

Eulogy for Nine Wandering Indians

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Solemn entry in the Parish of St. George's, NL church registry dated June 10th, 1862:

According to news received from wandering Indians it was supposed that about the 2nd of January, 1862, in the woods about 12 miles from civilization, that nine persons perished from hunger. A funeral service is held for these persons. They are: Francois, age 48; Marie, his wife, age 46; their children, three boys and four girls: Marie, age 26; Julienne, age 13; Christine, age 3; Etienne [Stephen], age 16; Francois, age 8; one with unknown name; one girl, unknown name. They were all Indians. The news was brought by a brother of the father.

Note by authors: the term “Wandering Indians” was the generally derogatory term used by most Europeans to describe Mi’kmaw Indians in the time period this story occurred in our history. These Newfoundland Mi’kmaw were not wandering Indians but rather nomadic Indians, as their hunting and trapping lifestyle required them to move around from place to place.

Father Belanger, parish priest for the Diocese of St. George's, NL at that time, did not record any last names in the church ledger for this entry; therefore it is not used in this eulogy for the family. There is no record of a formal burial site for these people nor is there any oral knowledge of the exact location of their untimely deaths other than it was 12 miles from civilization, based on the estimate given by the brother reporting the incident to the priest. It is perhaps safe to speculate that the burial site would be very close to where the family perished from hunger and the elements. Multiple deaths caused by accidents, starvation, fire or some other natural calamity were very common in pre-confederation Newfoundland; deceased persons were usually buried close to their death site if the incident happened away from a local, well-established town. Local folklore suggested that Francois' brother was Athanase Angelique? [a.k.a. Antignish or Tignish]. People around Flat Bay, St. George's and area would say of someone who was a little tardy or laid-back “you're as slow as Tignish” or something like “you're more forgetful than old

Tignish”. These sayings were popular because there was 6 months between the reported time of death for Francois and Marie’s family and the funeral service by Father Belanger. It is very possible that this community opinion of Tignish’s tardiness or forgetfulness was incorrect. Maybe the deaths were reported soon after the occurrence but not acted upon by the priest until June. We will never know all the facts about this terrible tragedy but we do know that it was very heart-breaking and should not be forgotten by present day Bay St. George Mi’kmaw.

Over the past several decades the authors, Len Muise and good friend Melvin White, along with Violet Dawson, Calvin White and many others in the Bay St. George Mi’kmaw community have spent a lot of energy and time attempting to locate possible sites where Francois, Marie and their family perished after enduring unfathomable hardships. We have all undertaken time consuming research into old historical reports, censuses, area topographic maps, oral stories and anything else that would give us a clue as to where the family’s burial site might be located somewhere on the country. Melvin has personally travelled, by both foot and skidoo, to all the sites that could possibly qualify as the last home to this forgotten family. Melvin has been a tremendous help in writing this eulogy and he is recognized for that excellent effort by been named co-author. Melvin’s decades old work in trying to solve the mystery associated with this tragic story has been an inspiration to all.

Two undisputable facts have dictated where the authors have focused their research: Firstly, when an olden-time trapper, prospector, hunter or just a plain old countryperson said that the distance between point “A” and point “B”, in this case from civilization to the location of Francois and his family’s last resting place, is 12 miles, then you can be fairly sure that the distance is very close to 12 miles, plus or minus a mile or so. Secondly when Father Alexis Belanger stated in his registry ledger that the Francois Family died 12 miles from civilization [based on a distance estimate given by the brother] he was using St. George’s area, most likely Molly Anne’s Brook, as his starting reference point because to Father Belanger and others from that historical period, Sandy Point/St. George’s was the center of civilization. There were lots of small settlements or hamlets located in western and southern NL during that time but Father Belanger and other Europeans then living at Sandy Point, would hardly have referred to those small, isolated places as civilization.

All the forgoing information has been utilized by the authors to write this eulogy about the last days and final resting place for Francois, Marie and their family. Please remember that the eulogy for this tragic event is told with humility and respect; a way to remember a very courageous family who were in the midst of the gradual assimilation of the Mi'kmaw nomadic way of life. As you read this eulogy, please bear in mind that no person can say with any amount of certainty what actually happened to the family or where exactly is their final resting place. The authors have based this narrative on decades of research on the assimilation of our People, personal experiences earned during 6 decades of traveling the Country and a good knowledge of early Bay St. George history including the different spiritual, cultural, social and economic lifestyles of our People. Marie's spirit has also guided us in our research and in writing this document.

It is very important to remember Francois and Marie's family because they belonged to the "Nomadic [Wandering Indian is term used by Europeans] Class of the Mi'kmaw Peoples". Our People's nomadic lifestyle was waning during the mid-1800. It was more difficult to maintain the traditional, many century old lifestyles of hunting and trapping because European settlers were slowing taking up more and more areas throughout Newfoundland. These settlers were also utilizing most of the natural resources that were previously only been used by Mi'kmaw. It was becoming easier and prudent for Mi'kmaw to adapt to a more settled way of life; a cash-based economic model that required some level of permanent residency in one settlement.

In a majority of cases, females were spearheading the move to permanent settlement because a nomadic life was very difficult on elders, women and children. A nomadic lifestyle was not for the faint of heart. People continuously moving between remote locations exposed themselves to frequent shortages of food, personal injuries and illnesses, extreme loneliness and isolation from other people and constant danger from the forces of nature. Children, the sick and elders were the most vulnerable. The normal life expectancy of a Newfoundlander in 1913 was just 47 years of age; imagine what a normal life expectancy would have been for nomadic people in the mid- 1800s. What happened to Francois and Marie's family is a stark reminder of the dangers experienced by nomadic Mi'kmaw living off the country. In fact, their story was replicated in other areas of Newfoundland and throughout Canada. Theirs is a story of the effects of

assimilation. Assimilation almost always causes human suffering, severe anxiety, extreme change to accepted cultural practices and often times racism, bullying and in extreme cases, for example the NL Beothuk, extinction.

This gradual economic model change occurring to NL Mi'kmaw would eventually lead to our People's traditional culture near complete assimilation by the early 1930's. When Willian Epps Cormack crossed the Island back in 1822 he reported that there were at least 30 families of nomadic Indians throughout Newfoundland; in fact he met at least 3 different Mi'kmaw families during his travels across the interior of our province. Government censuses from that period and reports by European sea captains and military people suggested that the total Mi'kmaw population in Newfoundland was at least 200 persons. Research by the authors has uncovered almost no reports of nomadic Indians families on the Island by the end of the 1800's; the majority of survivors had settled permanently in small communities, mostly in western, southern and central Newfoundland.

A new model was emerging which saw men only [with the exception of several Mi'kmaw women] traversing into the interior to hunt and trap; both authors' grandfathers and to a lesser extent their fathers engaged in that type of trapping and hunting lifestyle. Women and children stayed in permanent settlements along with European settlers. A majority of Mi'kmaw men now worked for wages; quite often away from their home settlement. Author Len can recall just 3 male Mi'kmaw who still practiced that nomadic lifestyle when he was a young boy growing up in St. George's; author Melvin has similar memories. There are some individual stories from central Newfoundland of Mi'kmaq males continuing with an abbreviated nomadic hunter/trapper lifestyle but most of these men also were permanent leviers in some NL community. Francois and Marie's family was most certainly one of the last of a handful of nomadic Indian families left on the Island.

Several questions come to mind when a person thinks about the untimely deaths of Francois, Marie and their family. Firstly, why would a large contingent of adult hunters and gatherers [3 adults and 2 teens] perish so close to civilization? A healthy Countryperson often travelled 15 to 20 miles in a single day, if they were forced to walk such a large distance. Secondly, why the long delay between their deaths on January 2nd 1862 and the funeral service on June 10th, 1862? Thirdly, where is the location "12 miles from civilization" and is the family buried at that

site? And lastly, what was the role of the brother, [Tignish??], in the story. Some thoughts and answers to these questions are offered in the following paragraphs.

It is not that difficult to visualize how a camp of 9 nomadic people can perish from the elements and starvation in the harsh conditions encountered on the country, especially during a winter storm. Elevations greater than 1000 feet above sea level cause a considerable drop in temperatures and those areas often experience more severe storms; large distances from the seashore also cause a proportional drop in temperatures. Therefore we know that the interior of Newfoundland, with elevations between 1000-2000 feet above sea level, is much colder in winter than coastal areas of Island. Severe illness or a few serious injuries to the adults present in camp would have prevented any hunting of big game away from camp. Combine lower temperatures, little or no food and injuries or illness with a lengthy, unexpected snowstorm and you have the recipe for starvation. While the leger entry stated that the deaths occurred “about the 2nd January”, most documented multiple-death starvation events report that deaths are spread out over several days, sometimes a week or longer. Francois’ family was only 12 miles from assistance which would have been just a good day’s walk to most adult Mi’kmaw at that time; it is likely a safe assumption to speculate that most or all of the adults were incapacitated due to illness, injury or extreme starvation. One other possibility would be that the group were afraid to come out to the community and seek help after their camp ran into trouble. This possibility is unlikely because St. George’s and Sandy Point were frequented by Nomadic Mi’kmaw; Marie and Francois would likely have had some of their children baptized at that location over the previous years. Based on this analysis we can speculate that the adults were physically unable to walk 12 miles to attain help for the family. Therefore all nine persons starved to death.

The only recorded facts we have, other than a partial list of names for the deceased souls, are that the deaths occurred the first part January, the deaths were reported to the priest by the brother and the funeral service was on the 10th June, 1862. We can assume that someone [most likely the brother] witnessed the deaths or arrived at death scene on or close to January 2nd. If someone else witnessed deaths, that person likely told the brother at a later date. If the priest knew about deaths in January why did he not hold funeral service then, rather than wait until June? For this reason, it is believed that the priest was not told about tragedy until June right

after the actual burial. A January burial up on the country with extreme wintertime conditions would have been a very difficult undertaking. Frozen, snow-covered ground, extreme cold and a lack of suitable manpower and digging tools would make a winter burial almost impossible. It is very probable that the brother and his party buried the deceased family in early June on their way out to report deaths to authorities at St. George's.

The authors believe that someone, most likely the brother, was present at death site during the first days of January, 1862; but because of the time of year and for individual safety reasons had to travel to their own winter camp or winter house rather than report deaths at that time. Tignish and his party had to wait until after spring break-up before returning to death site. They returned to the death site in early June, buried the 9 persons and then went out to St. George's to report deaths to the parish priest. Father Belanger then held a funeral service for Francois, Marie and their 7 children.

The last question "where is the location: 12 miles from civilization?" calls for the most speculation. If the 9 deaths were not in the Bay St. George's area then possible site locations would be too unfathomable for a reasonable discussion and remembrance site. If the authors assumption is correct and that the "12 miles from civilization" was St. George's then the most obvious site location would be some wooded area close to Country Path, the main travel way for our People as they traversed the interior of Island. That site would likely have been at or near Big Otter Pond whose waters run into Fischell's River. Big Otter Pond has an excellent, natural walking lead that runs right into Little Level and the main pathway for crossing the interior of Island. Nomadic Mi'kmaw used this path for centuries and no doubt Francois, Marie and their family would have camped at that site as many of our forefathers had done before and afterwards.

A person can look out towards Bay St. George from the high peak that is called, by some people, Dolly's Lookout [UTMs: 405660E; 5349020N]. The surrounding country, for many miles around, is visible from this ancient lookout. This high, domineering peak is almost 2000 feet about sea-level and located not a mile due east from the southern edge of John Mary's Pond which is close to the southern beginning of Little Level. Cormack referenced this lookout in his journal, stating that it was 18 miles from Bay St. George. A measurement on a topographic map

[Main Gut: 12B/8] of area confirms this distance. Little Level, that well-travelled plateau, marks the most northwesterly exit section of Country Path leading to Flat Bay Brook, Flat Bay and St. George's. The full extent of Country Path runs east and south east from the lookout; from that spot, our ancestors had quick access to the southern and eastern sections of the Island, the caribou herds and other well-known fur trapping areas found in the interior. Country Path, now an almost completely forgotten Mi'kmaw path or lead, was Newfoundland's Trans-Canada Highway for many centuries prior to Confederation.

Dolly's Lookout is a sacred place to our People because of its solitude and closeness to the Great Spirit and Mother Earth. The view from that historic lookout is spectacular. Every time a person visits this section of Country Path, the Spirits of our Ancestors are present and can be felt by visitors. After crossing the country, that panoramic view of Bay St. George, just 18 miles away, was always a welcomed sight for those long ago, weary travellers. Dolly's Lookout is just 5 miles east of Big Otter Pond. There were lots of fur animals to trap around the pond and its closeness to Country Path provided quick access to the caribou herds. The Big Otter Pond area would be an educated guess, by the authors, of where Francois, Marie and their family perished and were buried over 150 years ago.

One important requirement for most people wanting to move on emotionally after a tragic death involving a family member, friend or another community acquaintance is some type of culturally-structured closure ceremony. A long-standing, acceptable closure practice is a formal funeral that includes burial and the erection of an appropriate marker, cross or headstone showing where the person or persons are buried within a community. These markers are a futuristic beacon that allows family, friends and acquaintances to easily find and visit the burial site. These burial sites allow family and friends the opportunity to reflect on the life of the deceased person or persons. Burial grounds are tremendously important for the survival or remembrance of any culture. This eulogy will hopefully inspire some individual or group to take up the idea of remembering Francois, Marie and their family by building a memorial walkway and burial monument somewhere along Big Otter Pond via Fischell's River Valley. These tragic deaths are now in you, the reader's hands. Will you help us remember our Ancestors?

When you read this eulogy, the authors, Melvin White and Len Muise, would request that you not dwell too long on the physical aspects of this sad event including the untimely death of one complete family. They would prefer that the reader focus on the spiritual side of this historical-based story. Our Mi'kmaq Peoples have endured and survived much physical suffering over the past centuries, individually and collectively suffering tremendous physical, spiritual and emotional losses. But the single most important loss has been on the spiritual side of our culture. We have lost the ability to feel our wonderful universe, to become one with wind, water, fire and air. We have lost our sense of inner-self; the natural understanding of Mother Earth and all the beauty that surrounds all of us.

The authors encourage each of you to once again reconnect with Mother Earth. Why not travel up on Little Level, walk along the Fischell's River Valley area and stop for a while at Big Otter Pond, accessible via a tributary from Fischell's River. Look out over the country from Dolly's Lookout and try to feel our ancestors Spirits. Marie, Francois their family and many more of our ancestors are waiting to help you along with your journey of rediscovery. Maybe the spirit of Sister Crow or Brother Fox will cross pathways with you and your group of travellers. Learn the ways of the four major winds with all their individual strengths and power.

If country travel is not possible for you because of physical limitations do not fear; Mother Earth can still connect with you, "as is where is". All you need is a small piece of some "Power Item" like a rock or some meaningful artifact from a special place. Tops of mountains, gentle waterways, picturesque mountain-held valleys and seashore beaches are all prime locations for collecting power items. When an individual's personal power is concentrated enough just mentally thinking about "Inner-Self" will be sufficient for them to connect with the Great Spirit. You are encouraged to try finding your inner self; it will definitely make you a more complete person. May the Great Spirit always watch over you?