

This 1872 journalistic choice is based on some motive. And an analysis is needed to uncover that motive. Such an analysis begins with this observation: It would seem more “natural” to say, “her husband” or “her man” or possibly even “Too-too-tena Jack’s brother-in-law” rather than “her Indian.”

A digression is needed: Let me remember clearly and directly that there is nothing natural about how certain words in English “sound.” These examples – these alternatives listed above – make clear the ability of a language such as English to promote cultural values and imperatives.

What makes “her Indian” an exceptional phrase (aka an “odd-sounding phrase”) to my ear becomes apparent after matching it to one of the alternatives, “Too-too-tena Jack’s brother-in-law.” This latter phrase – which follows the pattern of “Too-too-tena Jack’s sister” – sounds to my ear “more natural” (i.e. less exceptional and not so odd). Why? Because it conforms closely to an imperatives of 1870s¹⁷ U.S. society where the rule was “women always belong to men” and where the corollary rule was “men do not ever belong to women.”

The following phrases violate the imperative of U.S. patriarchal society by subordinating a man to a woman: “her Indian/her husband/her man.” Patriarchy had great power in 1870s U.S. society. What motive might be so strong as to overcome the cultural imperative of patriarchal U.S. society? What might have prompted the reporter to violated patriarchal norms with the “odd-sounding” phrase, “her Indian?”

Racial animus trumps misogyny in this 1872 newspaper report. This truth can be ascertained by asking, “What is missing in the equivalent expressions?” The answer is that no designation of “Depot Charley’s” racial identity occurs with the alternative phrases “her husband,” “her man,” “her mate.”

The journalist’s purpose in utilizing the patriarchal-flouting turn of phrase, “her Indian,” is made clear by comparing it to the turns of phrase not used. What these alternatives lack, obviously, is information concerning the racial identity of Minnie DePoe’s companion. The writer wished primarily to convey precisely what the writer did, indeed, communicate: “Depot Charley” was an “Indian,” which is to say, not a white man.

Several factors indicate that such an explicit communication of the racial identity of Minnie DePoe’s male companion formed something like a journalistic

necessity. One such factor is the fact of frequent intermarriage between immigrants and Native people at the time.

Marriages between Natives and newly arrived people had been routine during the preceding decades. To start with, many of the most successful and respected immigrants had married into indigenous families. Virtually without exception, these marriages featured white men marrying indigenous women.

Hudson Bay Company Chief Factor John McLoughlin, sometimes known as the “Father of Oregon,” was the husband of Marguerite Wadin (Metis), who had previously been married to Alexander McKay, one of the founders of Astoria.

Alexis Aubichon, founder of Butteville, which is situated on the Willamette River only a few miles downstream from Corvallis, participated in the Champoege Meetings (aka the Wolf Meetings) and was married to Aluamox (Chinook), whose sister, Ecclesic, likewise married a white man named Pickernell. Many contemporary families at Siletz¹⁸ descend from such unions formed in the early and middle 19th century.

In addition to these alliances, which were typically enduring, less permanent unions occurred between white men and indigenous women. For example, a Portland newspaper, only a few weeks prior to DePoe’s arrest in Corvallis, reported that no less notable a figure than Ulysses S. Grant, the current U.S. president, had fathered offspring with indigenous mothers earlier in his career when stationed at Ft. Vancouver.¹⁹

To sum up, readers of 1872 Oregon newspapers knew that short-term unions as well as long-term relationships between white men and indigenous women were commonplace.²⁰ These readers might have easily assumed that the companion in jail with the Siletz woman known as “Too-too-tena Jack’s sister” was a white man named “Depot Charley” if this person’s racial identity had not been explicitly stated.

One additional contextual factor provided reasons for this Corvallis journalist to clearly state Charles DePoe’s racial identity: namely, the Siletz pair’s manifest boldness in pursuing justice among white settlers.

Their bravery is obvious, but, just to say it, the mission of Minnie DePoe,

and “her Indian, Depot Charley” was to confront an individual who had shown little hesitation in killing a person very much like them. To the Siletz relatives of Too-too-tena Jack, Boyle likely appeared as merely the last in a relatively long list of settlers who had escaped punishment after killing an Indian.

By 1872, the pattern had been well established: Indian killers typically received little or no sanction for their homicidal acts. As mentioned already, a notorious case of unpunished murder occurred in 1868, and Agent Ben Simpson recorded that Siletz leaders were “doubtful” that a specific murder of a Siletz man known as “Frank” in news reports would result in punishment “as they said that several of their Tilecums had been killed by white men, and that none of them had been hanged, or even tried.”²¹

Minnie and Charles DePoe exhibited bravery when they decided to pursue a known Indian killer among people likely harboring more men of the same ilk. The point is that readers in 1872 would have recognized the bravery – the confidence – exhibited by this pair from Siletz and these contemporary readers, had DePoe’s race not appeared in the report, might easily have concluded that such manifest boldness depended, in part at least, on Depot Charley’s assumed status as a white man seeking justice among fellow whites.

Another factor also attended the journalistic choice to embrace the unusual term, “her Indian, Depot Charley.” The journalist did not give DePoe’s indigenous name, “Ki-sa,” in this account. This Siletz Dee-ni’ name would have pointed to a racial identity. Because the only name Ki-sa bears in this newspaper account is entirely composed of English words rather than indigenous ones, a reader might fairly conclude that this man was white – not an Indian.

It is possible – perhaps even likely – that the phrase “her Indian” likely also served as a replacement in 1870s print for more popular phrases of a more insulting cast. Specifically, it is easy to imagine a reporter originally penning the phrase “Too-too-tena Jack’s sister, and her buck,” which an editor then changed to a less insulting form before publication. The important point – as was the case in the 1868 financial government report – was to state explicitly who was Indian so as to make clear who was white.

Both the historical and linguistic contexts strongly suggest that a reader, had the 1872 newspaper report remained silent concerning Charles DePoe’s racial identity, might easily have assumed that this couple consisted of a Siletz woman and a white man. Was this an instance of two Natives or a Native woman and her white husband being thrown summarily into jail? The journalist appears to have dutifully answered this question via the use of careful and non-patriarchy-conforming diction: “her Indian, ‘Depot Charley.’”

Depot Charley can be seen as the sort of name that defied easy racial categorization. This 1872 newspaper article and this 1868 government report help demonstrate that the name Depot Charley was used in the earliest years in a way that countered and confounded the categorizing imperative of the colonizing order.

Arguably, no distinction was more important to the success of the colonizing project than the distinction between “Indian” and “white.” At virtually every turn, 19th century white society sought to keep this gulf wide and insurmountable.

For example, the likely reason that Thomas Boyle escaped being charged with murder after killing Too-too-tena Jack was the legal prohibition on “Indians” testifying against “whites” in courts of justice. “Depot Charley” both confounds the distinction between “Indian” and “white” and foreshadows a further chapter in the development of Ki-sa’s name in English—a chapter when “Depot Charley” transforms into “Charles DePoe.”

Afterword: Author’s Request for Help

Charles DePoe is a relative of mine. My maternal grandmother’s first cousin James (“Jimmy”) Brown was a grandson of Charles DePoe.²² I can say with certainty that the Carson/Service/Viles families, then, are Charles DePoe’s distant relatives – shoestring cousins.

Leaving the world of certainty, which for me is based on direct experience and shared narratives from trusted family sources, I can make a further claim of relationship to Charles DePoe based on the following: One of my ancestors was named Ada DePoe Carson Arden. And yet, neither direct experience nor shared narratives from trusted and reliable family members have confirmed the exact relationship of Ada DePoe and Charles DePoe.

At an earlier age, I theorized as follows: “Ada Depoe Carson Arden must be a daughter of Charles DePoe.” My story changed when Robert Kentta shared with me some important knowledge: While last names in the Anglo-American tradition are solely given by fathers to their children, it was common at Siletz in the early reservation era for a man to share a last name with his siblings as well as his children. This occurred at the time that the custom of using English last names was first being adopted by our ancestors.

After that first consultation with Robert Kentta, I’ve been saying this: “Ada Depoe Carson Arden must have been a daughter – or sister – of Charles DePoe.”

More recently, Robert Kentta has shared with me that he believes my family and I are descended from Charles DePoe’s sister – which is to say, not Charles DePoe’s daughter.

Now, it occurs to ask for help from relatives. Help me relatives, please! Help me know who my relatives are more fully! I’m hoping some relative might read these words I now write and they might recognize a relationship based in their direct experience or based in narratives from their trusted and reliable family members.

They might then contact me (Drew Viles at vilesa@lanec.edu or 541-463-5480 or Department of English, Lane Community College, Eugene, OR 97405) and tell me who Ada’s father was and who her tilixam are.

17 This patriarchal imperative did not vanish sometime after the 1870s in this land. “Don’t ever underestimate the power of misogyny in the United States” – that warning, which was provided to me by Carla Chadwick Viles, an astute political analyst prior to the 2016 U.S. presidential election, is one of many recent demonstrations of the power patriarchy still exerts in 21st century U.S. society

18 In the author’s own family, Nancy Williams, mother of Rachel Brown Carson and daughter of Julia Skelly, married a white man named William Brown shortly before the year of DePoe’s Corvallis incarceration while Cahkat-see (Flathead), an ancestor of the author’s maternal grandfather, married a white man named Louis Tellier, a French-speaking member of settlement situated around the Whitman Mission (in present-day Northeastern Oregon) a few decades earlier.

19 “The Silent Man of Destiny,” The New Northwest, (Portland, Oregon) 23 February 1872, p. 2.

20 While the topic has escaped sustained analysis and is rarely even mentioned in historical accounts, there can be little doubt that the influx of U.S. military personnel into Oregon in the 1850s caused a spike in sexual relationships between white men and indigenous women. A review of federal 1860 census records, for example, demonstrates that marital unions between white men and indigenous women were frequent in many areas of the state. And reports from Siletz in early reservation times include both an order preventing soldiers stationed at the Siletz blockhouse from removing food from the mess hall, the intent of which prohibition was to dissuade soldiers from giving food to Siletz women with whom they were having sex, and oral accounts chronicling sexual assaults committed by white men on Siletz women. The author, for example, was taught the following history by James (“Jimmy”) Brown (who has been mentioned earlier in this article): “When the white soldiers came, they tried to kill off all the Indian men. And when they couldn’t do that, they started to rape all the Indian women.” The author’s sister, Cynthia Viles, remembers Cousin Jimmy both relating this account to her frequently and stating that the story was told to him by his maternal grandfather, Charles DePoe.

21” [Fagan, 484 – supposedly taken from Corvallis Gazette, 29 September 1868].

22 The maternal grandmother of my mother (the late Mary Service Viles) was named Rachel Brown Carson and Rachel’s brother (half-brother, to be more precise) was Oscar Brown. Oscar Brown married Delia DePoe, a daughter of Minnie and Charles DePoe. Delia and Oscar became the parents of James (“Jimmy”) Brown.