

The Story of Joseph LaForge

Source: Anthony Fulkerson
Family Tree

Joseph LaForge and his father, Louis LaForge, about the year 1809, started the first civilized and permanent habitation along the St. Clair River, in the township of Sarnia, as the Canadian side of the St. Clair River was settled before the American side, except in the region about Marine City.

They were both employees of a fur trading company @ Detroit, Sandwich and @ Upper Lake Posts and had learned Indian dialects. They chose the site of present day Sarnia because of the swamps and marshes swarming with wild animals and the tribe of Indians in the vicinity were partly Christianized and friendly as well.

Louis soon returned to Detroit and Joseph and sometimes his brothers set about trapping, hunting and trading with the Indians. They did their business with the trading vessels when they passed by, but, these were often far between they became accustomed to taking their products to Detroit just as the Indians had been doing, for many years before.

Shortly after the beginning of the conflict of 1812 – 1814 between The British and the Americans, a certain half-breed from the Detroit area, whose name was Mai-Kone, or Little Bear, was sent as an envoy to the Indians of the Sarnia area. He was instructed to make an attempt to draw the allegiance of the Lambton Red-men from the British and induce them to go to Detroit and join General Hull. Following vain efforts, Mai-Kone was starting off from the Sarnia tribe still wearing war paint, feather and carrying a bowie knife, when he was pursued by the loyal braves, overtaken at the famous sandbank, near the present day Grand trunk Elevators and killed there after a desperate struggle. Joseph LaForge and the other French settlers, taking alarm, made good their escape.

Joseph LaForge returned following the war in 1814 but this time he brought his family with him. His family had remained in Detroit during the war and had witnessed the surrender of Detroit by General Hull and also the Massacre of Bloody Run. Joseph LaForge's family had stayed in Sandwich and Detroit before the war during his stay in Sarnia, and it was in the neighborhood of Detroit that his eldest son, Francis LaForge was born in 1810.

Shortly after the return of Joseph LaForge, he brought to Sarnia his father-in-law, Mr. Pare Cosson and his family. Mr. Pare Cosson was an employee of the government for thirty years, as a mail delivery person from Kingston to York and also between Detroit, Sandwich, Chatam and Malden.

London Ontario was as of yet an unbroken wilderness. Following his long state service Pare was given a tract of land, which he selected himself, with the advice of his son-in-law, Joseph LaForge, on the St. Clair River where now stands the Village of Froomfield. The arrival of Pare was the start of an influx of French Settlers. There was no one settled yet on the Port Huron side. After awhile the Brandemores settled there, but soon moved to the Sarnia side and built a house where later the shipyard was built. The Indians were friendly and the fur, timber and other trades that sprung up were profitable. It is said these French Settlers use to carry little bags of gold.

Some of their experiences in those times were interesting. Joseph LaForge had always cultivated great friendship with the Indians, and he and his family were well versed in the Indian language, manners and customs. The Chief Oketitchick always held the French settlers in high regard, especially, LaForge, with whom he dealt with for so long.

It would seem, however, the some of the savage nature had not left some of the Indians yet. Louis LaForge, a son of Joseph LaForge, now living in the parish, was born in 1825, was witness to most of the things related in this narrative since he grew to boyhood. He tells of many things he heard from his father, of events before that. He recounts that one day, when a boy, he was in the wigwam of one of the Indians, when the squaw suggested to her lazy son that he should kill the young Frenchman to eat as they were short of food at that season of the year.

Louis, understanding her change of patois, although she was unaware of this, started for home with the Indian after him, fleet of foot, the savage was still fleet, and overtaking him as he was pressing through an opening in the palisade surrounding his father's garden, struck him in the side with a tomahawk.

The yells of the frightened lad as he ran with the Indian at his heels, brought the father to the scene in time to save him from the excited savage. The father, taking the wounded boy with him, went to the cabin of the Chief and made a complaint.

The indignant Chief, springing to his feet, tore off his upper garment, and snatching up a handful of hot coals, plunged them into a bucket of water, rubbed them between his hands, and after besmearing his face with this hastily prepared mixture, drew the palms of his hands across his breast in the form of an "X" making a large black sign on the bare breast from the shoulders down. This meant 'Death'.

Rushing from the cabin with a terrible War-whoop he headed for the wigwam of the would-be murderer and cannibal, calling his tribesmen about him as he went.

The culprit was seized and would soon have suffered the extreme penalty had not LaForge interfered. Yielding to the Frenchman's entreaties to spare the mans life, the Chief had the savage bound to the scourging post, which was always ready, and each warrior gave him so many lashes with the hickory rods and a warning was given that his next offence should mean death.

There is no existing account of any trouble having arisen between the Indians and the white men which resulted in the killing of anyone in these parts.

By 1827 many French had been settling along the St. Clair since the War of 1812. The following names of the earliest settlers are on record : LaForge, Pare, Pellette and Japineau were located between Corunna and Froomfield. Campeau, Bay, Brandemore, Freshet, Belrose, Cyre, Barstow, Gallineau, Mordica, Runalls, and Hurling were all about Mooretown. English names also appear : Courtney, Henderson, Davis and Burk. These are in the recorded list for 1826 for the Township of Moore . All were on the river front. As there were none in the interior.

Mooretown was laid out in village lots, as it is now, and received almost all of the earliest settlers, but, Courtright & Brigden were just farms and woods until the coming of the Canadian Southern Railway, now called Michigan Central, in 1870.

Following Father Crevier came his curate, Father Fluet, in 1829. These priests, like many before them and many after, celebrated Mass and administered the Sacraments in the house of Joseph LaForge at Froomfield and Later on in the house of Louis Gallarneau, who had come from Fort Malden, now Amherstburg, to Mooretown, and settled on land given to him for service to the British Crown.

Before Father Crevier arrived, Corunna had been surveyed, a town plan plotted, and the future community given a name. Sir Charles Beresford, the head of the surveying party, had served as an officer with Sir John Moore when the latter was "buried darkly at dead of night" on the bloodstained field of Corunna in Spain. Beresford gave the General's name to this township of Moore, the name of the besieged city, Corunna, to the village, which he expected one day to be a great place on account of its beauty and location, and his own name, Beresford, to the river-front street.

The Indians were used to moving their wigwams back into the interior of the country every winter as it was warmer and the hunting was better in the thick of the forest and in summer returning to the river. The priest with some of the whites often went to them in the forest, celebrating Mass, and administered to the Red-men.

Louis LaForge says he made many a trip with the priests in this way, and sometimes accompanied them on visits to the whites settled in Warwick, Plympton and Enniskillen.

The Rev. Father J.B.Morin of Sandwich who had been stationed at St. Peter's at Raleigh-on-the-Thames since 1819, but who was for awhile in the meantime pastor at Sandwich, took charge of the St. Clair Missions after Father Crevier left Sandwich in 1831. About the year 1841 he held a great mission at the house of Joseph LaForge at Froomfield, which was attended by four priests and the Catholics of all of the surrounding townships. Father JB Proulx with another priest came from Manitoulin Island to assist. They were accompanied by numerous canoe-loads of Indians, a priest from Sandwich and Father Morin.

A large platform was erected in LaForge's garden, a roof built over the Alter, and there the mission was held. It lasted four or five days. Louis LaForge, our informant, then 15 or 16 years of age, had the job of waiting on the priests and serving mass. It was an event of great importance at that time. A place was set apart for the Indians, who attended in large numbers.

In 1847 Father Morin, partly assisted by Father Runnell and partly by Father Pedrupe, commenced to build the first church above Mooretown, which was finished in 1843, and dedicated by Bishop Powers the same year. A cemetery had been established there in 1838, and many had been buried in it from Sarnia, from along the river, and

from the adjoining townships, as it was perhaps the first Catholic cemetery established in Lambton County.

