

The Red River Metis Settle in the Oregon Territory: Charles Richard McKay. (1808-1873)

Charles McKay and his family were part of the Sinclair expedition of Red River Metis pioneers who moved to the Oregon Territory in 1841. The area was called the Columbia Territory by the British. Charles voted for American Oregon and at Champoeg, he was elected captain of militia. In 1855, he took time to serve in the Yakima Indian War.

Charles McKay was born at Brandon House on the Assiniboine River in present day Manitoba. Charles was the son of John McKay and Mary Favel a Métisse. His notorious uncle, "Mad Donald," had founded Brandon House. McKay's father John spent most of his career there. His mother, Mary Favel, was the daughter of an Albany River English trader and a Swampy Cree wife Titameg. His mother died when he was just two years old and the responsibility for his upbringing fell to his older brother, John Richards McKay, who was then eighteen. After being released by the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) John joined American traders on the upper Missouri River, but within one year the HBC was forced to re-hire him. Charles and his family returned to Red River where Charles was apprenticed to a harness maker. Charles married Letitia Bird on October 2, 1827 at St. John's, Red River. Letitia Bird was born in 1810, the second child, in a family of eleven, born to James Curtis Bird [1772-1856] and Elizabeth Montour. Her father was a Chief Factor of the HBC. In turn Letitia's brother John married Charles' sister Mary. Charles and Letitia had nine children. Charles died in May of 1873. His wife Letitia died on February 26, 1897 at age 87. They are both buried in the Harrison Cemetery in North Plains, Washington County, Oregon.

In 1824, Charles was a member of Sir George Simpson's HBC party that crossed the Rocky Mountains into Snake Country. This party, sent into territory claimed by both Canada and the U.S., was charged with trapping the area bare to create a buffer against the pressure of U.S. occupation. The party encountered the Blackfoot but Charley, serving as interpreter, was able to negotiate with their leader. James Bird, Jr. Bird, Charley's future brother-in-law, had been sent into the territory years before to learn the Blackfoot language. At the end of this trip, Charles boarded a ship for Scotland, and returned in 1827 to marry Letitia Bird, daughter of the governor and former chief factor of the Hudson's Bay Company. They lived on a small farm on the Bird estate while Charles continued in the harness business.

In 1841, Charles, Letitia and their four children, joined by another two of Bird's daughters and their husbands and an unmarried brother joined the Sinclair party and traveled overland to the Puget Sound area of Washington. Charley's brother-in-law, James Sinclair, led the expedition which had been organized by Gov. George Simpson. On November 15, 1839, Governor Simpson had written to Chief Factor Duncan Finlayson at Red River to begin recruiting "steady, respectable half breed and other settlers" to go to the Columbia. the Oregon area. They were later instrumental in voting for the territory to become part of the United States.

The inducement to move was an offer of land, the use of common pastureland, an advance of livestock and the expenses of erecting farm buildings. For this purpose, they had previously set up a subsidiary company, the Puget Sound Agricultural Company in the spring of 1821.

Finlayson contracted with James Sinclair and 21 Metis families (121 people in all) to leave Red River and settle in the Oregon Territory with the hopes that this would maintain the land north of the Columbia River in what is now Washington State in British and Hudson's Bay Company control. The 1,700-mile trip took them from White Horse Plains in Manitoba to Fort Vancouver and finally Fort Nisqually. Jemmy Jock Bird acted as their guide for the part of the journey that crossed Blackfoot territory. On October 12, 1841, after a 130-day journey the group reached Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River but emigrated to what is now Washington State in 1841. Between 1821 and 1845 the Metis were the largest group in the record migrations to the end, the HBC failed to fulfill all of these commitments. Their plan was to have these people staff the HBC; to colonize the Puget Sound area; to offset the growing pressure from American settlement, and save the territory for Britain and establish the border with Canada at 54°40'.

The party arrived at Fort Spokane and, after a 10-day delay, the party moved on to Fort Nisqually. The colonization effort failed. The settlers felt that the English overseers, whom they considered arrogant and domineering, had betrayed them. After one year the Red River pioneers left for the Willamette Valley and Charles McKay took up a claim on the Tualatin Plains.



Charles Richard McKay

Charles McKay was proud of his Scottish heritage yet equally honored his mother's Cree-Métis background. As an entrepreneur, McKay was a gold miner, cattleman, real estate investor and harness-maker at various times in his work life as well as a politician.

During the winter of 1842-1843, Charles McKay, along with neighbours, helped lay out the road to the Willamette River and a bridge which crossed Dairy Creek. McKay later sided with those in the Pacific Northwest who favoured affiliation with the United States. He became an American citizen in 1851.

When he learned that the Americans were forming a government, Charley traveled to Champoege. There he renounced his British allegiance and gave up his financial support from Britain. He cast his vote for an American Oregon. At an earlier meeting he joined a committee considering measures for the civil and military protection of this colony. At Champoege, he was elected captain of militia. He was in charge of one of three planned companies of mounted riflemen. However, fearing that such a show of force might prove threatening to the Indians, the Legislative Committee abandoned the idea of the three companies, which ended his military career.

When members of the Cayuse tribe killed Marcus and Narcissa Whitman at their mission in eastern Washington, Charles marched with his good friend and noted Indian fighter Tom McKay and his group of French Canadian and Metis volunteers to punish the Indians. According to the McKay family, it was Charles who shot Five Crows, the chief of the Cayuse tribe. When McKay and Five Crows met many years later, Five Crows said, "You tried to kill me and I tried to kill you, but I am not mad at you." Five Crows frequently called on the McKay family and brought horses to trade.

In 1849, Charles followed several of his neighbors to the California gold mines. He did well but decided that the real money was in supplying the miners. On his return he traveled around the county purchasing cattle and selling them in Portland. Charles prospered in the cattle business and ultimately opened a butcher shop in Portland. He continued to wander, however, going up and down the Columbia River to trade and, in 1855, he took time to serve in the Yakima Indian War.

During the early pioneer period, the McKay home and its surroundings were something of a social center. Old Hudson's Bay Company associates and new and old immigrants joined officers from the British armed sloop, *Modeste*, stationed on the Columbia River, as frequent guests at balls held on the plains and festivities in the McKay home.

Over the years, Charley became active in real estate although he was often forced to sell parcels of his own land to make ends meet. This led to the development of a community around McKay Creek which Charles named "Glencoe." Though his Scottish roots were not in Glencoe, Scotland, Charles named the town in honour of the site of the massacre of the McDonald clan by the Campbells in 1689. Having visited the site in his youth, he likely remembered the tragedy and paid tribute to those lost by naming this pretty little glen "Glencoe." The town grew rapidly and became a close community where intermarriage between the Metis and their neighbors was frequent and accepted. The social tone set earlier by the McKays continued. However, railway developers platted the rival town site of North Plains. By 1911, the new town was rapidly diverting new business from Glencoe.

Charles died at Glencoe, Washington County, Oregon in May of 1873. He was fondly remembered in the press and extolled for his contributions to his adopted country. Many noted his success in breaking the stereotype of the Metis by proving himself a leader and one who was never vengeful against those who treated him and his family poorly.

References:

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