

François Beaulieu. (1771-1872)
Metis Patriarch of the NWT

François Beaulieu was the son of Jacques Beaulieu and an Indian mother of the Montagnais Cree. He was the patriarch of the first Metis family in the Athabasca and is reputed to have preceded Peter Pond to the region. François told Father Emile Petitot in the 1860s that his father (or grandfather) had come out west with *la compgnie des Sioux*. This company of New France had chartered many western expeditions between 1727 and 1760. Alexander Mackenzie, led by Francois Beaulieu, and a party of hunters, spent all of June 5, 1789, covering some 17 miles of narrow channels and primitive trails around the Slave River rapids between what is now Fitzgerald and Fort Smith where the Slave River cuts through a seventeen mile bar of granite rock. In that distance the river falls 109 feet, mainly at four separate rapids.

François was one of the Metis in the party that accompanied Alexander McKenzie down the river to the Arctic Ocean in 1789 and overland to the Pacific in 1793. Sometime after that he married Ethiba, a Chipewyan woman. He told the following story to Father Petitot:

I am the son of a Frenchman. My mother was a Chipewyan: my grandmother was a Cree; there are three bloods in my body. What I am going to say happened at the North West Arm of the Great Slave Lake, on Big Island (near Fort Providence). At that time, I was not a grown up man. However, I remember as if it was yesterday. I was 15 years old (1786). I was then staying with my parents. One day we heard that the White Men were coming. There were lots of them. My Uncle Jacques Beaulieu, chosen a spokesman for all the people, called all the Indians from all over the Great Slave Lake area. Many Dog Ribs came also although we always were at war with them because my family was on the side of the Chipewyans.

Beaulieu met John Franklin in 1820 and advised him to use what is now Dease Arm of Great Bear Lake as the base for his journey to the mouth of the Coppermine River. Franklin rejected this advice with the result of much hardship and loss of life on his first journey to the Arctic. Franklin's journal contains the following record:

March 26, 1820. Upon our arrival at Fort Chipewyan, our first object was to obtain certain information respecting our future route (to Coppermine), and accordingly we received from one of the North West Company's interpreters, named Beaulieu, a Half-Breed who has been brought up amongst the Dog Ribs and Copper Indians some satisfactory information. (Old Mary Beaulieu to Father Petitot, 1863)

The Route which I should prefer taking would be nearly North from Great Slave Lake, and, from the information Beaulieu has given, I am inclined to hope passage may be made up the river which falls into Slave Lake near Mountain Island; from thence, by crossing lakes and portages, into the Coppermine River, which

*communicates directly with the sea.*¹

Beaulieu drew a map for Franklin (with the help of Black Meat) tracing a route along the Coppermine River and eastward along Coronation Gulf to Cape Barrow. While he did not join this first expedition, Baptiste de Mandeville and Pierre St. Germain did join Franklin. Franklin employed Jacques Beaulieu (a brother) on his second expedition, 1825-27 as an interpreter and guide. Dr. John Richardson travelled down the Mackenzie to map the coast eastward to the Coppermine, but due to the lateness of the season couldn't return by the same route. He went overland as planned to Dease Arm of Great Bear Lake where Beaulieu met him and took them by boat to Fort Franklin.

Different groups were consistently trying to secure Beaulieu's services to meet their own ends. The North West Company at Great Slave Lake, and subsequently the Hudson's Bay Company employed Beaulieu as their combination peacemaker, lawman, intimidator and interpreter. A Hudson's Bay post run by Beaulieu was established on the Slave River at the mouth of the Salt River in 1863.

As head of a Yellowknife Band, Beaulieu was feared by the Slaveys, Dogribs and Sekanis and is said to have personally killed twelve of this latter group. Over the years he had at least three wives and perhaps as many as seven. Through marriage, he was a brother-in-law of Yellowknives chief Akaitcho. The Beaulieus and St. Germaines of the Northwest Territories were intermarried. Old Man Beaulieu appears to have had two wives who were St. Germaines. One was Louise St. Germain (Pas de Nom or Lacaille), the daughter of Jacques St. Germain and a Chipewyan woman (born between 1802 and 1807). François and Louise Beaulieu are listed in the Red River census documents. This indicates that they either visiting or living there in the 1830s to 1840s.² Catherine St. Germain who married Beaulieu in the Catholic Church in 1848 was the daughter of Pierre and Thakavilther St. Germain. She may have been the sister of the Pierre St. Germain; the Metis guide who accompanied the Franklin expedition and later settled in Red River in 1832.

In his later years, old François Beaulieu lived at Salt River, a tributary of the Slave River. Here he produced salt and obtained the salt monopoly from the Hudson's Bay Company. In 1848, a young man named Dubreuil went to Fort Resolution to work with Beaulieu and the latter became impressed with Dubreuil's religious devotion. Thus, François decided to be baptized and join the church. When Father Alexandre Antonin Taché baptized him at age 80 in 1848, François, out of respect for the church's teachings, dismissed two of his wives, after first making provision for them. In the winter of 1856-57, Father Grandin was Beaulieu's houseguest at Salt River. Father Grandin wrote, "I was welcomed by Beaulieu and his people like I was an angel. He gave me his own house during my stay amongst them. He and his family moved into another house that was much poorer and colder." Beaulieu taught Grandin to master the Chipewyan language and together they turned the house into a worship centre where all the settlement would

¹ L.R. Masson (Editor), "Letter from Frd. John Franklin to Edward Smith, March 3, 1820," *Les bourgeois du Compagnie du Nord Ouest* (New York: Antiquarian Press, 1960), 136.

² D.N. Sprague and R.P. Frye. *The Genealogy of the First Metis Nation*. Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications, Table 1.

gather to pray on holy days. Six years later, Grandin, then a Bishop, returned to visit Beaulieu and the industrious community of Salt River, where he erected and blessed a large cross.

The Beaulieus often effectively competed in trade with the HBC. In 1857, Antoine Beaulieu made a trip to Red River to sell the furs he had trapped or bought around Fort Chipewyan and Resolution. He returned with a load of merchandize to trade for more furs. As a consequence the HBC was forced to raise the prices they paid to the local trappers. Anderson, the district HBC manager briefly considered forcing François Beaulieu out of business however didn't proceed with these plans. By 1867 Beaulieu was HBC Post Manager at Salt River. In addition he had other businesses such as farming, ranching, fishing, hunting and salt making. Around the time of his death a post was built south-east of Salt River along the Slave River to replace Salt River, this was called Fort Smith. He died at Salt River, Northwest Territories at age 101.

The Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada have designated François Beaulieu as a person of national significance

References

Overvold, Joanne. (Editor), *Our Metis Heritage: A Portrayal*. Yellowknife: Metis Association of the Northwest Territories, 1976: 101.
Leslie H. Neatby, "François Beaulieu." *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. X (1871-1880). Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972: 38.



Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell
Coordinator of Metis Heritage and History Research
Louis Riel Institute