Breeds And Half-Breeds

GORDON SPECK

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PIERRE DORION, SR.

1780–1807

THREE generations of Dorions served the American West. They guided civilization from the Missouri to the Pacific, and their lives spanned history from an unexplored wilderness to the State House on the Willamette.

Pierre Dorion, Sr., was a member of a prominent Quebec family, at least one branch of which was interested in public affairs. Reputedly he was born sometime before 1750, and left the comforts of Quebec and came to Cahokia, Illinois, before 1780. He was therefore well toward middle life (old age came early in the 1780's) before he ventured to the frontier.

Why he left Quebec is unknown. It may have been nothing more than the urge to go west and make a fortune. It may have been something more personal. The survivors of unpopular duels often changed addresses; judges looked the other way when a troublesome character left town; gambling debts stood little chance of being collected west of the Mississippi; and nagging wives seldom followed decamping husbands to the wilderness. It is all conjecture, but Pierre the elder certainly cut his ties with civilization relatively late in life and in a dramatic fashion. He remained at Cahokia but a short time, moved to St. Louis briefly, and then gave up all pretense of civilized connections and went to the Yankton Sioux and took a squaw. He never left the Indian life except for occasional trips to St. Louis.

The Missouri marked the line between civilized society and total wilderness, albeit a wilderness not entirely unknown. Spaniards and Frenchmen had long tramped the plains of the Dakotas and, farther to the west, had trembled, as did the natives, at the mighty noise which came from the far reaches of the "Stony Mountains"—a great crashing

reverberation which was heard by many a mountain man, and which remains unexplained in any very convincing fashion even to this day.

It was this wilderness which the elder Pierre Dorion adopted when he dropped his white man's civilization, chose his Yankton woman, and founded the family which became a legend.

Very little is known of his first twenty years on the Missouri beyond the fact that he was engaged in trade and became sufficiently important to cause concern among rival traders.

Beginning in early August of 1799 and continuing for several months, an exchange of letters passed among Dorion, Spanish Governor Charles Dehault Delassus, and L. Honoré Tesson (or Taisont as he sometimes wrote it), a trader with a post at the present Montrose, Iowa.

The burden of these exchanges was Dorion's request of Delassus for a grant of land on the Des Moines River with privileges of trading with the local Indians, and Tesson's warning to Delassus that Dorion was a foreigner, from Mackinac, and probably represented British interests, and even more probably would cause trouble.

Therefore, what should he, Tesson, do?

The initial letters were followed in rapid succession by urgent notes: Dorion had arrived via the Illinois River; Dorion was trading; now he was with the Iowas; *now* two sons of Dorion's had arrived armed with a license to trade issued by their own interloping father, but probably they were working for a man named Crofeurte or Croford or—anyway, an Englishman who had already caused trouble on the river and was most assuredly behind this Dorion fellow; and you just ask Mr. Loisel (a Spanish trader on Cedar Island in the Missouri), and he will tell you all about it.[1]

Tesson told Delassus that he personally had met Pierre the elder at the mouth of the Des Moines River and caught him trading with the Iowas. Some action certainly should be taken against such a formidable rival.[2]

As if Delassus could do anything to stop the Dorion breed! Nor did he. They continued to trade.

Pierre Dorion, Sr., learned Indian languages easily. He loved Indian life, and he married a number of times and begot sons—how many no one knows. The river and mountain men chose their Indian women according to the code of each tribe, and married and deserted them according to that same code.

Indeed, where could Dorion or any other frontier "sinner" have found a clergyman to murmur a ritual?

And so the elder Dorion begot sons, and one of them, Pierre Dorion, Jr., carried on the family tradition as interpreter-guide. And his son, Baptiste Dorion, did likewise. We need feel no shame for them even if they did not always obey the moralists.

But is was a ribald and riotous family. Old Dorion and his half-breed sons often got drunk together. Once when he, young Pierre, one or two other sons, and an assortment of squaws were all home at one time, the boys and their father got drunk and engaged in a "friendly fight"—a common diversion among the voyageurs, mountain men, and Indians, especially after the last learned the use of whiskey.

There was no particular ill feeling in these brawls, at least in their early stages. Old men, young boys, and, if the truth were known, the squaws too, often put on magnificent bouts fatal only if they got out of hand. On the present occasion, young Pierre bested his father, grabbed his scalping knife, and was about to use it when the pater-familias sobered enough to cry, "Hold, my son, you are too brave, too honorable to scalp your father."[3] If the story is perchance apocryphal, it is nevertheless in the image of the Dorions.

By the time Lewis and Clark left St. Louis on their westbound journey, Pierre the elder had been with the Indians at least twenty years and Pierre the younger was a strapping half-breed assigned to managing a trading post among the Yankton Sioux for the Chouteau family, St. Louis traders. The elder Dorion was also trading along the Missouri, and was just coming downstream with two rafts loaded with buffalo hides and tallow as Lewis and Clark were starting up the river. Under date of June 12, 1804, Sergeant Ordway wrote, "We Got an old Frenchman to go with us which could Speak Several languages, among the indians for a long distance."[4]

The Americans recognized the advantage of having Dorion smooth their route through Sioux country, and as previously noted, they placed great importance on having Indian chiefs visit Washington. They hoped Dorion could arrange for several such guests. He was therefore hired to leave his rafts, reverse his route, and return to the Sioux, meanwhile acting as another interpreter-guide between the modern Glasgow, Missouri, and Yankton, South Dakota. A guide was not in any sense necessary, and Dorion was almost exclusively an

interpreter of Indian life, but in this role he was exceptionally skilled. He knew river customs, and was well informed on various natural phenomena—the stone breastworks six or seven feet high and a hundred yards long which, though often attributed to glacial deposits, were believed by the Dorions and many other trained Indian observers to be of Indian origin; or the Pipestone quarries in Minnesota from which the Indians made their ceremonial pipes, and which were a sanctuary for friend, foe, or tribal criminal.

On the last day of August, Sergeant Pryor and Dorion arranged a council with the first band of Sioux, and found with them Pierre Dorion, Jr. Young Dorion, five chiefs, and about seventy warriors came to talk and to give the Americans parcels of general information about the Yanktons and their home territory—information which either of the Dorions could have supplied without the formalities of a council, but these meetings were accepted protocol.

However, the explorers did not understand certain other facets of frontier protocol, and they committed a serious faux pas. At the council they gave young Pierre a flag, clothes, and other provisions as prepayment for services he was engaged to perform, but they neglected to invite his father to the feast following the council. The senior Dorion was "much displeased that we did not invite him to dine with us" said Clark.[5] This oversight wounded the older man's pride, and he immediately withdrew from expedition service, except that he agreed to fulfill his previous promise to enlist Sioux chiefs to take the long and, for them, dangerous journey to Washington.

These excursions could become complicated. The Indians were not used to traveling under the white man's conditions, and they often became unbelievably homesick and physically ill. They could not understand such disabilities, and the resultant fears bred distrust of any suggestion made by their escort which deviated ever so little from the original promises.

After several months the Dorions got a delegation ready and took them to St. Louis. In the meantime Lewis and Clark were urging still others to visit the "White Father," and a number of Arikara chiefs actually got to Washington, independently of the Dorions. There one of the chiefs died in 1805.

This death had to be explained to the folks back home if a war of revenge were to be averted. Joseph Gravelines, another longtime interpreter on the river but one about whom little is known, was given

An Arikara Indian. Painting by Karl Bodmer. *U.S. Signal Corps, Photo 111-sc-92840, The National Archives.*

a free hand for this not too promising task. As a beginning he collected a sizable package of presents as an indemnity for the chief's death. To get these past the Sioux and to the Arikaras was the first hurdle. Gravelines asked that the elder Dorion help in the talks with the Sioux.

Both interpreters were to travel upriver with a trading company under the command of one of the several Robert McClellans who were engaged in Indian trade.

On the way they were to inquire for news of Lewis and Clark. The lapse of so many months was considered evidence of total disaster by most national figures—Jefferson being an exception—and the attitude itself was mute testimony to the general ignorance of the vastness of North America 300 years after Columbus.

The negotiations among Dorion, Gravelines, and McClellan had taken so much time that on September 12, 1806, their party going up the river met Lewis and Clark as they were coming home.

Events now become confused, for at this point we must resume the story of René Jusseaume.

When Lewis and Clark returned from the Pacific, they naturally stopped at the Mandans again. Aided by Jusseaume and perhaps one of the Dorion family, they induced Chief Sheheke, or Big White, and his family to visit Washington. We have seen that Jusseaume was chosen to accompany Big White as interpreter. The entire party left the Mandans on August 17, 1806.

To Jusseaume's credit, he took his charges to Washington, called upon Jefferson, saw the sights, and returned to St. Louis without too much difficulty. Here the troubles began. As noted, one Arikara chief had died in Washington, and Big White could not have been kept in ignorance of it; he had been away from his people for a long time, and now he was told he must wait until a military escort could be provided for his further return.

Lieutenant Joseph Kimball was to go with the Indians as far as the Sioux, and Ensign Nathaniel Pryor and George Shannon, former Lewis and Clark men, were to continue the escort to the Mandans. Each officer was to have a small force of men. Kimball and Pryor were to be supported further by Auguste Pierre Chouteau, West Point graduate and son of the St. Louis merchant Jean Pierre Chouteau, and Pierre Dorion, Jr., each of whom would command a trading party. Altogether there were ninety-four persons, including the women and children.[6]

The extreme irregularity in the use of Christian names makes any identification of Chouteau portraits suspect. The above is probably René Auguste, 1749-1829, one of the founders of St. Louis. *The State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia.*

Shoh-ske, or Big White. Crayon portrait by C. B. J. F. de Saint-Mémin. *Courtesy of the New York Historical Society, New York City.*

It all appeared simple enough until the elder Dorion returned to St. Louis following his aid to Gravelines.

In the National Archives at Washington is a letter headlined St. Louis, May 18, 1807, from William Clark, Indian agent, to General Dearborn, Secretary of War, in which Clark refers to the senior Dorion as an Indian subagent for Missouri appointed by General Wilkinson. But the important item, said Clark, was that Dorion had arrived in St. Louis "a fiew days ago" with fifteen Sioux *on their way to Washington.*

Clark was having Indian trouble. Big White was on his hands, and now Dorion had showed up with fifteen Sioux. Since Clark had no instructions to finance their further journey, he told Dorion to take them home and stay with them until he received further orders.

Dorion then demanded his wages—contracted to be $1.50 per day, almost twice the usual rate, which readily indicates his reputation. He also asked reimbursement for goods he had used as presents while coaxing the Sioux to leave their homes. Clark paid the wages, and wrote that "Mr. Deirion has great influence with the Sicous haveing resided near thirty years with those people and can be of great service to the government in keeping those vicious tribes at peace."[7]

Despite this praise, Clark haggled over the goods Dorion had bought, and finally refused to pay "Two of his accounts . . . which he was not positively ordered to expend in his instructions, . . . altho I think that it might have been necessary to give such things &c. . ."[8]—a tortured bit of rationalization apparently designed to make Clark's cash account look good at Dorion's expense.

When all details were arranged, the Kimball-Pryor-Chouteau expedition to return Big White finally began. Trouble on the lower Missouri was now rare, and the combined commands reached the Arikara villages without incident on September 9, 1807.

There the Rees and a considerable force of Sioux allies opened hostilities, apparently catching Kimball and Pryor by surprise.[9] Why the military should have been unaware of the Indian temper is a minor mystery. That all three interpreters failed to sense trouble and so gave no warning is a hypothesis too absurd to be taken seriously. More likely, Chouteau and the military refused to listen to underlings better qualified than they to judge Indian behavior.

Ensign Pryor thought the Indians had been incited by the British, but this idea was considerably undermined when a captive Mandan

Pierre Chouteau, Jr. *The State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia.*

squaw stole to Pryor and told him that the Rees, the Sioux, and her people were just then engaged in one of their eternal wars, and that this accounted for the general ill will.

Chouteau now suggested that perhaps the Indians could be soothed by seeing his gaudiest trade goods, whereupon the "Two interpreters, Dorion and Jusseaume, went by land through the villages,"[10] and nearly lost their lives—for the Indians rejected the baubles and opened fire. It was here that Jusseaume probably received the wound for which he later petitioned "Monsieur le Président" for a pension.

The military returned the fire, hoping to cover the reembarkation of the several men who had gone ashore. But the whites were outgunned and outnumbered, and a retreat was ordered. Chouteau's boat got stuck on a sandbar and was dragged to safety just in time; Shannon eventually lost a leg from his wounds; and at least four whites were killed and twice that many were wounded.[11]

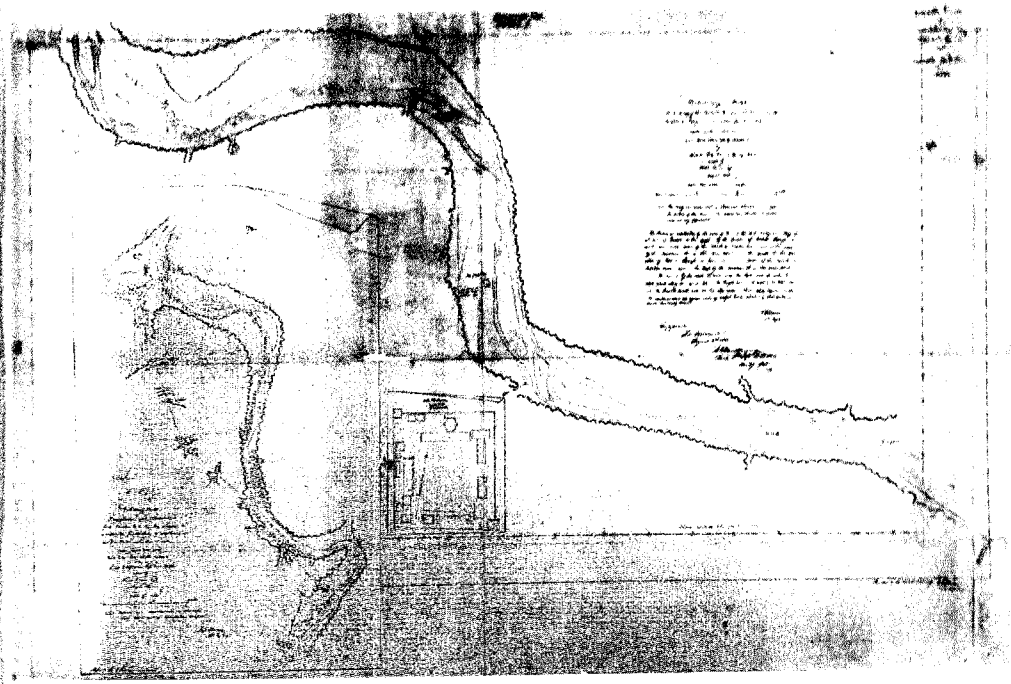
It was here, too, that Big White refused to detour overland to avoid the Arikaras, and Jusseaume and Pryor had no choice but to return their charges to St. Louis.

Big White was no closer home than he had been a year before. And there we must leave him and René Jusseaume until their story can be resumed a year later.

Both Dorions apparently remained upriver when Big White returned to St. Louis, and Dorion the elder became a somewhat hazy figure in the journals of the river.

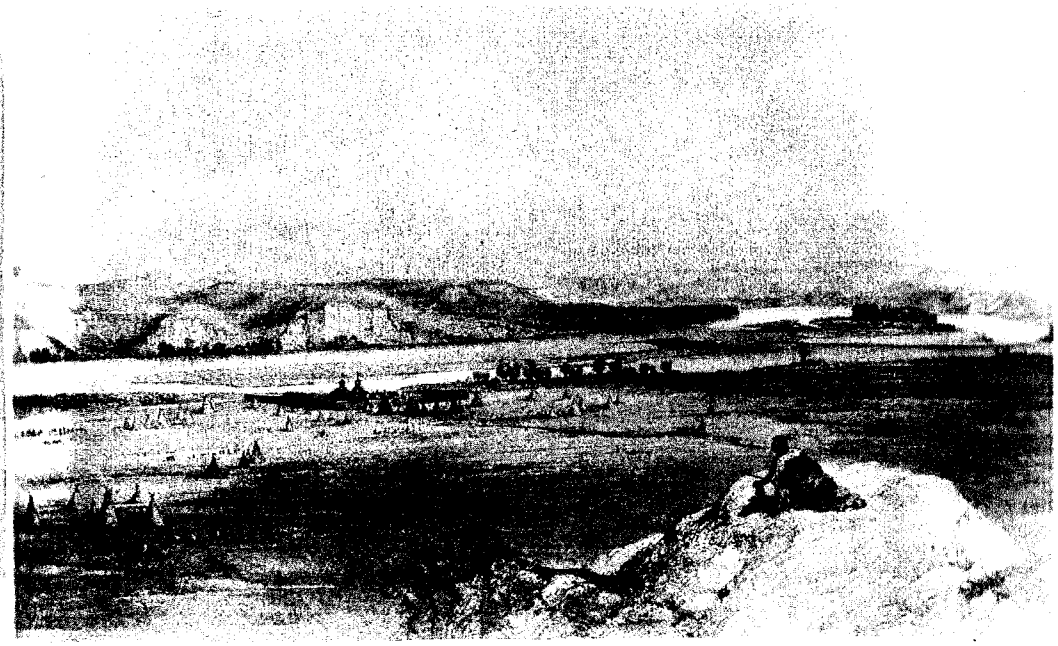
Pierre Dorion, Sr., was a trustworthy interpreter and Indian subagent; he must have participated in many of the stirring events which made Charbonneau's life one long adventure. But Dorion lacked Toussaint's flare for publicity. Royalty, river captains, and military commanders all surely used his ability, but they often neglected to mention it. He never moved beyond the footnotes of notice in the annals of the West.

Toward the end of his life, he lived in a tepee outside the walls of Fort Pierre, South Dakota. Tradition says that his tent was a flamboyant red and had scalps fluttering from the center poles, and that "Old Pierre" loafed about in the garish clothes of the voyageurs, telling tall tales of the past and wishing he were young again. But variations of the same stories are told about one or more of his half-breed sons, so we had best leave it as tradition.[12]



U.S. Army survey of the Missouri River near Fort Pierre, 1855. The modern Pierre, South Dakota, is across on the east bank. Inset shows the plan of the old post. *The National Archives, Record Group #77, Dr. 126-1.*

Fort Pierre, 1832, site of the present Pierre, South Dakota. *U.S. Signal Corps, Photo 111-sc-92851, The National Archives.*



Chapter 20. Toussaint Charbonneau Grows Old

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2. Carl Russell Fish, *The Rise of the Common Man,* New York, Macmillan Co., 1927, p. 294.

3. DeVoto, *op. cit.,* p. 283.

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5. DeVoto, *op. cit.,* p. 134.

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Chapter 21. Pierre Dorion, Sr.

1. See Tesson to Delassus, August 4 through October 10, 1799; Pierre Chouteau Collection, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

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3. Washington Irving, *Astoria,* New York, Century Co., 1909, p. 202.

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5. Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804–1806,* ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites, 8 vols., New York, Dodd, Mead & Co., 1904–1905, I, 129 ff.

6. Olin D. Wheeler, *The Trail of Lewis and Clark,* 2 vols., New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1926, I, 93; W. J. Ghent, *The Early Far West,* New York, Tudor Publishing Co., 1936, p. 116.

7. William Clark, Indian agent at St. Louis, to General Henry Dearborn, Secretary of War, May 18, 1807; War Department Records, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Copy with the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Wheeler, *op. cit.,* I, 93–94.

10. Hiram Martin Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West,* 2 vols., Stanford, Academic Reprints, 1954, I, 123.

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12. Maximilian, Prince of Wied, *Travels in the Interior of North America,* Vols. XXII–XXIV of Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels,* Cleveland, Arthur H. Clark Co., 1906, XXII, 318n.

Chapter 22. Pierre Dorion, Jr., and Wilson Price Hunt

1. For a concise review of the beginnings of the Astorians, see W. J. Ghent, *The Early Far West,* New York, Tudor Publishing Co., 1936, Chap. 4.

2. Henry Marie Brackenridge, *Brackenridge's Journal of a Voyage up the Missouri River in 1811,* in Vol. VI of Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels,* Cleveland, Arthur H. Clark Co., 1904, pp. 33–34.

3. Ghent, *op. cit.,* pp. 137–138.

4. John Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior of America,* London, Smith & Galway, 1817, pp. 102–103.

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6. Bradbury, *op. cit.,* p. 103.

7. *Ibid.,* p. 103.

8. Brackenridge, *op. cit.,* p. 107.

9. *Ibid.,* pp. 107–108.