THE HORSES IN THE MOON

By William A. Hunter*

IN MAY of the year 1760 a small party of Indians, headed by the Delaware leader Teedyuscung and accompanied by the Moravian missionary Christian Frederick Post and his white companion, John Hays, made their way up the Susquehanna River. Teedyuscung and Post had been deputed by the Province to attend an Indian treaty near present Sandusky; and they expected to confer on their way with the Indians living on the Chemung above Tioga (present Athens, Pennsylvania), who also were interested in the western conference.

On May 22 the party arrived at the Indian village at Tioga. "We had a great deal of Conversation with the People in this Place," Post tells us. "We agreed to send a Message to the Indians who live up the River to call the Nanticokes, Menissings, & Mohickons, to meet us at Atsenetsing" (near present Painted Post, New York). The ambassadors arrived at the latter place the following day, their visit coinciding with the revived observance of a long neglected native ceremonial; and between religious festival and cautious diplomacy they were detained there until Friday, June 6.

It was an uneasy and troubled stay. The French and Indian War was just ending; the Indians, accustomed to the mutual restraints of Anglo-French rivalry, feared the consequences of unopposed English supremacy, and, conscious of their own role in the recent conflict, feared retaliation. The open hostility of Pontiac's War was three years away.

Inevitably, the white visitors to this withdrawn Indian community were regarded with mixed deference and suspicion; in-


1 Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Christian Frederick Post's Journal, 1760, under date of May 22.

176
evitably, they were turned back from their journey. Possibly nothing so well illustrates the Indians' mood as the story of the horses in the moon. On June 2, Post tells us, in the journal afterwards presented to the Governor:

A Messenger Arrived from Diaogo [Tioga], informing us, that the People there had seen a Sign in the Moon on the 29 Ulto., to wit, that on the Face of the Moon there appeared a Body of Men & a Horse standing by them, afterwards they saw another Horse coming from the West, whom the Horse of the East run down, and all the People followed after.²

And in the hurried diary kept by Post's companion, John Hays, the story also appears:

. . . May the 29 at Diaog the Peopel Saw A Straing Site in the Moon they Saw two horses In Batel and the one Next the Sun Set fell and the one Next the Sun Riesing Prevled and they Saw Men falling on the horse that Fell Semed A Bout A fote Long and it was Seene By the Hole Town Men and Wemen The Indines was Very Much Sore Prised and vexed and Axed of us What is Meaned. . . .³

How did the Indians themselves interpret this battle of lunar steeds? We may guess that the victorious eastern horse represented the English, and the western horse the French. Were the little men the surge of settlers following after the conquering army? Like Post and Hays, we may suspect that the Indians hoped that in interpreting the vision their white visitors might reveal something of their attitude; and we can appreciate Hays' statement (in the journal based on his diary) that "the Indians were Very Much Greived at this Strang sight and Wanted to Know our opinions of it but we thought best to say nothing about it."⁴

The white men themselves did not see the omen, nor, apparently,

²Ibid., under date of June 2.
⁴Ibid., 69; previously published in Pennsylvania Archives, First Series, III, 738.
did any of the Indians with them. However, at Atsenetsing "It was a Rainy Day," Post tells us, on May 29, unsuited, we may suppose, for moongazing; and though we may feel inclined to dismiss the darkling vision "seen by the whole town, men and women," at Tioga, we should be wiser to reconsider. Let Mr. Harry B. Kelsey, of Wellsburg, New York, complete the story:

I wrote, under date of June 29, 1954, to Hayden Planetarium, New York city. . . . Under date of July 6, 1954, T. D. Nicholson, Associate Astronomer, replied: "... records show that there was a lunar eclipse on May 29, 1760. It was a partial eclipse, with approximately 90% of the Moon's diameter in the earth's shadow. It would have been visible in the early evening from New York State, about the time of moonrise."

On the evening of Thursday, May 29, there rose, from the wooded horizon into a cloud-veiled sky, an altered and changing moon; and the Indians at Tioga, like many other people before and since, read in its obscured and shifting image allusions to their own uncertain and changing fortunes.

5 Personal communication, H. B. Kelsey to P. A. W. Wallace, Nov. 30, 1954.