

Desjarlais, François. (b. 1825)

François Desjarlais led a life that was quite typical of the Métis men of his era. He worked as a buffalo hunter, a York boat voyageur, a trapper and a trader. He was multi-lingual and lived with his First Nations relatives as well as with relations in a number of Métis communities. In the 1860s he was paid annuities as a member of two different Chippewa Bands, however, in 1873 he took Métis Scrip. He traveled widely, from Red Lake Minnesota north to Hudson's Bay and west to Montana's Milk River basin.



Frank Desjarlais SHSND

François Desjarlais was born at Red Lake, Minnesota. As a boy he grew up near St. Boniface. His father, Antoine Desjarlais (b. 1796), was a guide and plains hunter of French Indian extraction, and his mother, Susanna (b. 1798), was a full blood Chippewa woman from Red Lake. Frank grew up near St. Boniface, where both of his parents died while he was still a child. He married Françoise Oshkenequay Bottineau, a Métisse.

In the summer of 1843 and again in 1844 Desjarlais made a trip to Hudson's Bay as a York boat hand for the HBC. The trip was made by way of the Steel River, a stream flowing into Hudson's Bay. Great skill was required in rowing down this river, as the current was very swift and the banks strewn with great boulders. It only required one day to descend the Steel River but three days for its ascent, as the men had to pull the boat up the stream with ropes. The York boats each had six oarsmen and about ten such boats were sent down to Hudson's Bay at a time. Their cargoes consisted of furs and dried meat, and they returned to Winnipeg with supplies of all kinds for the HBC. Mr. Desjarlais noted that the boats, which brought these supplies to Hudson's Bay, had great masts, which looked like groves of dead timber. They anchored a long way out from the shore while smaller boats, which came in with the tide and went out with the tide, brought their cargoes to land. The boatmen from Winnipeg spent several days resting on the shore of Hudson's Bay before beginning their return trip, which required about twelve days if the weather was favourable.

After his return to Winnipeg in the summer of 1844, Desjarlais went to St. Joseph, North Dakota where Commodore Kittson had established a trading post. Here he engaged in hunting and trapping with many other Indians and Half-Breeds. Two trips were made each year, one

beginning early in June and lasting until about the middle of August for the purpose of obtaining supplies of pemmican and the other late in the fall for securing furs. During the first trip the women accompanied the hunters and prepared the pemmican, but the hunters went alone on the fall trip. The general route of the hunting expedition led out from St. Joseph to the east end of Devils Lake and the Sheyenne River, although sometimes they went to the Turtle Mountains. In the summer of 1868 there was a great scourge of grasshoppers, and the season was so dry that the hunters went as far westward as the Coteau du Missouri in search of game.

These hunting expeditions that went out from St. Joseph were of considerable size. Some of these Half-Breed hunters had as many as twenty or twenty-five carts, and most of them had at least three or four. There were often several hundred carts in the expedition. The buffalo were numerous, and the carts were usually brought back heavy laden with pemmican. During the fall trapping, the men broke up into small parties of four or five. Dogs, three or four to a train, were used to haul back the furs, and each man usually had one such train. Buffalo carcasses were used as bait, around which foxes and wolves were trapped. Of all the animals trapped, the pelts of otter were most valuable. The Sioux used strips of otter hide to braid in their hair and would often trade a horse for a single pelt. At the trading post of Commodore Kittson in St. Joseph the otter hides brought five or six dollars, and as the Half-Breeds generally sold their furs there, that gentleman is believed to have made an independent fortune. The pelts most valued after otter were those of the black and silver foxes. They brought five dollars, but as the Half-Breeds discovered later, the traders had robbed them on these. In the very early days, however, before they began to make hats of silk, the beaver pelts had been the most valuable of all. For a time they brought seven dollars per pound.

François received Half Breed Scrip pursuant to the 1864 Treaty with the Red Lake and Pembina Bands of Chippewa Indians. In 1873 he received scrip for 160 acres, Scrip # 56. He appears on the Minnesota Territorial Census, Pembina County in 1850 where his occupation is shown as "hunter". In 1864, he appears as #109 on the Pembina Annuity Roll of Miskomuckwah's Band. In 1868 he appears on the Annuity Roll of Waykegekezhick's Band as #218.

In the spring of 1867, Frank Desjarlais was employed as a mail carrier by an agent of Charles A. Ruffee then stationed at St. Joseph. Mr. Desjarlais was assigned a station on the south shore of Devils Lake near the present site of Fort Totten. He was at that location when the troops of General Terry arrived, early in the summer of the same year. Desjarlais soon left that point, as he had been engaged for but a month and the mail never did get through to Fort Totten. He returned to his home in St. Joseph.

In 1868, Desjarlais removed with a large band of Half-Breeds from St. Joseph to Wood Mountain in what is now Saskatchewan, north of the Milk River Valley of Montana. The Grosventres, Crows, and Sioux had been at war in this region for years and the fur bearing animals were left comparatively undisturbed. Besides the Half-Breeds from St. Joseph a great many from Pembina and the Turtle Mountains moved into the Milk River Valley at about this time. Their furs, pemmican and other produce they disposed of at posts on the Milk River or sometimes took it across the Canadian line to stores of the Hudson's Bay Company.

After the Custer defeat at Little Big Horn, Desjarlais met Sitting Bull in Canada. In fact he acted as interpreter for that chief at Wood Mountain, where an agreement was made for the removal of the Sioux from Canada back to the United States. Mr. Desjarlais states that Sitting Bull was a very humane chief, and that he always ordered his men to spare the women and children of their enemies.

In his later years Mr. Desjarlais lived on the Red Lake Agency in Minnesota, where he practiced medicine among his people. He spoke French fluently, as well as the Dakota Sioux, Chippewa (Anishinabe), Plains Cree, and other Indian languages.¹

Scrip under Pembina and Red Lake Treaty

Desjarlais, Fr's. [1849 Petition]

Dejarlais, François (1831) [1850 U.S.] ·D

Dezalle, François

Dejarlais, Francis [1868]

Degelect, Franciscus [1863, Pierz]

Desjarlais, François [R.L. Scrip #56] ·

Desjarlais, Francois, Sr. [R.L. Scrip #300] ·

-, -: (1841-2) **Zaus way** [1889] ·Desjarlait

Desjarlait, Francis (1841-2) [1899]

Desjarlait, François (1842) [1907-8, 1912]

1849 Territorial Signatures: Fr's. Desjarlais

Minnesota Territorial Census, Pembina County, 1850:5/5 born: Red

River Br. occupation: hunter

Pembina Annuity Roll, Mis ko muck wah's Band, 1864:109

- 2 men, 2 women, 2 boys, 2 girls \$ 56 paid
- Way ke ge ke zhick's Band, 1868:218
- - 1 man, 4 women, 1 child \$ 18 paid
- National Archives, RG 75, Entry 363, "List of Persons to Whom Scrip was Issued under Red Lake & Pembina Treaties...." Halfbreed Scrip No. 56 issued February 12, 1873, under the authority of Secretarial Decision, June 12, 1872, delivered February 12, 1873; and Halfbreed Scrip No. 300 issued January 19, 1874, under the authority of Secretarial Decision, December 27, 1873, delivered January 19, 1874
- National Archives, RG 75, Entry 364, "Treaty of April 12, 1864, Red Lake and Pembina Half-Breeds," Scrip Stubs, Number 56 [checked], dated February 12, 1873, 160 Acres, delivered February 12, 1873, issued to Francois Desjarlais, delivered to Agent E.P. Smith Red Lake B.I.A. Enrollment, 1899:26, 1899:274, 1907:294, 1908:293, 1912:230/240
son of: Dejarlais, Antoine (1796) and Dejarlais, Susanna (1798)
- [1863: usband of: Demare, Marie (before 1848)
- [1863: father of: Degelect, Josette (1863)
- [1889: father of: Desjarlait, Solomon (1888-9)

References

Ron Rivard and Catherine Littlejohn. *The History of the Métis of Willow Bunch*. Saskatoon, authors, 2003.

¹ State Historical Society of North Dakota, "Appendix: Frank Desjarlais." *Collections of the State Historical Society of North Dakota*, Vol. 3, 1910: 214--216.

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