

Pierre Dorion, Jr. (1780/82-1814)

By Leah Dorion

Pierre Dorion Jr. is probably most remembered for his role as interpreter for the Astoria Expeditions (1811-1814). These expeditions were financed by John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company, which controlled the Great Lakes trade and later operated in the northern Rocky Mountains and the far Northwest. The Astoria expeditions were dependent on Canadien, First Nations and Métis guides like Pierre Jr. to ensure inland exploration and expansion. Pierre Jr. had considerable trade experience and worked at one time for the Missouri Fur Company at its Mandan Post. Pierre Jr. was the eldest son of Pierre Dorion Sr. and Holy Rainbow, a Yankton woman. He is very well documented in fur trade literature. Pierre Jr. practiced social and cultural customs similar to his father. For instance, he practiced polygamy.

Pierre Jr. and his father, brothers, cousins, contracted their labour and interpreting services out to various fur trade companies. There was sometimes intense competition between fur trade companies for their services. According to Ronda, "The protocol of plains diplomacy may have been new to Hunt and Bradbury, but it was familiar ritual to Pierre Dorion." In 1810, Manuel Lisa engaged Pierre Dorion Jr. as an interpreter for the second Missouri Company to winter at Fort Mandan. After he returned downriver, Wilson Price Hunt hired him to work for the overland Astoria Expedition. Lisa pursued this group to get Dorion to pay for the liquor he had drunk while at Fort Mandan, the ensuing fight had to be broken up by John Bradbury before the expedition could proceed.

In 1806 Pierre Jr. married, according to the custom of the country, an Iowa woman named Marie de la Iowa (L'Ayvoise). Marie was acknowledged by some authors as being of half Iowa Indian and half French-Canadian. The practice of Métissage was becoming an expected marriage practice by the Dorion family in the St. Louis area. Marie and Pierre Jr. had three children together, Jean Baptiste, Margaret and Paul. As was the local custom this marriage secured peace, diplomatic relations and trade with the Iowa Indians. Pierre Jr. was also influential in maintaining peace between the Yankton and the Iowa people because of the connection to his mother's people.

Pierre is documented in many different explorer journals as acting a guide and interpreter. In Bradbury's travels to the interior, he states that, "When this ceremony was ended, Mr. Hunt rose, and made a speech in French, which was translated as he proceeded into the Sioux language, by Dorion. About fifteen carottes of tobacco, and as many bags of corn, were now brought from the boat, and laid in a heap near the great chief, who then rose and began a speech, which was repeated in French by Dorion." According to Bradbury, Dorion was also present during important gathering following the councils, he states that, "The council now broke up, and Messrs. Hunt, M'Kenzie, M'Clellan, Dorion, and myself were conducted to the lodge of one of their chiefs, where there was a feast of sweet corn, prepared by boiling, and mixing it with buffalo grease"

(Thwaites, 1904). According to Ronda, “The protocol of plains diplomacy may have been new to Hunt and Bradbury, but it was familiar ritual to Pierre Dorion.”

In the literature there are many stereotypical views of the Dorion family and it is difficult to know how the family members actually self-identified. There are several “outside” terms used in the literature to identify the Dorion family background, such as French-Creole, Frenchman, Half-Breed, Mestizo, Freeman, trapper, Canadian, Mountain man, free trapper, and Indian. It is impossible to know if the family self-identified as Metis. In the 1814 account books of John Jacob Astor’s company in the Snake River Country Pierre Dorion Jr. is identified as a “freeman.”¹ A large portion of the literature ties their identity to their occupation.

In the summer of 1813 Pierre left Astoria with a group headed by John Reed and they headed into Snake River country and spent the winter on the Boise River in Idaho. Pierre Jr. was killed by a group of Bannock Indians on January 10, 1814 near a Pacific Fur Company trading post on the Upper Columbia River.



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¹ See the website at www.xaviermission.com