

Jean Marie LeMouel. 1911-2004

By Albert J. Lafferty.

Jean was born in Ft. Rae on August 23, 1911 to Joachim LeMouel and Marie Rose Bouvier. He had six brothers (Joe, Napoleon, George, Edward, Lawrence and Pat) and two sisters (Dora and Louise). Jean married Elizabeth Edji in Fort Simpson in 1939 and had two children, Marie and Joseph. Due to illness, his wife and children died in the early 1940's.

During his life, Jean held many occupations. He worked as a fireman and deckhand on the paddle steamers, worked for the Roman Catholic missions and was a boiler man at Giant Mines for many years. Even after retiring, Jean could not sit still and became employed with the Department of National Defense in Yellowknife as a custodian until 70 years of age. He also learned all the traditional ways of Metis life such as trapping, hunting and fishing which he continued to practice throughout his long life. Nothing gave him greater pleasure than teaching his nephews to snare rabbits, set traps and nets and hunt.

While working at Giant Mines as a boiler man, Jean began to study mathematics with the assistance of a co-worker. This became a passion for him and he was able to calculate most mathematical equations in his head. This unique ability led him to study astronomy that absolutely fascinated him. He would often have his family come outside and he would calculate the exact time and location that a satellite would cross the sky. Sure enough, right on schedule, you would see the satellite traveling slowly in the horizon. Jean was always abreast of current events and could debate any issue with the most intellectual of people.

Jean, a proud Metis, loved the history of his Metis ancestors. In the early 1970's, he began researching his ancestry and in 1973 completed a booklet on the "Bouvier's and Laferte's—Early Pioneers of the Mackenzie". "The reason," he said, "is to get the histories and family trees of my ancestors and many others before it is too late". All research, which took place in Ft. Rae, Ft. Providence, Ft. Simpson, Ft. Resolution, Ft. Smith, Winnipeg and St. Albert, was carried out at his own expense and time. His booklet clearly illustrates the strong character of the Metis and the importance they played in developing the Mackenzie. Many were traders, boatsmen, hunters, trappers, carpenters, farmers and fishermen. The women also played important roles not only in the cooking, cleaning and sewing aspects of daily life, but also in other areas such as tanning hides, snaring, trapping, berry harvesting, nursing the sick and midwifery.

Jean Marie also recounts the many sacrifices made by the Metis people of the Mackenzie in assisting the missionaries in evangelizing the North. Metis would act as interpreters in the English, French and Dene languages and also act as guides for the missionaries. Because of their strong Christian beliefs, they thought nothing of using their dog teams to take missionaries on long journeys to Dene camps. They would also assist the church in establishing permanent missions by providing labour, hauling logs for

construction, and providing the missions with firewood, meat and fish and vegetables from their gardens.

Much of Jean Marie's narrative chronicles the transition of the Metis from the province of Quebec to the Red River area in Manitoba and eventually into the Northwest Territories. These mighty pioneers settled in communities such as Old Fort Rae, Ft. Rae, Ft. Providence, Ft. Resolution, Ft. Simpson and Fort Good Hope where their numerous descendants still live today. Some of the surnames mentioned in the "Early pioneers of the Mackenzie" include the Lafertes, Bouviers, Beaulieus and Gairdiners.

Today, Metis organizations such as the North Slave Metis Alliance use his research to prove ancestral ties and inherent rights to the North Slave Region. In recent years, the Metis Local of Ft. Providence wished to partner with the North Slave Metis Alliance and give recognition to Jean for all of his outstanding work. Jean, a very private and humble person, told his family that he did not wish any type of recognition or publicity as that was not the Metis way. Jean continued to share his ancestral knowledge with relatives right to the end. Jean did not forget about his French relatives and in 1950 traveled to France for three months to meet and visit many of them. Upon returning to Canada, he toured the United States before returning back to the North.

Jean often spoke of the terrible flu epidemic that hit the north in the 1930's and how it was through the prayers and perseverance of the priests, brothers, nuns and Metis that more people did not perish. He recounted how his sister Dora, at only 21 years of age, died during this epidemic and how he, with other family members, had to bury her.

Jean was also gifted with the ability to learn languages. He could speak and understand English, French and Slavey and understand some Chipewyan and Dogrib. After the death of his brother Joe in 1987, he missed speaking French on a daily basis. He was always happy when a relative from Ft. Providence or another community was in town to whom he could converse in his beloved French.

Jean's life was not all work. He enjoyed music and played the guitar, fiddle and harmonica. He also wrote several songs in his lifetime and had them copyrighted. He was very proud of this and shared his songs with most members of his family. He loved to listen to country music by artists such as Hank Snow, Hank Williams, Kitty Wells and the Carter Family. Jean also loved the sport of boxing and knew all of the heavy weight boxers and recalled every major fight.

Jean was a very devout Catholic who attended mass daily right to the end of his life. He was not afraid to speak about right and wrong, had extremely strong convictions and always prayed for world peace. Jean was most happy when he would hear that one of his nieces or nephews were being baptized, making their first communion or getting married. He was always in attendance at these very important Christian milestones in each person's life. These types of family gatherings were an integral part of his life especially in later years.

At the age of 92, Jean's memory was quite amazing; he knew ancestral dates that would stump most historians. In the 1970s, Jean assisted in marking the area he believed to be the old cemetery site in Fort Providence that was used from 1868-1929. This site was ploughed over in the 1930's by the Roman Catholic Church and used as a potato field. One of the archaeologists remarked that Jean did a "remarkable job" based simply on memory.

Jean passed away suddenly and peacefully on Sunday, February 29, 2004 at the age of 92. His work in recording Metis history, for which he was so passionate, will be his legacy for generations to come. (Contributed by Albert J. Lafferty.)



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