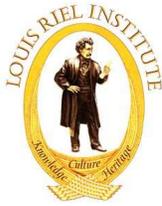# Reverend Edwin James Tanner. (1805-1870):
Killed During Manitoba's First Election Campaign

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Manitoba's first election in 1870 was lively and violent. A campaign homicide, still unsolved, was that of Rev. James Tanner of the Portage la Prairie region. Sometimes considered the first Presbyterian minister west of Winnipeg, this Metis son of the famous "White Indian," John Falcon Tanner, was half-brother to one of Manitoba's greatest war Chiefs, Picheito Tanner.

Reverend Tanner killed during election campaign

During the 1869-70 resistance James Tanner played a moderating role since he tended to side with the English Metis, he was instrumental in keeping his fiery brother, Picheito Tanner, out of the conflict. He did however become involved in the subsequent first provincial election campaign. He wrote to James Ross in Winnipeg trying to persuade him to run against the Canadian Party (led by Dr. Lynch) in the Marquette riding. James Ross, along with his brother-in-law Rev. George Flett, were moderate Metis who had served in Riel's Provisional Government.

James Tanner was killed in a fall from a wagon when two men stampeded the team on November 30, 1870, two weeks after writing to Ross, following an election meeting at Poplar Point, where Rev. Tanner had spoken on behalf of Lieutenant Governor Archibald. When Rev. John Black of Kildonan drove his team furiously from Winnipeg to claim his friend's body for Christian burial, he found that Tanner's brother, Chief Picheito Tanner, was already there. Face hard and scornful, he told Black: "Alive my brother preached your Gospel. You (Whites) killed him. I take him to my people who do not kill their Medicine Men." Thus ended Picheito's 15 year period of Christianity and to this day James Tanner's final resting-place is unknown.

Black, a close friend of Tanner's although living over 50 miles away, claimed that the team was deliberately stampeded by Colonel Wolseley's soldiers who were whooping and firing shots into the air. At the inquest, David McKenzie testified he had been a passenger in the wagon and that driver John Tait and James Tanner were thrown from it during the runaway. He and Joseph Pritchin who was riding behind, both testified that the

stampede was deliberately caused by two men on foot, who were hiding at the corner between the Taylor and Gunn farms. The two had suddenly appeared and spooked the team by hurling objects at the horses. The jury concluded that death was due to the fall caused by the runaway caused "willfully and maliciously by two persons unknown to this jury." The newspapers of the day give the following account:

MOB LAW
—————

THE "LOYALISTS" AT WORK AGAIN
——————

Another Death

On Wednesday evening, a crowded meeting was held at Poplar Point. The chief speakers were Mr. James Tanner, Mr. James Ross, and Dr. Lynch. Considerable noise was created at intervals by certain parties, but the result was when Dr. Lynch had stigmatized the Government as corrupt and incapable, Mr. Tanner in a speech which would have done honor to the House of Commons in England, moved a vote of entire confidence in Governor Archibald, and carried his motion three to one.

But the sad termination was to come. Mr Tanner on his way home had not driven two hundred yards, when some ruffians rushed towards his horse, waving their overcoats and throwing missiles, evidently to terrify the horse which was proverbially skittish. They succeeded to a miracle, for the horse started, poor Mr. Tanner (60 years of age) was thrown from the wagon, his skull was driven in and he died on the spot. And this was his "Loyalty's Reward." Mr. Ross and other gentlemen who were riding immediately behind Mr. Tanner had to ride the gauntlet through a shower of clubs, stones and snowballs. How long is this "loyal" rowdyism to continue?

The Manitoban and Northwest Herald
December 3, 1870, pg. 2.

The Life of James Tanner
     James was born in the Fond du Lac area, the son of John Falcon Tanner and his second wife, a Saulteaux woman from the Sault Ste. Marie/Rainy River area who later

took the name Theresa (she died in Makinak in 1850). From 1812-1828 John Tanner was employed by the Fond du Lac department of the American Fur Company and as an interpreter for US Indian agent, Col. George Boyd. During this time James received a fairly good education at the Rev. William Terry School. After the family moved to Sault Ste. Marie in 1828, James attended the Baptist Mission school of Rev. Abel Bingham.

At age 23, Roman Catholic Bishop Baraga baptized James at La Pointe, Wisconsin and James then married Louise Instkwekamegoka. She was the well-known "Granny" Tanner who spent her later years from 1870 to 1886 at Tanners Crossing, Manitoba (after James was killed).

After a reckless life as a Half-Breed freighter working for the well-known trader, Norman Kittson, at Pembina, James Tanner became a Presbyterian missionary among the Saulteaux people on the plains around Pembina, Fort Gary and Portage la Prairie.

For at least a decade, James Tanner worked for Norman Kittson's famous line connecting St. Paul with Fort Garry. He also helped Kittson cut the Woods Trail from St. Paul to Pembina. During his many trips to Manitoba he came to know well his famous half-brother, Chief Picheito Tanner of Portage la Prairie (also a trader and freighter). During this time James is described as "a notorious character, a giant in strength, who would terrorize entire villages when under the influence of rum."

However, in 1846, the tragic year of his father's death, James and his wife were converted to Methodism and became missionaries. For two years they laboured at Lake Winnibigoshish near Bimidji. During July 1850, James went on a 1,000-mile mission trip across the West on horseback from the Red Lake region of Minnesota, west before circling back to the Winnipeg-Portage la Prairie region of Manitoba. One Pembina resident commented on this amazing conversion "he is a changed man, I think the bible is the only book he reads…." After preaching briefly to a 700 cart buffalo hunting Metis brigade, he joined a 500-cart brigade for over one week. Subsequently, on various occasions, James would preach to Rev. John Black's Old Kildonan congregation and to the congregation at Rev. Cochran's St. Peter's Mission. James is reported to have assisted Rev. Edwin James in translating the Bible into the Saulteaux language.

With Rev. John Black's help, James worked diligently through 1852 to establish a Presbyterian mission to his brother's band but Hudson's Bay Company Governor Eden Colville turned a deaf ear (likely because there was already a Roman Catholic mission at St. François Xavier). Failing this, Tanner got the support of the American Baptist Society to build a mission in the Metis community of St. Joseph, North Dakota. However, after the wife of his Presbyterian mission colleague and his mission's school teaching assistant were killed in separate Sioux Indian raids, his superiors closed down the mission. Subsequently, Rev. Tanner went on a lecture tour to Boston and several other American cities. He then traveled to England where his family had an audience with Queen Victoria. Upon his return to Canada he took up freighting again for a short period.

Reference:

Neufeld, Peter L. "Manitoba Indian Chiefs and Missionaries: Brothers and Cousins."
        Winnipeg: Unpublished, no date, author's copy.