

Jean Baptiste “Big Leggins” Bruguier. (1849 – 1898)

Jean Baptiste Bruguier was the Metis son of a French-Canadian Metis fur trader, Théophile Bruguier, and a Yankton Sioux mother, Anpao (Dawn), who was the daughter of Wah-me-da-wah-kee (War Eagle).¹



Jean Baptiste Bruguier, holding a Sharp's Carbine

¹ Metis trader Theophile Bruguier was born on August 31, 1813, at L'Assumption in Lower Canada, the son of Jean Baptiste Bruguier a Métis, and Elizabeth Kipp. He was educated in the French language and originally studied law. After his fiancée died from cholera, Theophile left Canada to work for the American Fur Company in St. Louis, Missouri as a trader and interpreter. He was first posted to Fort Pierre in the Dakota Territory. He arrived there on January 1, 1836. In his travels along the Missouri River he established good relations with the Yankton Sioux, a group led by Wah-me-da-wah-kee (War Eagle). Bruguier married Blazing Cloud (21 Jun 1837 at Fort Vermillion) and Dawn, both daughters of Chief War Eagle. With Blazing Cloud he had seven children and with his wife Dawn he had six more children. He sent his sons to be educated at the College of Christian Brothers in St. Louis.

Bruguère served for some time as Tatanka Iyotake (Sitting Bull's) "private secretary", and wrote down some letters, or notes, in Lakota dictated by the great man himself. There is a transcript of one of these notes, in Stanley Vestal's 1932 biography of Sitting Bull.

In his early twenties, Jean served as U.S. Army Scout and Interpreter for General Nelson A. Miles. He distinguished himself by earning one citation after another for bravery. The Yankton might have remained with the Army had he not been involved in a fight at Grand River Agency in 1874. His brother, Bill, was jumped by another Agency employee, William McGee. In his brother's defense, John hit McGee over the head with a club. By morning, McGee was dead and Bill Bruguier was charged in connection with the killing. Even though John had disappeared, a charge of manslaughter was filed against him. A U.S. Marshall went out after the Interpreter, but lost his trail. Bruguier sought refuge where he knew no one would follow – in the camp of Sitting Bull and his grandfather's people. Bruguier became one of Sitting Bull's trusted advisors. "Big Leggins," as he was called was known for his "brave runs" – brazen dashes directly under enemy fire. But his personal acquaintance with Generals such as George Armstrong Custer proved far more important. He remained close to the Hunkpapa until after the Battle of the Little Bighorn. The Bruguier family reports that as a scout for Custer, John Bruguier was actually working for Sitting Bull and the other Sioux. While John was scouting for Custer, he would drop notes for the Sioux to find so that the Sioux always knew where Custer was going. It is said that two scouts survived the Battle of the Little Big Horn — John Bruguier was one of the two survivors. When John rode into Sitting Bull's camp wearing his military uniform, the warriors wanted to kill him but Sitting Bull would not allow it.

On September 27, 1879, Jean was finally arrested for manslaughter in the McGee Case. General Miles appeared as a character witness at the Bismarck trial. His testimony was a tribute to Bruguier's intelligence, which was of great value in several critical instances. Also appearing as character witness was the unscrupulous land speculator and lawyer, Dr. Walter A. Burleigh. The doctor successfully entered into court record a petition signed in John's behalf by many leading citizens of Miles City, Montana. The jury deliberated half an hour before delivering the final verdict of not guilty.

In later years, Bruguier moved to a reservation near Poplar, Montana. On June 13, 1898, he was murdered on a lonely, deserted road by a man wielding a wagon wrench.

(Parts of this narrative are taken from *Remember Your Relatives; Yankton Sioux Images, 1851 to 1904*, Volume I, by Renee Sansom-Flood and Shirley A. Bernie, edited by Leonard R. Bruguier.



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