



NATAWISTA IKSANA

—Sketch by Paul Ferryman

THE MAJOR'S LADY: NATAWISTA

By Mildred Walker Schemm

Back in the 1860's the good people of Peoria, Illinois were astonished to see a Blackfoot Indian tepee pitched on the lawn of one of the show-places of the town. The property belonged to Major Alexander Culbertson, a former fur-trader, and Major Culbertson's wife was the daughter of a Blood chief. For most of the year Mrs. Culbertson came and went as a civilized gentlewoman. Her clothes were of the finest materials and in the latest style, and anyone seeing her with one of her daughters from the Moravian Seminary in Pennsylvania would have thought her completely civilized. But when Indian summer came, the Major's lady, born Natawista Iksana, Sacred Snake woman, shed the many ruffled skirts and corset and tucked chemise, the heeled leather boots with fancy stitching, the gloves and bonnet and calash she wore with such grace, and clothed herself once more in the single garment of fine buckskin, ornamented with dyed porcupine quills. She walked out of the mansion Major Culbertson had built with the fortune he had made in the fur trade, away from the heavy carpets and lace curtains and carved walnut furniture and returned to the simple freedom of a tepee on her own front lawn. She paid no attention to the carriages driving ever so slowly beyond the shrubbery and the fancy picket fence, nor to the faces peering out of the carriages. It was cool in the tepee on those breathless Illinois days and she could remember the mountains and the prairie and the streams running down from the glaciers.

Natawista was no mere Indian squaw taken by a white man as a poor substitute for a woman of his own race, but, for once, a person of that great charm, dignity and beauty which the writers of romantic fiction and the makers of movies always ascribe to their fictitious Indian heroines.

There is a picture of her in which she looks out above her prim white collar, fastened with its brooch, with a stolid, enigmatic gaze that entirely conceals and wild flash of her eyes or curve of laughter on her straight-lined mouth.¹ Her black hair, parted in the middle and combed into two braids lankly borders her face. It is difficult to conjure up any hint of beauty or esti-

¹ *Historical Society of Montana Contributions*, Vol. X, 1940, 8.

mate her charm from that picture, but both beauty and charm must have been there for hardly a visitor to Fort Union or Fort Benton in those days refrained from writing in his journal about Major Culbertson's lady.

One visitor, Rudolph Friederich Kurz, a young Swiss artist, wrote in 1851: "If Mr. Culbertson's Indian wife had not received news of her younger brother's having been shot by the Assiniboin, I should have had a chance to study one of the most beautiful Indian women. In token of her grief she had her long lustrous black hair cut short. She would be an excellent model for a Venus, ideal woman of the primitive race; a perfect 'little wife.'"²

Major Culbertson first saw Natawista in 1840 when she came down from Canada with her father, Chief Men-Es-To-Kos, to trade at Fort Union on the mouth of the Yellowstone river. The bright-eyed young Indian girl attracted him at once and he sent an **engage** with nine horses to tie to her eldest brother's lodge and ask him for the girl. The next day the chief's daughter was sent to him with nine horses in exchange for those he had given.³ And after the proper speeches and smoking of pipes, Natawista's people went back to Canada, satisfied, and she became Major Culbertson's wife by proper Indian standards. She was about fifteen at the time of her marriage; he was thirty. He had had one Indian wife before and two children by her whom he educated in the east. But Natawista was always accorded honor and respect by all of Culbertson's friends and associates. She and her husband were seldom separated for more than a few days for the next thirty years.

Culbertson had succeeded McKenzie as head of Fort Union and was already widely known among the tribes for his fair dealing. Father de Smet described him as "a distinguished man endowed with a mild, benevolent and charitable temper, though if need be intrepid and courageous."⁴ Perhaps more important in the eyes of his Indian wife, his skill as a horseman and buffalo hunter was greater than that of any other white man of his time and of most of the Indian braves.

Natawista seems to have taken her place as the first lady of Fort Union with grace and ease and assumed the ways of civilized

² "Journal of Rudolph Friedrich Kurz," **Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 115**, (Nov. 6, 1851) 224.

³ **Journal of Lewis H. Morgan, 1862**, No. 2, p. 20. Ms. Historical Society of Montana. (Photostat)

⁴ **Historical Society of Montana Contributions, Vol. X**, 242.

living. When she journeyed with her husband back to St. Louis to the head office of the fur company or visited at the home of Mr. Pierre Chouteau, her bright black eyes were quick to take in the manners and styles. She had an instinctive taste in the matter of dress and ornament. (In jewelry she was fond of rubies and emeralds but found diamonds no more exciting than snowflakes or drops of water). She never learned, or perhaps never chose, to speak English although she could understand it. Her husband spoke all the Indian dialects and the French patois of the fur trade so they had no need for another language. One passenger on a Missouri steamboat in 1859 wrote of meeting Mrs. Culbertson "dressed as a white lady and said to be a very fine woman." And he adds, as though disappointed, "I have been introduced to her but as she cannot speak English I can say nothing to her!"⁶

So well did she take upon herself the ways of white women that Governor Stevens was greatly impressed. He wrote in 1853, "Mrs. Culbertson, who had fully adopted the manner, costume and deportment of the whites, by her refinement presents the most striking illustration of the high civilization which these tribes of the interior are capable of attaining."⁷

The young minister, Reverend Elkanah Mackey, who was discouraged before he began his task of making good Presbyterians out of the Indians, wrote gravely in a letter to his Board in 1856: "I think she (Mrs. Culbertson) is a very remarkable woman . . . her influence on Mr. Culbertson seems to be of the most favorable kind."⁸

But it is in the journal kept by John James Audubon when he stayed at Fort Union in 1843 that we can see Natawista most vividly. At the same time, we catch a glimpse of the verve and gaiety as well as the primitive simplicity of life in a fur-trading post in the western wilderness. Audubon had come up the Missouri in search of animals to paint for his collection of American quadrupeds, and Fort Union was a natural vantage point.

When Audubon stepped off the boat in that vast empty country, Major Culbertson and some of the men from the fort came down on horseback to meet him. They dismounted and

⁶ "Journal of Elias J. Marsh," *South Dakota Historical Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Jan. 1936, 100.

⁷ U. S. Cong. 33:2 S. D. 86, 403. Rept. of Gov. I. I. Stevens on Expedition of 1853.

⁸ Letter Fort Union, July 22, 1856 from Rev. E. D. Mackey to Walter Lowrie. *Journal of Department of History*, Dec. 1941, Presb. Hist. Society, 337.

escorted him across the prairie to the most impressive of the Missouri trading posts. His host, and perhaps, his host's lady, brought out glasses of "first-rate port wine." Audubon had only a dark little room with one small window and a bed of buffalo skins but it was the same room in which Prince Maximillian de Neuwied had spent two months some years before. Distinguished guests were not uncommon in this wilderness fort.

Audubon and his companions had retired early that first night in the fort when they heard music below and an invitation was sent up to them to come down to a ball in the dining-room, a room which boasted wall-paper and framed pictures! "There was no alternative; we all got up, and in a short time were amid the **beau monde** of these parts. Several squaws, attired in their best, were present, with all the guests, **engages**, clerks, etc. Mr. Culbertson played the fiddle very fairly, Mr. Gueppe the clarinet, and Mr. Chouteau the drum, as if brought up in the army of the great Napoleon. Cotillions and reels were danced with much energy and apparent enjoyment, and the company dispersed about one o'clock." ⁸ Natawista's life in the fort did not lack for gaiety.

The Culbertsons were at pains to entertain their guest and give him a taste of the country, much in the manner of westerners at the present time. One day, they put on a sham buffalo hunt, another day, everyone dressed in Indian garb and Mrs. Culbertson painted Audubon's young companion "in an awful manner," like a Blood brave. She, herself, put on her own "superb dress." Audubon's admiration shows through his words:

The Ladies had their hair loose and flying in the breeze and then mounted on horses with Indian saddles and trappings. Mrs. Culbertson and her maid rode astride like men and all rode a furious race, under whip the whole way, for more than a mile on the prairie; how amazed would have been any European lady, or some of our modern belles who boast their equestrian skill, at seeing the magnificent riding of this Indian princess, for that is Mrs. Culbertson's rank. Mr. Culbertson rode with them, the horses running as if wild, with these extraordinary Indian riders, Mrs. Culbertson's magnificent black hair floating like a banner behind her.⁹

Audubon was interested in every new bird and animal on the prairie, "the little new lark," the lazuli finches, plovers, arctic bluebirds, the western deer and the antelope, but in none of these

⁸ Maria R. Audubon, **Audubon and His Journals** (New York, 1900) in two volumes, II, 35.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, 88-89.

perhaps more than his young hostess who was a new species of woman to him.

And he was equally new to her. He went hunting, but he brought his prey home to paint! He looked at the claws of the beaver as though he had never seen anything like them before, and stroked the fur of a white wolf pelt as though it were more valuable than a blanket. He was an artist and she never tired of watching pictures grow beneath his brush. He was interested in woman-things; she made him a necklace of red berries and he fingered it like a squaw and admired the parfleche she decorated with dyed porcupine quills. He was French, but she had known French voyageurs and clerks and traders and he was different from all these. When she looked up she often found him studying her. What she thought of him there is no way of knowing except that one day she dove into the Missouri river and brought back six mallard ducks as a gift for him.¹⁰

Audubon was delighted. She, herself, must have been very like the lovely wild water-fowl, swimming under water like a silent shadow, then cutting the surface with her dark head and raised brown arm and climbing up on the shore to dry.

He noted with pleasure all the little domestic things she did: "After a good dinner of Buffalo meat, green peas (from the Fort garden) and a pudding . . . we had an arrival of five squaws who came to see our fort and our ladies. The princess went out to meet them, covered with a fine shawl, and the visitors followed her to her room. These ladies spoke both the French and Cree languages."¹¹

But Audubon is repelled to discover savage traits in his hostess. He writes: "I lost the head of my first buffalo bull because I forgot to tell Mrs. Culbertson that I wished to save it, and the princess had its skull broken open to enjoy its brains. Handsome and really courteous and refined in many ways, I cannot reconcile myself to the fact that she partakes of raw animal food with such relish."¹²

Father Point, a priest who lived at the fort for some time, like Audubon was disappointed to find the Major's lady clinging to the primitive superstitions of her tribe after he had thought her completely Christianized and had baptized one at least of her children. When her child was sick with croup and the white man's remedies had done no good, she persuaded her husband

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, 112.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, 123.

¹² *Ibid.*, Vol. II, 111.

to call in an old Blood squaw. The old crone heated rocks and poured water on them to give the child a steam bath, all the time chanting in a monotonous sing-song the lament that was part of the cure. When the heathen chant reached the priest's ears he tried to throw the old woman out of the fort but Culbertson intervened. Natawista was stubborn about certain things and, a miracle, the child was breathing quietly!"

In 1845 Culbertson moved up the Missouri to build a fort above what had been old Fort McKenzie to tap that vast wilderness, rich in furs, farther west. In 1847, he moved the fort again to a point that was more advantageous for trading and built the walls of adobe. On Christmas night, 1850, a ball was given to celebrate the completion of the Culbertsons' house inside the stockade.

Music reached the banks of the Missouri that was never quite black, even at night, but it could carry only a little way across the wind-swept prairie before it was lost in space. Inside, the big room of the fort was warm with a fire on the hearth and the heat of a hundred or more living bodies swaying, jigging, stamping to the music. Perhaps the Major was not playing the fiddle that night, but dancing with his lithe little wife. Her hair may have been in braids, but her full red silk skirt had come from St. Louis and on her buttoned bodice hung a silver cross.

There was punch for all, for Natawista's relatives, for the young army officers, the clerks and the interpreter, the hunters who had brought in the game for the Christmas feast, and a dram apiece of liquor for the **engages** and the Indians. There was laughter and the start of a Voyageur's song in French mixing with the music; then the fiddler tapped his bow and the Major raised his hand and the room hushed. The Indian squaws looked to their husbands to know what the white chief said and their husbands interpreted: The fort was henceforth to be called Fort Benton. Hands clapped, then the music began again and the Major swung his lady and the long, lonesome range of the High-woods looked coldly down on the prick of light on the bank of the Missouri."

For the next ten years, Major Culbertson made Fort Benton his headquarters. It came to surpass Fort Union in importance in the fur trade. The Blackfeet and the Piegans and Bloods and Gros Ventres brought their bales of beaver skins in peace and

¹³ Historical Society of Montana Contributions, Vol. III, 249.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 264.

trust. So heavy was the trading that by spring even the bedding and the cutlery from the fort kitchen went in barter and the boats sailed down the Missouri piled high with the winter's rich take. In St. Louis and even as far away as the capital at Washington, Culbertson was famed as the man who knew Indians and could smooth out any difficulty and bring back trade where it had fallen off, but who shall say how much of his success was due to Natawista?

When the Governor of Washington Territory, I. I. Stevens, set out to survey a rout for the Pacific railroad that would go through the country of the treacherous Blackfoot, he had Major Culbertson appointed as special agent to treat with the Indians, and he wrote in his report to the Secretary of the Interior: "I placed the more reliance upon the favorable influence which Mr. Culbertson might exert upon the Indians as he had married a full-blooded Blackfoot Woman."

Governor Stevens had not thought of actually taking Mrs. Culbertson with them on the expedition, but she insisted, saying to her husband: "My people are a good people, but they are jealous and vindictive. I am afraid that they and the whites will not understand each other; but if I go, I may be able to explain things to them. I know there is danger, but, my husband, where you go I will go, and where you die, I will die."

When they camped for the night, the Culbertsons' tent was always pitched outside the line of sentinels so the Indians could come freely to talk with Natawista. Stevens writes: "I soon perceived the advantage to be derived from Mrs. Culbertson's presence. She was in constant intercourse with the Indians, and inspired them with perfect confidence. . . . She heard all that the Indians said and reported it through her husband to me." He was amazed to hear the squaws shrieking with laughter around Natawista's tent and discovered that she was regaling them with tales and descriptions of the white ladies of St. Louis. He concluded that it was a mistake to think of the Indian as "silent and unsociable." "Mrs. Culbertson . . . rendered the highest service to the expedition, a service which demands this public acknowledgement," he puts down formally in the record. So Natawista helped to open the way for the railroad and the coming of the white settlers who would some day push her people onto reservations.¹⁶

¹⁶ U. S. Cong. 33.2, S. D. 86, 404. **Report of Governor I. I. Stevens on Expedition of 1853.**

Natawista had five children, these bearing the old-fashioned Christian names of Jack, Nancy, Julia, Fanny and Joe. When the second child was drowned in the Missouri, the Major sent the others back east to be raised in convent and military schools or by his maiden sister in Illinois. But each year he and Mrs. Culbertson went back to see them.

The Major's lady was always with her husband, traveling thousands of miles between forts and Indian camps. Some expeditions to the Indian camps she made alone. There are notes in the diary of the Fort Benton clerk of outfitting a wagon "for Mrs. C" or of "Mrs. C's return." Whenever the Culbertsons arrived back at the fort after an absence, it was a signal for rejoicing. The clerk's diary reads: "September 1854, About noon, much to the delight of all in the Fort, Mr. Culbertson, Lady, and three men arrived from Fort Union. Received him with a proper salute..." And the next day, "Mrs. Culbertson gave the men a feast and in the evening a ball..."¹⁶

There is an almost medieval flavor about this life they lived, and their cavalcades winding across the prairie toward the fort, sometimes in the shade of the cottonwood trees along the river, are not unlike those parties on gaily caparisoned horses that passed through the oak forests in England or France toward some moated gray castle.

The Major and his lady went up and down the river by mackinaw, or keelboat, or steamboat. For miles upon miles, sometimes weeks at a time, there was no sign of a habitation along the river, only buffalo, or a wolf, or a magpie flashing across the immense sky, flying its pirate flag of black and white. Yet in this land of unmeasured space they seem never to have been impressed by the isolation or danger or loneliness. Those were the good years of their lives.

By 1858, Major Culbertson had amassed a fortune of some three hundred thousand dollars. He retired from the active management of the trade in the Upper Missouri country and settled on his estate outside Peoria, Illinois. A new and hilarious chapter began for Natawista.

A nine-room mansion with sharp gables, trimmed with a scalloped border, was built for the Culbertson family. No expense was spared in furnishing it: a magnificent pier glass hung in the hall and the walls of the drawing-room were decorated with original paintings by Stanley. One of them, painted to order, used

¹⁶ Historical Society of Montana *Contributions*, Vol. X, 243.

Natawista as a model. An English gardener was imported to lay out the three hundred acres surrounding the house, and it is safe to guess that he must have been daunted by the corral on the property, stocked with antelope, elk and even panting buffalo, brought down from the upper Missouri. There were stables with the finest carriage horses that took blue ribbons in the horse-shows at Cincinnati, and the estate was staffed with servants and stablemen.

In his new role as an established country gentleman, Major Culbertson bethought himself of his Indian marriage, or, perhaps, gossip was rife among the citizens of Peoria. At any rate, the Peoria **Daily Transcript** for September 12, 1859, carried the account of a marriage,

... Performed in this county on Friday last (Sept. 9, 1859). The parties were Major Alexander Culbertson and Natawista, daughter of the Chief of the Blackfeet Indians, Major Culbertson is the well-known Indian trader and was married to his present wife according to the Indian ceremony some sixteen or seventeen years ago, but having lately severed his connection with the American Fur Company and settled down to an agricultural life near this city, he was anxious that the ceremony be performed according to civilized rites. The parties have three [5] very interesting children, the eldest of whom is about fifteen years of age. The marriage was performed after the ceremony of the Catholic Church by Father Scanlon of St. Joseph, Missouri.

By 1860 Peoria citizens were fond of driving their guests out past Locust Grove, which was the name of the Culbertsons' estate, telling them stories of the amazing family who lived there; of Jack taking a goat into the house to butt his reflection in the lovely pier glass, or of his riding his horse right up those front steps into the parlor; how the cook said there were barrels of gold coins in the cellar, though there were rumors that the Major didn't pay his bills promptly!

Such reckless extravagance had never before been seen or heard of in Peoria, and people told over and over how Mrs. Culbertson had the coachman hitch two half-broken colts to a brand-new carriage that cost not a penny less than three hundred dollars and when they ran away and smashed the carriage to smithereens, she just stood there laughing and clapping her hands as though it were the best joke in the world! Some folks said Mrs. Culbertson was fond of fire-water... this bit always accompanied by significant raising of eyebrows and the word "Indian" shaped by the lips.

Then, as suddenly as it began, the hilarious, musical comedy chapter was over. It turned into something not quite tragedy. Major Culbertson had invested his money unwisely in projects promoted by his good friend Senator Thomas Benton of Missouri, for whom he had named the fort. His family had spent recklessly and the fortune was gone. The barrels in the cellar stood upended.

In the fall of 1869 thirty-three creditors filed claims against the property, but the Major and his wife had already gone back up the Missouri. Major Culbertson must have been glad many times in his life that he had an Indian wife; when he saw the young missionary's white wife, who was overwhelmed with homesickness and horror at the loneliness of life at Fort Benton, take to her bed weeping until her husband promised to take her back to the States before winter; when Natawista traveled with him all day across the endless prairie with the cold wind blowing against them and, still unwearied at the day's end, was ready to make their beds and cook the wild meat she had often shot herself, or when Natawista rode as furiously as he in pursuit of a wolf for the sheer joy of the chase.

But, perhaps he was never more thankful than now to have an Indian wife who would not reproach him for his bankruptcy, nor cry for her vanished luxuries and ease, nor feel abused nor martyred. Sitting quietly in the boat going up the Missouri, her eyes watched for old landmarks and she could have had few regrets for the life in Peoria.

Yet things had changed on the upper Missouri in those ten years. Fort Benton was now the only post owned by the Chouteau firm and the business was no longer trade with the Indians but a transportation and merchandise business with the white settlers pushing into the new country.

Still, a man like Major Culbertson, even though he had turned sixty, and sixty is old on the frontier, was always valuable in the Indian country. He could make some money trading with the Indians on his own and acting as interpreter at the various Indian agencies. A come-down for a man who had been a feudal lord in that country, but one who had lived so long in the wilderness had few material needs and his dignity needed nothing to bolster it, it was inherent in himself.

And Natawista? Our sense of the brave ending would be pleased if we could say that she was faithful to her husband all the years of his life, dying where he died as she had vowed to do on Governor Stevens' expedition, but that is not the way the hu-

man record reads. Her daughters were in the east; they were to live all their lives as educated white women, marrying white men. Her sons found work around the forts, content with a life that was half-Indian, half white. She stayed at Fort Benton awhile, since her name is on the census for 1870; then she left the Major and went her own way.

We can only speculate about the motivations of her actions. She kept no diaries. Within a year or two of her leaving Fort Benton she, who had lived so well in a white man's world, turned her back on it and went north to Canada. The simple fact is moving. She had been away a long time and she chose to go back to her own people.

Major Culbertson was roving the country, trading with the Indians, even up into Canada. They may have met again on the Blood reserve, the old fur-trader and the still beautiful Indian woman who was his wife. Just before his death, Culbertson went back to visit his daughter, and in '79 died at Julia's home in Nebraska. Natawista lived on the Blood reserve in Canada until her death, but she could never step back completely into the old Indian ways, for she was always known by her married name of Madame Culbertson. She died in the '90s and was buried in the Indian cemetery near the Catholic Mission, northeast of Stand-off on the road to Cardston.¹⁷

The story of the Major's Lady has the beauty and strength of a legend, the strange mystery of an Indian ceremony and the disappointment of the cheap Indian wares bought in a tourist shop, but it has its own unique place in the history of Montana. Every school child in the state knows the story of Sacajawea but hardly a one has ever heard of Natawista, yet she, too, helped the white men in their trail-making and she is a woman worthy of a legend.

¹⁷ **Culbertson File.** Manuscript collection. Historical Society of Montana.