

## **Josette Legacé Work** (1809- 1896)

By George and Terry Goulet

A “country wife” in Western Canada and the Pacific Northwest was an Aboriginal woman who became the spouse of a man of Métis or European ancestry who was connected with the fur trade. As the fur trade moved westward, it was natural for explorers and fur traders to enter into marital unions with Aboriginal women as there were no white women in the west at that time. Also since there was then no clergy in this area, these unions were made *à la façon du pays*, i.e. in accordance with the custom of the country.

Country wives brought invaluable attributes and benefits to their relationships with the voyageurs, explorers, engagés, and fur traders. Due to their dual Aboriginal and white cultures, country wives forged kinship ties between the Native tribes and the fur traders. Josette (sometimes called Suzette) Legacé Work is an example of a Métis country wife who, with her husband John Work, left a lasting mark on the history of the Province of British Columbia.



Josette Legacé Work (LRI photo archive #WMN 26)

Josette Legacé was born about 1809 in the Oregon Country. Her mixed-blood lineage was derived from her father Pierre Legacé<sup>1</sup>, a French Canadian voyageur and her mother, a Nez Perce woman. Her father was known as “Old Pierre”. In 1825 Josette and John Work were married *à la façon du pays* at Fort

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<sup>1</sup> The explorer David Thompson sent a voyageur named Charles LaGasse (along with a man named LaBlanc) over the Rockies to winter with the Kutenai Indians in the winter of 1800. Charles LaGasse was the brother of "old Pierre" Legasse/Legace who crossed the Rockies in 1807 with Finan McDonald. The latter two settled down for awhile with an Indian chief and his family near present day Spokane, Washington.

Colville in the Oregon Country. Work was then the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) clerk in charge of that Fort. At the time of their country marriage he was in his early thirties, while his bride was only sixteen years old. Josette and John eventually had eleven children, three sons and eight daughters. Their marital union lasted until the day of John Work's death in 1861.

Work was born with the surname Wark about 1792 in Taughboyne, County Donegal, Ireland. At the age of 22 he embarked from the Orkney Islands for Hudson Bay to work for the HBC. Until 1823, he served in several areas of Rupert's Land, including York Factory in present day Manitoba. In that year he was transferred west of the Rocky Mountains where he was to live the rest of his life. He crossed the Continental Divide to the Columbia District with Peter Skene Ogden, a fur trader with the HBC. Their paths would cross frequently in the future.

In the Indian Country, Josette's Aboriginal blood brought the same advantages to her husband as that which other country wives brought to their marital relationships. This proved particularly advantageous in their early days when Josette accompanied John on many of his fur-trading ventures. Their young children also traveled with them. This was so even though the expeditions sometimes entered into the territory of hostile Natives, and frequently involved long and distant travel over many months.

Work was promoted to Chief Trader in charge of the Snake Country Expedition in 1830, replacing Peter Skene Ogden. Ogden had succeeded Alexander Ross as leader of these Expeditions. Ross had retired from the HBC and moved to Red River where he authored several books including *The Red River Settlement: Its Rise, Progress and Present State*. It is likely that the free trader identified by Alexander Ross as "Old Pierre" in the 1824 Expedition that Ross led to the Snake Country was Josette's father.

Even though she was pregnant, John Work took Josette and their children with him on the 1830-31 Expedition. During this combined hunting and fur-trading trip into the Snake Country, their daughter Letitia was born on June 15, 1831 in what was to become Idaho. Josette and the children also traveled with him and his crew the following year on another trapping expedition. During this 1832-33 Expedition they went southward into what is now California.

The dangers that the fur traders and their families sometimes encountered on these expeditions has been documented in a letter from George T. Allen (a clerk on the Columbia) to James Hargrave who was then in Rupert's Land. Concerning one of Work's expeditions, the letter states in part: "You have no doubt heard that Mr. Work in his last trip to the Snake country had some fighting with the Blackfeet & had some of his people killed."

In the fall of 1834 Work was sent to Fort Simpson (previously Fort Nass) on McLoughlin Bay in what is now North West British Columbia. He was placed in charge of the coastal trade, again succeeding Peter Skene Ogden. Josette and their children stayed at Fort Vancouver until they were reunited with him at his new posting. During her two year period at Fort Vancouver Josette would have socialized with other country wives at the Fort. These included two other prominent Métis women, Amelia Connolly Douglas and Marguerite Wadin McKay McLoughlin, the spouses of the top two officials at the Fort. Amelia was married to James Douglas who has been referred to as the "Father of

British Columbia". Marguerite's husband was Dr. John McLoughlin who in 1957 was officially named the "Father of Oregon".

However in late 1836 Josette and her younger children joined John Work in Fort Simpson. Two older daughters were left behind to attend school. During the thirteen years that Josette was at Fort Simpson, she gave birth to six of their children – three boys and three girls. Josette, with her Aboriginal blood, was sympathetic to the native women at her new location. According to N. de Bertrand Lugin in her book *The Pioneer Women of Vancouver Island 1843-1866*:

By precept and example, by earnest teaching and loving care, she began to make her influence felt. She taught the little girls and the young women to cook and to sew, to keep themselves and the other children neat and clean.

As her influence grew in the community, she decided to use it to persuade the Natives to give up slavery, a practice that was prevalent among many in the area. She contributed to a change in the views of many of them.

In their book *British Columbia Chronicle: 1778-1846*, G. P. V. and Helen B. Akrigg noted that suspended from the walls of the living room of the Work home at Fort Simpson was a variety of stuffed birds. These writers explained that Josette was "an expert taxidermist". The Akriggs also added that notwithstanding Josette was "a half-Indian fur-trade wife", she was treated with the deference due to a Chief Trader's wife. As an example, Josette had staff to prepare meals for her and her family.

John Work was devoted to Josette and his Métis children. On February 15, 1841 he wrote a letter to his old HBC cohort Edward Ermatinger, who was then living in St. Thomas, Upper Canada. In it Work wrote that Josette had given birth to a son:

.... like most old fogies I am quite proud of the little fellow, I had given up hopes of having a boy.... The little Wife and I get on very well, She is to me an affectionate partner simple and uninstructed as she is and takes good care of my children & myself[.] We enjoy as great a share of conjugal happiness as generally falls to the lot of married people.

In *Many Tender Ties* Sylvia Van Kirk, a leading authority on women in fur trade society, noted that John Work often affirmed his "... esteem for his Métis wife Josette Legacé."

John Work received a promotion to Chief Factor in 1846 and continued his service with the HBC at Fort Simpson where he was in charge of the coastal trade. In that same year the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel became the international boundary for the area west of the Rocky Mountains. In addition to this promotion, Work was appointed to the three-man Board of Management of the HBC's Columbia District. With him as part of this triumvirate were his long-time associates Chief Factors James Douglas and Peter Skene Ogden.

John Work was a replacement for Dr. John McLoughlin who had retired from the HBC and moved to Oregon City in the Willamette Valley. There was an established Métis community of mainly retired fur-traders and their families in this area that was called French Prairie. Josette, John and their family lived in Fort Simpson until 1849. In order that his younger children could attend school, he took Josette and the children to live in Fort Victoria in that year. Until then they had been schooled at home.

In Victoria Josette renewed her old acquaintance with Amelia Connolly Douglas, her Métis friend from Fort Vancouver. Amelia's husband James Douglas was then the HBC's Chief Factor at Fort Victoria, and later became the Governor of Vancouver Island. The close friendship between Josette and Amelia at Fort Victoria would last for many years.

Notwithstanding that they had been married *à la façon du pays* for 23 years, John and Josette had Reverend R. J. Staines marry them in a religious ceremony in Victoria on November 6, 1849. This may have been motivated by the fact that Staines was soon thereafter to preside at the weddings of two of their children. A short time later their older daughters were married. Sarah married Roderick Finlayson (who later became a Chief Factor of the HBC); and Jane wed another HBC official Dr. William Fraser Tolmie.

After their daughters' weddings, John Work returned to Fort Simpson as District Manager where he remained until 1852. In the summer of that year he moved to Victoria to rejoin Josette and the younger children. They purchased a large tract of farmland on which they built a substantial home which they called "Hillside". It was located at a distance from Fort Victoria in what is today the Hillside District of the City of Victoria.

Josette's husband carried on his functions as a Chief Factor of the HBC and in 1858 he was appointed to the Board of Management of the HBC headquartered at Victoria. With him on this Board were Alexander Grant Dallas (a son-in-law of James Douglas) and Dugald Mactavish. Prior to that, Work's long-time HBC comrade Governor James Douglas had appointed him to the Council of the Colony of Vancouver Island in 1853. This further enhanced the status of Josette and John in Victoria's society.

Josette and John Work entertained at their Hillside home on many occasions. An English naval officer Richard Charles Mayne (after whom Mayne Island is named) came to Victoria in 1857 as a surveyor. In his *Four Years in British Columbia and Vancouver Island*, he wrote:

In fine weather, riding parties of the gentlemen and ladies of the place were formed, and we returned generally to a high tea or tea-dinner at Mr. Douglas's or Mr. Work's, winding up the pleasant evening with dance and song.

Although Charles Wilson made demeaning comments about "half-breed" women in one part of his contemporary diary, this did not deter him from accepting the hospitality of Josette and John. On Saturday September 3, 1859, he wrote "Directly I landed I started off to spend the evening with the Works & thank them for all their kindness .... They got up an impromptu hop immediately & we danced till Sunday commenced ...." Perhaps Wilson did not know of Josette's Métis lineage since he added "The Works are about the kindest people I ever came across."

Wilson also attended a large dinner party at the home of Josette and John Work on January 2, 1860. His diary entry stated "This evening kept as New Year's Day .... There were about 30 at dinner .... We danced away till 12 & then all hands sat down to a sumptuous supper & then set to work dancing again until a very late hour."

The presence of the attractive daughters of Josette and John in Victoria did not take long to draw male suitors to their Hillside home. In due course all of their eight daughters were married, but their three sons died without issue. In addition to the marriages of Sarah to Roderick Finlayson and Jane to Dr.

William Fraser Tolmie during the winter of 1849-50, Mary Work was married in 1860 to James Allen Grahame the Chief Commissioner of the HBC.

On February 13<sup>th</sup> of that same year Sarah and Roderick Finlayson hosted a party. Charles Wilson attended it and noted in his diary:

.... we had great fun there, an old gentleman playing on the fiddle for us to dance to ....  
Scotch reels and Irish jigs to an immense extent.

Josette and John's youngest daughter Suzette, who was born at Fort Victoria in 1854, married Edward Gawler Prior in 1878. After the death of Josette's son-in-law Roderick Finlayson in 1892, Edward replaced his deceased brother-in-law as one of the trustees of the Work Estate. Prior was later to become Premier of British Columbia in 1902 and Lieutenant Governor of the Province in 1919.

Josette and John were the grandparents of a future Premier of British Columbia. Simon Fraser Tolmie was one of the children born to their daughter Jane and her husband William Fraser Tolmie. Simon was to become Premier of the Province of British Columbia on August 21, 1928. He served in that capacity for over five years.

John Work, Josette's beloved husband for over 36 years, died in Victoria in December 1861. At the time of his death he was not only one of the wealthiest men and largest landowners in the Colony, he was also one of its most highly respected citizens. Josette was a widow for 35 years. She lived out her life as a matriarch of Victoria society and continued her long and close friendship with her fellow Métis Lady Amelia Connolly Douglas. Their close ties came to an end with the death of Amelia on January 8, 1890.

Josette was sometimes referred to as Suzette. On August 18, 1874 she entered into an Indenture with the Registrar General of British Columbia in which she signed her name Suzette Work rather than Josette Work. Her signature was in good and legible handwriting. There is a photograph of Josette in her later years in which she is sitting in a chair dressed like, and appearing similar to, pictures of Queen Victoria from the same time period. In this photograph, her demeanor is that of a self-assured lady and matriarch.

On January 30, 1896 Josette died at the advanced age for that time of 87 years. She is buried in the Ross Bay Cemetery in Victoria. On her tombstone her name appears as Suzette Work. On the day after her death the British Columbia Legislature paid a special tribute to this Métis matriarch. Premier John H. Turner stated that Josette was an honored pioneer of British Columbia. He referred to her sympathy to those in sickness and in trouble and her kind works and charitable actions. The Legislature then adopted the following resolution:

That the Members of this Legislature having heard with regret of the death of Mrs. Work, wife of the late Hon. John Work, a member of the Council of Vancouver's Island from 1853 to 1861, who before her demise was the oldest resident of British Columbia, and who will be remembered for her usefulness in pioneer work and many good deeds, beg to express their sympathy with the relatives of the deceased.

Josette Legacé's prominence as a Métis pioneer woman in Western Canada is evidenced by her being profiled in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. Her life in British Columbia had spanned several eras – from fur trade society of the frontier outposts through colonial times to provincial status – from wilderness days to civilization. Josette was a true pioneer who had participated in and contributed

to the growth of the West. Like her close friend Amelia Connolly Douglas, Josette Legacé Work was an outstanding Métis and Canadian woman.

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