

John Charles Sayer Jr. (b.1818)

John Charles Sayer was born in 1818 at Vermillion Lake. He was the son of John Sayer¹ a North West Company (NWC) partner who traded in the west Lake Superior area. His mother was Bwanequay Obemaunoqua (Marguerite), the daughter Mamongazida (Big Foot) an Ojibway.² The United States government made a treaty with the Ojibway of the Fond du Lac region in 1826. It is known as Treaty #133 - Treaty of Fond du Lac of Lake Superior with the Chippewa, August 5, 1826.

Article #4 was written to provide for the Métis members of the tribe and the names of those implicated are listed at the end. The list mentions Obemau unoqua and two of her children:

- To Henry Sayer and John Sayer, sons of Obemau unoqua, each one section.

The children of John Charles Sayer and his Ojibway wife Marie are:

- Pierre Guillaume Sayer born circa 1803, died August 7, 1868 at Red River Settlement. Guillaume was the principal in the famous Sayer Trial at Red River in 1849.
- George Sayer, born circa 1806 and died September 22, 1882 at Belcourt, N.D.
- James Sayer, born circa 1810.
- Anna Sayer, born 1814, died on January 12, 1842 at La Pointe, Wisconsin.
- Simon Sayer, born 1816, married Esther Assinatch (1838) then married Elizabeth Katak (1848).

John Charles had been a NWC clerk at Rainy Lake until 1821, when his employment was terminated in the NWC/Hudson's Bay Company amalgamation after he refused to take a major salary reduction. Despite being displaced, he remained a fixture around Rainy Lake for many years, living a transient life as a hunter and trapper with his father-in-law's band.³ John Dugald Cameron, the Chief Factor at Rainy Lake, noted in the post journal for 1825-1826 that:

¹ In the fall of 1804, John Sayer, a partner of the North West Company and his crew departed from Fort St. Louis, near modern-day Superior, Wisconsin. Sayer originally intended to build a post near Cross Lake, but the location for his wintering operations changed to a site two miles up the Snake River, after he conferred with local Ojibway leaders. The exact period of the post's operation remains a mystery, but recent research indicates the post saw several seasons of operation. Sometime after the post was abandoned it was destroyed by fire. Today, the North West Company Fur Post, a reconstruction of John Sayer's post, is owned and operated by the Minnesota Historical Society. The site consists of approximately 93 acres on the north and south sides of the Snake River, with the historic reconstruction on the south side.

² Big Foot aka Loon's Foot Mamongazida was born around 1727 in Lapointe. His father was No-ka or Nokay and his Ojibwa mother (unnamed) had previously been married to Snow Mountain Wabasha (a Dakota). Mamongazida often travelled to Quebec and had fought against the British with Montcalm at the Plains of Abraham in 1759.

³ Entry of 16 August 1822, David Thompson Journal, No. 52, 1 August 1822-28 February 1823, Page 15, MS 4429, AO; *ibid.*, Page 64, AO; HBCA 105/a/11, fo. 21; HBCA 105/a/14, fos. 1, 22; HBCA 105/a/18, fo. 5.

*. . . Sayer the Free Man got afraid of the high water and has abandoned his usual Haunt. He arrived here last Night. He says [he] intends going to the Plains. I have advised him to go to Red River and become a Settler. He is however a Lazy drunken Scamp and prefers leading a Vagabond Life from one turn to another than to settle when in a Place when he would be obliged to work.*⁴

The former clerk, however, went east instead of west. By the mid-1830s, he was residing at Grand Portage with his wife and children, but trading at Fort William.⁵ He utilized the fort as a safe haven, whenever food supplies or the crops he had planted for his family failed.⁶

Sayer was just one of the employees at Rainy Lake discharged as a result of the 1821 merger, when a combined workforce of almost 100 staff and men was initially cut to thirty-two and then almost halved again in 1822.⁷ Of the thirty servants stationed at Rainy Lake over the winter of 1825-1826, nineteen were European, one was a St. Regis Mohawk, and the remainder were Métis.⁸

According to the Documents Relating to the North West Company:

John Charles Sayer was a clerk and interpreter in the service of the North West Company at Sault Ste. Marie in 1806 and in 1815 and was involved in the NWC confrontation with the Selkirk settlers.

The following details are found in his personal statement as recorded in the book, the “Statement respecting the Earl of Selkirk's Settlement upon the Red River.”

The author states,

*Mr. Norman McLeod had prevailed upon a party of the Lac la Pluie Indians to join him and the other partners of the Company, in their expedition to the Red River.—What the object of that expedition was, may be easily supposed, if, in addition to the other proofs, reference be had to the deposition of Sayer, a clerk and interpreter of the North-West Company, who was employed at Lac la Pluie by Mr. McLeod to confer privately with one of the Indian chiefs, in order to ascertain whether he and his warriors would accompany them. Having obtained the chief's assent to the proposal, all the Indians about the place were immediately invited to a Council, at which Mr. McLeod, and some of his partners, were present. Liquor and tobacco having been provided, and placed before the Indians, **Sayer**, as interpreter, was directed by Mr. McLeod, to make a Speech to them. The result was, that the chief, with a party of Indians, joined McLeod, and proceeded with him towards the Red River.—**Sayer** has further deposed “that the expressions which he was” instructed to use in the speech, were such as the Indians would certainly understand as*

⁴ HBCA B 105/a/11, fo. 12.

⁵ HBCA B 231/a/16, fo. 9; HBCA B 231/a/17, fo. 20.

⁶ HBCA B 231/a/16, fo. 20; HBCA B 231/a/17, fo. 12.

⁷ HBCA B 105/e/2, fo. 4

⁸ This employee list is contained in the Key Documents Section, Document No. 1, A List of Servants at Lac La Pluie District, 1825-1826, HBCA B 105/z/1, fo. 3.

implying an instruction to go to war against the opponents of the North-West Company.
(pp. 102-103).⁹

John Charles personal deposition is found on pages lxxv-lxxvi in the appendix of the book.

According to the Hudson Bay records, John was working with the North West Company even before 1811. He continued with the NWCo from 1811 to 1816 at Lac La Pluie and worked at Sault Ste. Marie in 1817. He was in Montreal in 1818 when his father died and then worked at Fort William and Lac La Pluie between 1819 and 1820.

John Charles' account book for 1816 indicates that he paid the balance of his mother's account on the Sault Ste Marie's books for that year. This shows that Obemau-unoqua was at the Sault at that time and that John Charles was covering part of her expenses. She was probably staying with her children, Henry or Julia.

Roderick McKenzie reported that one Mr. Sayer of the NWC occupied a post at Vermilion Lake with a force of one clerk and six servants in 1819. I presume that this was John Charles.

There is some confusion as to the location of Vermilion Lake. Fur traders referred to Crane Lake as Vermilion Lake, or Little Vermilion Lake, which leads to confusion with the larger Vermilion Lake to the south. Lord Selkirk referred to an old North West house at what was presumably the larger Vermilion Lake in 1817: "the old NW house at Vermilion is off the route to the Grand Portage four or five days up a river that falls into Vermilion Lake."



LOUIS RIEL INSTITUTE
Knowledge • Culture • Heritage

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

⁹ Statement respecting the Earl of Selkirk's Settlement upon the Red River Publication: London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1817.