Breeds And Half-Breeds

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RENÉ JUSSEAUME

1789?–1830?

THE "loveliest myth of all America was . . . the West. It was a poem of the sunset . . . of waste places and lonely peaks, a land of valleys and hills that drank water of the rains of heaven, a lost impossible province under far clouds, where men were not dwarfs and where adventure truly was."[1]

Yet life in this "loveliest myth" was somewhat complicated. True, men worked only when they had to, which was most of the time; ate when they could, which was generally irregularly; and relaxed when and where the fleshpots flourished. But by the same rules they had to be reasonably efficient in all manner of tasks—or they died. The frontier offered food for the killing when it could be found; and nature was unbelievably beautiful, but she was also a hard and ruthless ruler. There were no limits to the hours of work, no exclusive channels of labor. A man must do many things.

Learning to survive and learning to communicate with the natives were the prime requisites of frontier life, and it was a rare trapper or trader who could not double as an interpreter of sorts.

René Jusseaume, least of the Lewis and Clark interpreters, was such a one.

Jusseaume was a Canadian, presumably French, and had come to the Mandans perhaps as early as 1789.[2] He had a "wife and family who dress and live like the natives. He retains the outward appearance of a Christian, but his principles, as far as I can observe, are much worse than those of the Mandans: he is possessed of every superstition natural to those people, nor is he different in every mean, dirty trick they have acquired from intercourse with the set of scoundrels who visit these parts . . . some to trade and others to screen themselves from justice," said Alexander Henry the younger.[3]

Notwithstanding this reputation, René Jusseaume was on the payroll of the North West Company on the Red River a few years after his arrival in the West.

In the meantime, the great David Thompson, surveyor-explorer for both the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company, was rising to frontier fame. In 1797 he left the first company and joined the second; he departed from Alexander Fraser's House at the head of Reindeer River and set off for Cumberland House up near The Pas; thence he went back down to Lake Winnipeg, the Grand Portage, and Lake Superior. Here he encountered and joined forces with the greatest of the fur brigade commanders, Hugh McGillis.

In company with McGillis, he tramped over, paddled through, and surveyed hundreds of square miles of the Canadian fur country between Cumberland House and John McDonnell's House, a mile and a half above the mouth of the Souris (Mouse) River.

David Thompson was a restless, intense man. Despite the advent of winter, when he arrived at McDonnell's House he determined to go at once to the Mandans via the Souris Valley, purportedly to establish regular North West Company trade with them and other Missouri River tribes.[4] But English traders had reached the Mandans probably as early as the close of the American Revolution, and the most Thompson could do was divert business to his company and perhaps induce the Indians to abandon their recent attachment to roving Spanish traders up from the South.[5]

Thompson started for the Missouri accompanied by "Mons^{r} Jussome who fluently spoke the Mandan Language [and] M^{r} Hugh McCrachan a good hearted Irishman,"[6] along with seven other men, probably voyageurs out to become "free traders."

While it was true that McCrachan and Jusseaume were familiar with the Mandans and that McCrachan had made the present journey many times, Thompson's confidence in Jusseaume's fluency was not justified. The Canadian had been on the Missouri for nearly a decade, perhaps longer, but he had not acquired real proficiency in the Indian tongues. Alexander Henry the younger said Jusseaume spoke the Mandan language only "tolerably well," and called him "that old sneaking cheat whose character was more despicable than the worst among the natives."[7] Lewis and Clark said they found him "to be assumeing and discont'd."[8]

René Jusseaume could seldom deliver the quality of services of which he constantly boasted.

Thompson was in trouble on two counts before he left the Souris River post late in November, 1797. He had a poor interpreter-guide, and he was ill equipped with animals. He had but two horses. Jusseaume had only one, and the remainder of the crew owned a total of thirty half-savage and untrained dogs on which they spent endless hours, untangling harnesses and cursing the snarling brutes.

Yet there was cause for some optimism. The rivers were frozen, and three inches of dry snow promised a fast trail. The morning of departure was crisp and bright, but as the sun climbed slowly it brought no warmth. Exhaled breath spiraled into freezing vapors; fingers uncovered to fill a pipe with biting trade tobacco were quickly numb; soft moccasins squeaked louder and louder on the crystal snow. By sundown it was zero, by eight o'clock 20 degrees below, and by morning 27 degrees below zero.

Travel was impossible, and the men waited, shot at buffalo, and damned the cold. When it moderated five days later, fierce prairie winds had whipped the dry snow into huge drifts often as impossible to cross as sheer cliffs of granite.

Thompson had intended to follow the Souris except for cutting across a bend whenever this offered a better route. But he had not reckoned with his voyageurs' fear of the compass. They wished to remain close to the river, apparently not knowing that its reverse bend would place them in Saskatchewan, not among the Mandans. McCrachan had been to the Missouri several times, but he was not a guide, and Jusseaume had become hopelessly confused by the recent storms—if indeed he had ever been otherwise.

A week after they left McDonnell's House, some chance-met Indians told Thompson the Sioux knew of their journey and intended to prevent them from reaching the Mandans. "I did not like this news," said Thompson, "but the men paid no attention."[9] Voyageurs frightened by a compass they did not understand were disdainful of the Sioux who threatened their lives.

Next morning Jusseaume suggested a shortcut, but "Mons^{r} Jussome could not say where we were,"[10] and Thompson declined. It was an alarming situation. The ten men were partly lost, they had no adequate shelter, and they were without either an honest guide or an efficient interpreter. They did, however, appear to have food,

for Thompson's journal says he "reproved them, for what I thought Gluttony, eating full eight pounds of fresh meat p[r] day . . . ," at which the men replied that eating was their greatest pleasure.[11]

Under those circumstances, Thompson, McCrachan, and one other decided to press ahead relying on the compass. The others, too frightened to trust a flickering needle, dallied behind until the leaders were a half-mile ahead, when they all scampered to catch up like schoolboys caught out after the tardy bell.

Actually Thompson had spied a grove of oaks in the distance through his telescope, but he was too wise to squander his leadership by giving away secrets.

One wonders whether René Jusseaume knew of the deception.

Thompson now deployed his frightened men in a straight line close enough together to be heard by shouting but far enough apart to maneuver the untrained dogs. By so doing he got men and dogs to the oaks, set up a tent, waited out a new storm, and then moved up the Souris until they came to a friendly Indian camp where Jusseaume was at last of some help. He bargained to exchange dogs for two horses which had become lame.

The animals were lame, said the Indians, because they were white-footed and had yellow hoofs which could not tolerate a difficult journey. Black-footed horses were the only kind to use for such work as Thompson demanded, they said, and dogs were probably better than any hoof-color of horse.

It was mid-December, and the thermometer held at 20 to 30 degrees below zero day and night. Thompson must leave the Souris if he was to reach the Mandans, but he had lost most of his faith in Jusseaume and could not hire another guide. He took his own counsel and pushed ahead, keeping his men "close in file." In spite of these precautions, one man with a single dog fell behind, got lost in the snow and early dark, became too weak to walk, and fell to his hands and knees, "bawling with all his might until we fortunately heard him," said Thompson.[12]

So, with one near-tragedy after another, Thompson outwore Jusseaume's failures; outlasted a −32-degree Christmas season; nursed McCrachan through a siege of illness; survived a prairie blizzard which he failed to recognize for the killer it can be; left the Souris near the modern Verendrye, North Dakota, and struck overland;

outwitted a band of hostile Sioux; and arrived on the Missouri only six miles above the Mandans—a neat bit of dead reckoning.

Thompson, McCrachan, Jusseaume, and the voyageurs had tramped 238 miles through one of the coldest winters in Dakota history.

David Thompson never had more than a secondary interest in the fur business. Exploring, surveying, and studying the peoples he met were his prime concerns. As soon as the routines of his present trade venture could be decently finished, he plunged into a more intriguing subject, a history of the Mandans. McCrachan and Jusseaume were urged to help, but they "were illiterate* . . . and either did not understand my questions, or the Natives had no answers to give."[13]

It was unfortunate, but Hugh McCrachan was not a linguist and René Jusseaume was not interested in history.

With no further incentive for remaining on the Missouri, Thompson left the Mandans January 10, 1798, and resumed his notable work in the Canadian West.

In the meantime, Spanish traders from the Southwest were reaping profits. It sometimes shocks the provincial-minded to find that years before Lewis and Clark ever thought of crossing the continent, small companies of Spanish traders were leaving St. Louis, Santa Fe, and Taos and fighting north to the Mandans with red wine, Spanish leather, copper pots, and all the gimcracks of Indian trade.

But René Jusseaume, the Canadian squaw man, knew these things. While Thompson was vainly trying to get a history of the Mandans, Jusseaume was going from lodge to lodge, sponging free smokes and food and urging the Indians to desert the Spaniards and buy exclusively from the North West Company, to which he seemed to have had some vague sense of loyalty.

However, it never occurred to him, being the kind of fellow he was, to do this honestly. His mind was warped into devious patterns, and in the present instance he made a deal whereby certain Indians were to enter the lodging of the latest Spanish trader, John Evans (actually

* René Jusseaume was not entirely illiterate. Several examples of his signature are extant, among them the promissory note from him to J. Février dated Prairie du Chien, October 10, 1790, now preserved in the P. Chouteau Maffit Collection, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis; and an instrument of indenture between Jusseaume and Meriwether Lewis dated May 13, 1809, now in the Meriwether Lewis Collection, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

a Welshman), and rob and kill him. When this detestable plot fizzled, Jusseaume tried shooting Evans in the back. Prompt action by Evans' interpreter saved him. Disgusted, Jusseaume left for the Assiniboines along the upper Souris before Evans could retaliate.

Such, then, was René Jusseaume's introduction into history. From then on he was always a part of the Missouri story. He never achieved the distinction of Matonabbee or George Drouillard because he lacked both the ability and their integrity. Instead he skulked on the fringes of great events, a sort of historical jackal—too ignoble to praise, too conspicuous to ignore.

Following Thompson's visit to the Mandans, little of moment involved Jusseaume until Lewis and Clark hired him briefly during their outgoing winter on the Missouri. He kept them posted on the activities of rival visitors, accompanied them on short excursions, and regaled them with Indian lore of varying degrees of accuracy. But the commanders must have rued their bargain many times, for Jusseaume moved inside the American quarters, where there was more to eat, more warmth, less danger—and more opportunity for general skulduggery, such as quarreling or selling the services of one's wife.

We know little more about Jusseaume's activities during that winter. The journals rarely mention the "old sneaking cheat," and when spring came and the expedition headed for the Pacific, Jusseaume was left behind, presumably off the payroll. But some kind of understanding was maintained between Jusseaume and the American commanders on implementing Lewis' conviction that if a large number of Indian chiefs could be induced to visit the President in Washington, Indian-white relations would be improved.

Lewis had been propagandizing along these lines all winter, but he had to depart for the Pacific without knowing whether his campaign would succeed. He cannot be blamed for not seeing the pitfalls of the plan, for he had had relatively little first-hand contact with the Indians. Clark, a product of the frontier and thoroughly familiar with its psychology, undoubtedly knew the problems involved but refrained from saying so, for before they had ever crossed the Missouri into the West, he had been made to understand that he was in subordinate command, despite his popular coequal title of captain. And if he never let this color his relations with Lewis, either in public or in his journals, the reader of the unexpurgated daybooks would indeed be careless not to note that Clark walked while Lewis

rode the pirogue; Clark tramped off on side excursions while Lewis wrote up the journals in the relative comfort of the big leather tent; and Clark got the less efficient interpreter. Thus, it does not stretch credulity too far to suspect that Clark may have harbored reservations about sending Indians to Washington but that he was too loyal to Lewis to say anything.

In any event, the expedition left for the West and René Jusseaume remained with the Mandans with instructions to recruit a Washington delegation. That is the last we hear of him until the expedition returned from the Pacific and he was rehired to escort Chief Big White, or Sheheke, and his family to see the President.

The choice of Jusseaume for this duty was strange, because surely Drouillard or Charbonneau, the husband of Sacajawea, either of whom was better qualified, would have made the journey. Perhaps the commanders felt that since Jusseaume had helped recruit Big White, he deserved the excursion. Perhaps he was the more persuasive talker.

It is best to leave Jusseaume's journey to Washington, about which few details are known, to be interpolated where it impinges on more important events.* Suffice it to say here that in the course of the long and very unsatisfactory trip, Jusseaume was wounded—how does not appear clear—and, not being one to let an opportunity go untested, he evolved a plan to plump for what in our day are known as disability allowances.

Jusseaume petitioned "Monsieur le Président" in these terms: he was crippled for life and could never work again or support his family; he must get back to the Mandans so his wife's parents could take care of their many children; and as a bit of unasked-for advice, he added that the American flag would never be respected by the Indians until it was backed by force.[14]

René Jusseaume was about as reprehensible a character as the interpreter-guide clan ever turned up, but he was not devoid of finer points, among which was a sincere interest in the welfare of his half-breed children. On May 13, 1809, Jusseaume apprenticed a son, "Toussaint Jussome, aged about thirteen years unto . . . Meriwether Lewis" for a period of five years, Lewis to be responsible for all the expenses of raising and educating the young man.[15]

Little more is known about René Jusseaume. After arranging the

* We will take up Big White's adventure again in Chapters 21 and 27.

above apprenticeship, he entered the employ of Manuel Lisa and remained generally under his banner until the Spaniard died in 1820. More than a decade later, Maximilian, Prince of Wied, remarked on his visit to the frontier that Jusseaume still could not be relied upon as an interpreter. Time and practice had not perfected his abilities.

But where and when the "old sneaking cheat" ceased his sins are one with the pattern of frontier deaths: a shallow grave, a mumbled "Rest in peace," and no obituary.

Chapter 11. René Jusseaume

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3. Quoted in Elliot Coues, *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest,* 3 vols., New York, Francis P. Harper, 1897, I, 333.

4. David Thompson, *David Thompson's Narrative of His Explorations in Western America, 1784–1812,* ed. J. B. Tyrrell, Toronto, Champlain Society, 1916, p. lxxiv.

5. Meriwether Lewis and John Ordway, *The Journals of Captain Meriwether Lewis and Sergeant John Ordway,* ed. Milo M. Quaife, Madison, Wisconsin Historical Society, 1916, pp. 21–23.

6. Thompson, *op. cit.,* p. 209.

7. Coues, *op. cit.,* I, 333, 401.

8. 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, 233.

9. Thompson, *op. cit.,* p. 212.

10. *Ibid.,* p. 212.

11. *Ibid.,* p. 209.

12. *Ibid.,* p. 216.

13. *Ibid.,* p. 226.

14. Jusseaume to Jefferson, St. Louis, December 3, 1807; Thomas Jefferson Papers, Bixby Collection, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

15. Instrument of indenture, René Jusseaume to Meriwether Lewis, St. Louis, May 13, 1809; Meriwether Lewis Collection, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.