

# When I Was a Little Girl: Things I Remember From Living at Frontier Military Posts

By Martha Gray Wales



*“When I was a little girl,” Aunt Matt Wales would begin her stories to Billy Pope in 1945 and 1946.<sup>1</sup> She was not really his aunt, but the first cousin of his grandmother, Fanny Shaw Pope, and the nickname Matt or Mattie sprang from her Christian name Martha. She was a born raconteur, and he, an imaginative boy of four and five, living before the days of television, loved to curl up on the sofa and hear adventures either read to him from the Brothers Grimm or Hans Christian Anderson, or related as true stories which befell his ancestors. None was better than Aunt Matt’s account of her life as a little girl over seventy years earlier, when she lived with her parents on army posts in the Dakota Territory. Fortunately, Mrs. Wales permitted a stenographer to record many of her stories in 1943—and hence we have this article, annotated by Willard B. Pope, father of Billy Pope and first-cousin-once-removed of Aunt Matt.*

The most important people in this story are my mother and father, the Aunt Laura and Uncle Charlie of your Gammo and Bobby Pope, your Aunt Polly and your Uncle Harry and all the descendants of Grandfather Bissell.<sup>2</sup>

It must have been between the ages of six and eight that I first learned the interest value of stories of the Indians, and buffalo, and wild life of the plains. As an only child, and for eight years the only grandchild in my mother’s family, I gradually developed it, at first unconsciously in the family or later when some little girl or boy showed signs of taking the bow by showing a perfect report card or boasting of some adventure.

Mr. George F. Will, president of the State Historical Society of North Dakota, has asked me to put down some of these memories of my early childhood, which was spent at army posts on the upper Missouri River.<sup>3</sup> Three months ago I could not have done this; though I often told them to my children and small cousins, they were an uncritical audience and never asked awkward questions about dates and proofs. Since reading that very remarkable novel, *The Lieutenant’s Lady*, by Bess Streeter Aldrich, and Mr. Will’s translation of General de Trobriand’s journals for the years 1867, 1868, and

1869, it is as if some acid had been poured over the invisible writing on the tablets of my mind, and the vague background, which I never could quite recover, stands out more clearly than I supposed it could.<sup>4</sup>

Some time in the fall of 1866 my young parents brought me to **Dakota Territory**, where my father, Dr. Gray, was ordered for a tour of duty. His first station was **Fort Randall**, and I was something over two and a half years of age.<sup>5</sup> Of course, I remember nothing of this, though one of my most popular stories with my young listeners (from hearsay) has always been “Aunt Matt’s Adventure with the Kind-hearted Rattlesnake.” I have an old photograph of Fort Randall at that time which is interesting when reading General de Trobriand’s journal.

Later I heard that Fort Randall near the Yankton Indian Reservation was in a definitely dangerous country that year, as the Sioux were restless and threatening.

Early the next spring, 1867, my father was ordered to **Fort Buford**.<sup>6</sup> Miners and settlers were surging up the river, filling the boats and depending for protection on the two regiments of infantry stationed along the Missouri and Yellowstone in Dakota

and Montana. My earliest memories begin at Fort Buford. There are of course only detached pictures, vignettes of my surroundings and all entirely subjective. I was lying on a bed in our big tent under a mosquito net, and the heat and glare of the mid-summer sun was intense. My mother was fanning me and coaxing me to sleep. Another time, at night in the same tent, I was in my mother's lap. A shaded candle was lighted and she held me under the hooded waterproof cape she was wearing to protect me from the cloud of mosquitoes. There was great confusion outside, and the endless beat of Indian drums came to my ears from beyond the stockade. My father in his shirtsleeves kept coming in at intervals to soothe my mother's crying, telling her he did not think there was any real danger of attack, that he had several wounded men just brought in and must be at the hospital. My third and last picture of Fort Buford is of a cool summer evening. My mother and another Army wife were strolling out to look at a magnificent sunset. A guard was starting out to fill the casks for the next day's supply of river water. Evidently neither of the women had seen the curious confluence of the clear mountain stream of the Missouri and the yellow turbid flood of the Yellowstone, for they followed the men to the edge of the bluff. Of course, I was with my mother and clearly remember her pointing it out to me. Suddenly the officer of the day came striding down, and in no uncertain terms ordered the women back

into the stockade. I remember being very indignant at his speaking to my mother so roughly.

My next memories are of **Fort Stevenson**.<sup>7</sup> Some time in 1867 my father was ordered down to Fort Stevenson, twelve miles below the old French trading post of **Fort Berthold**.<sup>8</sup> The new fort was a mere aggregation of tents at the time, but the boats were beginning to bring materials and civilian workmen for the permanent post. We lived in a comfortable hospital tent with a wooden floor. My father unpacked his box of books (without which he never changed posts); my mother [unpacked] her linen and silver and they settled in. They often spoke later of the very pleasant people that were there, some of whom became lifelong friends, in particular, Lieutenant Hooten.

For me, things about me seemed to take shape in relation to one another. I became conscious of the landscape. My father had bought a little pair of Indian ponies, had them broken to harness, and with a light spring wagon we had grand drives over the prairies. I remember in particular one day his coming in and saying, "Put on your things. The prairie flowers are out." And so they were. It was a beautiful morning after just the right amount of rain. The short grass had grown green and the lovely little things were holding up their heads. I jumped down from the wagon and stood looking at them. I recall blue and yellow flowers, but no red ones.

**Figure 1. Paintings, watercolors, and sketches made by Colonel de Trobriand during his stay at Fort Stevenson offer a telling perspective on the frontier military. This June 1868 view of the fort clearly expresses the vastness of the surrounding prairie, a situation that very likely made the small society of the fort all the more important to those stationed there. (SHSND 12471)**



We drove to the Indian agency at Fort Berthold, perhaps to see a sick person. There was quite a collection of tipis, women, men, and children with their little bows and clay toys, and the women held up eggs to sell. I began to learn Indian names. I used a sort of chant, “Minneconjou, Brule, Black Feet, Uncpapa, Mandans, Arikaras. But Arikaras are best.”

The great event that spring, according to my parents, was the arrival of Dr. Washington Matthews from the Smithsonian Institution at Washington, to study and acquire some of the Sioux dialects.<sup>9</sup> He was an assistant surgeon, and as such was allowed quarters, etc., but I think his main duty was to study the situation between whites and Indians. My father had one assistant and hardly needed another in his small, two-company post. So his interest in languages made them very congenial, and they worked together on Dr. Matthews’s “Language of the Hadat-Su.” The Arikara chief, **White Shield**, was very helpful to them, and as a great sign of friendship showed them the tribe’s historic buffalo robe—a huge skin so carefully dressed on the inside that it was like a whitish suede.<sup>10</sup> On this the history of the tribe for “a hundred years” was told in pictographs. (These histories are often called **winter counts**.) The pictures were just outlines of men’s figures and were done in red, dark blue, and black, and each picture represented a year in the tribe’s history. Dr. Matthews photographed the skin and gave us a copy, which we had for a long time. The only pictures I remember was of the year the tribe had the smallpox, the outlines of two men standing side by side with small dots on them, and the year that twins were born, two small children with their arms around each other.

My father had a good knowledge of French. He had begun his studies of that language when quite a young boy while preparing for college. (I still have his little calfbound English-French dictionary.) He followed it through his classical course at Hobart College, Geneva, New York. After graduating from there in 1858 with Phi Beta Kappa honors, he entered the Geneva Medical College, from which he graduated in 1861 and at once

offered his services to the Colors.<sup>11</sup> After training at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, he was commissioned captain and assistant surgeon and sent at once to the field with the Army of the Potomac. He was taken prisoner of war after the Battle of Bull Run, where he surrendered before a country church building which he had converted into an emergency hospital.<sup>12</sup> After about a year in various southern prisons, he was exchanged, promoted major and brevet lieutenant colonel, and was cited for “gallant and meritorious service in action,” and was given a sick-leave of several months, and returned to his home in Chester, Orange County, New York.

In November 1862 he and my mother were married, and he was on duty at base hospitals in Wilmington, Delaware, and Louisville, Kentucky, until the end of the Civil War.

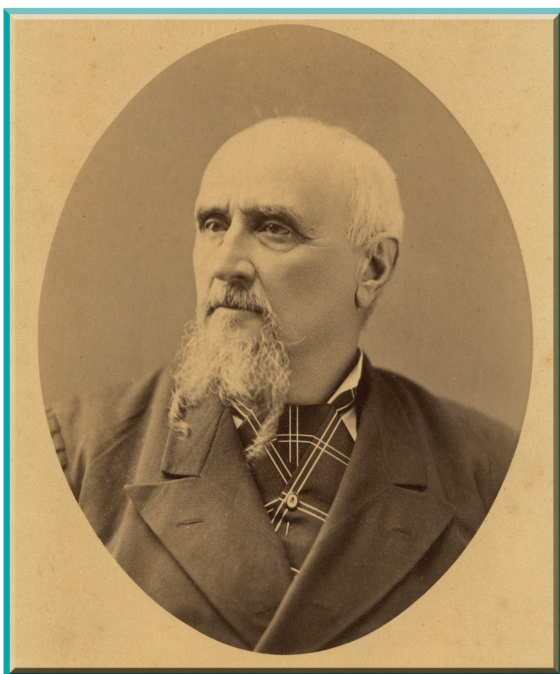
Keenly interested in the Indian problem, he applied for duty on the frontier, and the four years he spent in the Dakotas were perhaps the best of his military service. He was able to give not only medical help of every kind, but his French served him in good stead in interpreting our white point of view to the Indian. As General de Trobriand says, “French Canadians abound here. With one exception the traders at Fort Berthold are French, their employees are all of French Canadian origin, French is their language.”<sup>13</sup> The more intelligent of the chiefs and important Indians all understood French better than they did English, and so misunderstandings arose because of ignorant interpreters.

My father served at **Fort Sully** and Fort Randall again, and in the spring of 1870 was ordered to duty in New York Harbor.<sup>14</sup> Three years in western Texas and two years in Kansas finished his active service. He was retired for “disabilities incident to the service” and died in 1884, his forty-sixth year.

I remember the arrival of the new commanding officer [at Fort Stevenson], **General de Trobriand**, that summer of 1867, and the departure of General [*sic*] Whistler, with whose children I used to play and who I was to see again.<sup>15</sup>

During that fall, I realized for the first time the hostility of the Indians. A party of our men who had been sent out on some military errand were attacked while they were eating their lunch; they had foolishly left their arms at some distance. The sergeant who was responsible for the men was attacked and killed from ambush and two others were seriously wounded. By that time the others recovered their arms, and the Indians quickly vanished. The injured men were taken to the post hospital.<sup>16</sup> In one case two arrows were lodged in the soldier's forearm, and I remember hearing people talking about the long and difficult operation my father performed so skillfully. He was ambidextrous and could operate with either hand. The arrows with the dried blood in the runnels are still in my family.<sup>17</sup>

That same fall a party of woodcutters with a guard of soldiers were cutting on the bottoms at the other side of the river and were attacked by Indians. I remember the excitement of everyone from the post rushing to the plateau and hearing the firing of the mortar. October wore on and no boat came



**Figure 2. Colonel Philippe de Trobriand**, commonly known by his brevet rank of general, commanded the Middle District of the Department of Dakota from 1867–1869. (SHSND A3208)

up with supplies, so work was pushed on the log cabin quarters. Our personal disappointment was great as my mother had counted on letters and the Christmas box from her family. But I do not remember missing them as I had my old toys and the little clay figures of animals made by the Indians, one in particular, a beautifully modeled buffalo, I remember.

On the twenty-sixth of December, two sets of quarters were ready for occupancy. I vaguely remember the bustle and excitement of moving from the tent and being urged to finish my dinner as a storm was brewing. I was wrapped up in a buffalo robe and taken to the new home. This was the famous blizzard of 1867, which raged for five days. When it ceased our cabin had been converted into an igloo with snow going over its roof, which did not melt until spring. A tunnel was dug through it in front of the entrance, and this gave some light. An excellent sketch of our quarters at this time is given in Mr. Will's translation of General de Trobriand's diary which, when I recently saw it for the first time, transported me back these seventy-five years.<sup>18</sup>

Towards spring my mother was able to get an Indian woman, Tonka Mary, from Fort Berthold to help her with the housework. In April we saw the smoke of the first boat, our main link with civilization, and our Christmas mail was excitedly opened. Mine contained a wonderful wax doll with flaxen hair and with eyes which opened and closed and which I clutched and would hardly let out of my hands. Through Tonka Mary the Indians heard of my doll, and often while playing with it on the floor, the windows would be darkened, and I would look up to see dark faces peering in to look at "Waxy," as I called her. My father was offered buffalo skins, beaver pelts, and other valuable things for it, but I was never asked to make that sacrifice.

There was great suffering throughout that region that winter. The big timber wolves came down from Canada in great numbers, and we had besides the wolves other visitors from across the line, the big Canadian lynx. One morning quite early in



**Figure 3.** Fort Stevenson officers, their ladies, and their children gather for this portrait about 1869. (SHSND A4194)

the spring my father heard the sound of shots at the back of the post. Remembering that the melting snow had made quite a pond in a depression out there, he picked up his gun and slipped out to see if there might not be some game, for the wild clucks and geese were coming up from the south. He was just in time to see a young Indian, gun in hand, standing over the bodies of a lynx and a big gray goose. He had shot them just as the lynx was dragging the goose from the pond by one wing. He was glad to sell the lynx and the goose to my father. I suppose we had the goose for dinner, but game was so usual on our table that it made no impression on me. What he did with the beautiful lynx pelt, I have forgotten. My mother should have taken it for a neckpiece.

I remember an Indian boy who was found near the post nearly dead from eating poisoned meat thrown out for the wolves. He was cared for at the hospital, but that was too rapidly filling with our men so my father brought him home and made a bed for him in the lean-to and said, "We will keep him until he is able to go back to the agency, and he can help get the wood and water in." Idle words as it proved in the end. My mother had made a lemon pie for next day's dinner and left it in the kitchen for over night. Next morning, no John with the wood. He had vanished along with the filling of the lemon pie scooped out by hand.

But it was more than pie those lemons brought to Fort Stevenson. Our men had been suffering from scurvy in increasing numbers. The officers managed better as they had private stocks of canned goods. Game was plentiful for the shooting, and the government tried to maintain herds of beef cattle, but

these were sometimes stampeded or shot by the Indians and a good deal of the meat for the enlisted men was necessarily salted. My father remembered that old Fort Berthold had been established by a Frenchman years ago, and that where a Frenchman has lived, there must be a kitchen garden. So, given a guard, he started out as early as the frost was out of the ground to see what he could find. To his delight there were wild onions and Jerusalem artichokes, escapees from the garden, which greatly helped the men's diet until canned goods, lemons, and fresh vegetables came to the post by this first boat.

The life in the post was resumed with great activity and building started again. The little social life possible was resumed. Mails from the East came regularly then, and one day my father came in with an armful, giving my mother her letters and settling down at the table with his. In a moment there was a little shriek from my mother, "Oh, Charlie, father's been made Bishop of Vermont." My grandfather had been rector of Trinity Church, Geneva, New York, for twenty-three years, and we felt he deserved the honor. Joys and sorrows were shared by the garrison, and people came in with congratulations and good wishes because my mother was very much beloved by all of them.

The women of the post were busier than ever that spring sewing the materials of that first wonderful consignment into garments for themselves and families. Let us hope that all had new hats, and I remember how glad my mother was to get me out of the copper-toed shoes, the best the sutler had, that I had worn all winter, and into the fine new kid ones from the "States."

At one time a small herd of buffalo were pointed out to me. They were hardly distinguishable from the dust they raised.

The Indians seemed under control that season; drives on the prairie were more extended, and I enjoyed seeing the prairie dog “villages” with their attendant little owls. I wish I had a picture of one of those villages to put in here. Gophers is the real name, and I am told there is one in the Bronx Zoo, so some of you may have seen it. The gophers themselves are about the color of our gray squirrels, but they have short flat tails and much prettier faces because they are not rodents. I don't how what they lived on in Dakota, maybe on the roots of the buffalo grass, but now both the buffaloes and their grass have gone so probably the prairie dogs have too. They lived in holes in the ground like woodchucks with piles of dirt at the opening. They were very inquisitive, and whenever they heard a noise they would dash up and sit on their little piles of alkali-earth to see who was going by. They were sociable, too, and

they let the tiny prairie owls live with them; they sat on their dirt piles together, which was dangerous business as they often went home with the passerby for dinner. I loved them both and wanted a little “dog” for a pet. I can't think what the little owls lived on unless it was the dancing field mice of North Dakota.<sup>19</sup>

The new frame quarters were up, and our garrison had time and place for more sociability.

But we were not to enjoy one of these white clapboard cottages. My father was ordered down to Fort Sully that fall, and I can't help telling you the nice thing that General de Trobriand said in his “Journal” under the date of September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1868: “Dr. Gray left today. The Doctor is transferred to Fort Sully. He leaves many regrets here. He is a distinguished surgeon and a most agreeable man. Mrs. Gray is a charming person whose departure leaves a great hole in our little circle. The steamboat *North Alabama* took the doctor, his family, and all their belongings.”

**Figure 4. Fort Stevenson winter scene.** The painting, by de Trobriand, notes the hardships that faced soldiers and their families on the northern plains. This sketch is noted by Mrs. Wales as depicting her family's quarters. (SHSND 12470)



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## About the Editor

Edited by Willard B. Pope (1903–1988), a native of Detroit, who went to the University of Vermont in 1942 and served as chairman of

the English department before retiring in 1968. He edited the three-volume work *The Diary of Benjamin Robert Haydon 1808–1824*. Dr. Pope received his undergraduate degree from Hamilton College and his doctorate from Harvard University in 1932.

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Dedication: To [my daughter] Laura [Wales Beebe]. Most patient of listeners, kindest of critics and skillful copyist of these old stories. I must add—loveliest of companions at all times. We both hope they may hold some interest “A.M.”

1. Martha Gray Wales was the widow of George Worcester Wales. Born at Louisville, Kentucky, on August 17, 1864, she was the daughter of Major Charles Carroll Gray (1838–1884), US Medical Corps, and Laura Bissell Gray (1841–1908). Mrs. Wales died at Burlington, Vermont, on August 7, 1946. Widowed before she was twenty-five, Mrs. Wales had two children. Willard Ryan Pope (b. 1941), is the son of the editor.
2. William Henry Augustus Bissell (1814–1893) served as Episcopal bishop of Vermont from 1868 until his death; the others mentioned here are descendants. Aunt Laura, Bissell’s daughter, married Charles Gray. “Gammo” was Fanny Shaw Pope (1875–1961) and “Bobby” was Willard Pope (1867–1949) his sister, Aunt Polly, was Pauline Pope Miller (1864–1934). Uncle Harry was Henry Bigelow Shaw (1873–1936), a brother of Fanny Shaw Pope.
3. George Frances Will (1884–1955) served as president of the State Historical Society of North Dakota from 1942 until his death. A prominent scholar, he translated Philippe de Trobriand’s *Vie Militaire dans le Dakota, Notes et Souvenirs, 1867–1869*; it was excerpted and edited by Milo M. Quaife and published as *Army Life in Dakota* (Chicago: Lakeside Press, 1941). For data about Will, see Harlow Leslie Walster, “George Francis Will, 1884–1955: Archaeologist, Anthropologist, Ethnologist, Naturalist, Nurseryman, Seedsman, Historian,” *North Dakota History*, 23-1 (January, 1956), pp. 5–25.
4. Published in New York in 1942, the novel is based upon a diary and recounts the experiences of a young army wife on the frontier in 1867; see also note 3.
5. The Territory of Dakota was organized in 1861; in 1889, it was divided into two states, North Dakota and South Dakota. See Howard Roberts Lamar, *Dakota Territory, 1861–1889: A Study of Frontier Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956).
6. Fort Buford was located on the Missouri near the present Montana line and the mouth of the Yellowstone River. Named for General John Buford, a Civil War hero, the fort was established in June, 1866, and existed until 1895. See Ben Innis, editor, “The Fort Buford Diary of Pvt. Sanford,” *North Dakota History*, 33-4 (Fall, 1966), pp. 334–378.
7. Fort Stevenson, named for Brigadier General Thomas G. Stevenson, was maintained on the north (east) bank of the Missouri River near the mouth of Douglas Creek from 1867–1883. See Ray H. Matison, “Old Fort Stevenson: A Typical Missouri River Military Post,” *North Dakota History*, 18-2/3 (April-July, 1951), pp. 53–91.
8. Bartholomew Berthold established this post as a fur trade outlet in 1845; it was utilized by the army from 1865–1867 and replaced by Fort Stevenson. See Adrian R. Dunn, “A History of Old Fort Berthold,” *North Dakota History*, 30.4 (October, 1963), pp. 156–240.
9. Washington Matthews (1843–1905) was an army surgeon who studied the Hidatsa and Navaho, writing books and articles about their languages and legends, including *Ethnography and Philology of the Hidatsa Indians* (1877).
10. Famed Arikara chief White Shield proved a steadfast defender of tribal rights, once being removed as a chief by an Indian agent after refusing to accept deficient annuities. See Roy W. Meyes, *Village Indians of the Upper Missouri: The Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), pp. 121–122.
11. Geneva Medical College was a branch of Hobart College created in 1827; though closed from 1830–1835, the school existed until 1872. The faculty then allied itself with Syracuse University, created in 1870.
12. This first major battle of the Civil War was fought thirty miles southwest of Washington on July 21, 1861; Union forces suffered an important defeat.
13. See Quaife, editor, *Army Life in Dakota*, p. 35. Also see Lucille M. Kane, editor and translator, *Military Life in Dakota: The Journal of Philippe Regis de Trobriand* (St. Paul: Alvord Memorial Commission, 1951).
14. Fort Sully was first established in 1863; three years later, a second post replaced the first, but at a location some thirty miles upriver and now near the city of Pierre, South Dakota. The second Fort Pierre existed until 1897. See Joseph H. Drips, *Three Years Among the Indians in Dakota* (New York: Sol Lewis, ed., 1974); also see Langdon Sully, *No Tears for the General: The Life of Alfred Sully, 1821–1879* (Palo Alto, CA: American West Publishing Company, 1974).
15. Colonel Joseph N.G. Whistler graduated from West Point in 1846 and served until 1886; he died in 1899. See Quaife, *Army Life in Dakota*, p. 37n.
16. De Trobriand’s journal (see Quaife, p. 105) noted: “The wounded man was taken at once to the hospital, where Dr. Gray proceeded to extract the arrows. For one of them especially, the operation was difficult, the point having struck the bone of the arm and been bent. It had to be performed by an incision. Arrows, it is well known, cannot be extracted by the path through which they enter; they must be forced through with the barb in advance. The patient being put under the influence of chloroform underwent the operation without feeling the pain. Nevertheless he has suffered much since. The doctor, however, is not without confidence that he will recover without permanent disability. He had a narrow escape.”
17. The two arrowheads, owned by the late Charles W. Miller of East Setauket, Long Island, New York, were 3-5/8 and 2-15/16 inches long and probably made from iron.
18. Quaife, facing p. 206.
19. Two common errors appear in this description: first, the prairie dog is a rodent, not a dog; second, burrowing owls appropriate abandoned burrows rather than sharing occupied prairie dog dwellings. See John Sparks and Tony Soper, *Owls: Their Natural and Unnatural History* (1970), p. 57.

