

Anonyme

TRADING WITH SIR JOHN

Metis from the Willow Bunch district of southern Saskatchewan were set to murder Jean-Louis Legare after he tricked them into abandoning their plan to join the rebel forces of Louis Riel. But the Quebec-born fur-trader not only survived the 1885 incident, he bolstered his reputation as one of the most compassionate men in the West.

Half-starved due to the collapse of the buffalo-skin market and fully frustrated by a federal government that couldn't care less, dozens of Metis who were headed north for Riel's headquarters at Batoche had set up camp on the outskirts of Moose Jaw. The burghers of Moose Jaw were nervous.

North-West Territories Lieutenant-Governor Edgar Dewdney rushed to Moose Jaw and then wired Legare in Willow Bunch to come and persuade the Metis to return to their homes 130 kms (80 miles) to the south.

Legare was a talented negotiator. But the respected trader told Dewdney there's no easy way to change the minds of hungry and desperate men. Food or some kind of employment must be found for the Metis, he argued.

Dewdney balked. It's too expensive, he said.

Legare is reported to have replied: "There are 80 men at (Willow Bunch) that can carry arms. That might cost a good deal."

With authorization that came from Canadian Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald, Legare carried out his plan.

The Metis were scattered in isolated camps around Moose Jaw. Legare visited one of the camps and asked the men whether they'd be willing to deliver something to Willow Bunch (it's not clear what). There's good money in it, he told the men. But the mission must remain secret, he said, even from the other Metis.

With the prospect of money and food for their families, the men agreed. Legare told them to leave at midnight.



- courtesy Willow Bunch Museum

Jean-Louis Legare: fur trader, merchant and superb negotiator.

He then visited each of the other camps in turn, making the same secretive arrangement but advancing each departure by one hour. Then he quickly set off for Willow Bunch to be there before the first party arrived.

The Metis were outraged when they realized how they had been duped. They threatened to murder their former friend and burn down his Willow Bunch store and trading post. But while Legare may have thwarted their plan to join the rebellion, he had wrung from the federal government concessions that greatly alleviated the cause of their frustration.

Forty men, representing virtually every Metis family in the area, were given jobs as scouts at \$2 per day. Their job was to patrol the U.S. border region looking for Americans the Canadian government feared might be tempted to take advantage of the unstable situation created by Riel.

Legare is one of the featured personalities at the Willow Bunch Museum, a former convent built in 1914 by the Sisters of the Cross. His profile will be heightened when his life, times and trading post become immortalized at a heritage village planned for the future.



- courtesy Willow Bunch Museum

A replica of Legare's home/commercial building will be featured at the heritage working village planned for Willow Bunch.

"It will focus on Jean-Louis Legare, the history of our founding, the Metis, First Nations and the North-West Mounted Police," says the museum's Celeste Sabourin.

Plans call for the village to grow to a dozen buildings, including a functioning cheese factory representing the one Legare built and operated in the late 1800s, adds Willow Bunch economic director Steeves Tremblay. Local and professional players to will re-enact events from the community's colorful past, like Legare's role in the Sitting Bull affair.

Legare arrived in the Willow Bunch district in 1870 after leaving his native Quebec to work several years in Minnesota and North Dakota, where he became involved in the fur trade. Seven years after arriving in Canada, he found himself in the midst of an international brouhaha when Lakotah (Sioux) Chief Sitting Bull and 5,000 followers set up camp near his trading post at Wood Mountain, about 65 kms (40 miles) southwest of present-day Willow Bunch.

Sitting Bull's defeat of Custer at the Battle of the Little Bighorn in June of 1876 made him the most feared Indian on the North American continent. His flight to Wood Mountain

posed a political dilemma for Canadian authorities and a practical one for 'Canadian' Indians living in the area.

The government feared Sitting Bull would use the sanctuary granted him to stage raids on the U.S. or, worse, form an Indian coalition threatening warfare in both countries. For Canadian Indians, meanwhile, food was scarce and buffalo numbers shrinking before 5,000 hungry Lakotah arrived.

A series of particularly harsh winters left Indians throughout the region with little food and few furs to trade. Legare played a key role in keeping the Lakotah and others alive by giving them money, food and supplies.

Sitting Bull trusted only two 'white' men during his four-year stay in Canada: The courageous North-West Mounted Police Major James Walsh; and the kind Legare. The chief consulted both friends before agreeing to return to the United States in 1881.

Legare's status with Sitting Bull resulted in the U.S. and Canadian governments contracting him to escort the Lakotah to Fort Buford, North Dakota, where the chief surrendered to American authorities. The two nations promised to cover the trader's expenses and give him \$25,000, plus a township of land, for his role in resolving the international issue.



- courtesy Willow Bunch Museum

**Lakotah (Sioux) Chief
Sitting Bull.**

But when Legare submitted to the U.S. government an itemized bill for \$13,412 to cover the cost of feeding, transporting and protecting the Lakotah on their trip south - he hired Metis hunters for security - he received only \$5,000. The \$25,000 never materialized, nor did the land. Legare ended up with only \$2,000 from the Canadian government.

Legare dabbled in ranching and dairy farming after moving his trading post and store to the present site of Willow Bunch in 1880. There, he would play a central role as patriarch of the community.

When died in 1918 at the age of 76, his son Albert received a telegram from the Wood Mountain Sioux:

"We deplore bitterly the loss of our old friend."

So did many others.

http://www.virtualsk.com/current_issue/horse_trading.html