

The Métis in the 21st Century Conference

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Ruth Swan: The full title of my talk is "The Racist Myths of the Selkirk Settlers and the Lagimodière/Gaboury Family as First Settlers." And I first got interested in this idea of mythmaking and comparing it to historical accounts when I had an opportunity to teach some lectures in Western American history about fifteen years ago and I was reading that the cowboy myth grew out of a period of really only about twenty years. So, when you actually look at the history of what happened, it's quite amazing that that idea of the cowboy is so engrained in North American culture. And it occurred to me at the time that what was really more interesting was the way the Métis developed in the West and went out in the buffalo hunts with their families, with their wives and children. And that seemed to me a much healthier model than this single bachelor going out and shooting it up with the Indians and cattle rustlers. And maybe some of the violence that we see coming out of American popular culture stems from some of those myths. So, like Paul said, I think it's a good idea to examine some of our founding myths, and the Métis are obviously very central to that.

The master narrative of the Red River Valley history is that the area was settled by non-Aboriginal farmers who were either Scottish immigrants or Canadiens from Quebec. This racist myth satisfies the psychological needs of Canada's chartered groups, to feel that they deserved to colonize Rupert's Land because of racial superiority. Aboriginal residents, such as Indians and Métis, were dismissed as settlers because of the so-called nomadic lifestyle as buffalo hunters and trappers, and because of unscientific notions of racial superiority based on a belief in a hierarchy of races which linked physical characteristics of skin, hair, and eye colour and facial features to cultural and technological knowledge. Settlement equated with farming and Christianity.

While it was easier for non-Aboriginal historians to dismiss Indian claims to gardening as temporary and primitive, and their spirituality as non-Christian, it was more difficult to repress the evidence of Métis settlement when their families were in the Red River Valley for at least thirty years prior to the immigration of the Selkirk settlers. Nevertheless, non-Aboriginal visitors often discounted evidence of Métis settlement because they'd already convinced themselves that it did not exist.

Like the myth of the Selkirk settlers, which was deconstructed by Parks Canada historian Lyle Dyck, this article will show how the Catholic Church promoted the family of Jean-Baptiste Lagimodière and Marie-Anne Gaboury to fulfill their prototype of a French Canadian farm family who were both Christian and settled. The fact that the Lagimodière or Lagimonière, as he was called in contemporary documents, had a non-Aboriginal wife made him the exception among Canadian Freeman. They married local or mixed-blood women, mostly Ojibway, before 1812. And their children grew up to assume the new ethnic identity of Cuthbert Grant's cavalry, the Bois-Brules, or Métis. Nevertheless, this couple lived like their Freeman neighbours and adapted to the buffalo hunting culture of the plains so that they conformed to local economic conditions, rather than transforming Red River to an agricultural community, which really didn't happen till about twenty years later. Their main historic importance lies in the fact that they were the grandparents of Louis Riel, the famous Métis leader, not because they had the first documented white child at Pembina. In fact, the first documented baby born at Pembina during the fur trade was part black and part Ojibway, born in 1803. And it was not because they were non-Aboriginal farmers on the Seine River in St. Boniface. This article will argue that their importance lies in their connection to the Métis culture, not their racial separation from it. Since primary research also demonstrates that there were Métis farmers at Pembina and the Forks before the arrival of the Selkirk settlers, it will be argued that the Selkirk settler Lagimodière/Gaboury myth should be rejected in favour of a more inclusive view of the first settlers of the Red River Valley, who claim both Christian and Aboriginal values, the Red River Métis.

I first heard a complaint about this story from my partner, Edward A. Jerome, who's a descendent of the Pembina Métis. And he didn't like Grant MacEwan's descriptions of Alexander Henry's Ojibway wife, from whom he is descended. This is a popular history Grant MacEwan put out in the 1980s on, about, biography, Marie-Anne. So I was interested to see what, where the story came from and how it has been constructed as a master narrative of Red River history. The first published version was by Abbé George Dugast, who wrote it first in French in the 1980s, about ten years after Marie-Anne's death in 1875, and it was translated and published by the Historic and Scientific Society Manitoba, 1901, was called the *The First Canadian Woman in the Northwest*, and here's a copy.

The subtext of this story is that Marie-Anne Gaboury was the first white woman in the West who symbolized two important values, Christianity and agriculture. The priest, Father Dugast, outlined a basic framework of the story, one her birth and upbringing in Muskegon, Quebec. She worked for the priest and was very religious. She married late, in 1806, at the age of twenty-four to voyageur Jean-Baptiste Lagimodière, who was home on a furlough and returned, and valiantly stayed with him on the pays d'en haut. Despite his objections, he wanted her to stay in Quebec, but she insisted on going with him. She strictly forbade, forbore the solitudes of pioneer life. You can hear the song "Stand by Her Man" playing in the background in the future video production.

She was the victim of a murder plot by his first partner, an Indian woman. Dugast neglected to mention that this woman already had three daughters by Jean-Baptiste. They had to leave Pembina in a hurry because of this murder plot and escaped to the Braun camp at the Pembina Hills. The return in January that winter, where she gave birth at Pembina with her first daughter, Reine. Then they took off for Alberta with three Canadian Freeman and their families. They had more children out there. After several years, they returned to the Red River settlement, were involved with the fur trade war. Her husband was hired or chosen or sent to Montreal with letters to Lord Selkirk to tell about the destruction of the colony by the Northwest

Company. Made his epic journey of 1815-16 on foot. I'm sure everybody knows that story. They were, he was captured by the Indians allied with the Northwest Company at Fond du Lac on his way back, but he made it back safely. They said it was during the Seven Oaks incident, which is the anniversary today of 187 years, which is very interesting. The wife and children were hidden by Chief Peguis in his tent across the river from where the battle took place. And so the fact that she was the friend of this chief was also bemed in her favour that, that she was not only this important white woman, but she was also a friend of the Indians.

These incidents were later broadened and exaggerated, fictionalized and even invented by Grant MacEwan in 1984 and used by other authors like Agnes Goulet, a descendent who wrote a French version, DCB [Dictionary of Canadian Biography] biographies by Stanley and Lynn Champagne, popular stories in St. Boniface like "Playlet" [sp?] that was put on at the Festival du Voyageurs. And the "Tayac [sp?] de la cemetaire du St. Boniface" has had a show in the St. Boniface cemetery for the last several, where actors pop out from behind the tombstones and act out historical characters that are important in St. Boniface history. And, of course, the Lagimodières are, are very central to that. They're part of the popular history of St. Boniface, and Métis descendents are also very proud of their connection.

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