
Fort Frances Museum & Cultural Centre

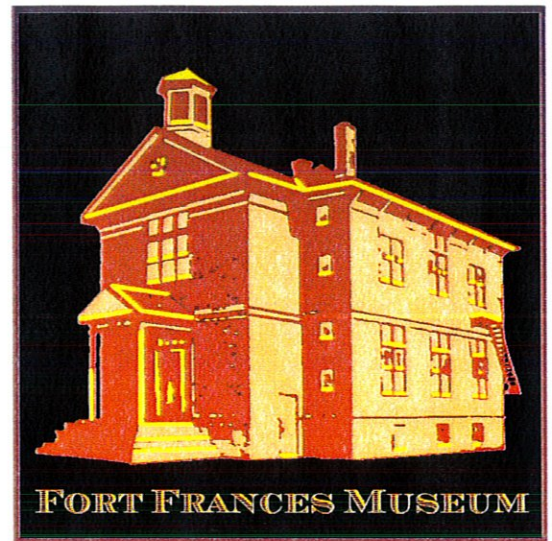
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Now on Facebook!



April 2013

Currently on display in our main floor gallery...

Our Local Métis Story — second in *Our Founding Families* theme — will run until school is out. This is a better fit for classroom visits than our summer exhibit.

I want to thank committee members who have worked over a year and a half to put together this important exhibit: Wanda Botsford, Anne-Marie Armstrong, Bob & Erma Armit, Dylinda & John George and Gerry Guimond of Sunset Country Métis; Wendy Orchard of the Rainy River District School Board; Michelle Tymkin of Northwest Catholic District School Board; Smokey & Ginny Bruyere and Glenn Jourdain of Couchiching First Nation; Art Hunter of Kay-Nah-Chi-Wah-Nung; and Merv Ahrens, local author and historian.

This exhibit combines many things. First it explores the history of our area — those early, important alliances formed between Europeans and Natives as the result of the fur trade and impacted by events elsewhere in Canada... the Red River resistance and Métis migration. It features some excellent examples of clothing, music and artefacts, important for their depiction of the vibrant and rich Métis culture that has been influenced by Native, Scots and French ancestry. To round out the exhibit, we have added a few carefully chosen family photos and stories that we hope makes this exhibit as personal to you as it is to us.

As part of this story, and only with the financial support of both school boards, we were able to bring in Fern

Perkins, who presented her family's story to area schools. Fern is a descendant of Isabella Mainville, a Métis girl who married a Hudson Bay Company clerk, Charles Ross, here at the Fort Frances post.

On Monday, April 22nd the Museum invites you to join us for an Open House... 4 to 5:30 p.m. in the main floor gallery. Representatives from the Métis Nation of Ontario will be visiting the display.



Photo courtesy of the
Fort Frances Times.

ISABELLA MAINVILLE ROSS (1807-1885) - *from information provided by descendant, Fern Perkins*

The very early years of Isabella Mainville are not clearly defined. We know that she was probably born in 1807, on Michillimackinac Island, part of the trade route that her parents, Joseph and Josette Mainville, travelled regularly. Oral family history says Joseph Mainville also had Spanish blood from the time of the Spanish explorations and intermarriage with Native women. That may be why Isabella's second name is given as Merillia.

When Isabella was twelve years of age, she had already lived through the War of 1812, and was accustomed to the harsh life of a Hudson's Bay Company engagé. She was approaching the age of marriage when she travelled with her parents to Lac La Pluie. Here she met Charles George Ross, a young clerk from Inverness, posted to Lac La Pluie in 1819.

Charles, with his heritage, education and wages of 30 pounds a year, was a socially and economically beneficial choice for a husband. He would have viewed Isabella as a resilient and skilled helpmate with valuable knowledge of her rugged homeland. This was the type of marriage union that the Hudson's Bay Company encouraged amongst their employees.

The record shows that they were married in 1822, à la façon du pays (after the custom of the country), which combined both Native and European marriage customs. Isabella was 15 and Charles 28.

Isabella was likely married in the traditional Ojibwa wedding regalia that Josette, skilled at beading and quillwork, would have made for her. Charles in later years commented that she may not shine at the head of a nobleman's table, "but she suits the sphere she has to move in much better than any such toy — in short, she is a native of the country and as to beauty, quite as comely as her husband!"

This indicates that Isabella possessed practical skills essential to the survival of their difficult lifestyle. Unlike Governor Simpson, Charles was loyal to Isabella until his death. It was a good union for that time in history, one of 'the many tender ties' spoken of by historian, Sylvia Van Kirk.

Charles was reported as 'a steady, correct young man, tolerable clerk and trader' with 'an excellent education'. Governor Simpson described him as 'a good classical scholar and a man of very correct conduct'. He did not have robust health, however, but was to be troubled by scurvy and flu throughout [his life](#).

Isabella also made it into the immortal pages of Simpson's journal in later years. He writes:

"Talking of wives, the wife of Mr. Ross, of this fort, a Saulteau half-breed from Lac La Pluie, lately displayed great courage. Some Indians, while trading in her husband's absence, with her son in the shop of the establishment, drew their knives upon the boy. On hearing this, the lady, pike in hand, chased the cowardly rascals from post to pillar, till she drove them out of the fort."



On June 1 of 1822, Charles was assigned to Thompson River. It appears that Isabella stayed in the Lac la Pluie area, possibly with her family while their first child, John, was a baby. She did not have any more children until 1827, and it would be uncommon for 4 years to pass without the birth of more children, unless there was a separation between husband and wife. The employee records say Charles was at Fort Alexander until May 31st of 1824 and that he was now making 75 pounds a year.

Isabella must have been wondering at the age of 17, while caring for a toddler, if she had been deserted for another woman. It was common enough for wives to be abandoned when fur-trade employees moved on.

Both Charles and Isabella were raised in the Christian faith, she Catholic and he Presbyterian. They had the older two children baptized by the HBC chaplain at the Red River settlement.

Isabella Mainville Ross did not return to Lac La Pluie. Charles was relocated to Fort McLoughlin. In 1843 he built Fort Victoria where he remained in charge until his death. Isabella bought 99 acres of waterfront farmland, and thus became the first woman registered as a land owner in BC. She died in 1885 and was buried within site of her old home near the bay that bears her name in Ross Bay Cemetery.

The remarkable Mainville girl from Lac la Pluie made it into the history books and remains a role [model for young women today](#).

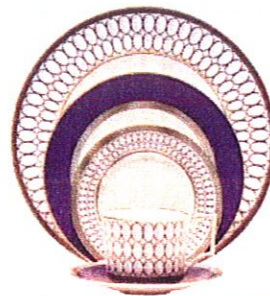
Coming up... *Bone China: Gone with the hope chest?*

This exhibit will tell the story of bone china: the reasons for collecting special-occasion table-settings, figurines and heritage plates; the establishments along Scott Street that once built their businesses around the sale of exquisite patterns; and the traditions surrounding the hope chest.

I hesitate to admit to receiving several tea cups and matching saucers from my grandmother for my hope chest — that practice where young girls collect tableware and linens in the hopes of some day marrying. Clearly I'm dating myself. I will quickly add that I was the only one of five sisters that received such items as even then the tradition was dying out.

Young women today not only may not aspire to marriage, but they no longer see the relevance of keeping anything that cannot be used for every day. Very practical, of course.

Still, although I never had a hope chest, nor ever truly valued the reasons for needing one, there is a part of me now that wonders if we've lost something. I remember special occasions — Christmas and that important anniversary — when the table was set with crisply starched, hand-embroidered linen, Mom's best china, sparkling crystal glassware and silver that was handed down from mother to daughter... so very classy! We kids knew to be on our very best behaviour, that's for sure!



Wedgwood
on the left

Royal Albert
below



Limoges above

Irish Belleek
on the right



For the exhibit, we intend to display one or two complete collections of china, in addition to as many place settings as we can borrow that will indicate the varieties out there. Royal Albert, Wedgwood, Irish Belleek, Limoges and many others... there were probably thousands of manufacturers of fine china world-wide and many produced more than one pattern.

We are also planning to serve tea and scones to coincide with Market Thursdays. For this we need tea cups and saucers, dessert plates, and cream and sugar sets. These can't be too precious, as there is a possibility of breakage. Fortunately, (*or perhaps unfortunately!*) there are an abundance of these in the community. It would seem our children have no wish to inherit our trinkets.

Keep us in mind as summer approaches. If you are out and about on Market Thursdays, check out the wares in front of the Museum and stop in to see the exhibit. Tea and scones will be served upstairs while quantities last. Remember that both floors are handicapped-accessible from the rear entrance.

And as for those few pangs of nostalgia that I experience occasionally... well, they are quickly followed by memories of carefully starching and ironing linen, polishing silver, and of long hours washing up afterwards.

Yes, my dear daughter, you are right... simpler is *way* better.



Royal Doulton
Figurines:

First Love above



Bunnykins
on the left



Museum Intern

This spring, the Museum has been very fortunate to have the services of **Samantha Manty**, a Community Recreation Leadership student from Dawson College out of Montreal. Born and raised in Fort Frances, Samantha chose to return to her community to complete her internship.

Samantha arrived in a burst of energy that never seems to burn out.

On her second day on the job, she brought the Museum into the modern age with a Facebook page that she updates regularly with museum events and Fort Frances trivia.

Popular with those who are media-savvy, it has opened up a new market for us; the number of museum 'likes' grows daily.

She tackled the snow sculpture project — doomed to be shelved for lack of support — and with the help of family and friends, re-branded it and made it a rousing success. Young families enjoyed a day of winter activities while checking out the snow sculptures.

In conjunction with Earth Day, she has organized a clothing swap — like new clothing and accessories — for Wed Apr 24th, 5-8 p.m.

She continues to work on our Borderland Walking Tour project. Details are on the following page.

This young woman not only believes in the community, she actively participates. Since arriving, she has volunteered her time putting together Healthy Living food box orders at the Métis hall, spent an afternoon at Rainy Crest and helps out Ben at the coffee shop, *'From the Grind Up'*.

Sam has also been an active participant in the brainstorming meetings held jointly by the BIA and Chamber of Commerce and, in support of community services, attended a council meeting.

I hope her experience with us has been as beneficial for her as it has been for the Museum, though I cannot imagine how. She leaves us in one short week and I shall be very sad to see her go. Her fresh approach, her willingness to get involved, her positive attitude and level of energy have been fantastic. Thank you, Sam. You will be missed.

Funding Support

Last summer, the Museum applied for funding to transfer our old database to new software and to assist with digitizing our 100-year-old newspaper collection. Our old database is unsearchable, so virtually useless as an aid. We must look for items manually — not very productive when wondering what to include in an exhibit. Our newspapers are also problematic. As they age, they becoming increasingly brittle and can no longer be handled — so no longer available to us for research.

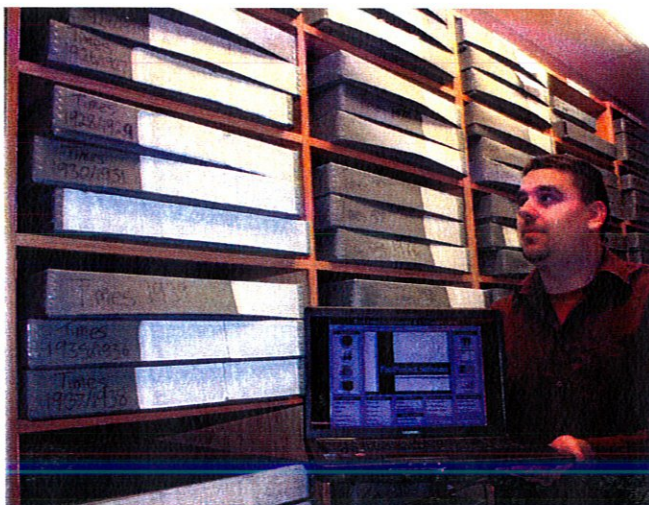
I am *very* pleased then to announce that, with the support of the Government of Ontario through the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, the Museum has been approved for funding to address these issues.

Jeremy Hughes has become a familiar face at the library for those in need of computer training or support. Although library staff and patrons were saddened to see his contract coming to a close, their loss has become our gain! ☺

Jeremy started at the Museum in mid-March and will continue through to the end of the year. He began the project by assessing the museum's functionality and becoming familiar with the new software. It turns out we have two old databases, neither one complete. He is now working at eliminating duplications and reducing inconsistencies between entries.

Welcome Jeremy!

Photos of Jeremy and Samantha —
courtesy of the Fort Frances Times.



Borderland Walking Tour

As promoted in the media, the Museum is currently working on a project that will allow visitors and residents to step into the past with the help of QR codes.

The plan unfolded like this...

Leading up to the Town's centennial year, the business district, with the help of the Museum and the mill, printed tabloid-sized photos of what businesses once looked like. As it happened, I was the person at the mill who scanned the photos and printed them out on the environmental department's plotter. I remember well that when each picture came off the printer, a large audience would gather round to see. People who had lived here most of their lives were fascinated by what the Town once looked like. Since then, I've often thought about how we could tap into that interest for a look at the past.

To that end, I discussed the possibility of using QR codes (Quick Response) with Jeremy Hughes — someone with a little more media knowledge than I can muster. Turns out, QR codes are free, can be downloaded easily and then used wherever needed. We discussed posting them inside a window, or on the outside of a building. By using a smart-phone, the QR image could link back to the Museum website where information and photographs about the establishment can be accessed. This could include old photos, historical facts, prior uses for the building and briefly what the business sells today.

The discussion gave us both something to think about, and we left the conversation there.

A couple of weeks later, Samantha and Jeremy came up with the idea of a borderland walking tour.



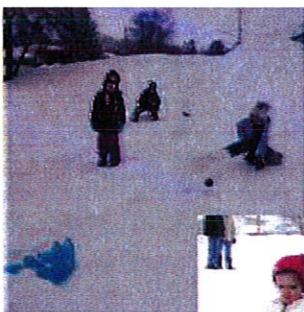
After much discussion, we've decided to start small and keep it simple. Initially the QR codes and a recognizable symbol for the walking tour will be printed on paper that can be laminated. As staffing at

the Museum is limited, we do need help from the public with the information-gathering stage. Businesses will fill out questionnaires regarding their establishments, providing as much information and as many photos as possible to get us started. We will add what we have at the museum and upload the information and photos to our website.

Once we see how popular the tour is, we can add other historical sites around town... the site of the Hudson's Bay Company post (mill office), the old MacKenzie hospital, LaVerendrye hospital, old churches, schools that have been torn down but not forgotten, Shevlin yard... the possibilities are endless. We could advertise the loops as Fort Frances Downtown, Fort Frances West, or Fort Frances River-Side. We could even extend the tour to the American side, should they wish to come on board.

Tourists will have another reason to stop here, and while out and about, take time to shop or grab a bite to eat. Our residents can be tour guides for visiting families and friends — something to do in the way of entertainment that allows us to boast about our picturesque community and its historic past.

Eventually paper copies of codes can be replaced by more permanent plaques that can be attached on the exterior of buildings, a fence post or embedded in the sidewalk. Information about an old home could be accessed from a distance, allowing owners to preserve their privacy.



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