

Jean Gingras in the Northwest

As the history of Fort Okanogan embraces the life of Jean Gingras for most of his years in the employ of the Hudson's Bay Company, one must know something of the Fort to understand the conditions awaiting a young French Canadian lately come from Quebec. Governor George Simpson of the Company, writing in 1828, called him "a handy man--more interested for the service in the absence than before his superior". If this oblique praise meant that Gingras appeared ambitious to become the master of a post, one is pleased to learn that he was rewarded some ten years later.

Fort Okanogan had been hastily put up by the Pacific Fur Company in 1811 near the junction of the Okanogan with the Columbia. It was taken over by the North West Fur Company two years later upon the withdrawal of the former. The Stuart party had only one building when they set up for business there, but added others from time to time during the five years at the site. William C. Brown, writing in 1914, stated that "Several large and distinct depressions still exist on the site of the original Astor post, showing where the old cellars were, and many fragments of masonry are scattered about, but none of it in place."

In 1816 the post was rebuilt about a mile to the southeast on the banks of the Columbia. Ross Cox, who had charge of the rebuilding, described the work thus:

"By the month of September we had erected a new house for the person in charge, containing four excellent rooms and a large dining hall, two good houses for the men, and a spacious storehouse for the merchandise and furs, to which was attached a shop for trading with the natives. The whole was surrounded by strong palisades fifteen feet high and flanked by two bastions. Each bastion had in its lower story a light brass four-pounder, and the upper loopholes were left open for the use of musketry."

In 1821, upon the amalgamation of the North West and the Hudson's Bay Companies, Fort Okanogan became the second in a north-south chain of forts between the Cascade and the Rocky Mountains. Below it was Fort Nez Percés (Walla Walla) on the Columbia, above it Forts Thompson (Kamloops), Alexandria, George, and St. James on the Fraser. As a fur post, Okanogan was never very important, being in a barren region, but it was a strategic link between the two river systems. Goods could be transported thus far up the Columbia, but here the river begins a wide swing

eastward, while the fur trade lay to the north. At Okanogan goods had to be transferred to horses for the hard trail over the mountains and down into the Fraser basin, and thence northward to Kamloops on Thompson's River.

A servant who had gained experience in one part of the country was seldom transferred to another area, for the region was vast and varied and each route required its own set of skills. The available records seem to show that Jean Gingras spent some twenty years in the Kamloops-Okanogan sector. By the time of Governor Simpson's visit to the West in 1828, Gingras, aged twenty-six, had a native wife and a young daughter, whose name is not known to us. The wife, later christened Charlotte but also known as Louise, was a native of the region. The Salishan people, of which the Okanogan tribe is a branch, occupied most of northern Washington and southern British Columbia; they were horse Indians of considerable pride and manual ingenuity.

1828

The annual round of life led by the servants on the Kamloops-Okanogan run can best be told as Joseph Lafleur, whose father Joachim had been a companion of Jean Gingras, recalled it in his old age.

"I came down from Kamloops with a big pack train once when my father was in charge. My father almost always took all the family when he went to Kamloops, and sometimes we stayed at Kamloops several years at a time. Those big pack trains that carried the furs down in summer and carried the goods up in the fall travelled about fifteen miles a day. When we left Okanogan the train usually got a late start and we did not go far the first day, probably about six or seven miles above the mouth of the river. The next night we usually got to where Salmon Creek comes into the Okanogan. The Indians called that place Con-con-ulps; the second night after that we would get probably to Bonaparte Creek and the next night to Osoyoos Lake. From there we kept on up the Okanogan valley past the lakes to Penticton and around the east side of Okanogan Lake, and on through to Kamloops. When the Hudson's Bay people used to come into Okanogan from other places, there were often many people there."

The Kamloops brigade might number several hundred horses. A similar brigade from Fort Spokane away to the east would meet them there to repack the furs into boats for the rest of the journey. While waiting for the second brigade, the first commonly held a regale of much hilarity--drinking, gambling, feasting, horse racing and dancing--that was the fulfillment of a

year's hope, long remembered. The drivers then became boatmen, leaving the worn horses to recoup on the wide bunchgrass plains back of the fort or across the river.

A post that was more depot than trade center was sometimes placed in the care of a responsible engage. It was in this way that Jean Gingras became Post Master at Fort Okanogan, sometime during the 1830's. It was the climax of his career.

1830's

In all this time there had been no formal law and no Catholic Church in the entire Northwest. But in November, 1838, two priests came down the Columbia with the brigade from Red River, Father Francois Norbert Blanchet and Father Modeste Demers. They had been baptizing, marrying and burying as they came, having lost twelve of their own number in the rapids of the river a few days journey to the north. Everyone along the way was eager to have his children baptized; among these children were the four youngest of the Gingras family--Jean II, aged seven, Narcisse, five, Angele, three, and Marguerite, one, with Etienne Gregoire, a servant at the post, and steersman Chalifoux's wife for god-parents. The brigade spent but one night, then hastened on because of the lateness of the season.

When Father Demers came back upriver the following July to hold a mission at Colville, Jean Gingras was there to return the compliment to Gregoire as parrain to his sons Etienne and Felix. He was godfather also to Lafleur's two little children, Julie and Joseph--the same Joseph who could remember so long afterward these early days. Two years later a similar round robin of courtesies took place on French Prairie when on August 2nd, 1841, Jean Gingras formally married Charlotte Okanogan in the Church, with Luc Gagnon as witness; then he in turn witnessed Luc's marriage to Julie Gregoire, Etienne's daughter, which should have left everyone in the clear socially. As no mention was made of the unnamed eldest daughter in the "legitimatizing" of Gingras's children at the time of his marriage, we must suppose that she had died or was herself married. Nor was Marguerite, the youngest, mentioned again; she must certainly have died in the intervening two years.

Some six months earlier a tragedy had occurred at Kamloops in the murder of Chief Factor Samuel Black by an aggrieved native, one of his own men. Word of the affair was sped down to Fort Vancouver and a general transfer of post personnel began in view of the potentially explosive situation. It seems that Gingras retired from the Company about this time to settle on French Prairie on the Willamette.

Joachim Lafleur, "a very competent and reliable employe" took over the management of Fort Okanogan for the next ten years, after which his stepson, Francois Duchoquette remained in charge until the post was closed in 1860. Duchoquette was the son of Lafleur's Okanogan wife whose baptismal name was Margaret but who was called ~~La~~ Petite because of her small size. When the post was closed out, all the remaining goods were moved to Similkameen, about two miles below the present town of Keremeos, to a new trading station. Francois died at Keremeos a few years afterward. He is said to have been a very intelligent man and competent in business, but much addicted to drink. One who knew him described him as "a short, stout French half-breed, not more than thirty years of age when I first saw him at Fort Okanogan. He died in 1863 and is buried on Shuttleworth Creek about one mile north of Keremeos. Yes, he was educated some, could read and write and was a pretty good bookkeeper." His stepfather, old Joachim Lafleur, went to Colville upon retiring from the service and started a little store of his own near the present Marcus. He was murdered some time during the sixties near Walla Walla, where had gone to purchase a supply of goods.

Prior to the Donation Land Laws of the United States in 1850, all land not already claimed was free; after the passage of the law, any American citizen could, for a small fee, file for a 640 acre claim, one half for himself and half in the name of his wife. Somewhat reluctantly, most of the Canadians took out citizenship papers while remaining, like Laframboise, "unreconstructed" at heart. They could then legally claim the same land they might have been occupying for ten or twenty years. Gingras became a United States citizen in 1851 and duly filed his claim.

This claim was a rectangular block fronting the Willamette River on the north and adjacent to the St. Paul Mission holdings on the other three sides. The land here is relatively level, with sudden deep little residual lakes left by ancient glaciers or river meanders. The Gingras claim took in the lower part of Horseshoe Lake, the largest of these, which teemed in those days with fish and waterfowl. Most of his land lay on the flood plain within the river bend, one corner only rising to the bench above that had been the original river bank. Directly across the river rises the scarp-like point known locally as "The Neck" between the Yamhill River and the main stream. This was the claim of Louis Labonte, one of the oldest settlers of all.

(Today, the first day of spring, I drove up there to refresh my geography of the region. Horseshoe Lake looked a deep and sullen piece of water, I thought, with the skeleton of a tree here and there where it had slid in, yet I scrambled down the steep bank

and through the briers to dip my fingers in it. The Gingras boys probably knew the same trail well, for it is at the line fence of their father's claim. A dull March day, though mild, may have lent a somber aspect to the lake, for the level fields of hops and clover were bright enough with spring growth. I heard no sound of bird or frog or distant bark; I felt I must be moving in an earlier century.)

On a bluff above a smaller lake a mile or so to the east, which the Canadians called Lake Ignatius but which is now known as Connor's Lake, the Mission had built a residence hall and shops for the boys of a school grandly named St. Joseph's College, though it was elementary and manual in its curriculum and existed only ten years. As the Gingras boys were of school age during the 1840 decade, it is quite probable that some of them attended the school as day pupils living nearby. A pile of half-buried bricks now marks the residence hall, and pipestems, metal bits and earthenware shards show up annually at spring plowing.

For the next decade or two following his retirement, the name of Gingras appears regularly in legal and Church records. He voted "No" at Champoege, that is, against the formation of an organized government. The tax rolls of 1844, first of the kind in Oregon, listed him as having horses to the value of \$400, cattle \$240 and hogs \$125, on which stock he paid a tax of \$1.45; he was not assessed for having any "town lots, pleasure carriage, mill, clock, watch, mules or merchandise", which were the other taxable assets a man might have.

Church entries note the birth of a son Louis, of whom no more is heard, in 1842, and of a daughter Esther in February, 1845, followed by the death of her mother, Charlotte Okanogan, in May and by that of Esther herself in September. In July of the same year Jean Gingras married Olive Forcier, metisse daughter of an old Hudson's Bay engage, Louis Forcier. The family continued to grow with the addition of Louis Xavier (1845), Francois (1849), Octave (1851), Calixte (1854) and Charles (1856).

After only five years on his legal claim, Jean Gingras died at the age of fifty-four, October 7, 1856. Both he and Charlotte Okanogan were buried in the old cemetery at St. Paul, which was the first to be established on the Prairie. When a new and larger spot was consecrated in 1875, the old cemetery fell into such neglect that eventually it was levelled off and the few remaining stones, it is said, were dumped into Horseshoe Lake. It is now a grassy lawn with a large central cross and one boulder for a marker.

In the meantime the children married as they grew old enough, which in the case of the one surviving girl, Angele, was very young. She married Hypolite Brouillet at the age of thirteen and Cyrille Bertrand at fourteen. Joseph married a young metisse from the Methodist School at Salem, Marianne Bastien. Jean II married Elizabeth Finlay, also a metisse, and Narcisse someone recorded only as "Louise". The widow Olive remarried; the youngest child, Charles, died at the age of two. The last Gingras entry in the "old" Church records on French Prairie is the birth of a daughter, Mary Olive, to Calixte Gingras and Josette Picard.

The sons drifted away under the pressure of increasing American immigration, many going to the Umpqua River far to the south, where their name, now phonetically spelled "Ghangrow", is carried by numerous descendants. At least one of the sons returned to the Okanogan region, or had remained there, for a contributor to the Oregon Historical Quarterly of 1912 wrote,

"Descendants of the Gingras, Lafleur, and Duchoquette families are living now on the Spokane and Colville Reservations. Many of the old folks now living were born at or near old Fort Okanogan, and are capable of relating reminiscences of the olden times. Peter Skene Ogden is well remembered. One of the Gingras clan recently recited to me in French a ditty about the famous old trader that must date back three quarters of a century. It is not quite suitable for print, however."

The old fort itself had disappeared by 1880. At the discovery of gold in the gravel bars of the Columbia, both white and Chinese miners tore down the timbers to use in their mining operations. A later flood washed away the embankment. For a time slight depressions that marked the cellar holes could be made out, but the entire site is now drowned by the impoundment behind the Columbia Wells Dam. Archeologists went over the ground rather thoroughly before the water rose, recovering nails, trade beads, mostly blue, gunflints, pottery and glass shards and stumps that marked the footings of buildings. It was not a particularly rich dig, but what they found is preserved in a modern museum nearby, sole physical reminder of Fort Okanogan's history.

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