

Johnny Berens. (1871-1954) Metis River Boat Pilot

Johnny was born at Fort Simpson NWT, the son of Samuel Berens and Mary Berens. Samuel, like many other Metis, was employed in the transportation industry. First he was employed as a dog team driver at Fort Garry, later his work on the York Boat Brigades took him to Norway House, Red River then to the Slave River post of Fort Smith and then to Fort Simpson on the Deh Cho (Mackenzie River). He was well-known as a steersman and a pilot on the Mackenzie River. Sam Berens worked for the HBC until September 1, 1898.

NAME: BERENS, Samuel		PARISH: Berens River+	ENTERED SERVICE: July 1856 (A.32/21, fo. 329 & 331)	DATES: ca. 1829 - 1899	
Appointments & Service					
Outfit Year*	Position	Post	District	HBCA Reference	
<i>*An Outfit year ran from 1 June to 31 May</i>					
1856, 24 July	Signed contract as labourer	at Norway House*		B.239/u/2, #107	
1858, 2 August	Signed contract as middleman	at Norway House		"	
1861, 13 April	Signed contract as middleman	at Lower Fort Garry		"	
1864, 11 June	Signed contract as bowsman	at Fort Simpson		"	
1866, 28 July	Signed contract as bowsman	at Portage La Loche		"	
1868, 10 July	Signed contract as steersman	at Salt River		"	
1870, 20 June-1889, 31 May	Signed contracts as steersman	at Fort Simpson		B.239/u/3, #129/186	
1891, 31 May-1897, 31 May	Signed contracts as general servant	at Ft.Simpson		B.239/u/3, #186; D.38/56, #75	
1898, 1 Sept.	Contract cancelled & listed as freeman in accounts			D.33/4	
1899, Jan.	Died at Edmonton			<i>The Beaver</i> , June 1942, p. 31	

+George Pendleton, in an article on his son, the famous river pilot Johnny Berens, says that Samuel was born at Lower Fort Garry ca. 1829. He was first employed by the Company at the Lower Fort as a dog driver. (*The Beaver*, June 1942, p. 31)

*Contract of 24 July 1856 is annotated: "It is agreed that if Samuel Berens dislike passing the second or last Year of this Engagement at Berens River he will be allowed to go to another part. Geo. Barnston." (A.32/21, fo. 329)

J. McDougall's Inspection Report on Fort Simpson post, 1892, describes Samuel Berens as: "General Servant, 54 [sic] years of age, 31 years service, widower, no children resident with him, wages \$155.75. Had been an excellent Servant, but beginning to be unable for hard work. Proposed for retirement on 1st June next." (B.200/e/23, fo. 14)



Filename: Berens, Samuel (ca. 1829-1899) (fl. 1856-1898) AM/July 1995 ; May/99/mhd; Reformatted PC May/01

Like his father, Johnny was involved in the transportation system. He joined the Hudson's Bay Company at age 15 (1885). In 1894, Johnny was employed as a trader for the HBC at Fort Smith and assisted in the construction of the *Wrigley*. Once the boat was launched he worked on board as a cook. One of the communities they traveled to was Fort Simpson, where he met and married Monique Lafferty in 1895. The family then moved to Fort Laird where Johnny worked in the HBC store as an interpreter, carpenter and cook. He then piloted the second *Wrigley*. As a pilot on the Mackenzie and Slave Rivers he was a man of great importance in the N.W.T. The job required great judgment and discipline; he loved the challenge of the rivers. When offered increased pay he

worked for two years as a pilot for Northern Traders. In 1921 he became pilot of the NWT's most famous boat, the *Distributor*. He piloted it for 26 years between Fort Simpson and Aklavic. In 1939, he was presented with a medal from the Queen and the HBC for his long service. In 1947, he retired having worked for over 60 years for the HBC.

NAME: BERENS, Johnny		PLACE OF BIRTH: Fort Simpson NT	ENTERED SERVICE: ca. 1886	DATES: b. 2 June 1871 d. 25 March 1954
Appointments & Service				
Outfit Year*:	Position:	Ship:	District:	HBCA Reference:
<i>*An Outfit year ran from 1 June to 31 May</i>				
1885	Joined HBC at the age of 15 as a carpenter's helper, then became a cook		Mackenzie River	Info. provided to N.G. Gray, Dominion Hydrographer, 29 Jan. 1960 (LC 26039)
1900-1947 1954	Sternwheeler pilot Died	<i>Wrigley II, Mackenzie River, Distributor</i>	Mackenzie River	<i>ibid.</i>
Father:	Samuel Berens, employee of HBC			
Feature length article & photograph: "John Berens – Pilot: He Served the Company along the Mackenzie River for 57 of his 71 Years"			<i>The Beaver</i> , June 1942, pp. 30-31	
Photograph & news item: "56 Years a Pilot,"			<i>Moccasin Telegraph</i> , Dec. 1941, p. 10	
Photographs: "Johnny Berens, Pilot S.S. Distributor" "J. Berens, M.R.T. Pilot, 59 Years' Service"			<i>The Beaver</i> , June 1933, p. 28 <i>Moccasin Telegraph</i> , Summer 1944, p. 8	



Filename: B... 1871-1954) (fl. ca. 1886-1947); JHB 1999/09; Reformatted PC May/01; Rev. JR 07/01



The Hudson's Bay paddle-wheeled steamer *S.S. Distributor*

Johnny married Monique Lafferty in 1896 at Fort Rae. They had eight children, Mary Louise (b.1899), Ellen (b.1901), Alice (b.1904), Alfred (b.1906), William (b.1908), Dora (b.1911), Frederick (b.1899), and Saragine (b. 1915).

He built a house for his family at Fort Smith and retired there after the boats were taken out of service. As a tribute to him the Government of Canada named the Mackenzie River ferry at Fort Providence "The Johnny Berens."

Duplicate sent to _____

STORY OF THE WRECK OF THE SS "NORTHLAND
"TRADER"

HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY

S.S. NORTHLAND TRADER 19

Outfit 19 To _____ Dr. _____
and Barge "BELL ROCK"
To _____ Outfit 19 Cr. _____
(JOHN BERENS)

Report from Pilot, SS "Northland Trader": John Berens

1924
Sept 25. S.S. Northland Trader, with barge Bell Rock, left Hay River 13.45, 25th Sept. 1924 whilst, ^{SS "DISTRIBUTOR"} cargo was tied up for wind. A very heavy ground sea, gale of wind from N.E. and snow squalls.

Before she sighted Point Islands came a very strong wind & snow storm & lost their bearings. After struggling, all afternoon & night of 25th, found chills 4.00 am on 26th at South Island which was first land sighted & thought was Point Islands till came near it. Storm & wind changed almost opposite direction & had to shift anchorage evening 16.00 o'clock. Sept 26th when wind changed very strong wind from N.W.

S.S. Distributor came in to Point Islands at noon this day we thought S.S. Trader must have made mouth of River.

S.S. Trader moved her anchorage to N.W. side of South Island & from there dragged her anchor at 10.50 pm & she went ashore. The crew did all that could be done but the barge was a hindrance. The boat was tearing & rolling heavily & threw the lifeboard off the top of the hurricane deck over the board & into lake & was upon rocks before anything could

Account by John Berens on the 1924 wreck of the S.S. Northland Trader and barge Bell Rock September, 1924. (Jackson/NWT Archives/N-1979-004)

Reference

Overvold, Joanne. (Editor), *Our Metis Heritage: A Portrayal* Yellowknife: Metis Association of the Northwest Territories, 1976: 48.



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