

Alexandre “Catchou” McGillis. (1863-1968)

By Melvin Beaudry, Larry Haag

Angus Alexandre was born to Angus McGillis Sr. (b. 1837) and Isabelle Fagnant¹ at St. François Xavier, just west of St. Boniface. He was born in November of 1863 and baptized on December 23rd of the same year. The family lived at St. François Xavier until he was about seven years old. After the Resistance of 1869-70, the hostility towards Metis people became almost unbearable and the McGillis family packed their belongings into a Red River cart and went south (probably along the Crow Wing Trail) they then headed west following the trails into Montana, and finally turned north into present day Saskatchewan. Angus first went into the Wood Mountain area to an existing Metis settlement. They soon heard of more fertile land to the east and moved to the area, which was later known as St. Victor.

In 1862, the McGillis family settled permanently on the site that Catchou was to call home for 91 years. He grew up participating in the buffalo hunt, but each year they had to go further and further to hunt the monarchs of the plains, until it was impossible to find a herd of any reasonable size. In addition, the herds were harder to locate. By 1881, when Catchou was 18, the hunt was a thing of the past. However, he does have the distinction of killing the last wild buffalo on the plains of southern Saskatchewan.

He then turned his skills as a horseman to ranching. First, he worked for Pascal Bonneau and later for Jean Louis Legare, a French Canadian who had immigrated to Wood Mountain from Quebec. Catchou became known as one of the best horsemen of the area. Roping from the back of a horse is not easy, but Catchou made it look simple, almost natural. By 1888, Catchou had his own spread and moved into cattle ranching in a big way. By then, he had four sections of land. He was only 25, but he had men many years his senior working for him. Alexandre was single and never married. He was respected by one and all. He was honest, hard working, and worked along side his men.

The name “Catchou” is Michif Cree for “Little Man.” Catchou was said to be fluent in several languages; Michif, the language of the Metis, Cree, Saulteaux and French. He was not a large man, some say he stood 5’ 7” on his best day, some say he was even shorter in stature, but he was a giant at heart. No task was too large and no challenge too big. He took everything in stride and resolved most problems in time.

In the winter of 1904-05, there was severe weather, and again in 1906-07 it turned bitterly cold. Cattle died during both winters, killing most of Catchou’s herd. He never recovered from those winters and instead turned to raising horses and hiring out to other ranchers in the area. He had to sell some of his land to remain out of debt. Catchou never married. He is said to have never taken white man’s medicine, but did smoke a pipe well into his twilight years.

¹ Isabelle was the daughter of Jean Baptiste Fagnant and Josephthe Monet *dit* Belhumeur.

His father died in 1881, and his mother died in 1933 at age 96. Catchou spent his final years at St. Anthony's Home in Moose Jaw. St. Victor's Parish owes much to this man; he donated a large parcel of land to the parish at its founding in 1914. His greatest gift was telling stories to whoever would listen, and he had many stories. Although not wealthy in a material sense, his passing down of knowledge of the old ways to the following generations was the greatest gift any person could receive.



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