

An Unexpected Battle

Prologue

“Pierre!” a gruff voice called my name. “The trail! You’re getting off track!”

I looked up to see Henry, the tough, burly guy with a long beard that was in charge of leading this hunting shift, gesturing at me to speed up the cart.

I snapped the oxens reins to get a faster speed and couldn’t help but realize as the screeching from the cart's wheels intensified.

There were about twenty Metis men on this hunting trip, and three large red river carts with oxen to hold our hunting supplies and all of the Bison meat and furs that we managed to collect on the trip. I knew that our village was just over this last hill, I couldn’t wait to see my wife and my family.

The truth is, I get really homesick. I know that I’m a grown man, but I miss my family when I’m gone on trips. *I’ll be home before I know it*, I’d tell myself over and over again. *Just stay strong. Stay strong for your family.*

This was an especially challenging time for us Metis, as the British had brutally handed over part of the First Nations and our land by the Red River to the Hudson's Bay Company. This restricted our hunting zones for bison and was blatantly just rude in a million different ways. I mean, the British had always acted like they were in charge of the First Nations, but now us too? I mean yes, we are partly made up of First Nations people, but we are not all First Nations, and the First Nations shouldn’t be treated like that in the first place! My *wife* shouldn’t be treated like that.

I first met my wife, Paskus, on a French hunting trip near the Cree peoples a long time ago. I must’ve only been a teenager back then. We had run into each other as we

were both walking along the river, and as the leaders of our group tried to communicate in separate languages, our eyes met. As I got to know Paskus more and more throughout the years, I eventually took her as my wife and we went to live in the Metis village by the Red River together. We Metis have our own language, Michif, which is mostly a mixture of French and Cree, with other First Nations languages mixed in here and there.

Our village is a very nice place to live, a peaceful, hardworking environment where everyone knows each other. Paskus cooks, cleans and takes care of the children most of the day, while I go out on hunting trips or go out in the fields to farm.

One of my good Metis friends, Joseph Letendre, wants me to try fishing with him, although I refuse to sit out by the muddy river bank all day just to catch two to five medium sized fish. He tells me it's not really like what I think it is, and it can get really entertaining at points, but I still think it would be a waste of time.

I snapped my head back into reality as the cart bumped over the uneven hillside and reached over the edge to the village. I smiled as our bustling village came into view, and people on the street began to wave, welcoming us in.

“Content de te revoir! Comment s’est passé ton voyage Pierre?” (*Happy to see you again! How was your trip Pierre?*) A smiling French man, Miles, greeted me with a warm smile.

“C’était super, nous avons attrapé beaucoup de bisons lors de ce voyage. J’espère que ça va nous durer un moment!” (*It was great, we caught a lot of bison on this trip! Hopefully this will last us a while!*) I answered, guiding the oxen towards the stalls.

The Mourning Dove

I paused at the doorstep and took a whiff of Paskus' favorite homemade stew, a meatball vegetable mix that smelled just like you would imagine it. I could hear the children playing and the stove crackling through the wooden door.

As I cracked the door open, I could see our youngest, Rufas, giggling on the stone floor as he rocked back and forth. Soon Amelia came into view, tickling Rufas' feet so he laughed even harder. The door creaked and their heads spun around before Amielia jumped up to greet me at the doorway.

"Dad! You're home! I missed you so so so so much!" She spoke fluently in Michif.

I leaned down to kiss her gently on the top of her head. "I missed you too, Amelia."

Stepping to the side, I greeted Paskus and engulfed her in a hug.

"The trip?" she whispered quietly into my ear.

"It was alright. Caught quite a lot of bison this time."

"But were you homesick?" She questioned worriedly.

"I'll be fine. I'm back now." I replied, avoiding her question.

Taking the hint, Paskus calmly took the pot off of the burner and began serving it into six small, wooden bowls.

Soon Reid and Nya came back from the fields and we all sat down to enjoy the first meal that we had together in the past week.

Paskus and I stayed up late that night stressing about the Hudson's Bay company. Not only were they still living off of our rightful land, but they had set up trading

posts just down the river from us. It was getting way too serious now, and almost the whole village was fuming under the topic. We were starting to get worried that they might keep taking land, and what that would mean for our children's future.

By the time that the sun began to make its journey over the horizon, I was up for the day. Since winter had finally passed, I wanted to go out for a walk by the river before the rest of the house had woken up. I didn't have anything in particular planned for that day, so I figured that I would get some food from the market later and maybe stop to get some new yarn for Paskus to use while I was at it. She was currently working on weaving a new wool blanket for Rufas, as he was growing out of his old one.

Closing the door to our cottage quietly, I started down the cobblestone street towards the river bank. I observed the houses and shops lining the streets, smiling to myself as I paired a photo and brief description of each person that inhabited each of the buildings.

The Letendre's lived just down the road from our cottage. We were good family friends. Joseph Letendre was specifically close to us. I could picture his goatee and friendly smile right off the bat. He was sixteen and would visit Amelia, Reid, Nya, and Rufus every once in a while, playing with them and staying for dinner when he had the chance. Our family loved having him around, we even joked about him being a member of our family.

As I passed the Farmer's Market, wooding shop, and more houses of friends and family, more pictures came to mind. I smiled as I reached the bank, the spot where Joseph wanted to take me fishing, and I listened to the mourning dove cooing and the

early birds joining in peaceful harmony. I sat down in the dewy grass, thinking of all the great memories I'd had here.

Later that same day, I was at my house playing with the kids when I heard a sharp knock at the door. *Henry*. I thought, getting up to open it. Sure enough, it was Henry standing in the doorway, holding a gruff look on his face.

“Okay Labruler, I've got a job for you.” Henry welcomed himself in, not bothering to ask for permission beforehand.

“What is it Henry?” I asked, trying not to hide my disappointment. I really wanted a day off today.

“We're going to deliver some pemmican to the North West Company on Lake Winnipeg.”

“The one at the Canoe bridges?” I asked. I figured that there would be many men taken on this trip, as it was a long journey.

“Yes.” Henry confirmed. “Gather your stuff and meet us at the red river carts at dawn tomorrow.”

June 19, 1816. That was the date that we ran into the HBC at the Seven Oaks.

I had been very tired from sleeping on the ground for so many nights, and was feeling extremely homesick at this point. It was early in the morning, and I was walking with Joseph Letendre along the road. There were about sixty Metis men on this trip, including Henry, Joseph, and I. We were led by Cuthbert Grant, the original founder of the Metis Nation. I barely remember what happened, it was all such a blur.

“The Hudson's Bay company?”

“I can't see!”

“Is that Robert Semple?!”

“Are we in danger?”

“Selkirk Soldiers!”

“Help!”

If I'm honest, I don't remember what happened next, except that Cuthbert and Semple exchanged some words and then we all started to raise our hunting supplies and charge into a battle at the Seven Oaks.

I looked to my side, my heart thumping. “Joseph?” My voice was muffled by the crowd. Joseph was nowhere in sight. I spun around, looking for Henry, who'd been a few steps behind us the whole time. Nowhere!

That's when I began to panic. “Henry! Joseph!” I called helplessly, my vision getting blurry.

A bearded man pushed past me to get to the center of the fight, calling in Michif and holding a dagger at hand.

That's when I saw them. The Selkirk soldiers. Robert Grant. War, breaking out.

I took a deep breath as an attempt to calm myself down. My hands shook as I pulled my hunting bow and arrows out from my bag. I ducked behind a tree for shelter, tracing my fingers along the side of my bow. I knew I should just stay out of it, but I felt so helpless. I had to be the strong one, for once. I aimed the bow, ready to release into the air. Then, I let my arrow fly through the air like the gentle birds I had heard on my early morning walk that day. So delicate, so peaceful. Like a morning dove.

After the seven remaining Selkirk soldiers retreated, Henry had pulled me out of a small ditch under an oak tree just off the road. I must've buried myself in there after I had flung my arrow aimlessly into the fields. It hadn't hit anyone, which I was actually relieved about because if it had I don't know what I would have done with myself.

"Get up sleepyhead." Henry ordered, his gruff tone unaltered after the battle.

"What... what happened?" I murmured, still shivering in fright.

"I have good news and bad news." Henry said, lowering his tone.

"What's the bad news?" I asked worriedly.

"Well, the good news is that we won? We killed 20 of the men and Robert Grant?" His voice went up at the end of every sentence, as if it were a question.

I knew that he was hiding something, trying to mask the pain.

"What's the bad news Henry?" I demanded, looking him straight in the eye.

"What happened?"

Henry exalted, letting out a deep breath. As he slowly tilted his head up to me, I could see the grief in his eyes. The pain, the longingness look in his eyes, like something was done that could never be undone.

"It's Joseph." He seemed relieved to let the words out of his mouth. "He's dead."

I don't know how to say this lightly, but I wasn't surprised. As soon as he disappeared from my side, I knew that something was off.

"He went straight in, aiming for victory, but it was too late. Shot with a Selkeirk arrow straight in the chest." Henry explained, running his dusty fingers through his hair.

"We couldn't save him."

I thought of my arrow, how it had plunged through the air so gracefully. I wondered if the Selkirk arrow did the same, gliding through the air like a mourning dove just to end up piercing its enemy dead on. I was glad that my arrow hadn't caused such a dreadful fate.

Epilogue

I stare blankly at Joseph Letendres' grave. It's just a chunk of stone in a graveyard, but it still reminds me of all the memories we had together. Now I wish that I'd taken him up on the offer to go fishing with him.

The whole village is raving about the battle. 'The Battle of the Seven Oaks' they call it. People are angry that they interrupted our peaceful journey, proud that they stood no chance, victorious that we had finally stood up to the HBC and won! But then there are the people that are grieving. I felt especially bad for the Letendres, who are still grieving their son's death.

Joseph, luckily, was the only Metis man to die in the battle of the Seven Oaks. Joseph Trottier was wounded, but I don't know him personally and everyone else was pretty much fine.

I guessed that life in the village would just go back to normal after the trip, and I was correct. Soon enough I was scheduled to go on another hunting trip, and before I went, Paskus had given me a surprise.

"A brand new blanket, for you," she explained with a Cree accent.

As she handed me the brand new wool blanket, I asked her why she had made it. "I already have a good and working blanket," I explained, confused.

“It’s for your hunting trip,” she said, like it explained everything.

I looked at her questioningly. “But... why?”

“So you don’t get homesick,” she answered, taking a fresh pot of noodles off the stove.

Sure enough, the blanket helped. Every time that I had started to feel homesick I stroked the fuzzy brown wool until I felt completely calm.

Looking up, I listen to the call of the mourning dove. *Oh Joseph, I think. That mourning dove shall always remind me of you. You were so good to me. To us.*

Looking back on my life before the battle, I’ve grown a lot since then. I no longer get homesick, I participated in helping my village by fighting in an unplanned battle against the HBC, I hunted enough bison to last my family through the winter, and I think that I’ve managed to maintain a better relationship with Henry through all that we’ve been through together. Sure, there’s been toils and troubles along the way, and a friend lost, but at least there was some good to come out of it.

I closed my eyes, exhaling as I flipped through the photo book in the back of my head of all the memories and possible things to come.



Works Cited

Bailey, Karen E. "Red River Resistance." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/red-river-rebellion>. Accessed 21 June 2023.

"Contributions Made by Métis People." *Manitoba Métis Federation*, https://www.mmf.mb.ca/wcm-docs/docs/our-culture/contributions_made_by_metis_people.pdf. Accessed 21 June 2023.

Dumont, Gabriel. "Métis Historic Timeline - Métis Nation of Ontario." *Metis Nation of Ontario*, <https://www.metisnation.org/culture-heritage/metis-timeline/>. Accessed 21 June 2023.

