

What happened to the children of Louis Riel?

(Written specially for the Sunday *La Patrie* by Charles Holmes)

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CHILDREN OF LOUIS RIEL?

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Rumilly, in the 1st edition of his excellent “Histoire de la province de Québec” poses the same question and tries to respond to the information that was furnished by people who knew Riel’s son¹. Indeed, before him in 1932 Olivar Asselin, director of the daily “Le Canada” commented on the book by Constantin Weyer “Sur la Ranch” who also asked what happened to the children of Louis Riel²?

Why are we interested in the progeny of the leader for the rebellion in the Canadian West? Whereas there are many in my generation who have a cult like worship for the memory of Riel, because it’s all, isn’t it, because of the rebellion that steered Riel and Manitoba to obtain the constitutional liberties they are now in possession of? What’s more, the principal regret of Riel doesn’t seem to be (his letters written in Regina prison prove this) that he didn’t have enough worldly goods to leave for this world, to assure the well being on his little family; of his wife Marguerite, his son Jean-Louis, his daughter Marie-Angélique and a third child born just after his father’s execution.

We can judge that Louis Riel loved his children from following the extract from the letter addressed to his well loved Marguerite, Sept 17, 1885 after hearing that news that his execution was deferred³.

“The Lord, so good, who cares for you and me who has rejoiced this day of September 17 and delayed the order of execution yesterday, which, was to happen tomorrow. My little girl Marie-Angélique, who is two years old, can pronounce my name with the smiling joy of hope and contentment. Blessed is the 17th of September, the birth day of our dear little Marie-Angélique. And my little one, little Jean, my little boy, I bless you, pray for me, my son, Good God will listen, I have confidence in your little prayers, above all the Holy Sacraments.”

And it was signed, “Louis “David” Riel”

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What interests researchers, is that the brief existence of the children of Louis Riel seems to be surrounded by mystery? Where were they born? How did they live? How did they die? These questions find contradictory answers; this is astonishing not only is it contemporary, they are the children of a man whose trial and execution created a grand repercussion in the politics of our province.

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¹ 5th Volume of “L’histoire de Province de Québec » by Rumilly, 1st Edition, referenced at the bottom of page 174.

² “Sur le Ranch by Constantin Weyer” by Olivar Asselin, “Le Canada” March 24, 1932.

³ Original letter in the hands of Dr. Maurice, C.R., head of the Law section at the Commune Chambers, Ottawa.

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“In the course of travel to France in 1927” writes Olivar Asselin, “I took part in a dinner which allowed me to meet a certain number of survivors of the Métis insurrection. I asked an old companion in arms of Riel if he knew what happened to the Riel children. Astonished, he told me that Louis Riel had stayed celibate, that he had not left any descendants. Sometime after by Mr. Prud’homme, the judge, from whom the history of the West has no secrets* and who demanded the key to the secrets, I learned that Riel was indeed married, that he had one son, that this son who was deceased a few years ago, was a bureaucrat in Quebec, had himself a wife named X, and was a bailiff of the Superior Court in this city. Upon which I concluded that those who had served under Riel were not very knowledgeable about this person.

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Asselin’s article is the subject of comments in “Le Soleil” of Quebec which affirms that Jean-Louis Riel died without descendants. Asselin insists in “Le Canada” that “despite the affirmation of our Quebecois brothers, he continues to believe that Jean Riel left in Quebec, a daughter and this daughter married in Quebec”.

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Now, to a trip I took to Winnipeg last September, I had the chance to meet many important French Canadians in the West whom I made inquiries of a sort about the children of Riel. If you are aware of the Métis rebellion, you are a little dismissive about what happened to the progeny of the leader of this rebellion. But, on promise to inquire, I will demonstrate, with precision, and what’s better official , so I can add to the correspondence received from the West to those I have from my friends in Quebec, I think I have much documentation about the children of Riel.

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So, when, where and to whom did Louis Riel—father, marry? Certain affirm that he was married in St. Vital, others in Montana to a Métis named Monet or Monette. See who it is.

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After the fiasco of the 1st Métis revolt in 1869, Louis Riel was banished from the country for five years.⁴ Outcast and exiled, Riel went to the United States and to Washington where he found a distinguished French-Canadian, Major Mallot, Inspector of the Indian Agency which he protected. He returned to Canada, left to Montreal, then Quebec, returned later to Washington where he established himself in Montana, and according to the registers, there married Marguerite Bellehumeur, daughter of a French-Canadian Métis from Fort Elliot.

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Bellehumeur? So where did this name of Monet or Monette that number of writers have said was the name of the wife of Louis Riel? He gives us a written explanation in a letter written to his mother Julie de la Gimodiere, widow of Louis Riel.

“I want you to learn, dear beloved mother, that I have been married for one year (1881). I have taken a girl from White Horse Plains, a French-Canadian

⁴ Judgment of the Clerk of the Peace, Winnipeg, dated February 15, 1875

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Métis. Her name is Marguerite. She is the eldest daughter of a man you don't know, I am pretty sure never seen, never known. His name is Jean Monette dit Bellehumeur.”⁵

We can confirm that the first child of Riel was born at the St. Peter's Mission on August 4, 1882. He was born here because in 1883, Riel went to St. Peter's Mission to fill the modest role of School Master, a post which he occupied until just in 1884, when the Métis of Saskatchewan came to find him to lead their insurrection. Where did they find Riel during the birth of his first child? Mr. R-A-T de Montigny, ex-recorder of Montreal, in his book about the Métis question, affirms that he found him “in the Missouri prairies”. He couldn't have been here in the state of Missouri, but the in long prairies along the Missouri River which travels southwest in the state of Montana. In effect, in a letter, which indicated the spot of the origin which it was sent, we could not read the letters dates August 9, 1882, Riel wrote to his mother:

“My wife has given me a little boy, in good health God, thank you, he is three months old today (Note—Jean Riel was born the 9th and not the 4th like certain suppose) but as the priests are found 150 miles from here, I have not had the opportunity to have him baptized, but I will do it.”

This letter⁶ proves that Jean-Louis Riel was not born at the St. Peter's Mission, because this mission was served by the Jesuit fathers and you could surely find a priest there. What is true is that the place ending in “...roll” where Riel wrote and his son Jean was born? It is evidently Carroll, the city situated on the Missouri River, 23 miles below the beginning of the Musselshell River. This city doesn't exist since the railroad replaced the river lanes for the transportation of merchandise. We know positively that Riel lived in Carroll on the 7th of December 1882; the “Helena Weekly” published a letter signed by him and dated in Carroll, relating to the municipal election held in this city. One year later, the same newspaper published in the editorials, a letter of Riel's, dated in the same place, relating to the sale of whisky to the Métis. So here is a rule one time to answer for all time the question of where the oldest child of Riel was born.

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On the contrary, the second child of Riel, the girl Marie-Angélique, was born at the St. Peter's Mission, September 17, 1883-13 months after the birth of her brother. When, on June 4, 1884, a group of Métis from Saskatchewan came looking at St. Peter's Mission. Louis Riel went with his wife and two children. He said the same in his “Dernier Memoires”:

“I crossed the border without arms or munitions, going with my wife and my children.”

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When, exactly, did the children and wife of Louis Riel arrive in St. Vital, on the farm of Madame de la Gimodiere-Riel. I have not obtained exact precision on this subject. This

⁵ The original letter is in the possession of the widow of Jean-Louis Riel.

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depends on the letters that Riel wrote to his wife from the Regina prison which were addressed to St. Vital and that agrees with the third child born in January 1886, three months after the hanging of his father. This third child did not live for many days.⁷ After the death of Madame de la Gimodiere-Riel, the family farm passed into the hands of her son Joseph. The little Marie-Angélique died from diphtheria at 11 or 14 says other sources.

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Jean-Louis Riel, the last survivor of Louis Riel, grew up at his Uncle Joseph's in St. Vital. When did his mother die? I do not have precisions on this subject. What I do know is that Jean went to St. Vital School up to fourteen years old, then the gentlemen Honoré Mercier (Jr) and Alfred Pellan (ex-secretary to the Honourable Honoré Mercier (Sr)), proposed to the family to take charge of his education. These gentlemen (who with the Honourable Jean Prévost and Alfred Laroque were his protectors during his stay in the province of Quebec) went to Montreal with him. Upon arrival, he was registered in courses at Jacques-Cartier Normal School, under the name of Jean Monet (and not Monette) because they decided it would be better not to raise the curiosity of folks who would be familiar with his real name.

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In one of his articles, Olivar Asselin tells us that he was invited one day to accompany Mr. Alfred Pellan to the Normal School to meet a young Manitoban who was doing his studies with a Quebec government bursary and that they (Pellan and Laroque) defrayed between them the cost of sundries. "In return, he told me confidentially that this young man, registered under a fake name was the son of Louis Riel."

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During his time at the Normal School, he evidentially left a good impression with his classmates. I know from some he was the lesser favourite of his professors and they, based on grades from the school, decided that Jean Riel was "intelligent enough" and had some disposition to study. This recalls the case of two other children whose professors told the school they were "too smart to learn": Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Alva Edison who proved that their professors were strangely contemptuous about their skills. But, back to the oldest son of Riel.

Jean was a great reader and the jobs he had in the provincial government prove that he had acquired considerable knowledge. In 1906 the Honourable Jean Prévost, one of his protectors, helped him to enter the Ministry of Colonization where he worked as a cartographer. This work consisted of establishing maps after notes produced by inspectors. It is this, you must admit, a work of precision for which the knowledge must be better than average. Finally in 1907 and part of 1908, he moved into the Service of Earth and Forests. The notes and memories of his prove that he wrote his French in a good way, "suitable". His critics have said despite his large stature, he was a sickly man and a drinker. Three of his companions from work were also bureaucrats in Quebec and all three agree to say that he was truly taciturn and not very communicative (didn't he have this characteristic of his

⁷ Affirmation of Mr. L-Prud'homme in an article in the "Liberté" of St. Boniface.

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ancestors?) He was not a drunk and the files of the ministers who employed him helped prove that he was always a hard worker.

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We know that in Quebec, notwithstanding his taciturn nature, he enjoyed a very grand popularity, especially with women. So great was the surprise when we learned of his marriage to a young girl from an excellent Québécois family. It was Mr. Alfred Pelland, his friend and protector of always, who knew the witness. As a matter of fact, he was strong, to the point that during his time at the Normal School, word was passed among the students not to enrage him, lest he lose his head and wound his tormentors. What's more he didn't have the pale characteristic of the sick. His complexion, always darker, brightens, proving that he was rich in blood. Nothing about the appearance of Jean-Louis justifies the impression that he had tuberculosis, as certain supposed.⁸

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He suffered for nostalgia of the prairies of the West. During his first years in Montreal, he passed his vacations in St. Vital among his own and it was there that he was really happy. As well, because he was hired to work in the construction of the Grand Trunk-Pacific Railways, barely a few after before his marriage, he moved to St. Vital and stayed with his young wife at his Uncle Joseph's.

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The railway files proved that he was employed with the title of "civil engineer". We can object to this because he didn't have the diploma which would give him this title. Anyway, in 1908, was there a corporation of civil engineers in this province?⁹ After all, don't forget that he practiced this profession in Manitoba and not in our province and the professional requirements were perhaps not the same as ours at home. We can therefore conclude that that was his title. He had the same job as civil engineers who had gained their knowledge in universities or under professors. All the same, we have many self taught who have made their marks to accept this last hypothesis.

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Anyway, he was not busy for a long time with this job, because barely three months after he was in the service of Transcontinental railway builders, he died, not in Quebec of tuberculosis as many have supposed, but at the St. Boniface Hospital (Manitoba) after a cart accident. I have documented particularly well about the circumstances surrounding the death of Jean-Louis Riel. I have a number of letters from his widow who visited him two times a day while he was at the St. Boniface Hospital; I've copied his file from the hospital, letters from Dr. E.D. Kenty, brother of Dr. James McKenty (deceased in 1940), who had treated Jean-Louis Riel, met with and interviewed Mr. Honoré Riel, cousin of Jean-Louis at the home of the father where Jean-Louis lived when he worked with the construction of the Grand Trunk-Pacific, the death certificate of Jean-Louis, etc

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⁸ Notes from Honoré Riel, cousin of Jean-Louis Riel, director of the Riel post office, St.-Vital, Manitoba.

⁹ The engineer's corporation was not created in this province until 1922.

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Summarizing all of this in a few paragraphs: the site of the railroad where Jean-Louis Riel worked is situated 15 miles from the house of his uncle Joseph Riel; where he was living with his young wife. As you can guess, the distance separating the site of the Transcontinental and the village of St. Vital prevented him from returning home each evening. It was not until the end of the week, on Saturday, that he went by foot the path the trail between the camp and his uncle's house. One Saturday night when he made his way home, one friend who had returned by cart offered him a ride and he got in with him. The "buggy" was pulled by a rather dashing and frisky bronco that came too close to the house of Joseph Riel and would not turn. The cart overturned and Jean was hit in the ribs by the wheel. Since he had to be carried home, we can conclude his injury was grave.

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For fifteen days, he was treated at home for what was believed to be an abscess in his side. I'm citing now his cousin, Honoré, son of Joseph Riel, who was only ten years old and which, as you can guess, hit hard by the sickness of Jean-Louis, "The fingers of his left hand was black like ash. He questioned amputation and was taken to the St. Boniface Hospital"

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Jean-Louis Riel entered the hospital on July 25, 1908. He talked about amputation but the injury he suffered was unfortunately, too advanced for a surgical intervention and only had a small chance of success. In the week after his admittance to hospital, he had a paralysis attack, lost his sight and on the 31st of July, six days after being admitted, he died. The certificate of death immediately gave the cause of death: malignant endocarditis. And this is how, the last descendant of Louis Riel disappears, a Colossus made to live so many years, struck down by a banal accident.

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Despite what Olivar Asselin thought, Jean-Louis didn't leave a daughter. He was married for four months and there was no child posthumously. There is not in this text a single fact that is not supported by documentation- my dossier is made of more than 50—and I am sure that this article responds, once and for all, to the question to that so many seem to pose: What happened to the children of Louis Riel?

Charles Holmes
January 24, 1943