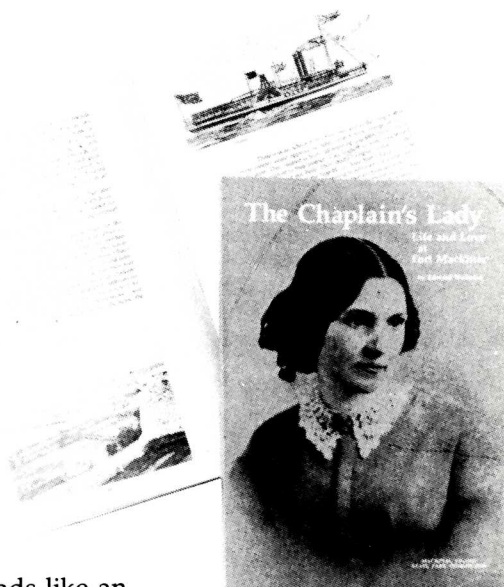


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Settlement in a Half-Savage Land: Life and Loss in the Metis Community of La Baye

by
Kerry A. Trask

Landing on the south shore of Green Bay in the early autumn of 1816, Captain John O'Fallon of the United States Army found what he described as a "mongrel French Settlement" stretching along the banks of the Fox River, "inhabited by almost forty families" who, he said, were "nearest allied to the Indians whose language, habits, and character most prevails with them." What O'Fallon had discovered was the Metis trading town of La Baye. It was the sociological offspring of the Great Lakes fur trade and the intermarriages of the European men and Indian women who depended upon that trade for their livelihoods. It rose and grew during the British regime of the late eighteenth century, but fell into rapid decline soon after the arrival of the Captain and his countrymen.¹

Until recently the Metis have been a people almost without a history. That has especially been the case for the half-breed sons and daughters of white expansion in the Great Lakes region of the United States. Fortunately, studies by scholars such as Jennifer Brown, Jacqueline Peterson, and Sylvia Van Kirk have provided some revelations about the Metis way of life and, as a consequence, we now have some appreciation for the roles played by those people on the frontiers of early America.²

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¹ Captain John O'Fallon to Colonel Richard M. Johnson, Mouth of the Fox River, 8 October 1816, in Archives Collection of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin (henceforth referred to as Wisconsin Archives).

² Jennifer S.H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980); Jacqueline L. Peterson, "The People In Between: Indian-White Marriages and the Genesis of a Metis Society and Culture in the Great Lakes Region, 1680-1830," Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, 1981; Jacqueline Peterson, "Prelude to Red River: A Social Portrait of the Great Lakes Metis,"

D.H. Lawrence once asserted that because "the red life flows in a different direction from the white life" those two distinctive racial-cultural streams had never been able to "meet and mingle soothingly." And yet, on the Lakes at places like Detroit, Michilimackinac, and Sault Ste. Marie, where the great waters narrow, or at La Baye which guarded access to the rivers running into the very heart of the continent, those two peoples met and merged to create a new and uniquely North American culture. In those places they did not attempt to deal with their "problem of alterity," as Romanian scholar Tzvetan Todorov has called it, in efforts to assimilate or annihilate one another, but rather, they created a way of life—part French, part Indian, and yet a nascent culture that was more than the sum of disparate parts—which was ideally adapted to the demands of the fur trade and the conditions of the Great Lakes environment. There, for generations, they were the trade's vital connecting links between the woodland tribes and eastern entrepreneurs. Their numbers remained few until the decades between the American Revolution and the War of 1812, and then, according to Jacqueline Peterson, the Great Lakes "Metis population growth accelerated and the Metis traders extended their commercial networks by establishing a host of new hamlets and trading posts." That was for them their fleeting golden age.³

Even during that brief era of good fortune, however, the Great Lakes Metis were a much misunderstood and maligned people. English-speaking outsiders usually identified them as a degenerate branch of the Canadian French who had fallen from the good graces of civilization into a low life existence in which they lived in "imitation of the Indians whose manners and

The Journal of Ethnohistory, 25 (Winter, 1978): 41-67; Sylvia Van Kirk, "Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society, 1670-1870 (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Watson & Dwyer Publishing Ltd., 1980); Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S.H. Brown, eds. *The New People: Being and Becoming Metis in North America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985).

³ D.H. Lawrence, "Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Novels," in Donald M. Kartiganer and Malcolm A. Griffith, eds., *Theories of American Literature* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), 237, (originally published in 1923 in Lawrence's, *From Studies in Classic American Literature*); Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, translated from French by Richard Howard, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1984); Peterson, "The People in Between," 247.

customs they . . . entirely adopted." They were called "an Indolent Slothful Set of Vagabonds" who restlessly roamed the wild country where they became "almost as wild as the Savages themselves," but remained "far more vicious and wicked." Assuming that the mixing of racial bloods produced offspring who inherited the very worst qualities of their parents, the British, who then governed the Lakes region, condemned them for perpetuating such racial degradation by being "Licentious Ruffians" who gave free reign to their base and lascivious drives in promiscuous fornication with the wild women of the forests. They were, as Colonel Henry Hamilton, Lieutenant-Governor of Detroit, summarily declared, "the most worthless vagabonds imaginable . . . and being proficient in all sorts of vice and debauchery, corrupt [even] the morals of Savages."⁴

That stereotype, which was more a reflection of Anglo-American values and prejudices than an accurate characterization of the Metis and their way of life, persisted even after the American conquest of the upper Lakes region in the War of 1812. The irony of all this is that the dominant qualities of Metis culture were, in fact, quite the opposite of those suggested by that image. The striking contrasts between what was assumed about these people and what was true of

⁴ Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed. "A Selection of Letters and Journals Relating to Tours into the Western Country by George Croghan," in *Early Western Travels, 1784 - 1849, A Series of Annotated Reprints of some of the Best and Rarest Contemporary Volumes of Travel, Descriptive of the Aborigines, Social and Economic Conditions in the Middle and Far West During the Period of Early American Settlement*, (Cleveland: A.H. Clark, 1904-1907), 1: 170-171; William L. Clement, ed. "Robert Rogers Michilimackinac Journal," *American Antiquarian Society Proceedings* 28 (October, 1918): 270; General Thomas Gage to the Earl of Hillsborough, New York, 17 August 1768, Clarence Edwin Carter, ed. *The Correspondence of General Thomas Gage with the Secretaries of State, 1763-1775*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), I: 183; General Thomas Gage to the Earl of Shelburne, New York, 22 February 1767, Newton D. Mereness, ed. *Travels in the American Colonies* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 462; Colin G. Calloway, *Crown and Calumet: British-Indian Relations, 1783-1815* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 118; General Thomas Gage to the Earl of Shelburne, New York, 13 June 1767, *Gage Correspondence*, 1: 143; Henry Hamilton's statement is quoted from Douglas Dunham, "The French Element in the American Fur Trade," Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1950, 128; also see Kerry A. Trask, "To Cast Out the Devils: British Ideology and the French Canadians of the Northwest Interior, 1760-1774," *The American Review of Canadian Studies* 15 (Autumn, 1985): 249-262.

how they lived is clearly reflected in the nature and experience of the Metis community of La Baye.

The desire to control the Fox-Wisconsin waterway linking the Lakes to the Mississippi had led the French to erect a fort at La Baye in the early eighteenth century, but no permanent civilian community existed there until the end of the French and Indian War. It was in April of 1763 that Colonel George Ethrington, British commandant at Michilimackinac, granted permission to Charles de Langlade and his elderly father to move there "with their wives, children, servants, and baggage." Langlade was himself a Metis, the son of his father's life-long marriage to the daughter of an Ottawa chief, and at La Baye he and his extended family settled along the east bank of the Fox where they were soon joined by other mixed families from the Straits—the Grignons, Roys, and Brunets. At that time the combined Menominee and Winnebago population of the immediate area is estimated to have been about 4,400 people. Lieutenant James Gorrell, then commander of the small British garrison there, claimed there were 39,100 "Indian warriors, besides women and children" who were dependent on the La Baye traders for supplies. In that number he included 38,000 Iowa and Sioux warriors and although his entire estimate is undoubtedly high, nevertheless, the new colonial outpost of Michilimackinac had direct access to a very large and potentially lucrative market. Despite that, the community grew very slowly at first. By 1785 there were still only seven families and 56 permanent residents. But in the next two decades there was growth, so that by the outbreak of the War of 1812, according to Augustin Grignon, 250 people were living there. Peterson estimates that during those years well over eighty per cent of the settlement's households were Metis. After that La Baye continued to grow, and when Henry Schoolcraft passed through in the late summer of 1820 he counted "sixty dwelling houses and five hundred inhabitants" who were, he said, "with few exceptions, French, who have intermarried with Indian women."⁵

⁵ Colonel George Ethrington to Charles de Langlade, Michilimackinac, 13 April 1763, *Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1908), 8: 217, (henceforth referred to as *WHC*); Jeanne Kay, "The Land of La Baye: The Ecological Impact of the Green Bay Fur Trade, 1634-1836," 2 vols., Ph.D. diss.,

That community was primarily a base camp which waxed and waned in size with the cycle of the seasons and the rhythms of the trade. It was probably that ebb and flow which gave the Metis the appearance of being rootless drifters. But there was order and reason to their movements. In late autumn the men departed with the Indians for the winter hunt. During the cold months along the Rock and Menominee Rivers or the northern tributaries of the Mississippi, they gathered pelts through direct barter with the native hunters. John Lawe, La Baye's leading English trader in the early nineteenth century, called it "the hardest life a man can carry on," and described his own experience on the hunting grounds as one of "walking & hurrying all winter, suffering cold and starvation, wet & dry, in the Large Prairies Night & Day . . . sometimes [for] fifteen days at a time." But then, with the melting of the ice and the running of the rivers, they packed cargoes and eagerly headed homeward.⁶

Even before their arrival, the women and "the entire community would remove to the sugar camps." There they would remain "in the depths of the great maple woods" living and working together sometimes for weeks in their "commodious sugar-houses." It was there, amidst the smoke and steam and fiddle music of those camps, that families were reunited after long months of separation. Because of that, Easter in the forest was a grand celebration during which the reunited people rejoiced not only over the Resurrection but perhaps even more over their own survival of another northern Wisconsin winter. When the merriment ended and the caldrons cooled, the sweet harvest was loaded together with the pelts and deer tallow of the winter's trading and transported to Mackinaw. Traders and

University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1977, 1: 162; "James Gorrell's Journal," *WHC* 1: 32; "Joseph Tasse, Memoir of Charles de Langlade," *WHC* 7 (1908): 177 (most of the information included was derived from interviews with Augustin Grignon); Peterson, "The People In Between," 250; Henry R. Schoolcraft, *Narrative Journal of Travels Through the Northwest Regions of the United States Extending from Detroit Through the Great Chain of American Lakes to the Sources of the Mississippi River Performed as a Member of the Expedition Under Governor Cass in the Year 1820*, (Albany: E & E Hosford, 1821), 369.

⁶ Ebenezer Childs, "Recollections of Wisconsin Since 1820," *WHC* 4 (1906): 161; John Lawe to R.M. Eberts, Green Bay, 8 December 1843, in the Green Bay and Prairie du Chien Papers, in Wisconsin Archives (Wis Mss C).

voyageurs rendezvous there with comrades coming in from throughout the upper Lakes. They partied with great intensity, drank to legendary excess, and enjoyed some warm, relaxing, sun-filled days before returning to the bottom of the Bay with replenished supplies of trade goods to begin the cycle again. In between, and sometimes for brief intervals of mid-winter rest, La Baye was home.⁷

The settlement itself was more of a rambling neighborhood sprawling along the Fox River than a compact village nestled in a wilderness clearing. "Both banks for five or six miles were dotted by settlers' cabins, which were uniformly white-washed with lime," reported Albert Ellis, a young New York school teacher who migrated west with the Oneida in 1822. Most of those settlers, he continued, were "retired French voyageurs and half-breed French and Menomonee" who had "taken up the whole shore of the river . . . [and] divided it off into little strips" stretching back from the banks to the fringes of the forest.⁸

According to Joseph Arndt, another early American settler, there were "alternate strips (woods and cultivated land)," which were "from two to five acres wide and extended back from the river eight acres or more." The ground was broken with oxen and heavy wheeled plows. The women did most of the planting and they raised corn, wheat, potatoes, peas, and other "Indian crops" but, observed Arndt, they "cleared and cultivated just enough to supply their present wants." They also "Rase fine Black Cattel & Horseis with Sum Swine" noted the Connecticut trader Peter Pond, in his 1773 journal. The livestock ran wild in the woods during most of the year. The people "appear to live very comfortably," remarked Jonathan Carver. They caught fish in the river and bay, shot fowl in the marshes where they also harvested wild rice, cut wood in the forests, and lived in harmony with one another and the Menominee, Winnebago, and Ojibwa people with whom they intermarried and shared the territory.⁹

⁷ Albert G. Ellis, "Fifty-Four Year's Recollections of Men and Events in Wisconsin," *WHC* 7 (1908): 244-245; James H. Lockwood, "Early Times and Events in Wisconsin," *WHC* 2 (1855): 104.

⁸ Ellis, "Recollections," *WHC* 7: 215, 218.

⁹ Joseph W. Arndt, "Pioneers and Durham Boats on the Fox River," *Wisconsin Historical Society Proceedings*, 60 (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1912): 190-191; "The Narrative of Peter Pond," Charles

Theirs was a simple society, close to the state of nature, but it was no frontier democracy animated by a spirit of individualism. In fact, the Metis writer Elizabeth Baird, in describing the fur trade community at Michilimackinac, remarked that "although small, the society was very aristocratic." The same was true of La Baye. While Peterson claims that among the Great Lakes Metis "wealth was fairly evenly distributed [and] status distinctions were few," nevertheless, at La Baye, as at the Straits, a paternalistic social hierarchy existed. It was dominated by a few powerful trading families referred to by settler James Lockwood as "the aristocracy of the Country."¹⁰

Among "the Gentry of that district," as Ramsay Crooks of the American Fur Company called them, there were some rather impressive individuals who, one observer said, came from "very respectable French families." They made major efforts to preserve their civilized heritage even in the midst of the wilderness. For example, Charles de Langlade, the Metis founding father of the settlement, had been "sent to Canada and educated." When he returned west and took an Ottawa wife, their son, Charles Jr. was, in turn, sent east and "carefully educated at Montreal." Although Indianized in some rather obvious ways, the Langlades were far from being savages. Charles Sr. accumulated a substantial fur trade fortune and then, "because his grace and intelligence impressed both French and British military leaders," he went on to have a distinguished military career during both the Seven Years War and the American Revolution. He became "the most famous and exemplary" Metis leader of the eighteenth century and lived with his servants and slaves like a backwoods baron at La Baye. But his values, tastes, and life-style were not unusual. They were a reflection of those which prevailed among the fur trade elite of the Great Lakes frontier.¹¹

M. Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1965), 33; Jonathan Carver, *Travels Through the Interior Parts of North America in the Years 1766, 1767, 1768* (Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1956), 27.

¹⁰ Elizabeth T. Baird, *O-De-Jit-Win-Wing: Contes du Tempes Passe*, included in *The Elizabeth Baird Papers*, Wisconsin Archives; Peterson, "The People in Between," 41; Lockwood, "Early Times," *WHC* 2: 109.

¹¹ Ramsay Crooks to Robert Stuart, Michilimackinac, 4 January 1822, in the *American Fur Company Letter Book*, Mackinac Island, 2 (2): 214; Childs,

Jacques Porlier, another of the community's patriarchs, was "well born of the French nobility" and had "received a good education at a seminary" in Montreal. Albert Ellis was especially impressed with Porlier and described him as being "very gentle in his manners" and "a man of culture and fine tastes." Likewise, Charles Reaume came from "a very respectable family", "enjoyed good educational advantage," and possessed the "natural politeness of the better class of rural French." John Lawe, the community's leading English trader, also lived very much like backcountry gentry. In addition to the considerable wealth he acquired through the fur trade, he owned vast land holdings, some of which were used as pasture for his substantial herds of horses and cattle, but much of which he rented out to tenant farmers. About him, Joseph Arndt wrote: "You can see from his dwelling, garden, parks, and out-houses how he lives in patriarchal style like the old dutchmen on the Hudson River, a hundred and fifty years or more ago." He was an important and powerful man in his part of the country, but like other upper class gentlemen of his time Lawe had a strong sense of *noblesse oblige*. In fact, his home was known throughout the Green Bay region as a "house of refuge" where he took in "the poor and destitute among the whites and half-breeds" and the "old, decrepit, and poor among the Indians." In him "they only found charity, forgiveness, [and] the tenderest succor," wrote Ellis.¹²

Traders like Lawe, Porlier, and Langlade were distinguished from the other inhabitants by their relative wealth and comfort, as well as by their education and manners. They were expected to be the fathers of the community who assumed paternalistic responsibility for those who paddled their great bark boats, hauled their cargoes, and worked their lands. They were more

"Recollections of Wisconsin since 1820," *WHC* 4: 161; Augustin Grignon, "Seventy-Two Years Recollections of Wisconsin," *WHC* 3: 199; Tasse, "Memoir of Charles de Langlade," *WHC* 7: 182; Peterson, "The People in Between," 157.

¹² Ellis, "Fifty-Four Years' Recollections," *WHC* 7: 245; A. Grignon, "Seventy-Two Years Recollections of Wisconsin," *WHC* 3: 244; Ellis, "Recollections," *WHC* 7: 245; A. Grignon, "Recollections of Wisconsin," *WHC* 3: 246; James W. Biddle, "Recollections of Green Bay in 1816-1817," *WHC* 1: 61; see Jeanne Kay, "John Lawe, Green Bay Trader," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 64 (Autumn, 1980): 3-27; Arndt, "Pioneers and Durham Boats," *Wis. Hist. Soc. Proceedings*, 60: 191; Ellis, "Recollections," *WHC* 7: 248.

like the lords of medieval manors than capitalistic entrepreneurs, and from their workers, who were more like dependents and retainers than employees, they expected deference and loyalty. Even in the backwoods, the wisdom of the age taught them all that social order was rooted in the proper relationship of superiors to inferiors, a relationship very similar to that of parents and children.

James Lockwood also included clerks among the "aristocracy of the Country." They were the literate men who kept the records and functioned as apprentice traders. At La Baye most clerks were the sons or sons-in-law of the men they worked for and in time many of them became full-fledged traders in their own right.

Beneath them were the voyageurs or "mangeurs du lard." They were the muscle and backbone of La Baye's economy and the bulk of its population. Most were simple men who signed on for three, five, and sometimes even ten year stints for wages ranging from \$50 to \$150 a year. Among them, too, there was a pecking order. There were foremen called "devants" who sat in the bows of the canoes and "gouvernails" or steersmen positioned in the sterns. Both were paid more than the men who strained at the paddles in between. But they all worked hard, usually under terrible conditions. In fact, wrote Alexander Henry, their lives were spent in "unremitting exertion, till their strength is lost in premature old age." Much of the time they subsisted on pork and pea soup or, while traveling, upon corn meal, grease, and gills of rum. The conditions of their harsh vocation were such that, according to eighteenth century Swedish naturalist Peter Kalm they combined to "destroy a great part of the youth of Canada, and prevent the people from growing old." Nevertheless, while they lasted, their "powers of endurance were astonishing," exclaimed Irish lawyer, Henry Baird of La Baye. He admired many of their qualities and, in spite of their hard lives, found them to be an "open-hearted and convivial people." But they heedlessly lived for the moment and Baird declared: "They saved nothing, nor thought of the wants of the future but spent freely the whole of their hard-earned and scanty wages in a few weeks of their stay among friends, and again return in the fall to pass through the same routine of toil, hardship, and privation." As a consequence of those habits they were men usually caught in cycles of perpetual debt, a

situation James Lockwood argued the traders encouraged as a means of keeping them stranded in the backcountry where they remained a dependable supply of cheap labor.¹³

Nevertheless, the voyageurs of La Baye were devoted to their traders. They not only accepted their vassalage, but appear to have insisted upon it. Therefore, discipline was neither rigid nor harsh. It didn't have to be, for as Lockwood observed: "The voyageur has been so long accustomed to look on his employer as his superior, and to be treated by him as his inferior, that so soon as he is treated as American hands expect to be treated by their employers, they at once conceive a contempt for him and become mutinous." Furthermore, he continued, "their bourgeois or employers must be what they consider a gentleman or superior to themselves as they will never feel much respect for a man who has, from an engagee, risen to the rank of clerk." The chances of that happening were becoming increasingly more rare in the late eighteenth century for, by then, according to Peterson, "the voyageur class had become . . . a virtual caste" from which there was almost no escape. At La Baye only the senior Pierre Grignon, Joseph Roy, and Jacques Vieau managed to rise from the thwarts to become traders.¹⁴

In addition to the men still actively employed in the trade, there were those at La Baye who were described as "the old worn out voyageurs" who had "become unfit for the hardships of the Indian trade, [and] had taken wives generally of the Menominee tribe, and settled down on a piece of land." Of those there were many for apparently the settlement was an attractive place where aging canoe men from throughout the upper Lakes region retired to live out their last years in relative peace and leisure.¹⁵

¹³ The quotation from Alexander Henry was taken from Marcel Giraud, *The Metis of the Canadian West*, translated by George Woodcock, 2 vols., (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1986), 1: 241; Adolph B. Benson, ed., *Peter Kalm's Travels in North America: The English Version of 1770*, (Wilson-Erickson Inc., 1937, New York: Dover Publications, 1966) 2: 522; Henry S. Baird, "Recollections of the Early History of Northern Wisconsin," *WHC* (1906): 203-204; Lockwood, "Early Times," *WHC*, II: 110.

¹⁴ Lockwood, "Early Times," *WHC* 2: 134, 112; Peterson, "The People In Between," 220.

¹⁵ Lockwood, "Early Times," *WHC* 2: 105; also see Arndt, "Pioneers and Durham Boats," *Wis. Hist. Soc. Proceedings* 60: 220.

At the very bottom of this frontier hierarchy there were slaves. Some were of African descent but most were Indians taken captive in wars and sold into bondage by their Indian captors. They were called "Panis," and although there were only a few of them, nevertheless slavery was a social fact of life in fur trade era La Baye. All were owned by the trader elite who used them primarily as domestic servants. According to Augustin Grignon, himself a slave driver, "they made good servants [and] were happy and contented." Perhaps their happiness was as much myth as that supposedly enjoyed by the slaves of the Old South, but at La Baye, at least, they were considered members of their owner's family and most were eventually freed in reward for their good and faithful service. Furthermore, Grignon wrote, nearly all emancipated Panis remained in the settlement, where they married (in some cases even their own former owners), raised families, and made livelihoods as laborers and voyageurs.¹⁶

For the people of all those ranks, interracial marriage was the bond that held their community together and, in the most basic ways, made it possible.

Very early in their New World experience the French quite consciously decided, as Olive Dickason has pointed out, to use "racial intermixing as an instrument of empire," and at that they were most successful. A persistent shortage of white women, of course, helped the cause, and in their relations with the natives, unsatisfied sexual desires eventually seemed to override even the strongest sense of cultural differences. However, in the French-Indian fur trade, as Sylvia Van Kirk has pointed out, "the norm for sexual relations . . . was not casual promiscuous encounters but the development of marital unions which gave rise to distinct family units." That occurred because it was through marriage that white traders gained entry into the kinship groups of which the woodland societies were composed, thereby becoming directly related to the people with whom they hoped to do business. Indian wives taught their white husbands the languages of the forest, skills and

¹⁶ Augustin Grignon, "Seventy-Two Years Recollections of Wisconsin," *WHC* 3, (1856): 256-257; Also see Russell M. Magnaghi, "Red Slavery in the Great Lakes Country during the French and British Regime," *The Old Northwest, a Journal of Regional Life and Letters*, 12 (Summer 1986): 201-218.

knowledge often indispensable to survival in the wilderness. On the other hand, the tribal peoples of the Lakes, who suffered severe losses among their young men in the wars and epidemics of the eighteenth century, were eager to have their widows and daughters married off to Frenchmen who could provide for their needs, generate new children, and grant commercial concessions to their woodland relatives.¹⁷

Those conditions and relations existed at La Baye. And because stable kinship connections were essential for success, the community's traders were very much inclined to enter into long-term, often life-long, marriages with women of important Indian and Metis families. Also, over time there was a great deal of intermarriage among families of the trader class itself. As a result, the settlement's ruling elite came to resemble—came to be, in fact—a large, close-knit, extended family with strong ties with all major Indian groups of the region.

Men of the voyageur class also married native women. They were encouraged to do so by their traders who saw in such unions not only a way of enhancing their own influence with the Indians, but also a means which “bound the men more closely to the country, and ensured their continuance in the fur trade.” Generally those marriages were also long-term relationships as were those of the retired voyageurs and the “Indian women with whom they lived after the Indian custom.” In other cases, however, there were voyageurs who took temporary spouses from among the many females who were “a cross between French Canadian and Indian.” Those unions sometimes lasted less than a year. They were formed, according to Henry Biddle, when “the lover having made a choice of a girl, applied to her parents, with whom he entered into a limited marriage contract—specifying the amount to be paid to them for deprivation of her services.” Often the newlyweds moved in with, and paid rent to, the bride's parents who derived considerable financial advantage from this custom. However, for the duration of the contract couples were expected to remain true to each other and to care for each other's comfort. Thus the profits of the parents were not simply ill-gotten gains made in a system of sexual marketing in which fathers pimped for their

¹⁷ Olive Patricia Dickason, “From ‘One Nation’ in the Northeast to ‘New Nation’ in the Northeast: A Look at the Emergence of the Metis,” Peterson and Brown, eds., *The New People*, 19; Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 4.



Courtesy, Clarke Historical Library, Central Michigan University

Tshusick, An Ojibway Woman of the Northern Lakes Region

half-breed daughters. Even short term marriages were considered respectable and, stated Biddle, "the contracts entered into in this manner were regarded by them as sacred."¹⁸

Very often the women entering into "country marriages," either for a season or for life, were little more than children. In 1810, Thomas Anderson, who clerked for Lawe's uncle, Jacob Franks, wrote in his journal: "This year, following the custom of the country, which I had hitherto resisted, I took to live with me a little half-breed." She was probably still a girl in her early teens. Brides of thirteen and fourteen were quite common. Some were even younger. For example, the trader Michel Curot, while wintering in St. Croix valley in 1803-04, observed in his journal that one Bazile David "took a young girl 9 or 10 years old for his wife."¹⁹

Perhaps it was the early age of marriage that partially accounted for the amazing fertility of many mixed and Metis marriages. Historian John E. Foster estimates that the native women living in the hunting bands probably produced only an average of four off-spring during their lives while, in comparison, "those in the trading posts frequently experienced live births double and triple that number." That would appear to have been the case at La Baye for there, according to Arndt, when a man "married a squaw or woman of mixed blood... large families were the result." For example, Domitelle Langlade-Grignon and Therese Rankin-Lawe, who were both Metis, each produced ten children, and Jacqueline Peterson indicates that the average family size at La Baye in 1830 was 7.3 persons.²⁰

In response to a friend's inquiries about the prospects of getting a wife at La Baye, Charles Arndt wrote: "If I may be

¹⁸ Henry Baird, "Recollections of Early Northern Wisconsin," *WHC* 4: 204; Judge M.S. Martin, "Description of Green Bay, 1818-1827," *WHC* 10 (1882): 140; James W. Biddle, "Recollections of Green Bay in 1816-1817," *WHC* 1 (1854): 58-59.

¹⁹ "Personal Narrative of Captain Thomas Anderson," *WHC* 9 (1882): 179; Michel Curot, "A Wisconsin Fur Trader's Journal, 1803-04," *WHC* 20 (1911): 418.

²⁰ John E. Foster, "Some Questions and Perspectives on the Problems of Metis Roots," Peterson and Brown, eds., *The New People*, 84-85; Arndt, "Pioneers and Durham Boats," *Wis. Hist. Soc. Proceedings* 60: 220; Peterson, *The People In Between*, 251.

allowed to judge by appearances, you can have your choice of all colour 'copper' [and] ecepted sizes and forms." They may all have shared a common skin pigmentation but, like the men they married, there was a considerable range of quality among the women of the settlement. Some, like Charles de Langlade's second wife, Charlotte Bourassa, were quite attractive and refined. She was described as being "remarkably beautiful, having a slender figure, regular features, and very black eyes," as well as possessing "rare moral qualities, which secured her a general respect." On the other hand, some men had little to boast of in their mates. Jean Baptiste Jacobs, for example, who taught school briefly at La Baye before going into the trade, compared his Indian wife with that of his partner's. He wrote: "His woman and my woman [are] about the same in regard to being wicked but Chapue[']s woman drinks Whiskey but my woman does not." He also described how another man's country wife savagely attacked her spouse in a drunken fury, biting off part of his nose before pushing him into a fire.²¹

There were also women like Elizabeth Baird, the daughter of an English trader and Ottawa woman, who married Henry Baird, a lawyer originally from Dublin, when she was only fourteen. She was a highly intelligent and literate girl who greatly helped her husband with his law practice, serving as interpreter for his French and Indian clients. Furthermore, she became the author of a detailed descriptive account of early nineteenth century life at Michilimackinac and Green Bay. It was published under the title, *O-de-jit-win-wing: Contes Du Tempes Passe*. Domitelle de Langlade was another of the community's female leaders. She married Pierre Grignon when she was barely thirteen and the two of them together created one of the most remarkable fur trade dynasties in the history of the Great Lakes region. She too was literate and highly articulate. But most were simple women who tended to the needs of their husbands and children, who cultivated the gardens, and turned the products of nature to human use—women like Louis Grignon's wife, Catiche, who "used neither

²¹ Charles C.P. Arndt to Ebenezer Childs, Easton, 22 December 1828, Green Bay and Prairie du Chien Papers, Wisconsin Archives, (WisMss C), box 6, Folder 5; Tasse, "Memoir of Charles de Langlade," *WHC* 7: 181; J.B. Jacobs to J. Lawe, Menominee River, 23 January 1823, Grignon, Lawe, Porlier Papers, Wisconsin Archives, (WisMss B), Box 4 folder 1.

the French nor English, but spoke [only] the Chippewa," or John Lawe's Metis wife, Theresa Rankin. Mrs. Lawe was "tall and very handsome and dignified," she always "wore the Indian dress" and was regarded as "one of the best women," but she was unable to read or write and therefore unable to leave us her thoughts about life in La Baye.²²

John and Theresa Lawe were long and deeply devoted to each other and in old age he became Catholic so he could rest beside her even in death. But of course, not all La Baye's male-female relationships sprang from such affections nor produced such large and happy families. Some, in fact, failed to measure up even to the community's most minimal standards of respectability. Sometimes young girls were the prizes won in a long night's gambling, some were shared among numerous comrades on the wintering grounds, and others were taken by force. Some were abused, beaten, and even killed by the very men they lived with. Some men, like Jacob Franks, abandoned their country wives and Metis children. But for the most part the men and women of La Baye were committed to each other and their families and it is evident from their personal correspondence that they enjoyed remarkably healthy and happy relationships, despite the often extreme cultural differences they carried with them into their marriages.

It was from those unions that the newly created Metis culture arose. In the beginning Champlain had supposedly told the Indians "Our young men will marry your daughters, and we shall become one people." Rather than becoming one, however, the French and Indians remained distinctive peoples, but at least some of their sons and daughters did create a new way of life fashioned from the traditions of both their mothers and fathers. Commenting on that assimilation of French and Indian qualities in the new way, Henry Baird, whose own wife was Metis, observed that "the character of the people was a compound of civilization and primitive simplicity—exhibiting the polite and lively characteristics of the French and the thoughtlessness and improvidence of the Aborigenes."²³

²² Elizabeth Baird Papers, Wisconsin Archives; Elizabeth Theresa Baird, "Reminiscences of Life in Territorial Wisconsin," *WHC* 15: 207; John Lawe Papers, Chicago Historical Society Manuscript Collection, Box 1; E.T. Baird, "Reminiscences of Territorial Wisconsin," *WHC* 15: 207.

²³ Dickason, "A Look at the Emergence of the Metis," Peterson and

Metis looked like Indians. Their complexions were dusky. "Their manners and customs were of the most primitive character," stated Ebenezer Childs, and, according to Albert Ellis, "both sexes . . . arrayed themselves in garments procured from the chase." But even though the Indians' "language, habits, and character most prevailed with them," as Captain O'Fallon critically observed, the cultural influence was far from one-sided.²⁴

Even in the wilderness "politeness and strict 'good breeding' was the rule, from the highest to the lowest," remarked one observer. Furthermore, even without benefit of church or clergy, Catholicism persisted among the Metis families of La Baye. Theirs was undoubtedly an unsophisticated, superstitious faith, probably influenced by the fears and beliefs of the forests, but they nevertheless remained a people who wanted their babies baptized and their marriages blessed, and people who hung the crucifix in their huts and taught their children the creed and commandments. Ellis also noted that "they were strict observers of the seasons of festivals and feasts" of the liturgical calendar and that especially "the Lenten fast was strictly observed by these good Catholics."²⁵

They sometimes traveled to Mackinaw for the sacraments, and their continued belief in the magic of Catholic ritual and ceremony was accompanied by an on-going commitment to Christian morality. That was evident from the advice they gave their children. For example, in a long letter to her youngest son Amable, Domitelle Langlade-Grignon wrote: "I exhort you, my son, to comport your Self properly, to work to gain a livelihood honestly, Be wise . . . and prudent, avoid Debauchery, especially drinking which ruins many young Men, finally have the purpose and resolution to do right." To that she immediately added: "But above all fear God and try to live according to religion." John Lawe also reminded his oldest son George of

Brown, eds., *The New People*, 21; Henry Baird, "Recollections of Early Northern Wisconsin," *WHC* 4: 205.

²⁴ Childs, "Recollections of Wisconsin Since 1820," *WHC* 4: 161; Ellis "Fifty-Four Years" Recollections," *WHC* 7: 219; "O'Fallon to Johnson," 8 October 1816, Wisconsin Archives.

²⁵ Ellis, "Fifty-Four Years Recollections," *WHC* 7: 219; Giraud, *Metis of the Canadian West*, discussion of the character of backwoods Catholicism, 1: 352-353; Ellis, "Fifty-Four Years Recollections," *WHC* 7: 220.

much the same but also instructed him to always be polite and obedient to his superiors and to avoid becoming "Slovenly" by keeping himself "clean, neat & tidy" and by washing his hands and face regularly. Such counsel was hardly indicative of a man reverted to savagery.²⁶

In the same letter Lawe also declared to George: "How happy and proud I will be if you get a good Education." In that, he reflected another of the community's important values. According to Elizabeth Baird, among the "large families . . . , as the children matured the fathers were loth to have them live among the Indians" for fear they would be lost to lives of ignorance. As a result sons and sometimes daughters of traders were sent to Mackinaw, Montreal, or the eastern states to school. In time, "a school for children of mixed blood" was established at La Baye itself.²⁷

At the core of their new cultural hybrid was the Metis family. Indeed, with neither church nor state to regulate their actions or minister to their needs, the family alone provided an institutional structure for the shaping and nurturing of lives. Held together by ties of blood and kinship, paternalism and deference, the Metis community of La Baye was a successful cooperative attempt to work the fur trade in a manner that fell somewhere between the highly independent style of the *coureur de bois* and the bureaucratically organized methods of the great trading companies. Family was the basis of that cooperation. Through family alliances the human and economic resources of the community were mobilized in ways that enabled La Baye to become and remain an important center of backwoods commerce for more than half a century. In the process the Metis families living there created a society which was both communal and commercial, part sedentary and part nomadic and in which "primitive elements survived alongside civilized ones." It was a community seemingly balanced upon the very

²⁶ Domitelle (Langlade-Grignon) Longevin to Amable Grignon, Green Bay, 3 June 1818, in Transcriptions and Translations of Items in the Grignon, Lawe, Porlier Papers, by Louise P. Kellogg, Wisconsin Archives, (Wis Mss HR); John Lawe to George Lawe, Green Bay, 7 November 1829, in the Papers of John and George Lawe, Wisconsin Archives, (Wis Mss I).

²⁷ J. Lawe to G. Lawe, Green Bay, 7 November 1829, Lawe Papers, Wisconsin Archives; Baird, Contes du Tempes Passe, E. Baird Papers, Wisconsin Archives; Reverend Doctor Morse to John Lawe, Mackinaw, 25 July 1820, Lawe Papers, Chicago Historical Society.

rim of the white world, between the feudalistic past and the capitalistic market system of a rapidly approaching new age. There, long isolated from most of the pressures and conflicts of the outer world, its families lived an easy-going existence "more intent upon the enjoyments of the present than [moved] to lay up store or make provisions for the future." Ellis characterized their way of life as one of "primeval simplicity" and "of all people," he declared, "they seem the most innocent, honest, truthful, and unsuspecting." Some years later while wistfully reflecting back on that lost age of innocence, Henry Baird wrote: "With few wants, and contented and happy hearts, they found enjoyment in the merry dance, the sleigh-ride, the exciting horse race, and doubtless experienced more true happiness and contentment than the plodding, calculating, and money-seeking people of the present."²⁸

Those golden days ended abruptly, however, with the War of 1812.

The war itself brought hardship into the life of the community. In the midst of the struggle, while most men were away at Detroit with the British army, Louis Grignon's wife sent him a letter informing him of conditions back home. "We are continually in alarm & I never sleep an entire night having only your small lad as a Guard." Living in fear of enemy attacks was unsettling, but their worst problems were brought on by American control of the lower Lakes. Trade links with Montreal were severed and an acute shortage of supplies, accompanied by crop failures, and an especially brutal winter in 1813-14, reduced everyone to near desperate straits. Indians came to town begging, and in her letter Catiche Grignon reported: "Do not for a moment suppose that anything remains of the provisions you left. I am without ceasing besieged by the Savages, women and children who are perishing with hunger . . . and how can I refuse to assist them a little when I have the means." In time, however, the Indians raided and robbed the gardens and stock-pens of La Baye and by war's end, the people there, wrote one man, "in consequence of the frequent, wanton, and unrestrained depredations that have been committed upon their property by the Indians, are reduced

²⁸ H. Baird, "Recollections of Early Northern Wisconsin," *WHC* 4: 205; Ellis, "Fifty-Four Years' Recollections," *WHC* 7: 219; H. Baird "Recollections of Early Northern Wisconsin," *WHC* 4: 205.

to the most distressing want." The old harmony between peoples was gone, never to be restored. Neither group recovered from its wartime injuries.²⁹

The hardships of war were made worse by the conditions of peace, for American conquest of the Old Northwest was immediately followed by an invasion of new people eager to claim the spoils of their victory and determined to alter the very fundamental nature of life at La Baye. They carried with them into the upper Lakes country the old negative stereotype of the backwoods Metis. Like the British before them, the new overlords regarded the Metis as one of the lowest, most despicable people on the entire continent. They generally referred to them as the "mongrel French" and described them as being "a most indolent and wretched looking people" who mated with the dirty "nut-brown native, . . . raising children of mixed blood," and lived "almost in a state of nature" with "an unconquerable aversion to economy." The Americans also feared them, regarding them as unrepentant, "inveterate, and dangerous Enemies," who remained loyal to the King of England and who, therefore, could never be trusted. For their own evil ends they insidiously manipulated "the Fears, the ignorance, interests, and cupidity of the unfortunate deluded Savages," it was charged. "They systematically seize every opportunity of poisoning the minds of the Indians" against the United States, wrote Lewis Cass, governor of the Michigan Territory. William Puthuff, the American Indian Agent at Michilimackinac, among a host of other Americans, portrayed them as maniacal villains who had, during the war, aroused a terrible blood-lust among the savages and then "applauded the effects of their reeking scalping knives . . . and received from their hands, with plaudits and rewards, the scalps fresh torn, alike from the hapless Father, defenseless tender and affectionate Mother, or unoffending Babe."³⁰

²⁹ Catiche to Louis Grignon, La Baye, 24 July 1814, Kellogg, Translations from Grignon, Lawe, Porlier Papers, Wisconsin Archives; see Reginald Horsman, "Wisconsin and the War of 1812," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 46 (Autumn 1962): 3-15; Catiche to Louis Grignon, Kellogg, Translations, Wisconsin Archives; Captain John O'Fallon to Colonel Richard M. Johnson, Mouth of the Fox River, 8 October 1816, Wisconsin Archives.

³⁰ O'Fallon to Johnson, 8 October 1816, Wisconsin Archives; Lockwood, "Early Times in Wisconsin," *WHC* 2: 110; Ramsay Crooks to Robert Stuart, Mackinac, 4 January 1822, in American Fur Company Letter Books,

Most of the attitudes and many of the policies Americans directed towards the inhabitants of La Baye appear to have arisen from those emotionally charged images, and the images, in turn, provided them with what they believed were moral justifications for their harsh treatment and eventual ruin of the community.

Because the "British" residents of La Baye were believed to be both morally degenerate and physically dangerous, troops were sent in 1816 to maintain the peace. John Lawe estimated that more than four-hundred soldiers were stationed there. They came as an army of occupation, constructed Fort Howard and then Camp Smith, and stood ready to crush any pro-British disorders that might arise in the region. American soldiers clearly had no respect for the Metis residents. They bullied and abused them, and in a letter to Jacques Porlier, Robert Stuart of the American Fur Company characterized them as being a "lawless banditti" who had established a reign of "unbounded tyranny and violence" over the community. Lawe, too, angrily complained about those soldiers roaming about at night in armed bands engaging in "Stealing, Killing of Cattle, and committing every kind of depredation." Nevertheless, there was nothing the people could do to protect themselves, and all their protests fell on deaf ears.³¹

In the opinion of many American officials, stationing troops in the interior was not enough. The dangers posed by the British and their deceitful subjects were too great, and a resurgence of armed conflict in the upper Lakes region was anticipated at any time. In 1818, John Quincy Adams declared that the "bitter experience of thirty years had proved that all the Indian Wars . . . had been kindled by the pestilential breath of the British agents and Traders," and in a recent article, historian Colin Colloway points out that it took years following the war before the Americans "ceased to be haunted by the

Mackinac Island, 2 (2), 214; William Puthuff to Lewis Cass, Michilimackinac, 14 May 1816, *WHC* 19: 409; Lewis Cass, Regulations of Indian Affairs in the Northwest Territory and Proposals for Better Organization of the Indian Department, Detroit, 1815, manuscript in the Edward E. Ayer Collection, Newberry Library, Chicago; Puthuff to Cass, Michilimackinac, 14 May 1816, *WHC* 19: 411.

³¹ Robert Stuart to Jacques Porlier, Mackinac, 1 November 1820, Kellogg, Translations from Grignon, Lawe, Porlier Papers, Wisconsin Archives; John Lawe to Jacob Franks, Michilimackinac, 5 September 1823, *WHC* 20: 309.

specter of a powerful Indian confederacy" supported and manipulated by the British in the northwest backcountry. Also in 1818, Colonel John Bowyer, the American Indian Agent at La Baye, warned Lewis Cass that there would be persistent problems with the Indians in his district so long as the British subjects were permitted to remain there. "The principals as well as the engagees are married to Indian Women and by this connection their influence with the Indians is unbounded," he informed the governor. He was particularly concerned about the "Lower Class of the French" who, he asserted, "will always be tools for those who employ them, and through them the British influence will be kept up with the Indians." Because of that, concluded Bowyer, "the British Subjects must be removed from this place." His colleague, Matthew Irwin, who managed the government fur trade factory at La Baye, agreed wholeheartedly. He too worried about the "extensive family connections" between the "old settlers" and the Indians and predicted that great evils would arise if "those traders are suffered to reside at and enter this Country." Even before either Bowyer or Irwin let their views on this be known, Ninian Edwards, Governor of the Illinois Territory, expressed his own deep concerns about the British traders who had "settled themselves at the village of La Baye." In a letter to Secretary of State James Monroe, Edwards urged him to have all those people rounded up and driven out of that settlement. "To permit them to remain . . . and to cultivate the lands from which our citizens are excluded, would be," he declared, "not only to cherish a set of unprincipled British spies . . . but it would also continue to them evident advantages, in the prosecution of the fur trade over our own traders." Edwards concluded that they should "be removed from the settlements they occupy" and "their places to be supplied, by good American citizens."³²

The inhabitants of La Baye escaped that harsh fate but, in time, as John Haeger put it, they did become a "broken and

³² Quotation from John Quincy Adams taken from Colin G. Colloway, "The End of an Era: British-Indian Relations in the Great Lakes Region after the War of 1812," *The Michigan Historical Review* 12 (Fall, 1986): 8; also Colloway, "End of Era," 6; John Bowyer to Lewis Cass, Green Bay, 16 May 1818, *WHC* 20: 56, 57; Matthew Irwin to John Bowyer, Green Bay, 24 July 1817, *WHC* 19: 470; Ninian Edwards to James Monroe, Kaskaskia, Illinois Territory, 3 May 1816, *WHC* 19: 401, 402, 403.

destitute people, a casualty of America's frontier expansion."³³

It was only a very short time after the end of the war when Montreal merchant, John Aird, wrote his uncle at Michilimackinac warning: "I am very much afraid those fellows, the Yankees, will give you and all British settlers a great deal of trouble." Later, Robert Stuart sounded the same alarm and told John Lawe: "All you old residents must stick together, else you will be overwhelmed by the new comers, many of whom have neither honor, capital, nor any other wish than to cajole & prey on those who will have the misfortune to put themselves in their power."³⁴

The arrival of the Americans was indeed accompanied by a flood of calamity which beat upon and severely battered the old Metis community. At first, all the old residents were barred from participation in the fur trade simply because they were still British subjects. Then when they tried to regain their livelihoods by acquiring American citizenship they were denied that remedy as well. Furthermore, their ownership of the lands they lived upon was brought into question, and even their marriages which had been "solemnized according to the customs of the Indians" were declared by the new lawgivers to be no better than immoral and adulterous unions. They were robbed and bullied by soldiers, subjected to the insults of American moral arrogance, and finally, out-competed by Yankee traders motivated by a restless spirit of possessive individualism. Lawe described the Americans as being a "Jealous sort of people" and Robert Stuart wrote to him lamenting: "I have always told you, that you good honest old folks are not able to cope with the unprincipelled intreguing rouges around you." And so it was. In the face of it all there was little the people of La Baye could do to hold back the tide of change or to reverse their own ebbing fortunes.³⁵

³³ John D. Haeger, "A Time of Change: Green Bay, 1815-1834," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 54 (Summer, 1971): 285.

³⁴ John Aird to Dear Uncle, Montreal, 3 May 1815, Kellogg, Translations of Grignon, Lawe, Porlier Papers, Wisconsin Archives; Robert Stuart to John Lawe, Mackinac, 9 June 1825, Grignon, Lawe, Porlier Papers, Wisconsin Archives, Box 5, folder 4.

³⁵ For a thorough discussion of American policies adversely affecting the old settlers of Green Bay see, Haeger, "A Time of Change"; information on the question of land ownership in "Petition of Habitants of the Bay Verte to the Senate and House of the U.S. Congress," (written by Jacques Porlier),

The Indians around La Baye also suffered rapid decline following the war. They were shocked and embittered when their British "fathers" abandoned them to their old American enemies and deserted them to conditions of certain economic disaster. In 1817, Indian Agent Bowyer reported that there were Indian women and children at La Baye who had lost husbands, fathers and brothers during the war and that they were "starving in consequence of the frost having destroyed their corn, and the wild rice failing." A year later John Lawe informed Thomas Anderson that those conditions had deteriorated even further and told him: "If it was not for the old Traders the Indians must inevitably starve & Freeze for they get no assistance from these people, not even a mouthful of provisions." The Yankee traders made matters even worse. Referring to those new merchants and their methods of doing business Lawe declared: "We have the Rabble opposition running about with a few bad goods & [a] quantity of whiskey . . . as plentiful as water, that they trade out slyly, & destroys the Indians in every thing." In a short time the old settlers came to see their former Indian allies as a beaten, broken, and ruined people and within less than a decade following the war Robert Stuart concluded: "The Bay Indians have become so indolent, dishonest, & worthless, that no confidence can be placed in them."³⁶

Louis Grignon was enraged by what happened and by "the Bad Treatment by these new People." Lawe also decried his own

Kellogg, Translations from Grignon, Lawe, Porlier Papers, Wisconsin Archives; questions raised about the "country marriages" see, "Trials and Decisions of James Duane Doty," Wisconsin Archives (Wis Mss DD), Box 3, Cases of 1824; Ebenezer Childs, "Recollections of Wisconsin Since 1820," *WHC* 4: 167; Jacqueline Peterson, "The Founders of Green Bay: A Marriage of Indian and White," *Voyageur* 1 (Spring, 1984): 19; Business competition with American merchants see Haeger, "A Time of Change," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, (Summer, 1971); Jeanne Kay, "John Lawe, Green Bay Trader," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* (Autumn 1980); statements quoted in this paragraph, John Lawe to Jacob Franks, Green Bay, 5 December 1828, Grignon, Lawe, Porlier Papers, Wisconsin Archives, Box 6, folder 5; Robert Stuart to John Lawe, Mackinac, 14 May 1829, Grignon, Lawe, Porlier Papers, Wisconsin Archives, Box 6, folder 6.

³⁶ John Bowyer to Lewis Cass, Green Bay, 15 December 1817, *WHC* 19: 488; John Lawe to Thomas Anderson, Green Bay, 13 November 1818, *WHC* 20: 91; John Lawe to Jacob Franks, Michilimackinac, 5 September 1823, *WHC* 20: 309.



Courtesy, State Historical Society of Wisconsin

Augustin Grignon, Green Bay Trader

sinking situation and that of his community. "This is three years nearly Dear Tommy since peace has been made and I have been in Hell ever since," he complained to Thomas Anderson. Jacques Porlier too was shocked by the treatment they received at the hands of the Americans and admitted, "I would never have believed that among any people it would be title of reprobation to have been a British subject." Lawe likewise protested: "Opression is the Cry here for the [British] Subject . . . since these doodles have taken possession of this place." Porlier saw no hope. "In an obscure labyrinth, loaded incessantly with most atrocious calumnies without means of unmasking them, what are we to do?" he asked. Lawe too feared for the future. "They have the means of breaking us down entirely" and "they will and must inevitably route us out," he eventually concluded. By November of 1818 he admitted, "we are all going down hill fast," and then declared, "I wish I could sell out & leave this country for ever."³⁷

It was not just the loss of prosperity that distressed them, it was the loss of control over their own community and their own lives, and the tragic loss of an entire way of life that caused them the deepest sorrows. After the Americans came, their bonds with the Indians were broken, the old harmony was gone, and everyone and everything seemed out of joint and out of place. In a sad letter to his uncle, written in the early autumn of 1823, John Lawe mourned for what had become of their community. "You never saw what a wretched place the Bay is, it is full of these little dirty Shantys, as they call them but the right name would be to give them is the dirty Grog shops where every crime is committed . . . [and where] Indians, squaws, soldiers all mix together . . . & every thing that is bad is there" he wrote. At one point, in the midst of La Baye's downfall, he exclaimed: "Oh will there not come a Day of Reserection, that we may rise once more and . . . have the power and strength of Sampson." But what strength was still left

³⁷ Louis Grignon to Robert Dickson, La Baye Verte, 6 February 1819, *WHC* 20: 102; John Lawe to Thomas Anderson, Green Bay, 13 November 1818, *WHC* 20: 90; Jacques Porlier to Forsyth Richardson and Company, Green Bay, (no date, 1818), *WHC* 20: 91; Porlier to Richardson, (1818?) *WHC* 20: 94; John Lawe to Jacob Franks, Green Bay, 5 December 1828, Grignon, Lawe, Porlier Papers, Wisconsin Archives, Box 6, folder 5; Lawe to Anderson, 13 November 1818, *WHC* 20:93.

trickled unrelentingly away and by 1824 the old patriarch of the Metis community despairingly concluded: "The old times is no more, that pleasant reign is over & never to return any more."³⁸

³⁸ John Lawe to Jacob Franks, Michilimackinac, 5 September 1823, *WHC* 20:309; John Lawe to Thomas Anderson, Green Bay, 13 November 1818, *WHC* 20:91; John Lawe to Mrs. Robert Hamilton, Michilimackinac, 12 September 1823, *WHC* 20:351.