

Metis Get the Vote: The Suffrage Act of the Minnesota Territory

In 1849, by the Suffrage Act of the Minnesota Territory, the Metis gained the right to vote. The act provided that “all persons (male) of a mixture of white and Indian blood and who shall have adopted the habits and customs of civilized men, are hereby declared to be entitled to all the rights and privileges” of voting.

In the gubernatorial election of 1857, Joe Rolette from Pembina supported Sibley in winning the governorship by defeating Ramsey. Due to his efforts Henry Sibley got 316 votes in Pembina County and 228 in Cass County to none for Ramsey. A commentator of the day, in a slur against the Metis, pointed out that Half Breeds “who shall have adopted the habits and customs of civilized men,” accounted for this lopsided vote in the two counties. He said that the election judges interpreted the “civilized men” requirement to mean that Half Breeds wearing trousers filled the requirement and that Roulette had one pair of pants do service for swarm of men who would put on the trousers, vote, pass the garment over to the next man, and so on.

Joseph Rolette (Roulette), (1800-1871)

Joe Rolette, a Metis fur trader, for whom a county and town are named, was from Prairie du Chene, Wisconsin. He moved to the Dakota country in 1840. Rolette identified as Metis although his heritage was almost entirely French Canadian and British. His maternal grandmother, Madeline De Verville, however, was a descendent of one of the oldest and most distinguished French Canadian-Indian (Ottawa) families in the Northwest. Rolette married Angélique Jerome, a mixed-blood French-Chippewa who had relatives at Turtle Mountain. She died about 1890 and is buried in the Belcourt cemetery. After the death of Angélique, Joe married again to Estasia Gardiner, a widow with four children.

Joe came to Pembina in 1840, sent by his father to take charge of the American Fur Company business in the Pembina-St. Joseph area. His father was an independent trader. In 1844, he and Fisher (his mother’s brother) had six Red River carts operating between Pembina and St. Paul. This had increased to 600 by 1848. In 1847, the Hudson’s Bay Company set up a competing post about two miles from Rolette’s so-called factory. They then advertized to the Indians that they wanted furs and had plenty of money and whiskey to pay for it. HBC was not long established when Rolette took dozen or so of his Half-Breeds and marched against the British intruders. He tumbled their goods out of the houses and drove them away. This checked trespassing for some time to come. He acquired the title of ‘King of the Border’ because of his business acumen and aggressive style.



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