

Excerpt from

Mostly Murder: True Crime from Norfolk County, 1772-1955

by Cheryl MacDonald

David Ramsay

Depending on who was telling the story, David Ramsay was either a hero or a villain. Joseph Brant called him a “mischievous fellow” and an “unworthy rascal.” Patrick Campbell, a Scottish traveller who hired Ramsay as a guide, praised his “honesty and fidelity.” But there is no doubt that Ramsay also committed the first recorded murders in what is now Norfolk County.

E.A. Owen tells the story in *Pioneer Sketches of Long Point Settlement*, although he manages to get several details wrong, including Ramsay’s name, nationality, and the date of an incident which made him notorious. According to Owen:

this Ramsay had an encounter with the Indians on Long Point, while trading with them, as far back as the year 1760. It occurred (so the story goes) near the sand hills. The Indians, nine in number, seized Ramsay’s liquors and other goods, and after becoming crazed with “fire-water,” bound Ramsay hand and foot and determined on burning him alive. The attack was made in the night, and before the preparation for the burning was completed, the savage spirit succumbed to the liquid spirit of Christian civilization, and they decided to wait until morning. Eight of them stretched out in a drunken snooze around the fire, and the ninth was detailed to guard the prisoner. On this occasion Ramsay was accompanied by his nephew — a mere lad, whom the savages did not molest. During the night the boy secured a knife and severed the thongs which bound his uncle; and when thus freed, Ramsay made short work in sending his drunken captors to the “happy hunting ground,” and made good his escape.

David Ramsay was born around 1740 in Leven, Fife, Scotland and entered the Royal Navy as a ship’s boy. After service in Nova Scotia and Quebec, he joined a vessel patrolling Lake Ontario. Life on the Great Lakes apparently agreed with him. When he was discharged from the navy in 1765 he decided to stay in North America.

Around this time Ramsay went to work for a Montreal fur trader, an occupation which entailed a great deal of travelling. Competition in the fur trade was fierce, and many of the men engaged in it resorted to violence from time to time. Just what David Ramsay did is unknown, but in 1768 he was arrested at Fort Niagara, New York, which was still in British hands, and sent to Montreal where he was kept in custody for several days.

Whatever the reason for his arrest, he soon returned to fur trading. In 1771, with his 17-year-old brother George, he spent the winter in the area of Kettle Creek, wintering with a group of Mississaugas some distance inland. According to Ramsay, the natives constantly threatened to kill him if he did not provide them with rum. But the Mississaugas had another story — they said Ramsay was “drunk and mad” all winter.

Whether alcohol was a contributing factor, or whether several months living closely together had created considerable friction between the Ramsays and the natives, violence erupted after most of the Mississaugas left for their spring hunt.

A single warrior, Wandagan, had been left behind to keep an eye on Ramsay, along with two women and two children, aged 9 and 13. One night in mid-March after the three adults had been drinking heavily, they showed up at the rough cabin Ramsay had built and demanded more rum. When Ramsay refused, Wandagan smashed the door down.

Ramsay killed him with a spear, then killed the two women and, as he would later tell Patrick Campbell, scalped them “according to the Indian custom.” He then dug a grave for them beside his house and buried them, “at the same time repeating that they should never more quarrel with me nor any other person.”

Twenty years later, in recounting the story to Patrick Campbell, Ramsay created the impression that he was fighting for his life. However, if Campbell’s account accurately reflects the tale Ramsay told, he deliberately omitted the fact that two of his attackers were women. Furthermore, as Sir William Johnson, superintendent of native affairs, pointed out, there was a huge hole in Ramsay’s story. Johnson, who knew and respected native people and was married to the Mohawk matriarch Molly Brant commented, “the Indians, whenever they meditate mischief, carefully avoid liquor.”

Whatever the truth of the situation, Ramsay did draw the line at killing children and took in the two surviving youngsters. But he was concerned that the rest of the group would have their vengeance when they returned. In early April, with the ice in Lake Erie beginning to break up, Ramsay, his

brother George and the two native children headed east. At Long Point, a group of Mississaugas caught up with them.

An inexcusable crime

David was tied up, while George was given somewhat more freedom, but it seemed only a matter of time before they would meet the same fate as Ramsay's three victims. However the Mississaugas began drinking heavily, and according to Ramsay, forced him to drink rum with them. Ramsay waited for an opportunity to escape. When it came, he quickly killed five of his captors, including a woman and an infant child, scalped them, then launched his boat and fled eastward with his brother.

At Fort Erie he reported both incidents. Although he claimed he had acted in self-defense, Ramsay was immediately taken into custody and sent to Montreal for trial.

Sir William Johnson was furious. "Killing a Woman and Child, and then Scalping them afterwards is inexcusable," he raged. As far as he was concerned, the fact that Ramsay was able to kill so many people was proof that they were overcome by alcohol at the time — and if that was so, this was a case of murder, not self-defense.

Read about the outcome of the trial in

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