

Manuscript of Violet Lalonde

Note from the editor

Mrs. Violet Lalonde compiled this undated, untitled, and as yet unpublished manuscript during the 1980s. Mrs. Lalonde (1926-2005), a descendant of Marie-Louise Riel, had intended to complete her research and publish a book, but never had the opportunity to do so. However, she did share her preliminary work with historian Pierre-Louis Lapointe who, with her consent, filed it in the research centre of the Société de Généalogie de l'Outaouais. This document is reproduced by Stephane Jobin (ste.jobin@hotmail.com) with the permission of Mrs. Lalonde's son, Richard Lalonde. We have made minor spelling and grammatical corrections to facilitate reading, but without changing the meaning of the text. Excerpts or quotes from this manuscript may be used, providing proper credit is assigned to its author, Violet Lalonde.

Preface - Violet Lalonde

In our Canadian history there are many unsung heroines who helped pave the way to what we now know as Canada.

This is a story of one such a pioneer woman, Mary Louise Riel,¹ my great-great grandmother and aunt to the young Louis Riel, the father of Manitoba.

The story takes us back to the early beginnings when Mary Louise's parents, Jean-Baptiste Riel and Marguerite Boucher, packed up their children along with their meager belongings and made their way to what was then known as Lower Canada.

The young Mary Louise fell in love with a handsome young Scotsman, Robert Richard McGregor. He operated a fur trading post and she took every opportunity to visit with him, shyly admiring him from a safe distance. Following a year of courtship, they were wed² and later bore several children, one of whom was my great grandfather.

This story continues to reveal the true character of my great-great grandmother as her "knowledge of the bones," her errands of mercy as well as her skills in "birthing babies" are unfolded to the reader.

Mary Louise Riel-McGregor was known for her strong hands with their long, thin, slender fingers, which she used to help mend broken bones, prepare herbal medicines, build and mend canoes and administer the "laying of the hands" to the sick. Mary's herbal cures proved to be a source of relief to the people living along the river system and to them she became known as the "Guardian Angel of the River."

The mystic part of the character is also revealed in the book as stories of her deeds are told in Chapter Eight and I leave it up to you to "Believe it or not!"

In Part Three, called "The Circle of Hidings," my great-great grandmother plays a very important role in helping her fugitive nephew, the young Louis Riel, during his troubled years in exile. She often encouraged him to continue to work for his people, the Métis and the Indians, and, despite the trial and the hanging, she always believed that he was a man who shouldn't have hanged.

CHAPTER ONE

The Early Years

There were two pioneer families who left their trace in history, the Riels and the McGregors. Through marriage they formed a bond giving birth to their offspring which crossed the span of time linking together my Riel-McGregor heritage. Let me tell you about these people.

It was approximately in the year 1799 that Jean-Baptiste Riel went to Isle de La Grosse, Saskatchewan, for the North West Fur Trading Company as a fur trader. In 1809, he met a beautiful young French half-breed Marguerite Boucher, granddaughter of a Chipewyan chief. They fell in love and were wed *prairie style* in 1810.

¹ Marie-Louise Riel was born in 1811

² Marie-Louise married at 15 years old in 1826 at Oka

Marguerite's background is interesting and important for she was the one who formed the pure Indian link between the two families. Her father was Louis Boucher and her mother was an Indian princess, daughter of a Chipewyan chief, thus forming the pure Indian link. They were my great-great great grandparents.

Within this marriage was born a daughter, Mary Louise Riel, my great-great grandmother. Other children soon followed, including several historical figures: Louis Riel senior, father to the young Louis Riel, Lucy Riel (and her husband, John Lee). The Lees were later to assist their fugitive nephew during his long years in exile from the law.

When the third child (Louis Riel senior) was born in 1817, Mary Louise was a young girl of 8 years and five months. She loved her new brother and assisted her parents in caring for him as well as her four year old sister, Sophie. A year later, when the mother was stronger, the family decided to make its way back to Québec because of the endless quarrelling between the two leading fur trading companies. You see, Jean-Baptiste was a peaceful man and he did not want to be caught between their disputes.³

On their way home, they stopped at the Red River Settlement to visit with relatives and close friends for a while. In the meantime, the Hudson Bay Company and the North West Company amalgamated in 1821, reinforcing Riel's decision to move back to the East.

Their departure was difficult, for the Riels had many friends and close family ties in the West; however, they put that behind them and looked forward to a new life in Lower Canada.

They travelled for a span of about four years before they finally reached their destination. The family made many stops along the way, visiting with their people, the Métis and the Indians. One of their stops took them to Mattawa, a small village situated along the Mattawa and Ottawa rivers. This was the birthplace of my father, Wilfred McGregor, a descendant of the McGregor families. Jean-Baptiste Riel did not want to remain there for the Hudson Bay Company had a thriving business in furs and he also knew that there would be a lot of friction amongst the fur traders. With this in mind, he began his trek to the East.

By the time the family reached Quebec, Mary Louise was fourteen, her brother Louis Sr was five years and two months and Sophie was around ten years of age. Jean-Baptiste and his wife worked very hard to make a home for their youngsters. One of the first duties was to have the children baptised at Ste-Geneviève-de-Berthier on September 23, 1822, and to then establish their new home in the district.

³ Jean-Baptiste Riel, born in 1785, wed Marguerite Boucher circa 1808

CHAPTER TWO

Pioneer Love

The McGregors were of a different culture and background than the French Métis Riels. They differed in their language, customs, habits and mode of dress. However, this did not hinder the joining of the two families in friendship as well as a potential marriage between Mary Louise Riel and the young McGregor.

Mary's father, Jean-Baptiste, and young McGregor became good friends and worked together in the fur trading business. The young Riel girl visited the post frequently and took every opportunity to speak with the handsome young Scotsman. She shyly admired him from a safe distance.

According to my family's recollection, young Robert Richard was a tall heavysset man with striking blue eyes and blond hair. He spoke several languages, such as English, Gaelic and Cree. This was necessary in order to communicate with the natives who frequented the trading post. Robert Richard learned their tongues from early childhood and extended his knowledge and fluency while working in the fur trading business.

A romance slowly developed between Mary Louise and Robert and, following several months of courtship, they were wed *prairie style* circa 1822, 1826. The bride was about 15 years of age, while her groom was about twenty five. Their deep love formed a life-long bond between the two families, one which extends up to the present to my life and family.

Their marriage produced many children, three of whom I will mention: Robert Richard (my great grandfather), and his two sisters, Maria and Elizabeth.

Following her native heritage, my great-great grandmother gave her children interesting nicknames. Robert was Kato, Maria was Katago, and Elizabeth was known as Kadie. There was yet another nicknamed Paspie, but I am not sure which of the remaining youngsters had this name.

Not to be outdone by the Riels, the McGregors had their own customs in the naming of their offspring. It was the custom to pass on to their male heirs, the surname Robert and the given name Richard. I recall my introduction to the McGregor family. The mother's maiden name was Susan Roberts. This tradition is still practised in my own family, since we named our only son Richard.

Throughout her childbearing years, Mary Louise McGregor worked amongst her people, delivering the new offspring and caring for the sick. She often took youngsters with her to help with the canoeing and packing for she firmly believed that children needed to know the needs of their people and they represented a promise to carry on her work should she fail in health. As a matter of fact, Maria, her daughter, later became known throughout the district of Val-des-Bois as "La Sauvagesse."

The McGregors were caught up in the Rebellion in Lower Canada that was raging during the years 1837-38. Being a man of peace, and acting out of concern for their family, Robert and Mary Louise moved up the St. Lawrence and made their home in one of the many settlements that dotted the area along the waterways.

These insignificant little settlements were later to prove to be of prime importance for they became the future hiding places of Louis Riel, the couple's young fugitive nephew. It was also at these settlements that Mary Louise Riel McGregor became known throughout the district as a humanitarian.

CHAPTER THREE

My Great-great Grandmother

Perhaps this would be a good time to pause and tell you about my great-great grandmother as a person. My impressions of her come from my father and members of the Riel-McGregor families. This is how they remember Mary Louise.

She was a very tall, thin, stately woman who dressed in long dark robes of home spun cotton. Her mystic figure was often seen wandering through the bush along the riverbanks, silhouetted against the shadows of the forest.

She knew the bush. She knew it well. My people used to tell me that Mary Louise could walk in the forest right behind you and you would never know she was there. Whenever people were lost, especially young children, anxious relatives would come to seek her help. She rarely allowed anyone to go with her unless they were experienced because they made too much noise, disturbed signs, or distracted her attention during the search. Like her ancestors, the Chipewyan, she *walked in a whisper* in the forest, an old Indian skill that proved to be useful in her search for the lost.

This pioneer woman wore her own homemade clothing and moccasins. When it was bitter cold, she was often seen wearing dress on dress, a large woollen sweater and layers of thick furs. These garments protected her from the chills of winter. Around her neck she wore long, wooden beads that were drawn together by a cross. She carved these herself from cedar that she found in the bush near her cabin.

Her health was exceptional, despite living in such a harsh environment. It was said that her excellent physical constitution was partly due to the type of food she ate. Wild meat, fresh fish, partly-cooked vegetables and wild tea formed part of her daily diet.

Mary Louise's mental capacity was unmatched by anyone in her day. She could speak in five languages: French, English, Chipewyan, Gaelic and Cree. This allowed her to communicate with everyone and it helped her to form a bond of trust with the people.

My great-great grandmother had a deep insight into Mother Nature. She knew, understood, and followed her rules. The fishing seasons, phases of the moon, where and when to hunt all formed part of her collection of knowledge. Because she knew the ways of Mother Nature, it gave her an insight into human nature. Some people feared her because she used to make predictions. Listen to this story.

There were three brothers who lived on a farm near one of the local villages. They fished a lot, for times were hard. The three men caught enough fish to feed themselves, to sell to the villagers, and what was left over they gave to the pigs instead of to the poor. When Mary Louise heard this she was furious.

"People are hungry and you are giving the fish to the pigs? If you continue to do this you will not catch any more. Listen to my warning!"

The men laughed at her and continued to feed the fish to the pigs. But when they went fishing again they barely caught enough for themselves. Finally, very discouraged, they decided to go to Mary Louise and they promised that they would never waste the fish again. Soon afterwards, as the story goes, they caught fish in plenty.

Of course you have to realize that she played on people's superstitions, for if you were to check the signs of nature at that time, I'm sure that it would probably have shown low fishing time. You see, these men were farmers, not fishermen, and they didn't know about fishing so they

really believed that she had put a curse on them. My great-great grandmother knew these things and she used her insight to protect the needy – even from thoughtless men.

This woman was known throughout the area for her faith in God. People around her were aware of this because she used to help them in their time of need. When someone went to her in distress, she prayed with them and brought comfort and hope. Her faith also extended to her teachings, which included the “word of God,” midwifery, the making of homemade cures, “herb hunting,” and, of course, canoe building.

Her famous powerful hands with their long, slender fingers were used to carve out huge canoes as well as prepare and mend the broken ones torn by the swift currents found near the mighty falls—a natural obstacle on her route. Bark, cedar, tree gum and ash were some of the materials used to make these huge canoes that were a means of transportation for her errands of mercy. It was said that, whenever she was out on one of her trips and had no place to stay for the night, she simply did what the Indians would do—she tipped the canoe over and slept under it as a means of shelter from the evening chill.

My great-great grandmother’s hands were not only a source of comfort to people; they were also used to mend the broken bones of sick animals. There wasn’t a farmer in the area who had not asked for her help with their livestock. She even raised turkeys on her own and treated them with special herbs to “fatten” them up for Thanksgiving. It was a yearly ritual to see her take slaughtered turkeys to the homes of large families of the very poor so that they may have a happy celebration on this special day.

Yes, the people anxiously awaited her warm visits. It was not uncommon to see her coming down river with her young nephew, Louis Riel, her brother’s son, and one of her grandchildren, bringing news and comfort into the isolated villages. Her word was law. Whenever she asked for help or said “Hide Louis!” no one questioned her command. The local inhabitants called her the “Guardian Angel of the River.” Father Plouffe, the parish priest of Notre-Dame-de-la-Salette in Québec, said of Mary Louise McGregor:

“You know, her spirit is still alive to the people living along the river and they protect her memory as a living legend through stories which they tell to their children. They don’t want her to be forgotten.”⁴

One thing that people will always remember is her skill with the bow and arrow, the knife and the hatchet—survival means passed on to her by her father, Jean-Baptiste Riel.

Although she was skilled in the use of the long rifle, my great-great grandmother preferred the bow because of its accuracy and quietness. She used the knife to skin and clean animals for food and clothing and her aim with the hatchet was unmatched by any woodsman in her day.

Survival depended upon these skills. All of her children and grandchildren were taught the ways of the bow. This was a natural part of their up-bringing.

One interesting point that I would like to mention is the fact that many historians insist that Louis Riel owned and operated a gun. My fugitive cousin never owned or operated this form of weapon. Like his aunt, Louis was a skilled Bowman. Although Dumont, his military leader, was a sharpshooter, he could never surpass young Riel with the bow and arrow.

The chapters to follow in this section of the book will unfold this interesting character, Mary Louise Riel McGregor, as I attempt to bring you into her nomadic world, as revealed to me by my father and her descendants.

⁴ Father Plouffe, parish priest of Notre-Dame-de-la-Salette, Québec, quoted in August, 1980, in Québec

CHAPTER FOUR

Mary Louise's Errands of Mercy

Because of the harshness of pioneer life, many people fell prey to disease and illness. To reach the sick, Mary Louise had to use the trails and waterways that dotted the area. She was in constant contact with the settlers, acting as the “herbal doctor” for the whole river system.

I recall stories of how this woman would carry large pots of soup to the sick. For the children, she brought homemade bread, cakes and cookies, which she packed on her back. On other occasions, when she was going down stream, she caught fish for them, which formed part of their daily diet.

People found her eccentric, especially when they saw her wearing dress upon dress and apron upon apron. Whenever she was visiting and saw someone in need, she simply removed one of her articles of clothing and gave it away. It was against her principles to accept money for her acts of kindness. The only payment she would accept was pieces of clothing, vegetables from the garden, or lodging for the night.

One of her “errands of mercy” took place during the lifetime of my maternal grandfather, Alex Gervais.⁵ This is how I remember my mother telling me about the incident of “the broken leg”:

“Back in 1892, while working in the bush cutting wood and loading the sleigh, for some reason the horses were spooked, causing them to run off into the distance. While this was happening, the moving sleigh accidentally ran over your grandfather’s leg, breaking it in several places. This happened a short distance from Buckingham. Of course, in those days there were few doctors so your Uncle Louis Gervais ran to seek aid from the one person who he knew would help them, Mary Louise McGregor. Both she and her daughter Maria were visiting relatives in Buckingham at the time of the accident, so they didn’t have far to go.

Finding Alex in great pain, your great-great grandmother made a splint from cedar. This was used in those days because it could be easily bent, sliced and stripped. Underneath the splint she put rock moss—a good substitute for cotton—which protected and cushioned the leg from further injury until they reached home.

Once they arrived at the farm, Mary Louise carefully removed the splint and the rock moss and wrapped the broken limb in layers of leaves held together by strips of cotton. On top of this she applied a mixture made from flour, salt, water, egg white and wild herbs, which hardened to form a firm cast. Do you know that, within a short time, your grandfather was able to walk without a limp?”

As you can see, this great pioneer woman was looked upon as a “healer” and had “the knowledge of the bones” (as the Métis used to say).

One interesting thing that I remember my mother telling me is about a hide pouch that my great-great grandmother used to carry around her waist. It was always filled with an assortment of spices, herbs, roots and whatever else she would find in the forest that could be of some use as a medicine. Some of these herbs actually form the basis of modern drugs used today. Take for instance the extract called “Dr. Fowlers’ Wild Strawberry Extract.” Its source is the bark of the blackberry root and the wild strawberry leaf...a common cure for loose bowels. Her “pouch of

⁵ Alex Gervais married the former Onésime Brousseau in 1871, he died in 1912

cures” certainly helped my grandfather, for, according to my mother, his mended leg never bothered him again.

Mary Louise McGregor never missed an opportunity to teach people how to care for themselves when they were ill, how and where to gather herbs to make medicines and how to apply the mixtures to broken parts of the body. She needed to train certain individuals to replace her since it was almost impossible for her to always be available to serve the needs of the people. One of the people she trained was Marianne Allaire, the great grandmother of Mr. Onésime Prescott.⁶

Mr. Prescott is known in the area for the “curing of warts,” an old skill passed on to him by Marianne. His father had an old friend, Jos Collard, who suffered from a breathing ailment. With the help of a specially prepared herbal mixture, my great-great grandmother helped the sick man to regain his normal breathing. Jos lived right into his eighties. Mr. Prescott also told me how Mary Louise cured his father’s kidney problem as well as his sore back.

As you can see, whenever and wherever there was need, Mary Louise McGregor was there. But she was not only a healer of people. She also carried news, messages and information to everyone. As she travelled up and down the river, Mary Louise brought with her the news of the day, opening up the isolation by “word of mouth.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Babes in the Bush

In her hide pouch Mary Louise carried a variety of potions for the treatment of a number of ailments, such as constipation, asthma, pneumonia, broken bones and, yes, even the “birthing of babies.”

It was not uncommon to find her delivering infants at the isolated homes of the pioneers and her people, the Métis. Upon the moment of birth, she would also perform a Baptism and place the soul of the newborn into the hands of its Creator. You know, she never ceased to marvel at the mystery of new life and she never missed a birth.

My great-great grandmother delivered many of her own family members into this world. Grandfather Régis McGregor was born in 1862. She loved Régis as well as all of her other grandchildren and took pride and pleasure in their safe arrival.

Like all skilled people in those days, this great woman passed on much of her knowledge of “birthing babies” to her daughters as well as to her only son, Robert. Sometimes they accompanied their mother on her errands of mercy, each taking their turn in helping with the deliveries. Her oldest daughter Maria would later replace her mother as the local midwife. Many people living in Val-des-Bois still remember Maria delivering “babes in the bush” for she was known as “La Sauvagesse.”⁷

Passed down from my great-great grandmother McGregor’s people, the Chipewyan, was an old Indian remedy called the “Golden Thread.” This ancient herb grew wild, like a strawberry, crawling along the forest floor. The roots were boiled into a liquid and used to rinse the mouths of newborn babes. The tonic was also good for “scurvy of the mouth,” cold sores and pyorrhoea of the gums. This old Indian remedy was used to relieve many pioneer babies of their pain.

⁶ Mr. Onésime Prescott, a local resident of Val-des-Bois, Québec

⁷ The Indian woman

The well-being of these children was very important to Mary Louise, for she used to teach them their prayers in the form of games in the forest. At the same time, she would also instruct them in the ways of survival. You see, her interest in these youngsters did not stop at their birth. After all, they were her next generation. I was told that she felt very strongly that children should learn the ways of their people, their God, and their heritage. All her stories had a moral and she took every opportunity to use Mother Nature as an example. My great-great grand-mother respected the wilderness. Notice how this theme runs through the story of the rabbit, one of my favorite lessons, a tale passed on to me by “word of mouth.”

The event took place while Mary Louise was on her way to Buckingham to pick up supplies, such as flour, salt, sugar and spices. Even though she didn't eat much salt or sugar herself, Mary Louise used these for her family, to prepare herbal medicines, and kept some as supplies for the neighbors. It was on one of these trips that she had to kill a rabbit for her evening meal. This was how she told the story to my people.

“On my way to Buckingham it started to cloud over and there was a light wind. In time it changed and I knew there was bad weather ahead. It started to rain and thunder, making it hard to cross the lake that would lead me to the portage. You know, the white waves were well over two feet high as they pounded against my canoe. I must admit that I was a bit afraid, for my boat was nearly swamped.

That's when I decided to head for shore and wait out the storm. From this point, I could see the middle of the lake. How wild and furious it was! I could feel the power of God upon this land and I prayed silently.

The rough weather finally calmed down and I was able to make a fire and prepare what little food I had left for my supper. While sitting at the campfire I heard a noise. There it was—a rabbit eating shrubs. Very carefully, I picked up my hatchet and threw it towards the animal, killing it instantly. In no time I had it skinned, cleaned and roasting over the hot coals. For a moment, I offered a quiet prayer of thanksgiving.”

At this point in the story the children would interrupt her and ask, “What did you do then Grannie, what did you do then?” To this she would reply, half in English and half in French:

“Mes p'tits enfants, I ate it and I had a good feast.”

Great-great grandmother was not one to waste food or kill an animal for sport. What she killed, she ate. This was one of the lessons passed on to the children and they responded to her teachings. It was her simple way of instructing the youngsters in the ways of the bush and they loved her for it. Whenever they saw her canoe on the river, they would race along the bank awaiting her arrival and, of course, her next story. She never disappointed them.

The years passed and Mary Louise, still working very hard, continued to deliver the local offspring, as well as more of her own grandchildren. Little did she realise the significance of the birth of some of these youngsters, especially her grandsons, Régis and Angus, for they would later be willing to risk their own freedom and safety for their beloved cousin, Louis Riel. Of course, at that time, it was considered dangerous to be associated in any way with the young fugitive.

It was because of my great-great grandmother that her grandchildren nurtured a strong love and loyalty for Louis. This loyalty began in early childhood, for Louis lived with their families whenever he would visit, sometimes for months at a time, telling them stories of their people.

Life was not all work, even in those days. Mary Louise McGregor had a sense of humor and loved music and she always took time to enjoy herself, especially at local weddings.

It was while some of these youngsters were growing up that Louis' father, the senior Louis Riel, passed away in 1864. Louis was twenty-one at the time and he was away at school in Montréal. He was finding it difficult to accept his father's death. To ease some of Louis' depression, Mary's son, Robert, and his wife, Céline, decided to invite him to the wedding of their oldest daughter, fifteen year old Hermeline. She was to marry a Basile Turpin. The wedding took place in Maniwaki in January of 1865, one year after Louis' father's death. Young Louis' Aunt Mary Louise felt that it would be good for him to get away from Montréal for a while and spend time with his people, the Riels and the McGregors.

At the time of the wedding, Robert and Céline's other children were much younger than the bride-to-be, fifteen year old Hermeline. Grandfather Régis was three, Uncle George was only one, and Aunt Marguerite was ten, while Pauline was around eight years of age. Of course, the twins, Flano and Angus, were not yet born. Despite their tender years, the parents let their youngsters attend the wedding of their oldest sister.

Events in those days were very interesting and important. Such celebrations gave people a chance to meet with one another from time to time, to exchange stories and to enjoy themselves. *Grand grand grandmère* loved to listen to the fiddle and to watch the children (many of whom she had delivered) dance and enjoy the festivities.

Lucy, Mary's sister, also attended the celebrations with her husband, John Lee. Like her young nephew, Louis, and her sister, Lucy found it difficult to accept the death of her dear brother and so she decided to join with the other members of her family on this happy occasion. It would help her to forget, at least for a while.

These pleasant occasions were a source of relief from the harsh pioneer life and human suffering that Mary Louise often experienced in her travels amongst the sick. But the one bright light to all this pain was the birth of a new child. Nothing gave her more pleasure than to bring forth new life with her own hands and to play a part in its survival.

As a matter of fact, during one of my trips to Québec, I had an opportunity to visit with a Mrs. Chalifoux⁸ (Sylvio's wife)⁹ who had been delivered into this world by my great-great grandmother. This birth took place at Lake Toma on March 23, 1898. The most astonishing thing about this birth was that, six months later, on September 22 of that same year, Mrs. Chalifoux's deliverer, Mary Louise, passed away at the age of ninety six. This particular delivery will give you an idea of the energy and participation in life of this great woman – even up to the point of her death.

There is an interesting story about Lake Toma. The tale goes back to a legend of an old Indian who was called Toma. This elderly native lived all alone on an island in Lake Toma when, in 1896, a landslide took place, causing the lake to empty, leaving in its place a dry lake bed. The path of the slide destroyed a mill that was a source of employment for the people living in the district at that time. Although the loss of the mill caused great hardship for them, the people were grateful that not one life was lost in the slide.

I was made aware of this story when visiting Notre-Dame-de-la-Salette during the summer of 1980. My assistant, Bernice, and I actually walked along the dried bed of the lost lake. Incidentally, Mary Louise was still living when the incident occurred. She travelled and fished this lake and I tried to visualize her and her companions as they made their way downstream toward the isolated dwellers that depended on her help in their time of need. Since the lake emptied into Rat Lake, my great-great grandmother not only tended the needy, she also visited with her people, the McGregors, the Latours and the Chéniers, who owned the land around Rat Lake.

⁹ Mrs. Chalifoux née Maria Boisvenu – born March 23, Notre-Dame-de-la-Salette, Québec

My great-great grandmother McGregor used the lakes, the rivers and the land to administer her care, her medicine and her special gift of “the laying of the hands” in the delivery of “babes in the bush.”

CHAPTER SIX

The Laying of the Hands

There is a power of healing that still remains a mystery amongst my family and it is known as “the laying of the hands.” Mary Louise McGregor had this gift, for she was known as the “healer.”

Around her neck, she wore large wooden prayer beads, a symbol of hope to the ill. You know, she never took them off. She wore them wherever she went. During the “laying of the hands,” she would place the beads over the sick and pray for them.

There was a story of a young girl who lived in a small town near McGregor Lake. Her name was Ann La Salle.¹⁰ Ann was deeply in love with a young man who was away working in the bush at the time. Finding herself pregnant and fearing for her reputation, the young woman aborted her illegitimate child. You must realise that, in those days, it was a disgrace to bear a child out of wedlock. Because of the shame, Ann took this drastic step and it nearly cost her life.

The bleeding would not stop, so she was forced to tell her parents, who immediately sent for great-great grandmother. Relatives who were actually there said that when Mary entered the home they could feel a strange awareness of this mystic healer and even the children held her in awe. I can understand the people’s reaction as they saw her dressed in a long dark robe with her shoulders wrapped in a thick black shawl. Mary Louise entered the room and quickly moved her cloaked figure towards the bed of the sick woman. In a hushed voice, she spoke these words to Ann,

“Let me pray with you. God will help. Don’t be afraid.” As she prayed, out from under her shawl emerged a pair of large healing hands holding the beads, which she carefully placed over the feverish body of Ann La Salle. Within a short time, the bleeding stopped and the girl soon recovered.

Mary Louise used her gift once again in the late spring in the province of Québec. There was a log jam and the men were trying to break it with long poles. One of the young workers slipped and fell into the fast water, trapping his arm between the floating logs. The men quickly pulled the helpless victim to safety and brought him to shore, providing what comfort they could until help arrived.

The lumbermen sent for my great-great grandmother, who was visiting relatives in the area at that time. Her fame as a “healer” was well known. Since the injured man could not be brought to her, a decision was made to bring her to him. And that is what they did. Mary Louise was taken to the site where the young man lay helpless and bleeding. “Be still,” she said, “and I will help you.” As the people watched, she extended her healing hands over the injured arm and pressed gently until the bleeding stopped.

When this was done, she took some cotton stripping and herbal mixture from her pouch and carefully bandaged the arm. To ease the pain, the “healer” gave him a home remedy. Just before the lumbermen took the injured man home, she placed her wooden beads over his injury and prayed for him. For months, people talked about this woman and her “laying of the hands.”

¹⁰ The name Ann La Salle is used to protect the true identity of the young woman as well as her descendants

Not only did she use her mystic hands to help people; she also used her power to relieve sick animals from their misery. Many people came to her for help and to seek her advice because she was known to have “knowledge of the bones.” Mary Louise spent many long hours, late at night, in neighbour’s barns tending injured horses, feverish cows and new births.

One particular evening, she was called to help one of the local farmers whose mare was having difficulty foaling. The animal was about to give birth to twins. Complications set in, so Mary Louise had to use her strong healing hands to remove the foals.

“Hold the light over here; I must see what I am doing. Help her to push, John, help her to push! That’s it. It will soon be over.”

Over the years my great-great grandmother had passed on her healing gift to certain members of my family, one of whom was my Great Uncle Angus, Mary Louise’s grandson.

There was a rule that when a family member received the power of the “healing of the hands,” that person was placed under a “cloud of silence” never to reveal this knowledge. When Mary Louise passed on her powers to Uncle Angus, it left her weak, for she was beginning to show signs of age.

I remember, I was ten years old when I first met Uncle Angus. He lived with us for several years. Uncle had a great sense of humour, he enjoyed music and he loved to tell stories. He taught me the old Indian dances and even some modern “soft shoe.”

Once, I arrived home early from school with a severe toothache. Aware of my suffering, Uncle Angus asked me to come to his side and show him where it hurt. I can still remember him placing his finger on the painful tooth, closing his eyes and saying, “There. It’s all gone. You will never have pain in that tooth again!”

You can’t imagine how relieved I was! When I asked him how he had stopped the pain, he told me that he would tell me when I was older. Unfortunately Angus passed away before he could tell me the secret of the “laying of the hands.” I was nineteen at the time of his death. I never did find out the secret. I often wonder if he ever meant to give the gift to me, but I will never know.

How I wish he were still alive today to tell me stories about Louis Riel. He knew his cousin very well, for, as a young boy, Uncle Angus used to listen to Louis telling stories around the campfire. Later, as a grown man, it was Angus who accompanied his older brother, Régis, on a trip out west to visit with Louis.

Yes, I have fond memories of my great uncle Angus, but a young child will especially remember how her tooth was cured by the “laying of the hands.”

You remember my mentioning a Mr. Prescott from Val-des-Bois? Well, I went back to see him in Québec and he told me that he had the gift of the “laying of the hands.” I had a wart on my face and I asked him to remove it. He touched my face with his special hands, said some strange words, like a prayer, and then told me to go home and forget about it. He advised me that, in about a year, the wart should disappear. We shall see. I believe that it will go away, because I remember Uncle Angus and I believe in the “laying of the hands.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mary's Herbal Cures

Mary Louise's magic hands not only helped to heal the sick and tend to animals, they were also used to prepare homemade herbal medicines. These were made from herbs, spices, and parts of trees that were found in the wooded area near her cabin. My great-great grandmother spent many long hours in the bush, searching for "just the right root," "just the right leaf," flower or plant needed to make her "cures." She used a large home-built wooden mortar and pestle to crush the herbs into powders, which she stored in jars for future use in caring for the ill. Smaller portions were packed in the hide pouch that she carried with her on errands of mercy. Her "pouch of cures" was a source of comfort to the people, for they knew the power of her herbal medicine and they trusted her skills and her judgment in treating their ailments.

During my research, I found some unusual potions which I would like to share with you. Here are some interesting ones: To treat asthma, Mary Louise used a flower called *Shoemack* (*sumac*) which comes to full bloom during the month of August and returns to seed in the fall. This flower stands high in the forest and it is a favorite food of the wild deer. Just before seeding time, she would gather enough flowers for her winter supply and store them in large containers on the shelves until they were needed. Whenever she treated an asthmatic, she told them to chew on the sumac plant, suck out the juice, swallow and then "spit out the pits" (or the remains).

I myself am asthmatic. One time, back in 1954, my father and I were in the bush prospecting in the Algoma district. My asthma was bothering me that day, so my father, remembering his granny's cures, gathered some Shoemack and gave it to me to chew. It had a "vinegar" flavour and after a while I actually felt some relief in my breathing.

My own grandfather, Régis, suffered from a condition known as stomach ulcers. Grandpère, knowing about herbal medicine, went to see his grandmother for help. She took some bark of the "épinette rouge" (*tamarack*) which she boiled, strained and cooled into a liquid. When Grandpère drank it, it gave him some relief from the pain as well as the bleeding caused by the inflamed ulcer. "This will not cure you, she said, but it will stop some of the pain."

You know, in those days nothing went unused. Common herbs, roots, spices and parts of trees were a source of this woman's "miracle medicine." For instance, ordinary strawberry and raspberry stalks were good for the treating of diarrhea; the common wild horseradish called "La Coca Shew" was used as a spice. Everything had a use, even animal parts, such as the kidney of the beaver. The kidney was well cooked, drained, and spiked with a good shot of corn whisky or "high wine." It proved to be a source of relief from the phlegm caused by a bronchial condition.

People in my great-great grandmother's day suffered from boils just as we do today. There is an interesting root called "dragon's blood," which was used in the treatment of boils. This red and white root is found growing along the forest floor, creeping like a vine. Using her powerful hands, Mary Louise used to crush the root to make a paste, which she used as a "potus" (*poultice*) to draw boils out from the infected area of the skin.

Superstition formed a large part of the beliefs of people in those days. This can even be noticed in the preparation of pioneer medicines. Take, for instance, the cure called "La Susanne." This potion was made from parts of no fewer than seven trees—cedar, spruce, cherry, maple, jack pine and hemlock. A single branch from each of the seven trees was picked using only the left hand. According to superstitious beliefs, this was to ward off evil spirits. People really believed this. However, I was told that Mary Louise was not of a superstitious nature. She had a reasoning power and she had a deep understanding of both Mother Nature and human nature. There was a simple explanation for everything she did. And don't forget, she was also a very devout Catholic (This religion forbids a belief in false gods.).

Mary Louise's herbal cures were not magic potions. Neither were they based on the unexplained. These medicines were formed from knowledge itself. In other words, she simply used what was around her in the forest. As I mentioned before, some of her potions form the basis of modern drugs. Take, for an example, Dr. Fowler's Wild Strawberry Extract. This is made from the extracts of the bark of the blackberry root and the strawberry leaf. From the plant called the Foxglove, a cardiac drug that helps the heart to pump better, has been developed. Today, we know it as "Lanoxin."

Mary Louise did not keep this herbal knowledge to herself. She passed it on to others so that they too may help those in need. Our pioneer doctor was a teacher – instructing certain individuals who had that special quality for learning, healing and caring. You remember Marianne Allaire (Mr. Prescott's great grandmother)? Well, she was one of Mary's protégés. Mrs. Allaire was taught how to cure a gangrened leg. Marianne's patient had his leg cut twice by local doctors to help remove the infested gangrene. The leg just would not heal, so the family called Mrs. Allaire, who applied an herbal potion made from the "branche rouge." It proved to be very effective, curing the infected leg completely.

One particular cure that caught my eye was called "l'herbe à dinde" or "turkey grass." On one of my trips to Québec, I was told by Claire Morin¹¹ how her mother, Annie, was cured of her Arthritis by none other than Mary Louise McGregor. Annie had to drink a liquid which was made from this turkey grass. As you may recall, I mentioned that Mary raised turkeys and fed them with "turkey grass" to keep them healthy for the special feast days. In her mind, what was good for the treatment of animals was also good for humans, and she always carried some of this herb in a container in her hide pouch.

This woman with her "pouch of cures" travelled the river system, gathering wild herbs and spices to make new medicines to be distributed to the sick. I am left with a vivid impression of this herbal doctor administering to the ill, teaching her skills and bringing hope to those in need.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Believe It or Not!

In the previous chapter, I mentioned that my great-great grandmother was not of a superstitious nature. However, people told many stories about her mysterious powers that would leave one in a state of "Believe it or not!"

Let me share with you some of these tales, which I'm sure you will find interesting as well as stimulating to the imagination. Take, for instance, the story of the "portage and the barn with no roof", as told to me by one of the Morins, a great-great grand-son of Mary Louise.

Many of the local inhabitants worked in the lumber camps situated near High-Falls – a fair distance from Val-des-Bois. Mr. Charles Thibault operated a business in which people and goods were portaged from the lower part of the Falls to their destination up river.

Great-great Grandmother often travelled this area to transfer her much needed supplies to her family and friends. Very often, she would take one or two of her grandchildren along to help her on the way.

One time, Mary Louise and her two Morin grandsons were coming back from Buckingham with supplies. Upon reaching the place of the rapids, she approached Mr. Thibault to portage her to Val-des-Bois. He refused her request because he was busy building a barn¹² and

¹¹ Claire Morin - formerly Claire Daigle. Her mother was Annie Bennette, born in 1877, died in 1927

¹² Story of the barn – reference Mr. Ignace Morin of Val-des-Bois

he felt that he could not afford the time to take Mary Louise and her companions to their destiny. She pleaded with him, but it was no use. Finally, out of pure frustration, she turned to the grandchildren and told them to gather the supplies for a three day trip because that's what it would take to reach the Latour farm, home of her daughter Elizabeth. From there Mary Louise knew that she would receive help with her wares for the trip back to Val-des-Bois.

And so they separated their supplies into two bundles to be portaged on the first and second day; the huge canoe would be left for the final day. The trips were difficult for it was the hot time of the year and the mosquitoes were in abundance along the trail. At night they rested and applied ointment to their bites.

On the third morning, Mary Louise and the boys returned to pick up the canoe. Just before parting, she is said to have told the owner,

"That barn you are building, you will never finish it!"

As the story goes, as late as 1930, the "barn with no roof" was still standing there with its empty frame looking towards the sky. Mr. A. Morin, the one who told me this story, explained why the barn's roof was never finished. He said that there was an unwritten law during the early pioneer days in Canada that you helped others in time of need and asked no questions. This law ruled the wilderness as a means of survival, and it still prevails today in the isolated parts of the province of Québec where my great-great grandmother's descendants still live. Mr. Thibault forgot this decree. When no one showed up to help with the building of the barn, he went to the people to ask "why." The inhabitants simply reminded him of his misdeeds in not assisting Mary Louise McGregor and told him that this type of behaviour would not go unnoticed. Today, the actual barn is gone; however, its memory still lives on. "Believe it or not!"

Here are some interesting tales worth mentioning. Each has to do with one of the forces of nature: wind, water and fire.

Ordinarily when one sits near a campfire facing the direction of the wind, the smoke will naturally blow towards you. Well, not so with my great-great grandmother; she was different! It didn't matter which direction the wind was blowing or where she was sitting, she merely had to extend her hand over the fire and the smoke would blow the other way. "Believe it or not!"

Notice how the next story includes both wind and water as its basic themes. In Québec during my great-great grandmother's time, many people worked on the rivers in the pioneer lumbering industry. Logjams were a common event and, to add to the problem, strong winds were known to develop suddenly, making it difficult for the lumbermen to handle the logs on their way downstream. Everyone in the area knew of the power of the mystic, Mary Louise Riel-McGregor. So, when things got really bad, the workers summoned her to the site of the logjam. Once again, with an extended hand out towards the direction of the blowing wind, this woman was able to change the wind's direction so that the logs could be separated from the jam and sent to their destination—downstream to the saw mill. I leave it to you, "Believe it or not!"

The forces of water play a role in this story about the threatening rains. The people were busy gathering in the hay. In the distance a storm was brewing, threatening their dried crop. The workers were worried that they would not have enough time to finish the harvest before the coming of the rain. The storm was approaching closer and closer and the people were just about ready to give in to its fury when Mary Louise, who was helping them, shouted words of encouragement:

"Don't wait; do it now! The rain will not fall where you stand."

Bring the crop into the barn. Hurry!"¹³

And the people worked, piling in the dry hay while it poured all around them...except where they stood! When the last wagonload was secured, the rains fell, marking their foot prints in the dried earth.

Here is another episode that had to do with fire, both friend and foe to man. The story reveals my great-great grandmother's disturbing premonitions of disasters, such as a death, an accident, a fire happening to loved ones or people in the settlements. People who knew her well said that, whenever Mary Louise had one of these premonitions, she would become restless to the point of exhaustion, worrying about the fate that awaited someone, someone she knew and loved. Not being able to withstand the mental anguish for very long, she would try to warn the victims of their oncoming doom.

One particular evening, she had a painful vision of a neighbour's barn going up in flames just before dawn. In a desperate effort to help, this mystic woman walked for three miles to warn the owners of the impending danger and to help them quickly remove the livestock and equipment from the barn. When she reached the farm and told them her vision, no one questioned Mary Louise for her word was sacred and her fame as a mystic was known throughout the district.

The family did as she commanded and worked hard to remove their valuables and livestock. And, just as she predicted, the barn caught fire at dawn. "Believe it or not!"

I could go on and on, for there are so many stories told about this pioneer woman. I hope that you, the reader, have enjoyed these particular accounts and I leave it to you to "Believe it or not!"

CHAPTER NINE

The Missing Historical Links

Louis Riel was "on the run" from the age of 29 years until his death in 1885 at the age of 44, a total of fifteen years.

According to historians, Louis fled north across the American border into Montréal with the intention of going to Ottawa to register as the elected representative of Manitoba.¹⁴

Now the experts continue to state that Riel left Montréal and got as far as Hull, Québec, where he hid with friends, and that, while talking with them, he changed his mind about registering in the Capital because he feared for his life. The experts further stated that Louis left Hull and returned to Montréal. This is not so, for, according to our people, the Riels and the McGregors, he left Hull in 1873 and went directly into hiding. I can still remember my father telling me that there was a five-thousand-dollar bounty on Louis' head and that he was alarmed and went to great-great grandmother's place for protection.

You won't find this information in the history books, because the experts did not know about my great-great grandmother McGregor. You will notice that historians always left a gap, a missing link, concerning Louis' whereabouts between from Hull and Montréal. This was no accident of omission; they just didn't know. We intend to fill in the gaps—the missing information that the writers left out.

¹³ Mrs. Cyr told this story to the book's translator, Bernice, and Violet Lalonde on a trip to Québec in the summer of 1987

¹⁴ Louis Riel was the elected member of Manitoba in Parliament

For a moment, forget the historians and put yourself in Riel's shoes. Where would you go? Where would you hide? The answer is simple—with your people. And that is exactly what Louis did. He sought sanctuary with his relatives, the Riels and the McGregors.

Eventually, Louis did return to Ottawa in disguise and register for parliament. In the confusion, no one realized what was happening until it was too late. So, once again, Riel escaped and returned to the safety of his kin.

Let me tell you about this “hide-away” as told to me by my father, Wilfred McGregor. Look at a map of Québec and find the following places: Hull, McGregor Lake, Buckingham, Notre-Dame-de-la-Salette, High Falls, Val-des-Bois and Maniwaki (Lac Ste-Marie).

With a pencil, connect these locations and you will see that they form a circle on the map. This was where my nomadic great-great grandmother lived, fished, traveled the water-ways, worked amongst the people, and, of course, hid her fugitive nephew, Louis, from the clutches of the law. At the time, Louis was twenty-nine and his Aunt Mary Louise was sixty-four years of age. Despite their gap in years, both had a deep understanding and love for one another as human beings.

Great-great Grandmother McGregor realized that it was important to keep Louis on the move. This suited her nomadic existence quite well, for she too was constantly on the go. Relatives and friends took turns hiding him. Mary Louise's children, Robert, Elizabeth, and Maria, as well as her own sister Lucy and granddaughter, Hermeline, all played a part in this adventure. My father called them the “family pack”¹⁵ when he referred to them in his stories.

These people assisted Louis quietly and effectively during his fifteen years in exile. Their involvement in Louis' life was exciting and courageous and the pages that follow will explore their part in the unwritten chapters of Canadian history.

Following Louis' episode of the signing of the register in Ottawa, he slipped quietly into Hull, from which he made contact with his Aunt Mary Louise to meet him in Gatineau, Québec.

My great-great grandmother left her home at McGregor Lake to meet with Louis and they both made their way overland to Buckingham to visit with friends for a while. During their stop-over, they purchased their much-needed supplies as well as small gifts for the children whom they were planning to see during their frequent stops along the way.

Having concluded their visit at Buckingham, Louis and his aunt made their way by canoe on the Lièvre River, portaged a distance and completed the journey by horse and buggy to the home of Mary's only son, Robert, and his wife, Céline, and their family at Lake Toma.¹⁶

It is interesting to note that Céline's parents were among the first settlers to farm in this area. Her father was a wood cutter and trapper for the Hudson Bay Company. When her parents passed away, Céline and Robert took over the house and there they raised their family.

Robert and Céline were married in 1850 in Buckingham, a district not far from the lake. You know, for those days, this couple was wed late in life—she was twenty-four and he was already twenty-seven. Yet, despite their late start, they raised a family of eight energetic children, which included my own grandfather, Régis,¹⁷ the oldest daughter, Hermeline, brother, George and the twins, Flano and Angus. Of the eight offspring, I have chosen to mention these particular

¹⁵ Elizabeth was married to Veillot dit Latour; Mary was married to Charles Morin; Robert was married to Céline Chénier; Lucy was married to John Lee; Hermeline was married to Basile Turpin. These people were known as the “family pack”

¹⁶ Lake Toma, location – Notre-Dame-de-la-Salette

¹⁷ Régis McGregor's formal name is Richard McGregor – written on his birth certificate

five because they were in constant contact with Louis, especially Régis, who travelled with them on the waterways.

At the time of Louis' exile, Grandfather Régis was a lanky twelve year old, George was eleven, the twins were nine and Hermeline was twenty-three and lived in Golden Lake, Ontario.¹⁸ How the boys loved to hear Louis Riel (their cousin) tell them stories of the vast prairies, his endless escapes from the law and tales of the great American plains. Of course, their favorite stories were about their own people, the Métis, who roamed the West at that time. Riel wanted the next generation to know of the wrongs done to their people. He told them of the white man's deaf ears to the many petitions and requests for freedom.

Not only did Riel talk of the wrongs done to our people, he also spoke to the children of his own errors in dealing with (Canadian Prime Minister) Macdonald's government. Louis had a morbid regret for the death of Thomas Scott, claiming it was an accident that should never have occurred. These youngsters held him in awe and they developed a deep sense of loyalty for their beloved hero. They expressed their support in many ways and they were willing to help him in their own child-like manner.

Once again, Mary Louise and Louis made preparations for their next journey, which would take them to the home of her daughter Elizabeth who was living at High Falls near Val-des-Bois, Québec. Young Régis, Robert's twelve year old, wanted to go with them. Louis teased Régis about his age and his size, but, his Grandmother Marie said that he could go along, for he would be company for her should she return on her own when Louis left for Montréal.

All three departed in June of that same year (1873) and arrived at Elizabeth's home during the celebrations of the Feast of St. John the Baptist, a special religious event for French Roman Catholics living in Québec. To get there, the party had to leave Notre-Dame-de-la-Salette, travel up the Lièvre River and portage High Falls on the way to the Latour farm.

Mary Louise's daughter, Elizabeth (wife of Veillot dit Latour), welcomed the unexpected visitors and invited them to take part in feast day festivities.

The Latours were busy completing their dwelling and were only too happy to leave their heavy work and enjoy their guests. Following the Feast Day, life returned to normal and, as pioneer tradition would have it, the guests helped to build the log cabin. This proved to be a source of relief for Louis' troubled mind and helped to relieve some of the anxiety caused by his years in exile.

The Latour dwelling was located near the place called "Rapids of the High Falls"—one of the locations on the map of the "Circle of Hidings." Here is a picture of the old Latour home as it stands today. It was built in the summer of 1873 and the ownership passed from Senior Veillot dit Latour to J. Lépine, to Louis and David Latour who in turn sold it to Cyr. I actually saw the deed, which was shown to me by Mrs. Cyr, the present owner. I could see why it would be safe for Louis to hide at Latours. The dwelling was on an isolated road, miles from the village. The troops would never find him there.

The building was constructed of wide, thick logs, which were squared off for a firmer holding. This form of construction was called "*du bois équarré*" (square timber construction) and Elizabeth's husband was an *équarisseur* (hewer) by trade. The house also featured a summer kitchen (which is still there) that was used to preserve jams, jellies and fruits. On one of my visits to the site, I noticed all the old jars and bottles still in use by the present owners.

¹⁸ Golden Lake – Renfrew District, Ontario

Mrs. Cyr had an interesting name for my great-great grandmother. She called her the “Guardian Angel of the River.”¹⁹ It is interesting to note that, at one time, the mighty High Falls emptied into the Lièvre.²⁰ Today, however, there’s a dam that, when opened, flows into the river. Notice the great beauty and wilderness captured in the picture of the Falls as it stood during Mary’s time. The dam was constructed in 1929 and now serves the communities of the surrounding area of Val-des-Bois, Québec. But, at the same time, something was lost when they destroyed the great High Falls.

In speaking about the Latour home and the transfer of ownership, I mentioned a Mr. J. Lépine. His family background is historically interesting because it was his cousin, Ambrose Lépine, who fought with Louis in the Manitoba Rebellion of 1869-70. So as you can see, Riel had no difficulty securing a safe hiding place during his long exile, for he was amongst people who cared and families whose members had fought alongside him in the West.

My great-great grandmother and her companions remained at the Latours for only a short visit—just long enough to help with the new home and to attend the celebrations. Louis wanted to visit with his Aunt Lucy and Uncle John Lee whom he hadn’t seen for quite some time. They lived on the outskirts of Montréal—a location somewhat safe from the law. Things had quietened down now and he felt that it was safe to visit.

Just before Louis’ departure to visit with the Lees, Maria Morin (Mary Louise’s daughter) arrived from Val-des-Bois to invite them to the wedding of her son, Charles, to be held in the month of October that same year. Since Louis was going to Montréal, she asked him to invite Lucy and her husband and any other family members that he might see on his travels between June and October.

My great-great grandmother McGregor and her young grandson, Régis, decided to stay with the Latours for the remainder of their visit. She made Louis promise that he would bring her sister and husband to the wedding.

“Don’t forget to invite my sister to the wedding;
I haven’t seen her for a while and I want you to
bring John Lee. I will see you in October.”

Riel left for the district of Montréal, leaving his Aunt Mary Louise and young Régis to make their own way back to McGregor Lake in mid-July. Elizabeth’s husband, François, had business to attend to in Buckingham, Louis went directly to Hull to visit with devoted friends and from there he travelled to the Lees, several miles from the centre of the city of Montréal.

The Lees welcomed him warmly and encouraged Louis to remain in their home for a visit. At first Riel felt uneasy, for he knew that Macdonald’s men were constantly on the lookout for him. However, Lucy and John reassured him that he was safe with them. After all, the people in Québec always supported Riel’s cause. They knew that his fight was their fight.

During his stay, Louis visited his many friends and relatives here in Canada as well as in the United States. Of course, he had to be careful. Nevertheless, Louis spent the summer of 1874 moving from one location to the other, right under the nose of the law.

In early October, remembering his Aunt Mary’s request, Louis invited the Lees to the Morin wedding, which was to be held on the twenty-second of that same month. As always in the Riel-McGregor families, festivities of this nature were well attended. This event would be no

¹⁹ Guardian Angel of the River, this was the Lièvre River

²⁰ Rivière du Lièvre means “River of the Hare”

exception. The Lees and Louis were looking forward to the event, so, in high spirits, the three headed for the Morin homestead in Val-des-Bois, Québec.

Upon their arrival, the wedding plans were in full progress with family members and guests arriving daily, some of whom Louis had not seen for a long time. Hermeline, Robert and Céline's oldest daughter, was one of them. My goodness, he hadn't seen her since the day of her marriage in Maniwaki in 1865! That was a long time ago, when she was only fifteen years of age.

Great-great grandmother and young Régis arrived at the celebrations shortly after Louis. Mary Louise was anxious to see her sister, Lucy, and brother-in-law, John Lee. Everyone attended the ceremonies in Notre-Dame-du-Laus and returned to Val-des-Bois for the wedding celebrations. The bride was Auxélie Larocque, a local girl who was well known and liked in the area. The groom of course, was the son of Charles and Maria Morin. The parents were very proud and pleased that so many could attend.

Maria McGregor, like her sister Elizabeth, was also married in Buckingham in 1847 to a Charles Morin, a long-time friend of the family. At the time of their son's wedding and Louis' visit, the Morins were living at Val-des-Bois, Québec, a short distance from Buckingham.

During the summer of 1979, I had an opportunity to visit the Morin home as it stands today. The old structure creaks with history with its warped beaten windows, and the aged structure echoes many memories from the distant past. Wandering from room to room, I could actually feel the presence of Louis and Grandfather Régis – then a young man – talking to one another during their stay. My mind was also flooded with thoughts of my father as he spoke of the two sisters, Elizabeth and Maria, his Aunt Hermeline and, of course, his own father Régis McGregor, and how they had all helped in their own way to make Riel's life more bearable during his long exile. To think that Marie and Charles hid Louis right there in that house! If only Macdonald and his men had known!!

Returning to the event of the wedding, the Lees and Great-great Grandmother, young Régis and Louis bid their farewells to the young couple and departed for Lake Ste-Marie to visit with their relatives, the Riels.

To reach their destination, the family group travelled and portaged the following bodies of water: Lac des Rats,²¹ Lac Rouge,²² Lac Croche,²³ and Lac Poisson Blanc,²⁴ which leads to Maniwaki. From there, they travelled to the Gatineau River and finally to Lake Ste-Marie.²⁵ They were welcomed warmly by the Riels, many of whom had settled in that part of the country.

The days of their visit slowly drew to an end at Lake Ste-Marie and the company made its way down the Gatineau River to McGregor Lake, where they remained for a period of rest. From there, the Lees took the horse and buggy to Hull and made their way home to Montréal. Régis, Louis and Mary Louise slipped quietly away, unnoticed, to Golden Lake in the Renfrew District of Ontario. Here they would visit with Hermeline²⁶ and her husband, Basile Turpin, and the children. You remember them. They were the young couple who were wed in Maniwaki.

The Turpins were there to meet them as their canoe moved slowly towards shore. Régis was eager to spend some time with his oldest sister. Mary Louise always held a special place in her heart for this particular grand-daughter. Louis remembered her long ago, standing near the

²¹ Lac des Rats – Lake of the rats

²² Le lac Rouge – Red Lake

²³ Le lac Croche – Crooked Lake

²⁴ Le lac Poisson Blanc – White Fish

²⁵ Lake Ste-Marie – These lakes are in Québec

²⁶ Hermeline died in Toronto, buried in Sudbury, Ontario

campfire as he told stories to her sisters and brothers about their people. They all would have a lot to talk about to fill in the missing years since the day of the wedding.

The Turpins spent the early part of their marriage there, and this was Louis' first opportunity to see them as a family.²⁷

Hermeline was a very gentle person and a hard worker like her parents and her grandmother Mary Louise. Her sympathies, of course, were with Riel and she would always be there if he needed her help. During her family's visits, she constantly watched for strangers roaming in the area because anyone of them could be a bounty hunter. Since their place was isolated, there was little danger, at least for a while.

Part of her help involved helping Louis stay in close touch with his family and friends. Riel's supporters used the mail in an unusual manner. They sent letters to Louis enclosed in their own mail. Upon receiving the correspondence, the relatives and friends would remove Louis' letters and deliver them to him in person. This method baffled the Government of the day because, in their search for Louis' whereabouts, the officials could never find an address that would give them a lead. Hermeline was part of this game and she delivered much welcomed mail to Louis during his visit with the Turpins.

For a person in exile, time is a burden, and for Louis Riel, there was no exception. He, too, was caught "in time"; always coming, always leaving, always waiting, always watching. The three visitors bid their farewells. Louis set out for Montréal while my great-great grandmother and Régis turned towards home at McGregor Lake. Their paths would cross again, but not for a long time.

Riel was very anxious to see his Aunt Lucy and Uncle John Lee, since a long time had passed since their meeting under happier circumstances at the Morin wedding. There was love and respect between them, but Louis was uneasy—he had not experienced that emotion when he was with his Aunt Mary Louise at McGregor Lake. Compared to Mary Louise, Lucy was the more nervous of the two sisters. This made Louis uncomfortable because he did not want to add to her burden by his presence, especially as an exile from the law. To relieve their strain, Riel slipped into Keesville in the United States for a time. While there, he became very ill. When news of Riel's condition reached the Lees, they quickly made arrangements to have him brought back to Canada. The long years of exile were beginning to take their toll on his mental health, and physical well-being.

It became more and more difficult to hide their fugitive nephew from the Government while he remained with them in Montréal. But what could Louis' aunt and uncle do? He was sick—too sick to return to McGregor Lake and the sanctuary of his people. Riel was sought by the law, government agents, bounty-hunters, the curious, but family friends who watched him suffering could do nothing to help him with his mental anguish and pain. Those close to him could see the strain affecting his behavior. It was at this point that John and Lucy decided to seek the assistance of the local doctor and the parish priest concerning the condition of Riel. Both Lees were concerned and felt that their nephew would never recover without medical help.

Acting on the Lees' request, the doctor decided to place Louis, for his own protection, into the hands of the hospital officials. The time spent there would help to mend his broken spirit and help him to regain a sense of well-being, as well as provide a safe place for him to hide. According to historians, Riel was secretly transferred to a second hospital because he, as well as the nuns, feared an attack on his life by his many enemies. He was released in 1878.

²⁷ The Turpins lived for a while in Sudbury and Blind River, Ontario
The Turpins operated a boarding house in Blind River, Ontario

Even to this day, our people are convinced that Louis was never mad. They fully realize that he was exhausted and under great mental strain. The anguish was developed over a long period of worry for the care of his family, the safety of his beloved and loyal friends as well as the ever-present danger of the threats on his own life. Imagine how you would feel if you had a bounty on your head and were forced to live in exile, away from your family, friends and country.

Louis wanted to get away from Montréal and hospitals and go back to the seclusion of his people. Even though he felt safe in the institute, he preferred the sanctuary at McGregor Lake with his Aunt Mary Louise. There, Riel could roam at will. There was no confinement as experienced in the hospital. As long as he was careful, he would be safe. After all, Riel was still in exile and neither he nor his people could ever forget this.

When my great-great grandmother heard of Louis' release from the hospital, she and Régis made contact with him through the family mail and requested that he meet up with them at Hull. From there all three would make plans to visit with the Fauberts in Ontario. This particular trip was dangerous, for their paths would cross with the law, especially as they made their way into Ontario. Their exact destination was Snake Creek, nine miles from Mattawa. To reach there, the travellers had to pass by the many soldiers who were stationed at the point where the Mattawa and Ottawa Rivers meet. Listen to the words of my father as I remember them.

“Violet, my girl, Louis was hiding right there in Mattawa around Snake Creek where I was born and Macdonald and his men were too stupid to find him.”

The Fauberts actually lived at a mission located on an Indian reserve, and it was called the “Mission des Érables” (*Maple Mission*). It was under the direction of a Father during the time of Riel's visit. Of course, Louis and his companions felt safe once they reached the reserve, since they knew where they stood with these people. Any reserve was home to Louis and my great-great grandmother. These were their people, the Indians and the Métis. The locals' loyalty to Riel and his cause was expressed in unwritten pledges to help him at any time and in any way they could. These people knew that their struggle was his struggle and that the white man's law to persecute Louis was unjust.

While visiting at Snake Creek and the settlement of Mattawa, Louis, Régis and Mary Louise enjoyed the company of their relatives. It was so many years since they had seen them. You remember I mentioned one of the twins, Flano, daughter of Robert and Céline McGregor. Well it was with her husband, Emmanuel's, parents that Riel stayed at the mission. Their names were André and Hyppolite Faubert. By the way, Hyppolite was Céline's sister.

If you recall your history, Mattawa was a thriving settlement where the Hudson Bay Co. operated a fur trading post directly at the junction of the Ottawa and Mattawa rivers. This attracted a lot of people, especially members of the government and the law, each of whom had an interest in Riel's capture. The Royal Mounted Police were stationed in Mattawa, and Louis was well aware of the danger.

Prompted by the sense of this real danger and fear for his relatives and friends, Riel decided to leave Canada and go to the United States. There, he would live out the remainder of his exile in the State of Montana, until he was summoned by his people, the Métis.

And so the Circle of Hidings comes to an end as Louis' people bid him to once more be their leader in the Saskatchewan Rebellion of 1885. It was this decision to return that would play a part in his tragic destiny, and that would lead him to the scaffold and death.

CHAPTER TEN

The Man Who Shouldn't Have Hanged

It was a cold November morning and dawn was breaking over the prairies. The year was 1885, November 16. A great man was hanged on that day. His name was Louis Riel.

The trial lasted for many days. The jury stated that he was guilty of treason. Treason against what? Fighting for his people and their land? Surely the authorities must have known better, yet, they hung him.

How was it possible for a jury of six supposedly intelligent men to pass such a harsh sentence on a French Catholic Métis whom they barely knew? What drove them to do this? Was it fear, jealousy, anger?

History records that Louis was tried by a jury of six men rather than the regular twelve. I wonder if the outcome would have been different had there been twelve? Who knows? Even though some of the jurors bore French names, all six spoke only English. Yet, despite this, Riel placed his life into the hands of the “half jury.”

I wonder what his Aunt Mary Louise was thinking on that dreadful day? She was now seventy-seven years of age, living in Val-des-Bois, Québec. Despite her age, Great-great Grandmother was still very active. She was delivering babies, even at this time in her life. One of these babies was my own mother, Aldo Gervais,²⁸ born during the year of the hanging.

To Mary Louise, it must have seemed just like yesterday when she and her nephew, Louis were sitting at the kitchen table in the old log cabin, discussing the problems of their people. Did she ever think that it would all end like this—Louis hanged? She must have wondered what it was all about—the long years of hiding, running, always moving from one location to another. Was it all in vain? My father, who was twelve years old at the time and staying with Mary Louise,²⁹ said no. As far as he was concerned, my great-great grandmother never lost faith in Louis' cause, nor did she have any regrets about helping him to hide from the white man's unjust law.

My father is dead now, but I can still recall when we used to sit along the river bank and he would tell me the stories that his great grandmother McGregor had told him about her beloved Louis. “Poor Louis,” he used to say, “He only wanted to help his people. Why couldn't they see that?”

If my father were living today, I think that he would find it difficult to understand why our present government still refuses to grant amnesty to this great man of the past. Could it be that they still fear Louis Riel? Was my father right when he said that the government was afraid to admit that they were wrong in hanging Riel?

I find little evidence to show that our governing officials are taking the necessary steps to help to ensure the rights of the Métis and the Indians. Listen to the cry of Riel's people today as they are expressed in the words of George Munroe, vice-president of the Native Council of Canada:

“How much longer can we be stripped of our self-respect and our land? We do have the capacity to fight with dignity and self-respect to gain some of the things we are fighting for.”

²⁸ Aldo Jervais – born in 1885

²⁹ Wilfred McGregor, remained with his grand-mère when he was twelve years of age - Marie-Louise was not well at the time and he was sent by his father Regis to attend to her needs

In 1980, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation presented a film on Louis Riel. It was obvious to me that the presentation was developed as a form of entertainment at the cost of the Métis image. Let me give you an example to show you what I mean. Take, for instance, the symbols used in the film. I did not agree with the burning of Louis' arm near the campfire. Nor did I appreciate the scene when he was lying outstretched across the prairies in the form of a cross. Both of these symbols could indicate madness. Throughout the film there was always a shade of doubt of Louis' sanity. The whole historical "put down" is still there, waiting to be corrected. Perhaps our book can shed some light on the truth as seen through the eyes of the Métis.

John McGregor, my nephew and senior artist for the book made the following analogy of the hanging of Louis Riel on that cold November morning:

"I find that the hanging of Louis Riel represents to me his return to the umbilical cord, only, this time, it led to his death."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Adieu, Good bye"

The passing of Louis left Mary Louise in a state of grief for quite some time. She shared her sorrow with her family, especially with her son, Robert, and his wife, Céline. My great-great grandmother was living with them at that particular time in her life in Notre-Dame-de-la-Salette.

My father, Wilfred, was born in the year following the year of the hanging, 1886, in Mattawa, Ontario. He had a sister, who was two at the time of his birth, and she was named Mary Louise, in honour of her great grandmother. The youngsters' parents were Régis and Virginia, my grandparents. They (Régis and Virginia) were wed in 1883, two years before the hanging, and had three children (two of whom survived). My grandparents were very much in love; however, Virginia's family objected strongly to the union, so the young couple decided to elope. Régis was twenty-one and his bride was a few years older. Together, the couple lived a happy and fruitful life until Virginia's death in 1891.

Following this tragic event, her devoted husband, Régis, took the two children to live with their great grandmother at Notre-Dame-de-la-Salette. Young Mary Louise was seven at that time and Wilfred was just five years of age.

As you may recall, the senior Mary Louise was a nomad and did not remain in one location for too long. On her next move, to Val-des-Bois, she took Régis and young Wilfred with her. The sister remained at home with the grandparents. During his stay, Wilfred helped with the chores, which must have seemed endless to a five year old. Wilfred's favorite pastime was listening to the stories of their people, the Métis, and Louis Riel, especially after the hanging. The people really missed him, for now there was no one to speak for them, no one at all.

There was one thing that my father disliked while living with his great grandmother. That was the "rosary hour." Mary Louise always wore long wooden prayer beads around her neck and every evening, following supper, father said that she would gather everyone together for the evening prayers. You can imagine from the viewpoint of a five or a six year old just how long the beads were. Surely they would never end. They must have seemed enormous and that it would take forever, at least that's what his knees told him. By the time the hour was finished, Father used to complain about his red knees.

As the weeks passed, young Wilfred was beginning to show signs of loneliness for his sister, Mary Louise, and his grandparents, the McGregors. His father, Régis, noticed the change in the boy and decided to take him back to Notre-Dame-de-la-Salette to be united with his sister.

There, both of the youngsters remained with the McGregors, who continued to raise them to adulthood.

When Wilfred was twelve, my great-great grandmother had a stroke that paralyzed one side of her face. If you will examine the photo of her that was taken at the time, you will see the effects of the stroke in the lines of her aged face. At the time of the stroke, Mary Louise was living alone at Val-des-Bois so it was decided to send young Wilfred to assist her and to do her chores until she regained her strength.

Despite her paralysis, my great-great grandmother remained just as she had always been, fun-loving and good-natured. When the children came to visit, they would tease her because she spoke French with a “slur”—the result of the stroke. To this she would reply:

“I’m trying, my children, I’m trying. Don’t tease me.”

In time, Mary Louise began to weaken as the day of her death drew near. Father Jules Lortie visited with her each day and served her Holy Communion. The priest was accompanied by Mary Louise’s young great grandson, Louis Latour, an altar boy from the village church.

The day of her death was like any other day in her life. To her, life and death went hand in hand and she was ready to take her leave of this world with a sense of dignity and pride.

Her family openly grieved her approaching death, but she cautioned them not to mourn her passing but to take joy in her end, for she was neither sad nor afraid of what was to come.

Great-great Grandmother loved music and requested that a local fiddler come to her bedside and play her a tune. And so, on September 22, 1898, to the sound of the fiddle and with her big toe tapping to the beat of the music, Mary Louise McGregor left this world.

Mary Louise Riel McGregor, wife of Robert Richard McGregor, was buried at Val-des-Bois, Québec, following a mass offered by Father Jules Lortie at the parish of Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde. The final event was the official signing of the death certificate by Jean-Baptiste David and Charles Morin, her son-in-law.

This chapter brings to a close the “passing” of a great woman who helped to pave the way for a better life for her people, the Métis and the Indian, as well as for the numerous children that she brought into this world.

It was my intention to bring my great-great grandmother McGregor out of the shadows of history so that everyone might know her and share the experience of her life.

It wasn’t just the death of a great woman. It was also the passing of a way of life, the loss of a generation, an era, a great pioneer woman and a young man who should not have hanged. But most important, it was the passing of a truth that was never told. And this truth, as told to me by the Riels and the McGregors, I leave with you.

At the age of 96, Mary Louise Riel-McGregor, beloved by her people, brings the story to its closing by her death in “The Passing,” Part Four.

Manuscript signature of Violet Lalonde

EPILOGUE

VIOLET LALONDE

Thirteen years following Louis Riel's death, Mary Louise Riel-McGregor passed away, leaving a legacy of the joys, sorrows and struggles of our people, the Indians and the Métis.

My book is the first serious personal family document on the Riel-McGregor families, and it is my intention to erase the wild, ridiculed, insane image of our beloved hero, Louis, that is so often portrayed by many historical writers.

It is only recently that the Government (of Canada) is beginning to recognize the true meaning of Riel's work. For the first time, they will also be made aware of one special person who had a positive influence on his thinking. And this person was Mary Louise Riel, Louis' aunt. She was a strong, silent force behind him all through his haunted years in exile.

Today, the Indians and the Métis have awakened from their hundred-year sleep. We now see evidence of their protest over the very same concerns and issues that preoccupied Louis so many, many years ago. Times have changed, but the issues remain the same.

Perhaps my book will help these people in their struggle. It is time to move on to the better life envisioned by Louis, even to the end of his life.

Manuscript signature of Violet Lalonde