

Ross, Isabella née Mainville. (1807-1885)

Metis roots in Rainy River go back two centuries

Atikokan Progress

by Jessica Smith on April 23, 2013



CELEBRATING OUR PAST

Educator Fern Perkins, a direct descendant of the fur traders of the Rainy River district, visited AHS Tuesday. She is dressed as her ancestor Isabella Mainville, Native wife of a Hudson Bay clerk, who is depicted by Perkins' husband, Mark. The couple are joined by Atikokan Métis Council chair Marlene Davidson and the school board's Aboriginal Education department's Wendy Orchard.

The fur trade – in which the Rainy River district plays an integral role – led to a relationship between Native and Voyageur culture that was initially one of mutual trust and respect.

That early piece of history may hold some lessons for modern times, says Métis educator Fern Perkins, who shared her 50 year journey to discover her Métis roots with AHS students.

Now an education consultant with the BC's health services authority, Perkins shared her research of local Métis history with schools across the district here, courtesy of the Rainy River District School Board's Aboriginal education department.

Perkins related the tale of her great-great-great-great grandmother Isabella Mainville, a Native woman who married Scotsman Charles Ross, a Hudson Bay Company (HBC) clerk stationed at Lac la Pluie (now Fort Frances). To bring that story to life, Perkins embodied her ancestor by wearing the cross-cultural garb typical of what she wore as a

‘country wife’ of a European: The long dress, shawl and hat typical of European women of the day, combined with a Métis sash.

Married at age 15, Isabella would eventually become the first female Native landowner in Victoria.

Perkins recalled how, as an 11-year-old in the 1960s, she first heard about Isabella and the family’s Métis ancestry from her mother, who cautioned her not to discuss her lineage with anyone. The reason? The ‘60s scoop,’ when the government was placing children with Native blood in residential schools.

“My mom was really concerned they would take me away to a residential school,” recalled Perkins, adding that parents who refused to allow their children to be placed in these schools could be jailed.

The family secret was out however, when Perkins’ father, an author and researcher, wrote a piece about Isabella Mainville which was published in a local magazine. “All of a sudden, when I was walking home from school, my neighbour friends started calling me names and some didn’t want to play with me anymore.”

It was following the death of her mother in 2004 that Perkins realized that “there was no one left to ask” about her Native ancestry. She began researching her family history further and discovered Isabella was originally from the Rainy River district.

At age 7, Isabella’s family moved to Lac la Pluie because her father traded fur with the HBC. In 1819, at age 15, Isabella was given in marriage to Ross by her father, Joseph Mainville. The ‘fur trade marriage’ was a typical way to strengthen a business relationship between a fur trader and the company, something encouraged by the HBC, said Perkins.

Isabella became a country wife, and although it was an arranged marriage, the union seemed to be at least a congenial one. Unlike many HBC reps who would often go on to marry a European wife and abandon their Aboriginal wife and children, Ross never did. They had ten children together and due to Ross’ work with the company he was often gone on long canoe trips to places as far away as the west coast.

Isabella was frequently on her own for as long as a year with their young children. While she wore the finery befitting any company wife, like all Aboriginal women of that time she was skilled in living off the land – hunting, trapping, tanning, weaving, making moccasins, etc. – and was clearly a practical woman.

An incident in 1823 illustrates her toughness. While Ross was in Selkirk, the couple’s son John was threatened by knife-wielding fur traders while minding the Lac La Pluie trading post. Isabella chased off her son’s attackers, a move that earned her the respect of the fort’s Governor George Simpson, whose record of the event has been preserved in the HBC archives.

The Ross family eventually settled in Victoria, where their last child was born. After Charles' death, Isabella purchased a sizeable land holding there. It would appear the country marriage worked out much better for Isabella than for Governor Simpson's country wife. The head of the fort was married to an Aboriginal woman named Margaret Taylor, with whom he had two children. In 1830 however, he returned from England with a young bride, Lady Frances, and abruptly abandoned Margaret and their children. He re-named Fort Lac la Pluie after his new bride. Three years later, heartbroken after the loss of a child and finding life in Fort Frances too rugged, she returned to England.

The betrayal of Margaret incensed one HBC employee who recorded his feelings in a journal entry. He noted most at the fort disapproved of Simpson's treatment of his first wife. He added that the Aboriginal people "most however only educated by nature, lived more innocent lives and made better parents, husbands and families than those who would call themselves Christians."

The children of the fur trade – offspring of those country marriages, and of unions between Aboriginals and either the French Canadian Voyageurs or the Scottish settlers along the Red River – would become the Métis. They were known for the industrious and cheerful nature, and because of that and their love of music, Métis paddlers were paid extra to sing to keep up the morale of the Voyageurs on the fur trade trips, said Perkins.

They are now the only mixed blood people in the world to be recognized by every level of government as being a nation, Perkins told students. It was only after the first recognition of the Métis in the 1980s, that Perkins' mother began to research the family's mixed blood heritage, which now dates back six generations.

"It's not about blood quantum – once you're Métis, you always are. It never ends," said Perkins.

Its beginning, however, is what Perkins wanted students to remember.

"Remember that this country was built on the First Nations helping the fur trade; they worked together and respected each other, and that's the only way we can now move forward – by working together."



Isabella died in 1885 while being cared for by the Sisters of St. Ann. She was buried on land that had once belonged to her, within site of her old home, near the bay that bears her name in Ross Bay Cemetery.

She originally came to British Columbia with her husband who was employed by the Hudson's Bay Company as Chief Factor (Chief Trader) who was in charge of building Fort Victoria, the headquarters of Hudson's Bay Company operations in British Columbia. The fort was the beginnings of a settlement that grew into the modern Victoria, the capital city of British Columbia.

Isabella Ross was the first woman to own property in British Columbia. After her husband's death Isabella bought land for a farm that now makes up the eastern two-thirds

of Ross Bay Cemetery, where she is buried. Not only is Ross Bay named for her but she also named Fowl Bay, though it was originally spelled "Fowl".

Isabella died at St. Anne's convent in 1885 at age 77 years.

Isabella was born on January 10, 1808, the daughter of Joseph Mainville (a French engagé boatman) who worked for the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and Josette, an Ojibwa woman.

In 1819, at Lac la Pluie, Isabella married Charles Ross who was an HBC Clerk.

Children of Isabella Mainville and Charles Ross:

- John Ross (1823 - 1863),
- Walter Ross (1827 - 1855),
- Elizabeth Ross Wren (1829 - 1859),
- Charles H. Ross (1831 - 1905),
- Catherine Ross Murray (1832 - 1916),
- Alexander Ross (1836 - 1876),
- Frances Ross (1837 - 1910),
- Mary Amelia Ross Hess (1840 - 1882),
- Flora Amelia Ross (1842 - 1897),
- William Ross (1844 - ____).

Charles Ross joined the HBC as a clerk in 1818:

From 1818 – 1819 he was a Clerk at Norway House

From 1819 – 1822 he was Clerk at Lac La Pluie

From 1822 – 1823 he was Clerk at Thompson River

From 1823 – 1824 he was Clerk at Fort Alexander (Bas de la Riviere)

From 1824 – 1830 he was Clerk at Babines (Fort Kilmaurs) New Caledonia

From 1830 - 1831 he was Clerk in charge at Connolly Lake, New Caledonia

From 1831 – 1832 he was Clerk at Fort St. James, New Caledonia

In 1832 he was Clerk at McLeod Lake

From 1832 – 1833 he was Clerk at Fort Chipewyan, Athabasca

From 1833 – 1835 he was Clerk in charge at Fort Vermilion, Athabasca

From 1835 - 1836 he took a leave of absence - returned to England on the Prince Rupert for medical advice.

From 1836 - 1837 he was Clerk in charge at Cumberland House, English River

From 1837 – 1838 he was Clerk in charge at Kootenay, Columbia

From 1838 – 1839 he was Clerk in charge at Cumberland, Saskatchewan

From 1839 – 1841 he was Clerk in charge at Frasers Lake, New Caledonia

From 1841 – 1843 he was Clerk in charge at Fort McLoughlin, Columbia

From 1843 – 1844 he was Chief Trader in charge Straits of De Fuca, Columbia

In 1844 he was Chief Trader in charge Fort Victoria, Columbia

In 1844, 27 June, he died of Appendicitis

In 1832, George Simpson in his notes, admired Ross's education and conduct but took issue with his appearance and attitude to business (HBRP xxx p. 225). From 1832 to 1835 he was stationed east of the Rockies until he took a year's leave of absence in England and Scotland because of ill health. He returned to North America in 1836 and Fort Vancouver in 1838. He then led a southern party to Trinidad Bay where he failed to meet up with the Michel Laframboise party; he subsequently he returned to Vancouver to perform such duties such as taking farm implements to the Cowlitz farm. Because Donald Manson was in ill health in Fort McLoughlin, Ross was sent there in 1838, and took charge in 1839. At the end of 1842 he was promoted to Chief Trader and when Fort McLoughlin was abandoned in 1843, he went to southern Vancouver Island to erect Fort Victoria where he remained in charge until his death from appendicitis.



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