, escaping with their lives," declared a local man a few days afterward. "At Clear Water Harbor, and in parts of Benton County [Hernando, Pasco, and Citrus Counties], the destruction is very
great." At Charlotte Harbor, the Kennedy & Darling Indian store received damaging blows, while a sloop containing nine persons crashed upon the shore with no survivors.28

Elsewhere, the story appeared much the same. Historian Lillie B. McDuffee looked into the storm's impact at modern Bradenton. "In places along the banks of the Manatee River the water was hurled in with such force that it threatened to wash away homes," she discovered. "It beat hard against the houses, rocking them back and forth." Pioneer John A. Bethell recalled: "Every island from Sanibel to Bayport was overflowed..., and many new passes were made... through the islands. For instance, Longboat inlet and several small passes between there and Big Sarasota; also John's Pass." The Egmont Key lighthouse experienced damage severe enough to compel federal authorities to tear it down. Even Indians in the interior were affected. "They state that the late hurricane was very destructive in their section of the country," observed Major Wade, "sweeping everything before it."29

As the day passed on Tuesday, the sun shone and dispositions turned brighter. Townsmen set about poring through the rubble looking for valuables as the waters ebbed. John Jackson may have been the most fortunate. Two boxes of coins held for him at the Ferris store turned up in a pile of debris at the foot of Washington Street. The crew of the Sprague discovered themselves marooned on land at what is now the corner of Tampa and Twigs Streets. Upon examination, they found that food and other commodities carried on board had weathered the storm in good shape. "The captain of the Sprague came out of the woods and brought some coffee, hard bread, and other supplies," remembered one villager delighted at the sight. "When the post commander learned that the food on the boat was intact he immediately sent a detachment of soldiers to take charge of them, and the supplies were brought to the village and divided between the storekeeper [W. G. Ferris] and the army men."30

As fear of starvation abated and settlers recovered some of their effects, grateful residents reflected appreciatively on Major Wada's leadership. "Major Wade has been unremitting in his efforts, day and night, to alleviate the distress of the sufferers," noted one Tampan, "by affording assistance to the helpless, giving shelter to the houseless, etc." Juliet Axtell recalled the officer's personal kindness to her family. "The Major took us to his quarters after the storm abated," she wrote, "which was almost the only place standing uninjured."31

A night of forgetting followed the labors of Tuesday, as Tampans prepared to face the daunting task of rebuilding their literally shattered lives. During the day several barrels of whiskey had been found floating in Hillsborough Bay. Additionally, a few cases of wine had turned up in rubble that littered the shore. Before Major Wade could impound "the potent stuff," the local people helped themselves. "Whiskey was free the evening following the big blow," commented an historian of the occasion, "and doubtless some of the thrifty villagers made the most of their unusual opportunity." The relief, without question, was welcome indeed.32

The hurricane of 1848 swept down upon Tampa Bay with a fury that lay beyond the ability of human beings to resist. Within a matter of a few hours, a promising frontier community had found itself prostrate before the force of nature. What many pioneers called "the most terrible gale ever known," offers Tampans today a vivid reminder of
the price nature can exact. It is a lesson best not forgotten.

ENDNOTES.

1 "Letters to Harriet Tracy Axtell from her family at Ft. Brooke, Fla.,” ed. by Jean Rumsey, 123 (transcriptions at Tampa Bay History Center, Tampa) (hereafter, Axtell letters).


3 Except as otherwise noted, background materials for this essay may be found in Canter Brown, Jr., Tampa Before the Civil War (Tampa: Tampa Bay History Center, 1998).


6 Bethell, History of Point Pinellas, 77


8 McKay, "Our Big Wind"; Axtell letters, 124; Winchell, "Elements Combined."

9 Axtell letters, 123.

10 Ibid, 124; Winchell, "Elements Combined."

11 Cynthia Farr, A Sketch from the Life of Mrs. Nancy Jackson (Tampa: priv. pub., 1900), 14.

12 Ibid.

13 Axtell letters, 123; James McKay, Jr., "History of Tampa of the Olden Days," The Sunland Tribune 17 (November 1991), 78; Winchell, "Elements Combined."


16 Ibid.

17 Winchell, "Elements Combined."

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid; D. B. McKay, "Story on Big Blow"; Savannah Republican, October 16, 1848.

20 Wade to Jones, September 26, 1848; Axtell letters, 124.

21 McKay, "Story on Big Blow"; Winchell, "Elements Combined."

22 Winchell, "Elements Combined" Savannah Republican, October 16, 1848.

23 Wade to Jones, September 26, 1848; McKay, "Our Big Wind."

24 Axtell letters, 124.

26 Savannah Republican, October 16, 1848; Axtell letters, 123-24.

27 Matthews, Edge of Wilderness, 165.

28 Savannah Republican, October 16, 1848; Canter Brown, Jr., Florida’s Peace River Frontier (Orlando: University of Central Florida Press, 1991), 75-76.

29 McDuffee, Lures of Manatee, 59; Bethell, History of Point Pinellas, 77; John W. Stafford, "Egmont Key: Sentinel of Tampa Bay," Tampa Bay History 2 (Spring/Summer 1980), 21; R. D. A. Wade to Roger Jones, October 12, 1848, M-567, roll 398, NA.

30 Jackson, "Storm of 1848"; McKay, "Story on Big Blow"; Winchell, "Elements Combined."

31 Savannah Republican, October 16, 1848; Axtell letters, 123.

32 Winchell, "Elements Combined"; McKay, "Story on Big Blow."

33 Matthews, Edge of Wilderness, 165.