

CASS COUNTY, MICHIGAN PROFILES
PRESERVING LOCAL HISTORY
WITH PEOPLE, EVENTS & PLACES
By Jeannie Watson

JOHN-PIERRE RUSH

FRENCH FUR TRADER

John-Pierre Rush (born 1787) was a French Quebec, Canadian of French ancestry, who settled, first in Van Buren Township, then in Howard Township, Cass County, Michigan around 1837. His family was part of the Great Lakes French, English and American Fur Trade for four consecutive generations. Tales of his life and family's heritage, provide an insight into the part that Cass, Berrien and Van Buren County, Michigan played in Great Lakes' fur commerce. We tend to think that the overall fur trade ended before white pioneers settled in western lower Michigan, which is not the case; it was a slow collapse over a long period of time, with periods of equilibrium. Some local early French settlers were progeny of French Fur Traders, who acted as traveling barterers and intermediary between the Indians and French (then later the English and Americans). John's family history and genealogy lend new meaning to the struggle and competition, that once existed for the vast wealth of Great Lakes fur, and made men rich beyond their wildest dreams.

The Rush family left historic "footprints" of their existence in a number of records, places, and lineages. On the 1840 Howard Township U.S. Census, John Rush is listed as having seven family members. The 1850 Census gave John's age as 63 years, wife Catherine as age 50, son William as age 20 years, and daughter Mary as age 14 years. Rush Lake in Hartford and Bangor Township, Van Buren County, Michigan was named after this Rush family. The Rushes married into the Williams family, and a number of Cass, Berrien and Van Buren County descendents exist today.

The Michigan Rush bloodline originated in La Rochelle, France. They then migrated to Arras, France. When the French King Louis XVI was recruiting more men to send to North America to support his lucrative well established fur trade, with the Native American Indians in "New France" (parts of Canada and the United States), the Rush men migrated to North America. The family surname was originally spelled "La Rochelle," and was gradually Americanized, going from La Roche, to La Ruch, to La Rush, and then Rush. These men were adventurers, unconventional, and risk takers. The four generations of Rush French fur traders were Phillippe La Roche (wife Nicollett Callone), John-Maurice La Ruch (spouse Juliana Francois), John-Pierre La Rush (wed Catherine Lisette Loubet, French/Irish) and William Montgomery Rush (married Loraine Sarraut). John-Pierre, William M., their wives and families finally settled in Cass County.

A basic understanding of the Great Lakes Fur Trade is essential to comprehend John Pierre Rush. The Spanish were the first to explore North America. When the French and English observed the wealth of resources available in the "New World," and European demand for fur products skyrocketed, they began their own exploratory trips in the 1600s. The French, however, used a different strategy than their counterparts. The Indians were a challenge, and extremely dangerous, if riled. Instead of the military approach of the English and Spanish, the French King, in the beginning, sent missionaries (Jesuit Priests), and single young men who were encouraged to intermarry with the local Indian populations. Marriage in old European aristocratic families was

used to form political, military, and financial alliances, and King Louis used the same strategy here. He, also, created French Fur Trading Companies to set up Great Lakes trade routes, establish outposts, and form bartering agreements with Indian tribes. The statement, "no man is an island, no man stands alone," truly applies here, because the untouched wilds of Cass, Berrien and Van Buren County were impacted by powerful economic French forces that were based on the north eastern shores of North America, and French Quebec. The St Lawrence River, and the Great Lakes, was a corridor leading to Michigan, the interior of the Great Lakes Region, and the Mississippi River.

From about 1652 to 1850, a series of fur trade water and land routes were maintained by use of large birch bark canoes. The entire Great Lakes economy of this era "revolved around fur in the way that today's economy revolves around oil." Beaver and raccoon skins, so popular in Europe, became the commodity of universal trade, exchanged as easily as we use money today. The Indians allied with the French so readily, because "they were family though marriage and children," provided goods unattainable anywhere else, and Jesuit priests connected religious beliefs with loyalty to the French King.

John Rush's grandfather, Phillippe La Rush, and those like him, were the traveling barterers and intermediaries who, in those large birch bark canoes, paddled the waterways of the Great Lakes Region, after the French Fort St. Joseph (Niles, Michigan) and Fort Miami (St Joseph, Michigan) were built. French soldiers were present to defend the French traders and trappers against the British, Spanish, and hostile Indians. Their biggest threats came from the British, as northern inland Spanish involvement was minor. Where water routes ended, they followed Indian Trails inland, "ferrying" trade goods on their own backs or those of hired Indians. The first goods traded for beaver furs were flints (to start fires), metal knives, guns, shot pellets, gun powder, hatchets (tomahawks) whiskey, pots, pans, kettles, blankets, salt, trinkets, porcelain beads, and rope. For almost two hundred years fur clothing was the rage in Europe, and all levels of the French fur trade prospered. "Thousands of pounds of pelts" would be brought to central trading posts, transported by birch bark canoe, and then taken to Europe by French ships. "The fur trade was so profitable," the British and Spanish competed with the French, and fought wars to gain control of this valuable resource.

French Fur Traders and Trappers dressed in fringed buckskins because this was the sturdy clothing of the first Native Americans they encountered on the Atlantic Coast. The Mi'kmaq Native American Indians lived in Maine, Newfoundland, Quebec, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick. Their buck skins and moccasins were durable, water repellent, and protected the skin when pushing through underbrush, so the French adopted their mode of dress. There was a joke shared among the early French settlers in Cass and Berrien County. Many of this region's first French settlers were descendants of Canadian Frenchmen who had been fur traders that had intermarried with Mi'kmaq women. The joke was that Cass and Berrien County had been invaded by the Mi'kmaq and did not even know it. The gene pool of Southwestern Michigan is quite diverse.

The fur trade preyed upon a wide variety of Great Lakes fur bearing animals. Beaver, raccoon, mink, muskrat, weasels, bears, deer, wolves, foxes, squirrels, seals, moose, wolverines, rabbits, musk-rats, otter and opossum were slaughtered. With profit their number one motive, neither the white man or the Indian stopped to consider species survival. The concepts of conservation, "animal rights," or the "consequences of the wholesale slaughter of innocent animals" was never considered. "Skins were brought to trading posts in raw condition." Squaws (Native American women) "were hired to scrape off the excess fat and flesh" from pelts. The skins were then dried, secured in 90 pound bundles by wooden presses, and tied off. "Some original Great Lakes fur bearing animal species were almost wiped out," or became extinct in some areas. This was a period in history, when natural resources were viewed as unending commodities, and conservation was a foreign concept.

In 1754, the French and Indian War started, and Phillippe La Rush (John-Pierre's grandfather) headed east to help fight the British. His family never heard from him again. The only indication that he even made it east was a family genealogy note that said he died in southeastern Canada. The French lost the war in 1762. At the treaty of Paris in 1763, France abandoned all rights to land in North America. From a Southwestern Michigan point of view, this was a turning point for the Native Americans and the Great Lakes fur traders. The British dealt with these factions much more harshly, than did the more humanitarian French. At one point, to escape Canadian and Great Lakes British treachery and tariffs, John-Maurice La Rush (John-Pierre's father) went to Virginia with his wife, where their son was born. Eventually, after the Revolutionary War was won by the Americans in 1776, John-Maurice and his family returned to his previous fur trading activities traveling between Canada and Southwestern Michigan. Reaping healthy profits was hardly difficult in the wilds for those who knew the territory well.

John-Pierre Rush, like his father, John-Maurice La Rush, worked for the "North West Company," which was a fur trading business that was located in Montreal. By 1800, it had 117 trading posts scattered throughout the Great Lakes Region, and was active from 1779-1821. A small segregated French community, and fur collection outpost was located on the shores of Lake Erie, in Erie Co., Pennsylvania. It was the home base of the Rush family, before they migrated to Southwestern Michigan.

Bitter rivalries between the various fur trading enterprises, started "fur company wars." Both Canada and Michigan, like other areas, were subject to unpleasantness as the fur trading businesses tried to convince Indian suppliers to only do business with them. Bribes were used, mercenaries ambushed rivals stealing their furs, and threats of death hung over the heads of many Indian Tribes. Cass and Berrien Counties were spared most of the intimidation, threats, and violence because the region was the end of a trade route. However, once Cass and Berrien furs were in canoes heading north, much blood was shed. John-Pierre's parents were killed in one such skirmish.

By 1803, the Lewis and Clark expedition was on a quest to find the mythical North West Passage, across Canada, in hopes of establishing an all-water trade route to the Pacific Ocean. In 1815, when the War of 1812 ended, "the United States forbid any foreign traders to operate in American territory (especially the French and British). This put an end to Canadian based fur companies trading with Southwestern Michigan Indians, and most of the company's 117 Great Lakes trading posts were shut down. However, this did not stop individual fur traders from slipping quietly into areas to do business, with settlers and the few remaining Native American Indians.

As more and more settlers came into Cass, Berrien and Van Buren County, the population of fur bearing animals decreased rapidly. Beaver fur hats fell out of fashion in Europe, and over the next 35 years "the fur trade slowly collapsed." Seeing the end coming to his livelihood, confident that his accumulated wealth would keep his family comfortable in the coming years, John-Pierre Rush settled on the shores of a secluded lake in Van Buren County, Michigan in 1831. Rush Lake, today, bears the Rush family name. John moved to Howard Township, Cass County, Michigan around 1837, at age 53 years. Eventually, William Montgomery Rush, John's son, would join his father in Howard Township. By 1855, John was 67 years old, and missing the "wide open unoccupied spaces" of the Great Lakes Region "that once had been."

Viewed from the French's point of view, three basic exploration and colonized periods existed in Southwestern Michigan, which may clarify the Rush family's involvement. First, the FRENCH ERA (1621-1700), was when they built Fort Miami (1679) on the Miami River (which is now the St. Joseph River) on the shore of Lake Michigan, and constructed Fort St. Joseph (1691) on the same river in Niles, Michigan. French ships crossed the Atlantic Ocean, anchored along what is now

the coast of Canada, Maine and Newfoundland. They funneled a small, but steady, stream of French explorers, military personnel, Jesuit priests, fur traders, civilian colonists, and manufactured goods toward Michigan, and other Great Lakes regions. Phillippe La Rush migrated to North America late in this period. Second, the BRITISH ERA (1763-1796) was a violent period. Even though France ceded her North American lands to Great Britain at the 1763 Treaty of Paris, many Native Americans tribes revolted against British rule, preferring the French. Then when the American Revolution was fought, Michigan was left alone. French speaking civilians retreated to Quebec, Canada until the violence lessened. British troops lingered in the region even after the war, until the America government insisted they be removed. John-Maurice La Rush and his son John-Pierre Rush were still fur traders based in Canada during this 33 year period, but trips to Southwestern Michigan were clandestine. Third, the AMERICAN ERA (1797-1850) was when serious Southwest Michigan scouting trips, surveying and settlement began in earnest. Foreigners were forbidden to trade in American furs, so the Rushes made trading trips to friends in the dead of night. By the late 1820s, it became known that Michigan land was being offered to new immigrants and homesteaders, so John-Pierre migrated to lower Michigan, soon to be followed by his son. (The Spanish are not mentioned here, because their influence on French traders and trappers was virtually nil.)

The Rush family became part of the small remaining French culture in Cass and Berrien County, Michigan. There were five main French communities in the 1800s. These were places where the French language was spoken, French culture prevailed among certain families, and French-Canadian customs were observed. Social interaction and marriages bonded these small French groups together. Those five small communities drew French speaking immigrants, and welcomed new pioneers of French heritage. One was in Niles, Michigan, which had started out as a French Fort, trading post and village, and retained its French heritage. The small French community there centered around the Williams family, who ran a general store, were bilingual, and accommodated French speaking customers. The second was the City of St. Joseph, on the shores of Lake Michigan. It, also, started out as a French Fort, and retained descendents of French civilians and the military. Third was Howard Township in Cass County. The French community there gathered around the Rushes. John-Pierre Rush and son William Rush were that group's spokesmen. Fourth was the City of New Buffalo. A French trading post had been established there, survived through many years of turmoil, and drew French descendents. Fifth was Indian Lake in Silver Creek Township. The Gilbert Family had already integrated into the larger community, but showed sympathy for several French immigrant families and the Indians. Uncle Tommy Gilbert gave them jobs on his farm. These French enclaves quickly integrated into the larger culture and the French influence faded, all becoming part of the "Great American Melting Pot," and multi-ethnic gene pool.

John-Pierre Rush is thought to have died in Howard Township in 1851, and his wife a short time after that date. The graves of early pioneers were marked with wooden crosses, which rotted away. It was not until mail order catalogs, the railroads, and shipping companies reached Cass and Berrien County that permanent gravestone became popular. If relatives did not mark ancestor's graves with tombstones, those internments became unmarked graves. Southwestern Michigan cemeteries have many such burial sites, and most will remain a mystery.

In conclusion, John-Pierre Rush was a Great Lakes Canadian French Fur Trader, who lived in Quebec, Canada, Pennsylvania, Van Buren County, and Cass County, Michigan. Rush Lake in Van Buren Township is named after his family. He worked for the North West Company, prospered handsomely from animal pelt commerce, and traveled water routes in birch bark canoes. He was an intermediary between the French, Canadians, Americans, Indians, and settlers who bartered manufactured products for furs. John lived to see the French and Canadian Fur Trade dwindle to a meager trickle of what it had once been, and then disappear. He was the last of his kind.

RESEARCH

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