

Joseph Laurent Dussome. (1880-1963): Montana Metis Leader

By Judy Jacoby and Lawrence Barkwell

Joseph Dussome was born on February 26, 1880 at Milk River, Montana. He was the son of Joseph Dussiaume¹ and Marie Frederick². On September 8, 1916 at Glasgow Valley, Montana, he married Caroline Pambrun, daughter of Isidore Pambrun and Isabelle Dufresne.

Joseph Dussome was well known throughout Montana and in Washington D.C. because of his work on behalf of the Metis people of Montana, particularly the Little Shell Band of Metis who were in the late 1800s under the leadership of Chief Thomas Little Shell. This group was part of the Metis and Cree who were known as the “Landless Indians of Montana.” In 1927, Dussome became the State President of the Little Shell Band and continued in this position until his death in 1963. In 1941, Joseph Dussome helped to form what was called “The First American Teepee Club”, which consisted of 197 or more Little Shell Band members from around the state of Montana. Vern Dusenberry gives the following story:

Dussome recalls, too, the purchase by the government of a forty-acre tract of land near Great Falls in the 1930's. Here was to be a chance for the Indians of Hill 57, the landless ones from the Turtle Mountains, to live in less squalid conditions and to have subsistence garden plots. Too vivid in Dussome's memory is the opposition from Great Falls' residents to the occupancy of the site by the Indians, so the opportunity passed. And then there was the government Resettlement Plan that was almost accomplished, early in the 1940's. In Phillips county, where the Farm Security Administration did remarkable things for white farmers, the plan developed whereby all of the Ben Phillips' pioneer land holdings were to be purchased by the government for the Landless Indians. On this land, experienced Indian farmers would have separate units; inexperienced ones would work cooperatively. But the



¹ Joseph Dussome Sr. was born in Red River Valley of North Dakota in 1845; he died in 1884, and is buried in Walhalla, North Dakota. He married Mary Frederick who was also born in the Red River Valley in 1842. She died in 1925 and is buried in Malta, Montana. Both of these people were one half or more degree of Indian Blood of the Chippewa Tribe, and members of the Pembina Band of Chippewa Indians who were then under the leadership of the Chief Thomas Little Shell. Neither of them had ever attended any school, however, Mrs. Dussome did speak several languages. Born from this marriage were sons: John and Joseph H. Dussome; daughters: Mary Rose Dussome Doney, Clemence Dussome Brewster, and Rachel Dussome Leedy.

² Marie Frederic was born 15 August 1843 (Al Yerbury.); married Joseph Laurent Dussiaume on 10 May 1868 at St. Joseph, North Dakota she subsequently married John Desmarais, son of Joseph Desmarais and Adelaide Clermont, before 1887; died 18 March 1926 Malta, Montana, at age 82.

war came, and the idea became a forgotten one. But hope, even now, is not entirely dead. Joe Dussome still believes that the federal government will eventually provide a rehabilitation program for his people; that the Indian claim to the hunting rights of the Turtle Mountain area will some day be recognized as being as significant as those cultivated rights of the white man; that eventually right will triumph and some of the inequities of the past will be rectified. The trucks from the mines roar by his cabin by day. At night wind blows down from the little canyon past his door. Joseph Dussome sits in his cabin at Zortman and waits, perhaps for a day that never comes.³

Through his lobbying efforts in Washington, he was instrumental in obtaining the Brown Ranch and the late Senator Cowan's Ranch near Box Elder, Montana for his people. These were later lost along with their other lands (1934). In 1962, he was called to Washington D.C., accompanied by David Doney of Hays, to testify in the court of Claims, concerning the Ten Cent Treaty of the Chippewa-Cree-Metis of the Dakota Territory.

Joseph Dussome spent the majority of his life fighting for his people's rights. He was known to one-and-all as a "man of loyalty." For many years he was employed with the Reclamation Service on the Crow Reservation, where he built dams and other water management structures. He was also active in the Democratic Party and held the position of congressional Committee man in Phillips County, Montana. This article was written with contributions by Judy Jacoby, Dussome's great grand-daughter. Judy has served as a Band counsellor for the Little Shell Band of Montana. This information is extracted from a genealogy presented as a gift to Judy from Gail Morin. Gail cites Al Yerbury ("My Red River Lineage," May 1994) for some of this information.

Reference:

Dusenberry, Vern. "Waiting for a Day that Never Comes", *Montana The Magazine of Western History* Vol. 8, (Spring 1958), 37-38.

Dusenberry, Vern. "The Metis of Montana," in Michael S. Kennedy (Ed.) *The Red Man's West*, New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1965: 88-105.



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³ Vern Dusenberry, "Waiting for a Day That Never Comes", from *Montana The Magazine of Western History* Vol. 8, (Spring 1958), 37-38. It is a summary history of the Little Shell tribe's struggle for recognition from the US government since the 1800's. The article chronicles conversations with Joseph Dussome and the plight of the "Landless" Metis and Indians on Hill 57 at Great Falls, and other areas around the state of Montana.