

RECOLLECTIONS OF THE LATE SEIGNEUR OF METIS, JOHN H. FERGUSON¹

OLD TIMES IN METIS

*N.B. This document is taken from the Macnider files of Mrs. C.A. Bowles (Barbara) of Thunder Bay, Ont. given to me -- E. James Tarlton - in May 1995. She obtained it from Alice Sharples Baldwin in the early 1980's. I believe it was written after 1900. The footnotes are mine from data given in *Metis, 1814-1900, Volume I* by Gilbert R. Bossé, Metis Beach, Que., 1994.*

To begin with, I must first explain what a Seigniority is, as compared with landed property generally. The title is, as you probably know, of French extraction and is confined to what is now the Province of Quebec, which in the early days was exclusively the home of the French nobles and aristocratic followers of the Governors and Generals of that army.

It was the day of the Bourbon, when Louis strove to attach to the throne the young aspirant for fame, by territorial gifts and by titles of high sounding but pinch beck and of ephemeral quality.

That the Kings expected to make a new France on the shores of the St. Lawrence is matter of history – and following the plans to which they were accustomed they divided this portion of the Dominion into estates which they styled Seigniories in pursuance of the customs of their own land. To a Count, whether of ancient or later lineage is not known but who held the title of Peiras,² this parish was granted by King Louis in 1617,³ the concession being ratified by Comte de Buade, representing the King in this country.

It is not likely that the recipient of the favour ever entered upon his possessions. For more than a hundred years, the forests were undisturbed by the axe, or the ground trodden by the foot of white man.

The Indian wars in the west and the constant fear of invasion of England, the natural enemy at that time of France, led to a concentration of forces at the more disturbed or salient points and Metis was left to its slumbers.

Then as to the name of this place, it, like many others, took its designation from the River following through its western corner and later the title Little Metis from the smaller stream usually called Brock's Brook, but which is actually Little Metis River and gives the name to this village, just as Grand or Metis River has conferred the title Grand Metis to the western part of this parish.

It would be impossible fully to state the various changes in the early proprietorship of this estate in the time at my disposal, but to allude to the events affecting us, toward the close of the 18th

¹ John H. Ferguson, 1848-1920

² Jean-Baptiste de Peiras, 1641-1701

³ Most documents place the date of the grant as May 16, 1675. The reigning French Monarch would have been Louis XIV, 1638-1715. See *Topographical Description of the Province of Lower Canada* by Joseph Bouchette, 1815, p. 547; Quebec Archives, 1945 Mullen Street, Montreal, Que.

acknowledged their fault to be reprehensible and promised amendment, but on a sudden, Mr. James Boyd came to stay with them, fresh from California, and the possessor of a fine gold watch. This had a strong influence upon the hour of their entry into Church, for that watch, henceforth, was their infallible umpire, and, if it happened to be slow, their arrival was proportionately delayed. Mr. McAlister was a large, dignified man, who allowed no trifling, but Mr. McEwing would take back-water from no man living, so when, one Sunday, the family moved in stately procession to their pew and by the interruption destroyed the effect of the minister's firstly, (for the sermon was under way), he stayed while the family innocently and smilingly took their seats, then broke forth sternly – "I do wish people would be here in time it is most annoying this interruption". We all shuddered at the onslaught, but Mr. McEwing kept calm and cool. "It wasna eleven when we left the hoose", he replied with dignity. Mr. McAlister froze him with a look of horror, and we looked for fire from heaven to fall and consume the miserable man. "I allow no man to reply to me in Church", thundered the preacher. Mr. McEwing settled himself in his seat and resumed as if only interrupted in his remarks. "It wasna eleven by James Boyd's gold watch".

Mr. Colin McEwing,¹⁹ father of James and Angus, owned the farm where Wm. Muckle Jnr. resides, a dear old friend of mine, full of anecdote and Scottish song. Old Mr. Leggat still lived, though bent with years. He had been in business in Quebec, had failed and had come here, after a sojourn at Murray Bay. He was a scholar and a deep mathematician and had taught two men famous in their day, Father Chiniquy and Delgrave, a noted lawyer of Quebec. Mrs. Leggat had been waiting woman to a great Countess and has crossed the sea when her Lord was Governor General.

Mr. Hugh McNider¹³ lived where Joseph Sim now resides, and there, when a child, I spent many happy hours with the young McNiders till they went to Belleville.

John Ritchie lived where Mr. Robert Campbell now is, Mr. Boyd, a dear friend and neighbour, having intervened.

Matthew Campbell, father of James, owned the farm now occupied by Win and Alex Turriff, and William Gow owned the Tuggey homestead.

Francis Brough was then alive and a skilled blacksmith, and William Muckle lived about where Mrs. William Dawson's cottage now is.

Where the Sea Side Hotel stands, old John Muckle dwelt in an unpretentious hut.

Fred Astle, John Turriff and William Turriff farmed east of Sandy Bay hill, and David Tuggey near Tartigon Point, his neighbour being Henry Page, who worked an old grist mill at that spot.

Near where the Sandy Bay Church now stands dwelt William Andrew and Janet McRae. I often think of them there, their tiny cottage, the stumps of newly felled trees to the very door. Of William and Janet, I can but echo a remark of Mr. Mandesley "Israelites in whom is no guile". Once a profane person and what the U.S. authorities would call a moonshiner, he was converted some years before I knew him and, like the out-and-out man he was, he first cleared the false idols from his own hearth as a proof of his newly found religion. His apparatus for distilling the toothsome liquid, badly wanted by some thirsty souls in the settlement, struck horror to his awakened conscience and seizing an axe he proceeded to destroy the machinery of Satan with furious blows. How many appreciated his religious energy or, on the other hand, how many deprecated this, to them, almost sacrilegious destruction, which robbed them of the gentle drops of mountain dew they loved – let us not enquire – Mr. McRae had burned his idols and had set his face Zion-ward, there after much tribulation he came at last.

century. There lived then in Quebec a merchant named Matthew McNider⁴ who had accumulated a fortune in commerce and he, for reasons which we cannot determine, purchased from the heirs of the defeated Frenchman the Fief or Seigniory and then conceived the idea of inducing his friends and acquaintances in Scotland to cross the sea and settle as his tenants on the estate he had acquired.

Mr. McNider was, like myself, a bachelor and, so far as I can find, did not live to see his dreams of a Scottish colony here realized, but the work was continued by his nephew, John McNider,⁵ who, with a persistence beyond praise, met the emigrants from the land of heather, as they were brought after their dreary voyage of long weeks of storm and seas and, when he could, turned them from their further emigration westward and led them to Metis, there to clear the forest and open fields for cultivation.

I cannot of course enter into the details of their engagements. As you can imagine, most of these settlers required advances and I question very much if the investment was profitable to Mr. McNider. Those who remained of course repaid in most cases their indebtedness, but many whose names are lost to the record of that time failed to see the advantages of the situation and, after a time, shook the dust of Metis from their feet and disappeared forever from our knowledge.

You will therefore understand that the Protestant population of Metis descends from the comparatively small number who found the land and climate sufficiently goodly to assure their presence for life and for burial.

The oldest house in Metis is that on the wharf, so long occupied by Mr. Price as an office. Just when it was built I cannot say, but it must have been very early in the last century.

The first Scottish residents were – Donald McGugan⁶ (father of the late Duncan McGugan⁷), Malcolm,⁸ his brother, father of Mrs. Wm. Turriff and Mrs. Lepage, Angus Campbell⁹ and Donald Smith.¹⁰ I have no exact knowledge of the year of their arrival but from the best information possible I would put the date at 1818. Shortly after others arrived, among whom were Dugald Smith,¹¹ of whose family, Mrs. John Grant is the only survivor here; Colin Smith, Neil Blue,¹² with his son

⁴ Believed to be either Matthew, 1770-1810, the son of James Macnider of Thrave, bapt. 1717 or Matthew, bapt. 1732, the son of William Macnider of Balsaroch, Kirkswold, b. 1690, all of Ayrshire, Scotland.

⁵ John Macnider, 1760-1829

⁶ Donald McGugan, 1794-1859

⁷ Duncan McGugan, 1821-1899

⁸ Malcolm McGugan, 1781-1859

⁹ Angus Campbell, 1794-1888

¹⁰ Donald Smith, 1807-1887

¹¹ Dugald Smith, 1813-1853

¹² Neil Blue, 1794-1872

Dugald Blue, then a boy ten years of age; Hugh McNider,¹³ John Smith,¹⁴ Robert Turriff, Charles Brand,¹⁵ Joseph Sim, grandfather of James and Alexander Sim,¹⁶ and his son Joseph,¹⁷ who died about two years ago. Gaven Crawford, father of our friend of that name, James¹⁸ and Colin McEwing,¹⁹ and a few others. All these arrived between 1818 and 1820, as their deeds are dated in the latter year, and remained on, cleared their farms, married and left successors, of whom many remain to the present day.

Of those born in Scotland, only three are alive I believe, Dugald Blue, William Muckle and John Crawford. A number who were induced to settle here, many of whom took deeds and remained for a short time, are shown in the records, all located here previous to 1822, selected farms, had their names entered in the Seigniorly ledger, obtained the promised advances and disappeared, leaving no trace or posterity behind.

Besides these there are evidences of the sojourn of a wandering or floating class, who were more anxious, judging by the records, to secure the promised advances than to swell the agricultural population. These also disappeared and, save for the unsettled account of advances, have left no trace behind.

As years advance, other names appear, bona fide settlers, whose names in their posterity or relations still endure – Mr. Leggat, Arch. McCowan,²⁰ Henry Page,²¹ Paul Jones,²² Alex. McMillan,²³ and later, in the thirties, Thos. Astle,²⁴ with his son Frederick,²⁵ which latter was destined to materially alter the temporal matters of the district, very much for the better.

¹³ Hugh Macnider, 1797-1893

¹⁴ John Smith, 1795-1857

¹⁵ Charles Brand, 1788-1882

¹⁶ Alexander Sim, 1853-1946

¹⁷ Joseph Sim, 1811-1897

¹⁸ James McEwing, 1793-1866

¹⁹ Colin McEwing, 1797-1882

²⁰ Archibald McCowan, 1792-1882

²¹ Henry Page, 1792-1858

²² Paul Jones, 1807-1875

²³ Alexander McMillan, 1799-1869

²⁴ Thomas Astle, 1795-1875

²⁵ Frederick Astle, 1817-1897

That these sturdy men had difficulties to face, goes without saying. The firs and birches grew to the shores of the St. Lawrence, vast trunks of fallen, primeval trees covered the ground and sodden with the snow and rains of years, refused to burn, and the unknown severity of a Canadian winter had to be faced in small shacks with moss caked seams and joints, through which the fierce storms invaded and nearly froze the wretched pioneers.

There were no roads by which to travel or escape! One or two horses alone had to suffice for the wants of the entire community. One mill existed, near Grand Metis, to grind the corn for bread, and only the coarsest articles of grocery or ware were obtainable at the one store, whose stock, once depleted, could only be replenished when navigation permitted the advent of a schooner from Quebec.

Such difficulties did not fall to the lot of our French Canadian brethren, who in later years settled in this and adjoining parishes. These came from old established parishes west of here, many from Kamouraska, St. Paschal and River Ouelle and made their appearance here long after the advent of your forefathers. Moreover, they were natives of the soil, farmers of experience gained in these older inhabited districts and acclimatized to the hardships and rigor of bush farming in Lower Canada.

Your forebears were in most cases mechanics, weavers and fishermen – few understood the art of forestry. They chopped trees in the style the beaver adopts, all round the stump, and the trees, so addressed, usually fell in the opposite direction to that intended and occasionally killed the chopper.

Yet, in spite of all difficulties, the little colony grew, filled the first two and part of the third concessions of Metis and then, evidently loath to locate far from the sea, spread eastward toward Tartigon Point. All were not of Scottish origin, – England and Ireland were owned by some as the land of their birth; but all developed that strain of British pluck and endurance which has carried the flag of Great Britain into every continent and sea, and nailed it securely to the mast wherever planted.

I am to speak of my own recollections of Metis, dating back perilously near the half-century mark, but I must first refer to that most important matter, namely, the retention and growth of the Protestant faith in this district.

It is rather difficult to follow the events which so effectually preserved the Church in this isolated settlement, but certain it is that provision was made by both the Church of England and Scotland to give occasional though infrequent services to the settlers, as well as to secure the ordinances of marriage and baptism. From time to time Bishop Mountain of Quebec, with incredible hardship and exposure, visited the colony for the purpose and his zeal and devotion were seconded by the Rev. Mr. Clugstone, a Presbyterian minister who died in Scotland about twenty years ago.

Other names are on record and spiritual offices were dispensed by other clergymen and for a time it seemed uncertain which denomination would hold the field. Mr. McNider being a member of the Kirk of Scotland naturally threw his influence on the side of the Church he followed and eventually a Mr. Paul, student of theology, settled at Leggat's Point and taught school during the week, presiding over the religious services on the Sundays.

Quite a feud began to burn between the rival churches and much ill feeling was evident in the persistence of each to overthrow the other. But a more potent influence than either possessed was soon to thwart the well meant efforts of both and to eventually oust them from the field altogether.

To the early Scottish settlers, the disruption of the Established Church had a deep interest. Like the Pilgrim Fathers who freighted the May Flower, they too objected to a State Church and were in

a country where feudal rights were expunged – strongly in favor of Dr. Chalmers' attack upon patronage and livings. We must not forget that the claim to be a State Church by Episcopalians does not hold good in Scotland, where the Established Presbyterian is just as aristocratic and claims a prestige as proud as his English brother. Our settlers believed in freedom to select the minister they wanted – Mr. McNider notwithstanding – and that doughty gentleman went so far as to lock the door of their meeting house in their faces when they showed resistance, leaving them to discuss the matter and cool their heels outside at the same time.

All was in vain. Tradition says that old William Craig,²⁶ hard at work ploughing his land, hatless and soiled with his work, suddenly loosed his team, and springing on his fleetest horse, rode, bareback, through the settlement calling for volunteers to raise a Church of their own. Then came Dr. Cairns, the first Free Church missionary. Then Mr. Kaidy, then finally Mr. McAlister,²⁷ duly called and ordained resident pastor, to preside over a regularly constituted Church, which under the Presbytery of Montreal, continued to minister to his community up to 1863, when the present congregation of Little Metis severed its connection with the older Church and formed itself into a separate body – first under Mr. McAlister, who had disagreed with the General Assembly on certain doctrines, and resigned his charge, and lastly as a Methodist Church, to which Rev. Mr. Mandesley was appointed as first minister.

Such is, briefly, the history of the religious movement which kept alive the Protestant faith in this long isolated settlement, and, while time has forbidden a more ample reference, the fact that a true and enthusiastic loyalty to the religion of their forefathers, which never faltered in the darkest and most hopeless house of our little history, while other settlements of a like origin, more highly favoured in many respects, drifted away from the traditions of their race and lost both their language and the doctrines for which their forefathers had fought and died, is not to be lightly mentioned or forgotten. They had not the wealth by which to give a generous support to the ordinances, but they gave what they could, a deep loyalty – and universal attendance.

We are too apt to forego our attendance upon the services in our comfortable churches, with all the benefits of proximity and easy access. They turned out on foot when horses could not traverse the heavy drifts, or when no horses were owned by which they might reach the place of worship, and it is greatly on this account that the spark of protestantism, so freely burning now, was in those days of great difficulty kept alive that our torch might burn brightly in these later days.

Although services had been for several years held in the old Church at Leggat's Point – now the Grand Metis Hotel – under the presidency of ministers delegated thereto, it was reserved to the celebrated Dr. Donald Fraser, then of Montreal, afterwards of Edinburgh and London, and famous as a pulpit orator, to ordain the first elders and deacons here, and to constitute a session in connection with the Free Kirk of Scotland in Canada – in the summer of 1854 I think.

²⁶ William Craig, 1767-1856

²⁷ William McAlister, 1803-1866

Those ordained were, my father,²⁸ Neil Blue,¹² Malcolm McGugan,⁸ Alex. Campbell,²⁹ Donald McGugan, Peter Leggat³⁰ (the elder) and Dugald Blue – all now asleep, save the latter, who, full of years and in perfect peace, will meet with no alarm when the summons comes to join the brethren he loved, in the Church invisible.

How well I remember them, in the old time celebrations of the Lord's Supper – black-coated, stern, earnest, as they gave and received the tokens, or passed, with calm, dignity, the symbols of Him they had served through long trying years.

When I read the sketches of Ian Maclaren, or Barrie, my mind goes back to those long, solemn diets, and I could fancy they lived on the pages of Drumtochty. There was no curtailment of the time-honored ritual. Mr. McAlister carried it through with unstinted generosity. There was first the regular service with the sermon, unabridged in view of the unusual circumstances of the great occasion; then the special service, the long earnest sermon of invitation to join the feast, then the terrible discourse which fenced the tables, the deep silence in which you might hear a pin fall, as the elements were handed by the stern elders to the communicants in the white-covered pews; then the paraphrase of praise and the minister's ascent to the pulpit to once more address a word of exhortation and to flay those who had failed to sit down to the solemn feast.

The wind drove the snow fiercely against the windows, little drifts sometimes sifted through a niche in the frame and were lost on the white covers of the pews. The stoves cracked, as a deacon occasionally stuffed a great hunk of wood into their fiery bowels, and the short day darkened with clouds of evening; but no sign of impatience must appear. Sometimes a wayward youth in the rear of the sacred building, where we children were huddled, would half rise in an effort to flee, but one swift look from Mr. McAlister was sufficient to bring him back to his seat in blushing confusion. We children, brought up in the strictest of sects, early taught the meaning and sacredness of the Holy Supper, would gaze fearfully upon the shamed cowering wretch and presage dire punishment sure to follow his act of awful rebellion.

The Church Socials of those days were of momentous importance and brought the adherents from Tartigon Point even, for to miss one of these entertainments would have been considered next thing to a crime. Coal oil had not then come into use, seal or porpoise oil or tallow dips being the means of lighting the darkness, and besides, many lived at too great a distance to attempt a drive of hours, at night, through the roads of that period. So these festivals were held by day, the great kettles boiled on the Church stoves and hampers disgorged the best baking of which the housewives were capable. Speeches were made, my father and Mr. William Craig always delighting the audience, although my admiration was more excited by the wonderful capacity for the consumption of tea revealed by the youths, who taxed the best efforts of the matrons to slake their unquenchable thirst. Sixteen cups of tea – strong enough to float an egg – did one young man tuck away, without turning a hair, to my wonder and admiration. That he received a less hearty commendation from the indignant ladies, I fancy he was even buffeted and thrust forth in disgrace.

²⁸ David Ferguson, 1802-1870

²⁹ Alexander Campbell, 1792-1883

³⁰ Peter Leggat, 1790-1862

Then Mr. McAlister's great story comes in, which always made us laugh very heartily, about a Highland preacher, somewhat absent minded, who gave out the 119th Psalm and forgot to restrict the verses, in consequence of which the precentor, to the tune Irish, in which there are some lofty notes, sang on unnoticed by the preacher, who was pondering over his discourse, till at the 50th verse, the poor man, striking the high note, already weary, cracked and went to pieces, recalling by this mishap the minister, who, in black fury, leaned over the pulpit and thundered – "Man, if ye get zoupy over a few verses o' a psalm, hoo will ye ever sing thro a' eternity".

The person I first remember in Metis was Mr. Kaidy, the Presbyterian missionary; the second, Robert Stuart, who then farmed the Point and Domain. Only a few of the first settlers had passed away – for instance, the first Mr. Turriff and Mr. Crawford. Many changes have naturally occurred since that far-off-time and to these I would briefly refer.

In the second concession, the alterations, beyond a general improvement, are so slight as to make a mention of any unnecessary, but the front range from Grand Metis had been so altered that it bears but slight resemblance to what it was in the early fifties. Starting from Grand Metis, where the half century has made only slight changes, we find the old Seigniorial grist mill, which clacked for many years at the outlet of Brand's Brook, erased and forgotten. Where Bernard Caron now lives, Mr. Charles Brand in my young days carried on the best farming operations in the district. Mr. Brand had been a British soldier, had fought in the battle of Lundy's Lane, where a wound received had brought about an honorable discharge and the munificent pension of ninepence sterling per day. After his death a description of his military services appeared in the newspapers and his side-arms were buried with their owner.

Where Mr. Dufour now lives, old William Page held the fort then, and where Mrs. James Muckle resides old Alex McMullen [McMillan?] for many years occupied a long grey cottage of very musty interior. McMillan I chiefly remember on account of two large wens³¹ which adorned his head and which I was told, and in my credulity believed, were horns, in consequence of which I ever regarded the wearer with much deference, not unmixed with dread.

Arch McCowan²⁰ lived in the old house, now used by W.J. Campbell as a barn, and had the reputation of being hospitable and jovial. I believe he, with his brothers, John and Duncan, had been a mariner in Scotland, for I remember many tales of a smack flying, under their direction, in the seas between France and the Isle of Man, and I have an idea they were not above a trifle of smuggling in the old days.

Colin Smith, with his family of giant sons, lived in the old yellow house near the route and owned a large pilot boat, in which he traded with the North Shore, doing quite a thriving trade till one April snowy day he lost his bearings between Goose Point and the Bersimis, and his grave is beneath the sand-bars of that shore.

Mr. James McEwing¹⁸ owned the farm now the property of Mr. John Grant, and was a stately figure in those days, well read in history and ready to face any man or thing. It was an accepted fact that he and his two sons John and Ritchie never left for Church till the last vehicle had passed, when they would walk slowly Church-ward and stream up the aisle to their pew, which was near the front, to the interruption of the service and the great annoyance of the minister. For a time they

³¹ Wen - a benign encysted tumor of the skin, especially on the scalp, containing sebaceous matter; a sebaceous cyst. From *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, 1996.

Metis was difficult of access in those days – one had to travel by schooner – old bluff tubs – with small ill-smelling cabins. Of steamers, only a couple of government tugs existed, and no railway this side of Montreal. The mail was by single horse team – slow and irregular – our news necessarily stale ere it reached us.

Little Metis, unvisited by tourists, was a melancholy locality, the business end of the parish being Grand Metis, where the Price lumber works even then existed – and there the stores were situated, with every facility for breeding mortgages – through the credit system – and the extra percentages when accounts ran over six months with 7 per cent interest running – and compound interest bobbing up unexpectedly to astonish customers.

As early as 1862 or thereabouts, Mr. Robert Turriff, a long-seeing man, built a summer boarding house relying upon a transformed lake steamer, called the "Arabian", to land passengers at Rimouski wharf, and some boarders did turn up, for I remember Mr. John Dougall, founder of the Montreal Witness, Prof. Robins and others. But the steamer was uncertain and the drive long, and for a time the hotel closed for lack of business. The establishment of the Gulf Port S.S. Co. and my acquiring the agency here, to land and embark passengers, gave from 1867 to 1870 the first real indications of the possibilities here, as a summer resort.

Mr. Mathewson and Mr. Thos. Jenking first acquired property and, as the rails of the Intercolonial reached Ste. Flavie, Prof. Clark Murray and Prof. Dareg and Dr. Trenholme built the first cottages as summer homes at Little Metis.

With the completion of Seaside House, we began to realize that a future was in store for the locality, undreamed of in the old days of the schooner as a vehicle of passage. Of the later days it is unnecessary to speak, – to all here the developments are too fresh to demand an exponent. Let me only add that my experience, if not remote, is nevertheless valuable, for I have stood at the turn of the way and can speak of the pastoral side of our story, as well as of its later and practical development, and while the things of today far outstrip in comfort, and the means of culture and enjoyment, the earlier days with their scanty resources and straitened conditions; yet there is a dignity about the past, which should awaken our respect and admiration, for, however well we are doing our day's work, we are but improving upon the older methods of our fathers – and that, in scenes created by them. For my part, I grow fonder every day of looking back upon those who peopled my young past and who have left the scene forever. I did not see the arrival of the first settlers, but I knew the greater number of them well and I have seen the grave cover all that was mortal in them – some long ago, others in later years. I remember their sturdy manhood, their success in a fight against great odds, their loyalty to their motherland, and to the faith they had learned in their native glens, and how, in so many cases, when weary, they lay down to rest, conscious that in how much they had come short, they had done what they could.

E. James Tarlton

27 November 1995

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