

A Brief History of the First Catholic Pioneers of Lewistown, Montana.¹

By Elizabeth Swan²

Along the Milk River between Harlem and Chinook, Montana, was a large settlement of Red River Half-Breeds, as they were known at the time, who had come from the Red River Country of North Dakota, and Canada, following the buffalo trails, at the same time in search of a permanent location, which after a sojourn of eight years or so their livelihood was diminishing fast. Then they began to think seriously about their future knowing they could not their way of life forever. After some discussion they began to break up into groups. Some went back to North Dakota and Canada and to different points of Montana.

Pierre Berger and his family of eleven children were amongst the settlement. One of these children, a daughter³, and her husband Frank Azure, and the Gladeau families, with others went to St. Peter's Mission, Montana, where the elder Azures were already located.

Mr. Berger had been thinking, then he made up his mind to tell his relatives and friends how he was very much interested and anxious to come further west to look for a certain locality he had heard about from an Indian friend, where there was an abundance of wild game, and other good chances of good prospects. He had also been directed as near as possible to the location. Consequently, it was considered a good idea for him to go. A Band of about (25) twenty-five families, including the Bergers agreed to follow Pierre Berger to his new adventure. The children who accompanied their parents were Peter, Barney, Catherine and Frances. The married children with their families were Isaie, Isidore, Jake and John B. Berger. Mrs. 'Adele' Vital Turcotte and Mrs. Amable Frank Ouelette; Alexander Wilkie and Antoine Fleury two brothers-in-law of Pierre Berger. Their friends, Benjamine Kline⁴, the Lafountains, Doney's, Fayants, Turcottes, Ledoux Gayions and Mrs Laquoit, an elderly widow known to all as Old Ellen. She had no one to provide for her, but she was well taken care of through the generosity of the people she traveled with. She was helpful too and very capable. She would always assist the women to jerk meat and that was hard work. With the group was another unfortunate who was partially blind, with his wife and their little girl and two young stepsons who were also

¹ Annotations and editing are by Lawrence J. Barkwell.

² Elizabeth Swan, "A Brief History of the First. Catholic Pioneers of Lewistown, Montana," file. 541, Merrill G. Burlingame Special Collections, Montana State University Library, and in the Joseph Kinsey Howard Papers, MC 27, Montana Historical Society, Helena, Montana. Elizabeth Swan was a grand-daughter of Pierre Berger and Judith Wilkie.

³ Marie Berger, b. 1857, married François Azure on January 29, 1878 at Milk River.

⁴ Benjamin Klyne. (1847-1932)

Ben Kline was born on October 13, 1847 at what is now known as Fort Totten, near Mni Wakan (now called Devil's Lake), North Dakota. His father Michel Klyne Jr. was born in 1811 at Edmonton, a Half-Breed descendent of Michel Klyne Sr. and Suzanne Lafrance a Métisse. His mother was Madeleine Millet *dit* Beauchemin, whose father was a French Canadien, Andre Millet *dit* Beauchemin who had married a Half-Breed Crow woman Charlotte Pelletier. Benjamin's parents moved to Pembina from Red River in the late 1840s. On August 6, 1880, he signed Louis Riel's petition to Major General Nelson Miles requesting land for the Montana Metis.

looked after by the people, however, he was most obliging and was glad to do what he could, especially as a crier when anything important was to be discussed, or a prayer meeting. When there is a buffalo hunt they go too and he is told to make the rounds, where everyone gives a portion of meat and buffalo hides. His wife helps jerk meat. When she tanned the hides they were able to sell or trade them for their needs.

Heading For the New Location

In the spring of (1879) eighteen seventy-nine, early in May, after all the necessary preparations for the journey, the caravan set out, and headed for Fort Benton, Montana, with Pierre Berger⁵, who was a good scout, acting as guide and leader.

For safety against horse thieves when camping, they made an enclosure by placing all their carts in the form of a circle where they kept the horses overnight.

On a Sunday they would not travel unless very necessary and all gathered in the centre of the enclosure, and had a public recitation of the Rosary.

From Fort Benton, after crossing the Missouri River by ferry they traveled their own trail to the River breaks, where with much difficulty they finally made their way through en route for the Arrow Creek regions. After travelling a long distance in the wilderness, for some reason, most of the group decided to lay over a day or two, while five or six families came further away.

Child is Lost (omitted)

Journey Continues

In the meantime the rest of the group had joined the camp and stayed till all was well.

From there when the journey proceeded all travelled together, and have encountered slow and dangerous travelling on their Red River carts, but by using precautions they managed getting through safely crossing Arrow Creek and the rugged areas that covered the path of their journey.

First Child Born at the Basin

⁵ Pierre Berger Sr. (b. 1816)

Pierre Berger Sr. was born at Red River in 1816, the son of Jacques Berger and Cecile Dumont. He married Judith Wilkie, the daughter of Metis leader Jean Baptiste Wilkie and Amable Azure, at Pembina before 1841. On August 6, 1880, he signed Louis Riel's petition to Major General Nelson Miles requesting land for the Montana Metis.

Nevertheless they pushed on coming to this part of the country until they came to the site where the Arrow Refinery is now and made camp for a few days, during this time, on May 31, 1879, a daughter was born to Mr. And Mrs. Jake Berger. Her given name was Eliza, and in later years people who knew her never did call her any different, only the “Basin” girl.

The Buffalo Hunt

Soon, as the mother was able, the exploration continued. They went past the mountains; going North then East and on to the Musselshell (River), from there went alongside the Snowy Mountains, as far as Judith Gap, where they had a buffalo hunt. In the chase, an accident occurred. When John Ledoux’s mount ran into a hole and fell with him. Benjamin Kline who was an expert in setting broken bones examined him, by which the man escaped, but was still hurt enough that he could not stand riding the uncomfortable cart. So they conveyed the injured man on a stretcher they made for him and tied securely on a travois consisting of lodge poles fastened together over the back of the horse with the lower ends dragging on the ground. Then he travelled with ease the rest of the way after moving from the Gap.

The End of the Journey

With all their hardships they never once gave in, but kept up their good spirits. They had faith and always trusted in Divine Providence.

They were determined to keep onward until the long weary journey finally terminated; it was only after they found the “land of their dreams” and the ideal place our pioneers chose to establish their permanent homes. On their arrival here from the tour, and all were pleased with the surroundings and good water, their first thought was to get settled some place near the Judith mountains, and the next thing was to find a crossing on Spring Creek. At that time there was no opening in sight and a thicket on both sides. They went down a few miles before coming to a place for a good crossing. From there they traveled east and followed the creek from the present site of the Willow Inn and on up a ways and made camp, right where the Irene Desy’s ranch buildings are now. In fact this particular place was formally known as the Old Berger Home. From the time they first camped Pierre Berger squatted here until his son Peter filed a claim. Peter was never married therefore he settled here and made the home for his parents and two sisters, Catherine and Frances, before they were married, and he provided for all of them. He kept the homestead until he sold it to Irene Desy the year of 1907. They had left their home a few years previous when the aged parents could no longer take care of themselves, and moved into separate quarters with their son John B. Berger, just a short distance joining the old homestead, and where they had the best of care. Within this abode on April 12, 1907, Pierre Berger went to his reward at the ripe old age of 93 years, and up to the time of his passing still had a wonderful memory and could tell his life experiences the same as he usually did in his earlier days.

On the way to the mountains Alexandre Wilkie⁶ and his sons-in-law, the Lafountains, squatted about a mile above the Berger place. He built himself a two room cabin. One of the rooms was about 20 x 30 feet. He had in mind that they would be visited by some missionary soon, and wanted a room large enough to accommodate a good number. The rest of the band went to the mountains and made a little village there, which was at the head of the creek now known as Blind Breed Gulch. And, some on the hill, on the Horack place, formerly owned by the late James H. Neuman. In later years, the ruins of some fire places and other old relics were still visible.

First White Man Seen (omitted)

Francis Janeaux, a French Canadian Arrives With His Party

Our first contingent of Red River Half Breeds were yet unsettled when joined here by another group of their people. They too came from the Milk River country where Janeaux had kept a trading post near where Malta, Montana is now.

He came in with a long string of Red River carts, loaded with the stock of merchandise that he carried. Janeaux always was in the company of Half Breeds along with his hired hand, Paul Morase, also a French Canadian.

Janeaux was married to Pierre Laverdure's daughter Virginia, and Morase to Frank Daignon's⁷ daughter Margaret. Janeaux was well thought of as he was a generous man to deal with.

Both of the men had good foresight and immediately saw they had a good opportunity to start a business here. Both took up their homesteads right away. Then Janeaux, after he had his temporary home built across the street from the present post office, started the work for his business and also had a stockade built to protect his property from the Indians. Pierre Laverdure moved up at the mouth of Big Casino Creek where he and his family were located for years.

The First Settlers and Their Temporary Homes

When the first Red River Half Breeds located here they did not have a thing in [terms] of household furnishings or any farm implements; what few tools they could

⁶ Alexandre Wilkie. (b. 1831)

Alexandre Wilkie was born in 1831, the son of Metis leader Jean Baptiste Wilkie and Amable Azure. The family was enumerated at Pembina in 1850. Alexandre married Louise Gariepy, the daughter of Francois Gariepy and Louise Gladu, in 1852 at Pembina. On August 6, 1880, he signed Louis Riel's petition to Major General Nelson Miles requesting land for the Montana Metis.

⁷ Francois Daigneau. (b. 1840)

Frank Dagneau was the son of Isaac "Zac" Daigneau and Angelique Peter. He married Eliza Laverdure the daughter of Pierre Laverdure and Catherine Charette in 1876. On August 6, 1880, he signed Louis Riel's petition to Major General Nelson Miles requesting land for the Montana Metis.

carry on their Red River carts consisted of each an axe, one party had a shovel, Pierre Berger who was very adroit in tin and some blacksmithing, had a few extra tools to serve the purpose. He also had a grub hoe.

Isaie Berger⁸ had a few carpenter's tools as he was naturally handy on carpentry work. Some people had more than one cart, that is, according to the size and means of a family.

Building the log cabins was quite a task, they could not have many logs at a time, with only a device of their own [making], but managed to snake down a few logs each day, being as they were skilful with the use of an axe they made all their roofing, flooring, framework and some furniture with smoothly hewn logs. No one had a stove and they cooked in the fireplace built on a casing of small timbers and finished with mortar made with a mixture of grass and dirt. When the roofing is all up in place the cracks were filled with mortar and the top covered with sod, for the doors and windows the framework was covered with raw hide, which was not altogether transparent but still gave plenty of light inside and was weatherproof.

The bunks, tables and benches were finished with peg legs. Besides the light from the fire place at night, a lamp was made by melting tallow on a deep receptacle and a twisted rag for a wick. The brooms were made of buck brush tied securely on the end of a stick.

New Arrivals

The month of August 1879 brought another band of Half Breeds.

These people came across in a ferry at the junction of the Missouri and Musselshell Rivers. Amongst this band we find Antoine Ouelette⁹ and his family, the Edward Wells¹⁰ family and some of his relations.

⁸ Francois Isaie Berger. (b. 1844)

Isaie Berger was born at Red River in 1844, the son of Pierre Berger Sr. and Judith Wilkie. Isaie married Clemence Gourneau the daughter of Turtle Mountain chief Joseph Gourneau and Judith Delorme. On August 6, 1880, he signed Louis Riel's petition to Major General Nelson Miles requesting land for the Montana Metis.

⁹ Antoine ("Ratte") Ouellette. (b. 1834)

Antoine was born on December 29, 1834 at St. Francois Xavier, the son of Joseph Ouellette and Therese Houle. He married Angelique Bottineau, the daughter of Joseph Bottineau and Angelique Cardinal in 1854 at Pembina. He died on July 22, 1922 at Weyburn. On August 6, 1880, he signed Louis Riel's petition to Major General Nelson Miles requesting land for the Montana Metis.

¹⁰ Edouard Wells (Wills). (b. 1837)

Edouard Wells was born at Pembina, the son of Edouard Wells Sr. and his wife Isabella Wells. Edouard married Marie Demontigny, the daughter of Charles Demontigny and Marie Desjarlais in 1863 at St. Francois Xavier. Edouard Wills Sr. (b. 1812) is listed on the 1850 Pembina Census where Edouard Sr. is shown as a hunter. On August 6, 1880, he signed Louis Riel's petition to Major General Nelson Miles requesting land for the Montana Metis.

They were rounded up at Milk River (where they were residing) by the United States Army and were asked kindly to settle down somewhere, and were told about this locality, and at once agreed to come over.

General Miles and his men escorted them as far as the Missouri River and helped to load the Red River carts on the ferry. They were also given directions to follow to get here.

On arriving Mr. Ouelette at once picked his choice of land, and made his home, which was later called Buckskin Flat.

From then on people of every class were coming in. The first white settlers coming in then were Frank Day, Henry Brooks, Edward Brassey, and the Crowley Brothers, and many others too numerous to mention. Frank Day settled on Little Casino Creek, and he started a hotel and a blacksmith shop on his place. And, our first post office was built here by one of our old pioneers, Mose LaTray.¹¹

He had just recently arrived. Old Mose as he was familiarly known was a carpenter by trade, and in later years helped to build the mining town of Guilt Edge where he lived on the outskirts of the village. At this time Janeaux brought the subject to Morase and Ouelette about having their land plotted out for lots, but could no sell til they made proof of their homesteads. Janeaux let D.M. Crowley start a little business, today known as the Crowley Block, he had a saloon and a livery barn.

A school house was built also on his place. Edward Brassey was the teacher. This little log building was situated between Boulevard and Washington Street east of First Avenue North. The building was recently torn down within the past ten years.

First Death at the Settlement (omitted)

Closing the First Trading Post (omitted)

¹¹ Jean Moise Latreille (LaTray). (1846-1938)

Moise Latreille, a childhood friend of Ben Klyne was connected to the Wilkie family through Charlotte Pelletier's family. They were all founders of Spring Creek (Lewistown) Montana. He built homes and the Post Office at Lewistown. On August 6, 1880, he signed Louis Riel's petition to Major General Nelson Miles requesting land for the Montana Metis.

Jean, known as John Mose Latray was born on 23 September 1846 in St Norbert, Manitoba, the son of Felix Lalonde *dit* LaTreille¹¹ and Marguerite (Maggie) Jolibois.¹¹ He died on 15 April 1938, aged 91, in Zortman, Montana and was buried in Lewiston, MT.

John Mose LaTray married Suzanne Perreault *dit* Morin. Suzanne was born on 4 July 1852 the daughter of Joseph Perreault *dit* Morin and Josephte Langer. Suzanne died on 17 March 1926, aged 73. They had thirteen children.

First Homesteaders

The first people to file on claims [during] the first year were: Peter Berger, Paul Morase, Francis Juneaux, Pierre Laverdure, and Antoine Ouelette. They had to go to White Sulphur Springs, county seat of Meagher County.

Not till the following year did the rest settle on homesteads, but during the winter those that wanted to settle down got busy and cut what timber they would want and had everything ready.

John B. Lafountain settled at the head of the Blind Breed Gulch and shortly after his wife was called out of this world and left him to care for their little five year old girl and her two boys.

Catholic Activities and the Coming of the First Priest (omitted)

Alexander Wilkie

Our story would not be complete if we did not tell of the valiant work done by Alexander Wilkie to promote Catholic Action, also the service he rendered to the missionaries.

He came from a family of thirteen children and all were brought up to be useful and practical Catholics. He had a fair education in French and in the Cree Indian language, and had also taken music and played the violin very well. In his spare time in the evenings he taught religion to the children of the settlement at Milk River, besides he taught singing and had a choir and sang the music of the old "Basilan Airs." His daughter Josephine Lafountain¹² and niece Mary Berger Azure, nephews Peter, Isaie and John B. Berger, composed the choir. Peter who had been taught to serve mass when a young boy at school in Pembina, North Dakota was still assisting when necessary. And, when visited by the missionaries they were well prepared to do their part in their own settlement. They sang for the high mass, and for the low mass sang appropriate hymns either in French or in the Cree Indian language. Most of the congregation would join in the singing. The older people were taught to read and write in Cree by some missionary at Pembina, North Dakota. Some of the books are still in the possession of the children of the pioneers in Lewistown.

When they left their native Red River country in 1870 they were always traveling with some missionary, till they stopped at Milk River. Then if in need of some priest would go any distance to get one. Father Decorby from Cypress Hills was one often called to perform marriages.

¹² Marie Josephine Wilkie (1854-1937)

Julienne was born on September 1, 1859, at Pembina, the daughter of Alexandre Wilkie and Louise Garipey. She married Octave Lafountain, the son of Calixte Lafontaine and Charlotte Adam, on February 9, 1875 at Lebrét.

But, they were visited annually by the Jesuit Missionaries from St. Peter's Mission who would spend some time with them. The names of Father Giorda, Imoda, Eberschweiler, Grassi, and Phillip Rappagliosi were familiar with them, especially Father Phillip or "les petit père Phillip" as he was mostly called. When on a visit he always went to the home of Alexandre Wilkie, his intimate friend.

There were several bands of Half Breeds all living within a few miles of each other. In one of the camps a chapel had been built for any visiting priest. Incidentally, a former curate was there from North Dakota and had come in and was occupying the structure. For some reasons of his own, he refused to have the little priest come to the chapel to say mass. He created quite a spell over the people he was with and created quite a disturbance.

Father Phillip was grief stricken over the state of things, and pined away with a broken heart. His faithful friends did all they could for him and went after Father Decorby when they saw he was sinking fast. He died on February 1878, at the home of Alexandre Wilkie, where he was making his home and holding services.

After the death of Father Phillip his body was taken back to St. Peter's Mission. Before the company of Pierre Berger left the Milk River region to come to this locality, Mr. Wilkie made and erected a cross on the site where the good priest died as a mark of respect to his memory. This land mark was about four miles from the present site of Harlem.

In the year 1936, a party from Lewistown visited the place. The cross which was made of oak was still there but had fallen to the ground.



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