

Baptiste “Nishecabo” Desjarlais. (1787-1871)

Baptiste was a mixed-blood son of Old Joseph Desjarlais (b. 1754); a fur trader from Lower Canada and his mother was Okimaskwew, a Saukteaux.¹ Baptiste was born at Lac la Biche and was married to Lizette Cardinal. He and Lizette were married in 1815 at Baie St. Paul settlement, known as Saukteaux Village near St. François Xavier. Baptiste was the chief of a mixed Metis/Saukteaux/Cree hunting band. Baptiste held to his Saukteaux spiritual roots and was a feared Midewewin Medicine Man. Baptiste is mentioned in HBC clerk, Isaac Cowie’s writings:

Among the freemen wintering about the lake (at Qu’Appelle in 1870) was one of the widespread Disjarlais [sic] families, but decidedly more Saukteaux than French in tongue and tone. The father, named Wah-ween-shee-cap-po, was a giant in size and ancient in days and devilment. When one of his grandchildren had died during the previous summer, in his grief and rage old Disjarlais, arming himself with his long flintlock, with powderhorn and ball-pouch slung over his shoulders, commenced blazing away at the sun, challenging the power up there “to come down and fight him like a man instead of killing innocent children.” As a professor of Indian medicine and black art in general he was dreaded, and he appeared to have the faculty of either hypnotizing or putting himself in a trance, lying so long in that state that during the winter his sons twice thought he was really dead, and came to the post for material to bury him. On both these occasions he came to life again after two or three days, during which he said he had visited spirit-land, of which he related his experiences to his fascinated and awestruck family and audience. By the time he fell into the third trance, or actually died that winter, his sons had no occasion to come to the post for winding sheet or coffin nails. (Cowie, Isaac. *The Company of Adventurers on the Great Buffalo Plains*. Toronto: William Briggs, 1913: 416-417)

Baptiste was made a trading chief in 1819 at the Lesser Slave Lake Post. In the 1820s his band was frequenting the Carrot River Valley and then south around Fort Pelly where Baptiste Desjarlais was again designated as a trading Chief (1830-1832). They were then wintering at the Fishing Lakes in the Qu’Appelle valley in 1833-34. Some of his family became signatories to Treaty Four as members of Muscowequan’s Band of Cree and Saukteaux located near Fort Qu’Appelle. Others (sons and grandsons) lived as Metis, did not take treaty, and they homesteaded in the same region. Baptiste ‘Nishecabo’ died in Little Fork, Qu’Appelle Lakes, NWT, in the winter of 1871; he was 84 years of age.

References:

Cowie, Isaac. *The Company of Adventurers on the Great Buffalo Plains*. Toronto: William Briggs, 1913:
Devine, Heather. *The People Who Own Themselves*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004.

¹ Joseph Desjarlais was born on 3 Sep 1754 in Contrecoeur, P.Q. 1785. When Joseph was 30, he married Okimaskwew, in Manitoba. Joseph died in Swan River, Manitoba, on 22 Oct 1833; at age 79. He was buried on 11 Jan 1834 in St. François-Xavier, Manitoba.



Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell
Coordinator of Metis Heritage and History Research
Louis Riel Institute