

The Frenchtown Story: Community, Not a Town

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As told by son of Pioneers:

(The following article is prepared from a recent paper read by Clem Bergevin before a meeting of the Walla Walla Valley Pioneer and Historical Society as well as from other recollections of this son of pioneers of the area – Editor.)

BY CLEM BERGEVIN

"Frenchtown" as I knew it was not a town by just a community. These French were ex-employees of the Western Fur Trading Co. and the McLoughlin Fur Co. They disbanded about 1824. These French were all through this part of the Northwest. They saw the possibility of the Walla Walla country with its furs, salmon, trout, wood, mild winters and plenty of pasture for livestock.

When the mines opened up in Montana and Idaho, these French went there in the summer and came back here to winter. The oldest inhabitant here at my place was Joe Larouche who had a cabin where my cellar is today. This was 1824. The soldiers used this cabin as a hospital in 1855 during the Battle of Walla Walla.

This area grew from what was known as the Gravelle Place (now Last Chance Service Station), west to what is now Touchet and between Milton-Freewater and Dry Creek. This was the general area populated by these people who had once been the aristocracy of France. At the time of the French Revolution they fled to England, were refused admittance, so sailed for American and landed in what is now Canada. From here, many enlisted in the service of the fur trading firms, with several coming to the Oregon Country. It was these French who were among the first settlers of the Northwest and they were ahead of Dr. and Mrs. Marcus Whitman and Rev. and Mrs. Henry Spaulding.

Originally "Frenchtown" was known by the settlers there as "Village de Canadiens". Later, the community was to be renamed to honor the Frank Lowden family, early leaders here. First home in the area was established by the Pellesier family about one quarter mile east of Whitman Station. Other early settlers (with dates of their arrival in the Northwest) were:

Early Settlers

George Tellier, 1830; Narcisse Raymond, 1833; Louis Downie, 1845; William McBean, 1833; Oliver Brisboe, 1836; L. Rocque, 1823; J.M. Abadie, 1855; E. Beauchemier, 1837; J. Beauchamp, 1837; F. Chartier, 1836; M. McDoughlin, 1835; T. Morrisette, 1849; A. Morrin, 1836; A.D. Pambrun, 1842; B. Remond, 1857 and Frank Lowden, 1865.

Some other early settlers here included: Marcel Gagnon, Jim Madgin, Demase Bergevin, John Hancock, Charles and James Driver, the Allard's, Bushman's, Jerry St. Dennis, Jim Dobson,

Andrew LeFevre, Remo Remillard, Madigan Collins, Mrs. Leverton, James Ladoceur, A.P. Woodward, and Fred and George Perry.

Donation Claims

Some of these early settlers took up Donation Land Claims. One was Louis Downie who had a claim of 640 acres. My grandfather Oliver Allard, Purchased 400 acres of this Downie claim. Ten, Narcisse Raymond took up a donation claim and sold different parcels of this land to his sons-in-law.

You will first find Raymond in the Northwest at St. Louis-on-the-Willamette, now St. Paul, Oregon. He was a witness when the priest came to the country in 1840 to formalize the marriages of the Canadians and the native women and to baptize the children, some of whom were 20 years old. Some of these men took up 40 and 80-acre plots along the Walla Walla River and its tributaries.

The first Bergevin's were Louis and Joe Bergevin. They were in California during the gold rush of 1849 and then moved up here in late 1850 with their pack train. They packed into Virginia City, Montana and to Frenchtown, Montana and would winter their pack train here. Louis lost his pack train in the early 70's in Lolo Pass after making a trip of mercy to Idaho late one winter. Heavy snows pinned him down and he lost his animals.

Father here in '68

My father, Demase, and Uncle Clem came here in 1860. They went to the Idaho mines that same year. They were born on the St. Lawrence River and each was an expert boatman and among the world's finest broad-axe men. They worked for Dr. Baker, founder of the Baker-Boyer National Bank, who built the first railroad from Wallula to Walla Walla in 1872. They were the lead men in the drive of logs for this railroad down the Snake and Yakima Rivers to Wallula.

My grandfather, Oliver Allard, came west in 1860 and went first to the mines at Kellogg and Helena, Montana from St. Paul, Minnesota, then settled near Frenchtown a year later. My Uncle Louis Allard is celebrating his 90th birthday this year (1967). He was born at Frenchtown in 1877.

After the massacre of the Whitman's here in 1847, a company of French Volunteers was organized in the Willamette Valley as a part of the Oregon Volunteers of that time. This group came to the Walla Walla Valley and many remained until harvest time but then had to harvest their crops at home. Many returned, however, to the Walla Walla Valley and it was these who first settled Frenchtown, a prosperous settlement until the Battle of Walla Walla in 1855. The capture and accidental killing of Indian Chief Peopeomoxmox was a highlight of this action.

School Built

A school was built in 1870 where now stands the barn of the Charles Baker farm on Highway 410. A church building came a couple of years later for the St. Rose Mission which was here

from 1850 to 1880. Skilled axe men settlers went to the Blue Mountain near at hand and cut timbers of stout pine and fir. When cut and hauled to the site, the community held "raising bees" and soon erected the first school house for the Second Walla Walla County School District.

William McBean, chief trader or factor for Hudson's Bay Company, at the mouth of the Walla Walla River, was the first teacher. Among the first pupils were my mother as well as an aunt and some uncles.

From minutes of the first school district meetings, I would like to insert these notes at this time:

First meeting held April 18, 1870, at the home of Oliver Allard. R. Babcock was elected chairman and C.H. Hanford, secretary. Other elected directors were D.W. Hensley, Oliver Allard and John Hanford was elected the first clerk.

Lowden Elected

At the June 11th meeting, Frank Lowden was elected to take the place of Babcock who had resigned. At the November 4th meeting James Driver was elected to fill the resignation of Hensley. The pay indebtedness of \$600 (probably for the school building) a levy of 120 mills on a dollar was voted on all taxable property . . ."The same to be collected forthwith after 10 days notice thereof."

Ralph Amin was the first teacher for the school term commencing March 1st and ending May 31st, 1871. He was paid \$120 for the term. Books used were Webster's and Thompson's Arithmetics; Wilson' and Sanders' Readers; Clark's and Pineo's Grammars and Montieth's Geography.

Church services were held in the schoolhouse until the church was erected nearby. Before that, missionaries had visited the area periodically, conducting services in various homes of the area for the nearly 200 Catholics. My mother and father were married there.

The church was built under the direction of Fr. Charles Richard and was also dedicated by him. He also blessed the wooden cross and the small cemetery which still remains today on a low hill near the Baker farm and within view of my own home. Marcel Gagnon made the cross.

At least 123 people are known to be buried in the cemetery. Among early burials there were: Mrs. St. Dennis, Mrs. Dobson, Mrs. M. Gagnon, Allards, Mrs. Louis Bergevin and Narcisse Raymond.

The church was moved to Walla Walla in early 1900's where it formed the basis of a grocery store at 9th and Chestnut.