

Joseph Augustin Vermette. (1891-1986)

By Gabriel Dufault

Auguste Vermette was born on February 9, 1891 at Saint-Pierre-Jolys, Manitoba. He was the youngest of the nine children of Toussaint Vermette and Élise Tourond. At his birth, he was given the names Joseph Augustin. His neighbors and friends shortened his surname to August and he himself used it for all practical purposes.

He attended elementary school until he was 13 or 14 years of age. His studies were entirely in French at École de Saint-Pierre nord. When he left school to help his father on the farm, his knowledge of the English language was consequently limited. With the first dollar he earned, he took out a subscription to a newspaper called the Prairie Farmer in order to continue learning the language that was becoming the language of business in Manitoba. He was first married to Maria Desjardins of La Broquerie in 1914. She died of consumption (TB) seventeen months later leaving no children. He tilled the land bequeathed by his father with horses, as he never wanted a tractor. He avoided being in debt.

Augustin remarried on January 14th 1918. Philomene Gladue, a niece of Louis Riel, was his new bride and together they raised ten children-five boys and five girls.

August was a prolific reader putting his hands and devouring all the books he could obtain. He also loved politics and was knowledgeable with almost every bill presented in the House of Commons. These he studied very meticulously both before and after being passed. This earned him the nickname of “lawyer” which he did not like, accolades made him very humble. He became a school trustee, president of his local school board as well as secretary treasurer of Union nationale metisse Saint-Joseph for many years.

Augustin Vermette was a die-hard Liberal and never voted Conservative. He referred to the latter as “the party who hangs people”. He was intelligent with a remarkable sense of justice a bit of a philosopher. He had a refreshing sense of humour. He loved children and nothing pleased him more than to gain their attention and to tell them stories true or false. He was always teasing. After having met him, no one was left indifferent either you loved him or hated him. He was proud of what he has, a French speaking Metis. He would often tell the story of Louis Riel, the Metis Nation and the many injustices inflicted on his people by governments and the Canadian military.

His beloved Philomene died in 1963. Two years later he left the parish where he was born and the land he had farmed for fifty-one years. He moved to the city where many of his forty-five grandchildren and fifty-seven great-grandchildren lived. It was in 1966 that he married for the third time, a former neighbor Elise Dumont.

Numerous photos long covered part of the walls of his room. He remembered them all by name. He spoke Michif, French, English and a bit of Cree. He delighted his family with stories of the Michifs and particularly the role played by his grandfather Antoine

Vermette during Louis Riel's time at Red River. His memoirs were edited and annotated by Marcien Ferland in the book, *Au temps de la Prairie*.

He passed away on July 21st 1986 "in his ninety-sixth year." as he loved to say, having yet all his faculties. He bequeathed to his family a sense of pride of who they were: French speaking Metis, descendants of Canada's First Nations. (Contributed by Gabriel Dufault.)

Reference

Ferland, Marcien. *Au temps de la Prairie: L'histoire des Métis de l'Ouest canadien racontée par Auguste Vermette, neveu de Louis Riel.* Saint-Boniface: Les Éditions du Blé, 2000.



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