

The Story of Joseph Lewis

Diversity is Alberta's strength.



IN 1799 JOSEPH LEWIS, A HUDSON'S BAY Company employee, arrived in what is now Alberta. He was 27 years old but his life had already been crammed with adventure.

Born in 1772 in Manchester, New Hampshire, at 20 he'd made his way to Montreal, where he joined the North West Company. He was a Nor'wester for four years before he jumped ship—or canoe—and went to work for the HBC. He signed a three-year contract as a “steersman” at a salary of £20 a year. Lewis paddled and portaged his way west for three years, until he arrived here, at the tail end of the 18th century, to help Peter Fidler found Greenwich House, a trading post near Lac La Biche.

One other thing about Joseph Lewis? He was black.

Oh, I know. When you picture voyageurs, you probably don't imagine them as Afro-Canadian. And I don't blame you. After all, our textbooks, our miniseries, our novels, our

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heritage parks, don't tell the stories of black fur traders in the Canadian West. But they were here nonetheless. They've just been erased from our cultural narratives.

I think it's worth asking why—especially in this age of Wexit, when Trump Lite wannabes and would-be separatists are trying to rewrite Alberta's past, the better to advocate for their wizened vision of our future.

We have forgotten, or neglected to learn, so much of the

real history of this place: of the Indigenous peoples who were here first; of the early fur trade; of the Metis Nation that was born of the blending of European and First Nations cultures. We've forgotten that the NWC and the HBC attracted adventurers from all over, young men of energy and ambition, who could seek fortune and fame here, even if they came from working-class backgrounds back home, wherever home was.

We've forgotten, or never knew, that those early western fur posts were multicultural, multilingual places, where English, French, Michif, Gaelic, Orcadian, German, Norwegian and other tongues mixed and mingled, spoken alongside many Indigenous languages from Cree to Blackfoot to Iroquois.

This territory was never a homogeneous, ethnically “pure” place—that's the nativist nonsense of malignant fantasy. Our diversity has always been our strength, even when we didn't realize, much less celebrate, it.

Records being scarce, we don't know whether Lewis was an escaped slave or a free man looking for a better life. But why should we be surprised that he headed for the western frontier, where he might hope to be judged by his abilities, not his race?

I first learned Lewis's story two years ago when writing a column for the *Edmonton Journal*. I'd been inspired, or rather goaded, by a debate I'd had with a history professor. Fort Edmonton Park, I'd suggested, could do a better job of teaching about diversity. She'd insisted that would be ridiculous because, as she put it, “There were no black people at Fort Edmonton.”

I had no idea if she was right, but her attitude annoyed me so much I determined to find out. With the help of poet and professor Bertrand Bickersteth, who was researching Alberta's lost black history, I determined that Lewis had indeed been at Fort Edmonton—or Edmonton House, as it was then known.

In the summer of 1810 he joined Joseph Howse's expedition across the Rockies to the Columbia River. (By then, his pay had risen to £30 a year.) He was a free man, though slavery in the British Empire wouldn't be abolished for another 30 years.

History records that a few other black men come to Rupert's Land. Stephen Bonga, a fur trader and interpreter who took part in the Bow River expedition in 1822, was the grandson of Michigan slaves. Glasgow Crawford, another black HBC employee, spoke English, French and Iroquois, and worked as a cook and “middleman” at Fort Chipewyan from 1818 to 1821.

But Lewis may have left the most lasting Canadian legacy. He married a local Indigenous woman, whose name we no longer know. They had two daughters and a son, who later moved to join Red River colony to become a part of the Metis Nation.

This column is called “On Second Thought”—an allusion to the fact I'm now a Senator, sitting in what's sometimes called the Chamber of Sober Second Thought. But second thought is useful outside of the Senate too. With Black History Month here again, retelling Lewis's story seems politically urgent.

Don't be fooled by what you read on protest placards and in the dark corners of Twitter. Albertans aren't defined by skin colour or ethnic identity. What makes us Albertan is our shared belief that this is a place of opportunity, freedom and fresh beginnings, a place where courage, skill and hard work are valued, and where people are encouraged, indeed invited, to start life over again. We need to learn about Albertans like Joseph Lewis, not just to understand our history but to navigate our future. Especially as we steer into troubled waters ahead. ■

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