

Benjamin D. Kline (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.

As a boy Ben attended the mission school where the Chippewa speaking missionary's wife taught him to speak English. In 1886, he married Angelic Ayimatch St. Pierre (b. 1845), the daughter of François St. Pierre and Marie Laverdure. Typical of Metis traders and buffalo hunters their 10 children were born at many locations, namely: Little Missouri, Lebret, Wood Mountain, Cypress Hills, St. Peter's Mission and Hammel Creek.

Kline made his first journey to Montana Territory in 1865 and found a large Metis band of Metis hunters living on the Milk River. He returned to gather a group to settle in Montana. They traveled up the Missouri River, then up the Milk River to a site between the towns of Glasgow and Malta. There they erected a number of cottonwood constructed cabins. Subsequently a small pox epidemic broke out among the neighbouring Indians. The illness did not affect the Metis and the Indians were angered over this and made life unbearable for them. Kline thus moved back to Devil's Lake as a precautionary measure.

In 1867, the family returned to Montana. Their camp was visited by X. Biedler the United States Marshal for Montana who had heard Metis traders from Canada were there illegally transacting business. He confiscated their stock (over \$15,000.00 worth of goods) burned their cabins and ordered traders Antoine Gladue and James Francis, to return to Canada. He allowed the rest of the party to remain. Kline then asked the Marshal how they were to get supplies and ammunition for hunting. In response, Biedler asked Francis Janeaux who was part of the Marshal's party to stay and open a store. This was the start of what was to become a close friendship between Kline and Janeaux.

For the next two years Kline and the other 25 Metis families lived on the Milk River and hunted buffalo as far west as the Little Rockies. The hides, after dressing, were sold to the T.C. Powers & Brothers Co. Pierre Berger was the leader of this Metis band but because he did not speak English, Kline transacted almost all the band's business. The others in the camp were Berger's brothers, Isaie and John, Vital Turcotte and Frank Ouelette, all Metis of French-German-Cree-Chippewa and Assiniboine ancestry.



Ben Kline (Klyne)

In May of 1879, a group of Milk River families led by Pierre Berger moved to the Judith Basin. Ben Kline and his boyhood friend Moise LaTray were with this main party. Kline and LaTray were both related to the Wilkies (Berger's wife) through the Charlotte Pelletier family. Captain Williams, the commanding officer at Fort Benton, furnished the Metis with an escort of two soldiers and two civilians who guided them as far as what in later years became known as the Felix McGinn ranch on Cottonwood Creek. From there the party moved toward Big Spring Creek and camped on the former John Crowley ranch north of the former Great Northern freight house in Lewistown. Two hunters were sent to Black Butte, northeast of Lewistown, to locate the buffalo. In a short time they reported they had found a large herd northeast of the butte. After a few days of rest, all the hunters went after the buffalo and killed large numbers.

It was necessary for the Metis to follow the buffalo and they drifted in the direction of Flatwillow Creek. In July 1879, they were joined by Pierre Laverdure, Frances Daignon and Francis Janeaux, who had traveled from Fort Benton. They all moved south of the Big Snowy Mountains toward Judith Gap where they found the country literally black with buffalo, and they killed so many that it took them a week to dress and dry the meat. After returning to Big Spring Creek, they camped near Reedsfort where they found Paul Morase and a Canadian named Renaud who had come from Rocky Point on the Missouri. They were so pleased with their surroundings that they decided to take up land and make the basin their permanent home. Morase and Janeaux located on the present site of Lewistown and streets are named for them.

Other Metis settled on Burnett and Boyd Creek, which empty into Big Spring Creek near Lewistown. Some went further east toward Grass Range on coulees and streams tributary to Big Spring and McDonald creeks. They remained there and raised their families and increased in numbers.

From 1890 to 1900 they had a population of probably 400 to 500. During that period they attained considerable political strength with a representative vote of from 75 to 100, and their support was largely sought by the politicians. Due to the untimely death of Francis Janeaux in 1888 at the age of 49, Kline took over as leader of the Lewistown area Metis.

Ben Kline was one of the few who could speak English, a leader among them and a man of great influence. In 1880, Kline took up a homestead a few miles east of Lewistown on Half Breed Creek and developed an excellent ranch property there free of encumbrances. Benjamin died in 1832 at Lewistown, Montana.

References:

- Foster, Martha Harroun. *We Know Who We Are: Metis Identity in a Montana Community*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006.
- Kramlich, Ann. "Montana Pioneers," *Lewistown News Argus*, 1998-2001.
- Mueller, George D. "Ben Kline: A True Leader of the Metis." *Lewistown News Argus*, Dec. 12, 1999.



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