

Venne, Joe. (1906-1990)

By Lynn Whidden and Lawrence Barkwell.

The life and songs of Joe Venne illustrate well the mixed heritage of the Métis. Joe, who died in 1990, was born on November 21, 1906 in Pumpkin Plains, Manitoba. His father was Alexandre Venne (b. 1876) and his mother was Elise Fleury (b. 1878), daughter of Jean Baptiste Fleury and Cecile Flammond. His grandfather and three brothers had moved from Baie St. Paul to the Ste. Madeleine area. After Joe's mother died from childbirth complications when Joe was four years old, he was raised by his uncle, Pat Bellehumeur, a brother-in-law to Louis Riel, and by his grandfather, Jean Baptiste Fleury¹, who homesteaded in Ste. Madeleine, Manitoba. By age 12, Joe was supporting his entire family by cutting wood, tending horses and working for farmers. Joe married Josephine Vermette and they had eight children.

Besides the Michif language, Joe spoke English and French, and understood Cree and Saulteaux. He had a large repertoire of traditional songs in French, a smaller fund of old songs in English such as "Sixteen Coal Black Horses" and other popular tunes learned from the radio. He was particularly fond of the 1930s "Bum Songs," as he called them, such as "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum." Joe did not compose any songs, but said they were just songs he had heard, songs for passing time. He didn't learn any Indian songs, but because he lived in close proximity to the Waywayseecappo reserve, near Rossburn, Manitoba, he recalled hearing the night long drumming for a Midewiwin healing ceremony in the 1920s.

In 1935, in the midst of the "Dirty Thirties," the Canadian government set up the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act. The town of Ste. Madeleine, and surrounding area called Pumpkin Plain, was designated as pastureland. The Métis families who had their taxes paid up to date were to be compensated and relocated. However, because of the economic conditions of the time, few families had their taxes paid. The Métis were again forced to find a new home and they lost everything they had. Their homes were burned, their dogs were shot, their church was to be dismantled and the logs sold to build a piggery. The priest from St. Lazare also sold the church bell and statues. When confronted by community members the priest said the money would not be returned and he was using it to build another church at St. Lazare. The plan to dismantle the church was foiled by Joe Venne and other community members who confronted the crew sent to dismantle it with their rifles. They then moved the family of Caroline and John Vermette into the building to protect it. By 1938, the once vital community had all but vanished. Today, all that remains of Ste. Madeleine are the stone foundations of the Belliveau School and the cemetery encircling the mound of grass where the church once stood.

Reference:

Zeilig, Ken and Victoria Zeilig. *Ste. Madeleine: Community Without a Town, Métis Elders in Interview*. Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications, 1987.

¹ Jean Baptiste Fleury was the son of Louis Fleury and Marguerite Trottier. His father Louison Fleury was an employee of Alexander Henry the Younger at Pembina and Lake Winnipeg in the early 1800s and married Josette a Gros Ventre woman. Louis was the older brother of Patrice Fleury, a brother-in-law of Gabriel Dumont.



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