

## The Pig That Almost Caused a War

by Rupert Holland

Off the far northwestern corner of the United States lie a number of small islands scattered along the strait that separates the state of Washington from Vancouver Island. One of these goes by the name of San Juan Island, a green bit of land some fifteen miles long and seven wide. The northern end rises into hills, while the southern part is covered with rich pastures. In the hills are coal and limestone, and along the shore is splendid cod, halibut, and salmon fishing. In the year 1859 a farmer named Hubbs pastured his sheep at the southern end of San Juan, and had for a neighbor to the north a man in the employ of the English Hudson's Bay Company, whose business it was to raise pigs. The pigs thrived on San Juan, and following their fondness for adventure left Mr. Griffiths' farm and overran the whole island. Day after day Hubbs would find the pigs grubbing in his pasture, and finally in a moment of anger he warned his neighbor that he would kill the next pig that came on his land. Griffiths heard the warning, but evidently the pigs did not, for the very next day one of them crossed the boundary line and ventured into Mr. Hubbs' field. Here it began to enjoy itself in a small vegetable patch that Mr. Hubbs had planted. As soon as he saw the trespasser Hubbs went for his gun, and returning with it, shot the intruding pig.

When Griffiths found his dead pig he was as angry as Hubbs had been, and he immediately set out in his sailboat and crossed the strait to Victoria, a little city on Vancouver Island, where officers of the British Government had their headquarters. He stated his case, and obtained a warrant of arrest for his neighbor Hubbs. Then he sailed back to San Juan with the constable, and going to his neighbor's house read the warrant to him. Hubbs indignantly replied that he was an American citizen, and did not have to obey the order of the English officer. Thereupon the constable left the house, vowing that he would return with a force of men and compel the farmer to obey him.

Mr. Hubbs was a shrewd man, and believed that the constable would be as good as his word. As soon as he had left Hubbs therefore sent a note to Port Townsend, which was in Washington Territory, asking the United States officers there to protect him from arrest for killing his neighbor's pig. When he received the note General William S. Harney, who was in command, ordered Lieutenant-Colonel Casey to take a company of soldiers and camp on San Juan Island to protect Mr. Hubbs.

Now that thoughtless pig had actually lighted a fuse that threatened to lead to a very serious explosion. As it happened San Juan lay near the middle of the Strait of Juan de Fuca and commanded both shores. The people at Victoria could see the American soldiers setting out in their boats from Port Townsend, and landing on the green island. So long as it had been the home of a few farmers San Juan had caused little concern, but now that troops were camping upon it it presented quite a different look. Victoria was all excitement. The governor, Sir James Douglas, heard the news first, and then Admiral Prevost, who was in command of some English war-ships anchored in the little bay near the city. The admiral was very angry and threatened to blow the Yankees off the island. He gave orders to move his fleet to one of the harbors of San Juan, and his cannon were ready to fire shot over the peaceful fields, where sheep and pigs had divided possession. Sir James Douglas, the governor, however, was a more peaceful man. He persuaded the admiral not to be in a hurry, but suggested that it would be wise to have a company of British regulars camp somewhere on San Juan. This would serve as a warning to the United States troops. Accordingly Captain Delacombe was sent over, and pitched his tents on the northern end of the island that belonged to the Hudson's Bay Company.

As a result of the pig having trespassed in Mr. Hubbs' vegetable patch, the flag of the United States flew above the tents on the southern part of San Juan, and the British flag over the tents on the northern end. Mr. Hubbs was left in peace, and Mr. Griffiths went on raising pigs; but the people in Victoria shook their fists across the strait at the people in Port Townsend, and in each of those cities there was a great deal of talk about war. The talk was mostly done by men who had nothing to do with the army. The soldiers on the little island soon became the best of friends, and spent their time in field sports and giving dinner-parties to each other.

No part of the boundary line of the United States has given more trouble than that in the northwest. The Hudson's Bay Company had once claimed practically all of what was known as Oregon Territory for England, but after Marcus Whitman brought his pioneers westward the Hudson's Bay Company gradually withdrew, and left the southern part of that land to the United States. For forty years the two countries had disputed about the line of division, and the political party that was led by Stephen A. Douglas had taken as its watchword, "Fifty-four, forty,—or fight!" which meant that unless the United States should get all the land up to the southern line of Alaska, they would go to war with England. Fortunately President Polk was not so grasping, and the boundary was finally settled in 1846 on latitude forty-nine degrees. That was a clear enough boundary for most of the northwest country, but when one came close to the Pacific the coast grew ragged, and was dotted with little islands. Vancouver was by the treaty to belong to England, and the agreement said that the boundary at this corner should be "the middle of the channel." Now it happened that San Juan and its small neighbors lay midway between the two shores, and the treaty failed to say which channel was meant, the one on the American or the one on the British side of San Juan.

As a matter of fact this question of the channel was very important for the British. It would lead them to the coast of Canada, or the United States to Alaska. The one to the west, called the Canal de Haro, was much straighter than the other, and deep enough for the largest war-ships. Naturally the United States wanted the boundary to run through this channel, and the British equally naturally wanted the boundary to run through the opposite channel, called Rosario Strait, because midway between lay the little island, which would make a splendid fortress, and might prevent the passage of ships in case of war between the two nations. So long as the islands were simply pasture lands the question of ownership was only a matter for debate, but when the pig was killed, and the troops of both countries camped on San Juan the question became a much more vital one.

News of what had happened on San Juan was sent to Washington and to London; and General Winfield Scott hurried by way of Panama to Mr. Hubbs' farm. He found that all the United States troops on that part of the coast that could be spared had been crowded on to the southern part of the island. This seemed unnecessary, and General Scott agreed with Sir James Douglas that only one company of United States and one of British soldiers should stay in camp there. The little island thus became the scene of what was known as "a joint military occupation." In the meantime there were many lengthy meetings at Washington and London, and the two countries decided that they would leave the difficult question of the boundary line to arbitration. So the statesmen at Washington drew up papers to prove that the right line lay in the middle of the Canal de Haro, and statesmen at London drew up other papers to show that the correct line was through the middle of Rosario Strait, which would give them San Juan and allow their ships to sail in perfect safety between the islands and the Vancouver shore. The statesmen and lawyers took their time about this, while the soldiers amused themselves fishing for cod and salmon, and the farmers cared for their sheep and pigs as peacefully as in the days before Hubbs had shot Griffiths' pig.

After some time the two nations decided to ask the Emperor of Germany to decide the question

of the boundary line. The Emperor appointed three learned men to determine the question for him. They listened to the arguments of both sides, and after much study made their report to the Emperor, who gave his decision on October 23, 1872, and handed a copy of it to Mr. Bancroft for the United States, and to Lord Odo Russell for England. His decision was that the claim of the United States was correct, and that the middle of the Canal de Haro should be the boundary of that northwestern corner. This gave San Juan to the United States, much to the disappointment of the people of Vancouver Island, who knew that a fort on that little strip of land could control all navigation through the Strait of Juan de Fuca. One month after the decision was given the British troops cut down their flagstaff on the northern end and left San Juan.

San Juan lies opposite the city of Victoria, which has grown to be one of the largest ports of British Columbia. Instead of lessening in importance the island has grown in value, because that part of the country has filled up rapidly, and both sides of the line are more and more prosperous. The question of who should own San Juan would have been decided some day, but it was that prowling pig that brought matters to a head, and for a few weeks at least threatened to draw two countries into war. On such slight happenings (although in this case it was a very serious matter for the pig) often hang the fates of nations if we trace history back to the spark that fired the fuse.

Source:

Holland, Rupert. "The Pig That Almost Caused a War." *Historic Adventures*. Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs & Company, 1913. 222 – 228. Electronic.