

François-Jacques Bruneau: Metis Judge. (1809-1865)

François-Jacques was born at Lac Vert, Saskatchewan, the illegitimate son of Antoine Bruneau, a Metis. In 1814, he went to Montreal with his father. He moved to Red River in 1822 and completed his education at École de Saint-Boniface. In 1831, he married Marguerite Harrison, the daughter of a Cree mother and a North West Company employee. François-Jacques became a teacher then a farmer. The couple had eleven children. One of their sons, Athanse, served as a guide to Lord Milton and then Dr. Walter Cheadle in 1862.

François-Jacques was prominent in community affairs. In 1843, he appeared before the Council of Assiniboia as head of a delegation requesting a distillery, which would give the Metis a chance to dispose of their grain surpluses. He also argued for more Metis involvement as officers in the police force. He helped lead the Metis in support of Sayer during his trial in 1849, and became a magistrate in 1850. In 1851, he was made a judge for one of the Assiniboia judicial districts. He was eventually appointed to the Council of Assiniboia in 1853 on the recommendation of Bishop Provencher. He was only the second French speaking lay person (after Cuthbert James Grant) to be appointed to council. In late June 1865, both Bruneau and his wife died within hours of each other during a cholera epidemic.

Bruneau's son-in-law, Johnny Grant gave the following sketch of Bruneau:

François was born, and his father dying soon after, he was brought up and educated by Bishop Provencher. He studied for the priesthood. In the meantime, Edward Harrison, a chief Factor of the Hudson's Bay Company, had died suddenly, leaving a wife and three children. Mrs. Harrison did not understand business methods and became the victim of unscrupulous people, so that she was soon penniless, although her husband had left property. Bishop Provencher took them also under his protection and gave them a home. The youngest daughter, Marguerite, was a pretty girl with fair hair and blue eyes and so different from the other girls of the country that, by the time she was twenty years old, young François Bruneau fell violently in love with her, and changed his mind about his calling. Instead of continuing his theological studies, he married her. Although they were both poor, they were willing to face the world together. He taught school and studied law, and in time became a magistrate and then a county judge.

He was so big-hearted that, a week before the High Court met, his house would be full of people asking advice. They got the advice and free board as well. He always tried to affect a settlement between litigants; his usual way being to appoint a day for one party to state his case, then he would hear the other side, then he brought the two together and in nine cases out of ten affected a settlement between the litigants. He explained the law to them and they would leave well-satisfied and good

friends. In cases which came up in court, if he was obliged to sentence a prisoner, he was just, but very tender-hearted, so he was well respected by all classes. He and his wife died of the Red River fever in 1865 and were buried on the same day. As he was too hospitable to have saved anything out of his small salary, he left his five daughters with little means. At Judge Bruneau's funeral, Archbishop Taché began to address the congregation, but was so deeply moved he could not continue his address. (Johnny Grant in Lyndel Meikle (editor) *Very Close to Trouble: The Johnny Grant Memoir* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1996: 186-187.)

References

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