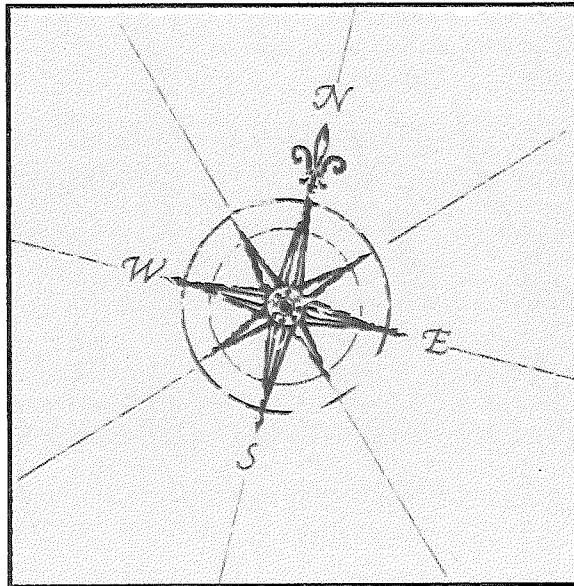


# PIG'S EYE AND ME

by

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Well, it all started so innocently, you can hardly believe how it morphed into my all-consuming passion. Actually, I was never really interested in genealogy or family history. I knew my uncle, Earl Belisle, had done the basic research on the family lines of BELISLE, DUFRESNE, and PARENT, but I didn't really care about it. Who would want to study a bunch of dead people???

And then Uncle Austin died. He was run over by his tractor in his pole barn in 1997. I had been keeping a few simple records of baptisms, marriages and deaths, just so I could write Christmas cards and address the proper people. So I took out the BELISLE family history book of Earl's and wrote "Austin died January 22, 1997 at Range, Wisconsin." I saw a family group sheet there and noticed that Austin (and Earl's) grandmother was Marie Louise Parent, born in Detroit, Michigan. Again, I was not all that interested in it, because I figured that she had to come from somewhere.

But then, someone had written above the surname Parent "**aka Parant.**" And I jumped out of my chair. Just jumped. I still remember it like it was yesterday. Parant. Pig's Eye. The founder of St. Paul. With one eye. Who brewed and sold whiskey down in some cave. Who could possibly live in a cave this far north? Parent is really Parant, just Anglicized.

And then the \$64,000 question: Is Pig's Eye my cousin? Was he a relative of my great-grandmother Marie Louise Parent? How many people named Parent could have been living around here 200 years ago? And thus began my journey into the new, exciting, elusive, and treacherous waters of family history.

Because I had taught in St. Paul for 20 years, I knew the city quite well. I became "hooked," as they say, to find out all I could about Pig's Eye, whose real name was Pierre Parant. How hard could it be to find out who his parents were? Maybe it would just take a couple of visits up to the Minnesota History Center. It couldn't be such a big deal. Just a lark.

That's how it all started...the slippery slope I fell down that became the major focus of my life.

I started going to the Minnesota History Center and found several territorial, state, and federal censuses. Then I ordered some fur trade records from St. Louis. And I found there were more fur trade records in Montréal, Thunder Bay and Winnipeg. Then I found repositories of baptisms, marriages, and deaths in Québec and on-line. I joined the Canadian Branch Group of the Minnesota Genealogy Society and the St. Croix Valley Genealogy Society. I started hanging out with people who had vast knowledge of ancestors. I started traveling to fur-trading posts and libraries. I learned how to work with birch bark from tribal elders at the Mille Lacs Ojibwe Museum in Onamia. I became a certified genealogy merit badge counselor for the Boy Scouts. I learned how to make moonshine from a historian at the Stearns County History Museum in St. Cloud. I spent days in obscure archives looking at ancient records and log books wearing white, cotton gloves. I developed the skills to read 200-year-old French and Latin documents, when I never could before. Actually, I kind of changed into a new person due to Pig's Eye.

I learned so much about him. I learned he was born in the late 1700s in the Montréal area of Québec.<sup>1</sup> I found out that he signed on with several fur trade companies starting in 1812 as a

voyageur.<sup>2</sup> The parish where some of his original voyageur contracts were signed and notarized is called Sault-au-Récollet;<sup>3</sup> it is still in existence in Montréal. He spent several winters at outlying fur-trading posts in what are now Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Ontario. He later moved down to the St. Louis area in the 1820s and was working at the Little Sioux River in Iowa in 1829 when he was kicked out of the American Fur Company for stealing "...a considerable amount of property" and desertion.<sup>4</sup>



**Little Sioux River in Western Iowa;  
A tributary of the Missouri River<sup>5</sup>**



**Sault-au-Récollet Church<sup>6</sup>**

It was then that he moved to St. Paul, which was just a territory at the time. He must have come up the Mississippi from St. Louis about 1832. He brewed and sold whiskey from several locations, getting on the nerves of the authorities at St. Peter's Agency, and later, Fort Snelling. His main location for selling whiskey was at Fountain Cave, near what is downtown St. Paul today.<sup>7</sup> He especially irked the Indian Agent, Major Lawrence Taliaferro, who said he was the worst whiskey trader in the area and was prohibited from entering the territory.<sup>8</sup> I believe that Fountain Cave was "party central" to the soldiers, natives, and settlers near Fort Snelling, sending Taliaferro into a major hissy fit.

However, what kind of a man was Lawrence? Was he the fine, honorable, Southern gentleman<sup>9</sup> described in local history? Lawrence brought his slaves up here to the fort and actually married the surgeon Emerson's slave, Dred Scott, to his own slave Harriet.<sup>10</sup> Is the enslavement of people ever morally acceptable? I don't believe it is. It seems especially disgusting to me that he brought his slaves up into this territory, which was free at the time and not part of the South.

Thus the plot thickened. Pig's Eye was a thief who had been kicked out of the fur trade. He often was running from the law, usually due to claim jumping, failure to pay bills, or his whiskey business. But, as far as we know, he was always kind to soldiers and Native people. And he never owned slaves. How slippery is history! How complex and ambiguous!

Although Mr. Taliaferro tried to kick Pig's Eye out of the area for several years, he does show up on the territorial censuses of 1840, 1842, and even 1850. The census taker didn't actually see him in 1850, but he was "...reported to be in the area sometime during the year."<sup>11</sup> Aah! This was getting stranger and stranger. He tried to cover his trail.

And what was his life like? He only had one eye, was under five foot seven, and completely illiterate.<sup>12</sup> How could he possibly survive up here with our brutal winters with swarms of no-

see-ums and black flies the size of quarters in the summers? Did he get enough fresh fruits and vegetables? How did he manage to canoe 1000 water miles in 60 days<sup>13</sup> with at least 30 portages?<sup>14</sup> The whole story just got more and more amazing to me.

And little by little, I would say, I became mesmerized by Pig's Eye. It didn't matter that my research became very difficult—like walking through a mine field because of the old documents and complex family lines. I dreamed at night of campfires, caves, and Indians. I bought a beautiful Hudson's Bay blanket from eBay and decorated my living room with it. I imagined canoes filled with furs, pots, and fabrics. I thought about their rendezvous parties and what fun the voyageurs must have had singing and dancing with the locals. It didn't even seem real, yet all these things were true, and happened not even 200 years ago around here.

Whatever became of Pig's Eye after he was kicked out of St. Paul? No one knows for sure. One legend is that he died right after he left St. Paul "...of his own vices."<sup>15</sup> But that is just a legend. Other scenarios place him near Lake Superior, Sault Ste. Marie, Mackinac, or the Red River Territory near Winnipeg.<sup>16</sup> There were several Parents living in the Red River area at the time, and his friend from St. Paul, "Jolly" Joe Rollette<sup>17</sup> lived in Pembina, so he had local contacts. His whole life was based around rivers; they were his life blood for work and travel.

But by any stretch of the imagination, he lived an amazing life; one of adventure, travel, and new experiences. I don't think he was a bad fellow, even though he was often on the wrong side of the law. He tried to live life as best he could with the hand life dealt him. He certainly had guts and "true grit" to survive all the difficulties involved in being a voyageur such a long time ago. I don't think many people today could survive his lifestyle. We have gotten too soft.

Some of my travels have been for fun; others were strictly for my education. I thought that the Family History Library in Salt Lake City was absolutely top notch, with all the maps, microfilms, and family history books. The Hudson's Bay Archives in Winnipeg are also impressive, and the archivists there are especially helpful. The main repository for Québec is on Viger Avenue in Montréal and it is a sight to behold. An old technical school has been updated for the archives with all new rooms, elevators, and architecture. It is very lovely and the archivists were outstanding. Everywhere I have gone, people have tried to help me with my strange quest. Actually, it isn't all that strange, as I am now involved with people who are just as keen on genealogy as I am.

A few people I have run into thought I was a bimbo. These were mainly people employed by institutions who were looking for an academic historian, which I am not. I already have two bachelor's degrees and two master's degrees. I don't need any more education. I explain to people that I am not completing a dissertation; I am a possible relative!

By far, the most helpful people to me have been **Brent Peterson**,<sup>18</sup> archivist at the Washington County Historical Society, the late **Don Boxmeyer**,<sup>19</sup> Features Editor at the St. Paul Pioneer Press, and **Jean-Charles Parent**,<sup>20</sup> officer of the Parent Family Association of North America. Finally, **Father Robert Parent**, a Catholic priest in Auburn, Maine, has provided me with invaluable information and translation of documents. His knowledge of historical church records

has been of amazing help to me. These four people have bent over backwards for me, providing me with clues, documents, information, maps, and translations regarding my intriguing subject.

Don even told me that I know more about Pig's Eye than any other living person, which, to me, was a great compliment.<sup>21</sup>

So, you ask, what is the bottom line here? Is Pierre my cousin? Well, the truth is, I don't know for sure. He probably is. I am quite sure he is. But not positive. My line (Pierre Parant-Jeanne Badeau) is the largest of the four Catholic lines in North America. And in my data base of every possible Pierre Parant born in Québec from 1777 to 1801 there is only one unaccounted for Pierre. He is from my line and his name is Pierre Michel Parant, born June 5, 1791 and baptized at St. Martin Church in Montréal June 6, 1791.<sup>22</sup> All the other 37 Pierres in my data base are accounted for. I either have their marriage records, baptisms of children, agriculture census forms, or death records. So he is my main focus right now.

To strengthen my case, I looked at his first voyageur record. It states that his home parish is Châteauguay just outside of Montréal. And Pierre Michel's parents were farming in Châteauguay at that time. Pierre Michel also had two brothers who do not appear in any Québec records after their baptisms. They were Louis, born in 1783 and François, born in 1795. I can't find any records for Louis at all, but there is a tantalizing voyageur contract pertaining to a François Parent signed July 24, 1823 to New Market from the parish of Faubourg St. Laurent in Montréal. This is a church that is actually where his possible parents (François-Amable and Marie-Louise Cousineau) were married. It is a perfect fit!

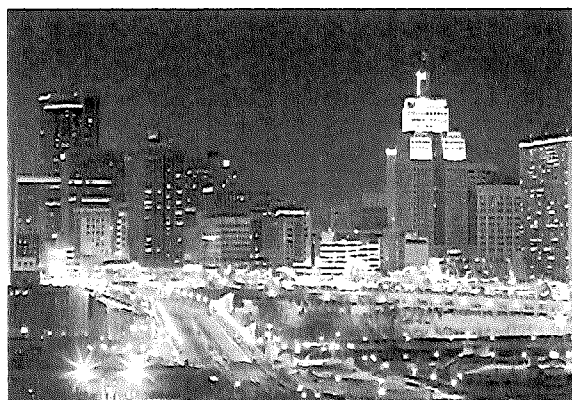
But there is a fly in the ointment. There is a day laborer in Montréal named Pierre Parent who married a Henriette Lauzon/Loison/Hanrio and they had a baby girl named Eleanoire baptized in December of 1816.<sup>23</sup> I cannot find out who this Pierre is. He doesn't "fit" into any of my data. I just haven't found his records yet. I need to find out more about him to determine if he came from Ontario to work in Montréal, who his parents were, or if he is the Pierre Michel from St. Martin. There were a group of Parents in Ontario at the time; they were not French-Canadian at all, but rather French-speaking Belgians called Walloons. Is this day laborer one of these people? Is that why I can't find him? I have gone through every church record in greater Montréal and he is not in any marriage record there, yet the baptism for little Eleanoire clearly indicates that her parents are married. Could the priest possibly have written the baptism wrong and the surname is Perrault or Perron—an error in the record? I don't think so, as little Eleanoire died nine months later, and the surname is Parant in that record too, even though her death record is in another parish.<sup>24</sup> My work has been double-checked by Jean-Charles of the Parent Family Association and he isn't sure about it either. So until I find out who this stray Pierre is, I don't know for sure if Pig's Eye is my cousin.

I will never give up. I will plug away, leaving no stone unturned, until I have either ended my research or died. I will access every possible record, data base, book, archive, web forum, message board, microfilm, and log book humanly possible hoping to find what I need.

I got real sick a few years ago. I sneezed and developed a herniated twisted bowel. The doctors said if I wasn't operated on within 48 hours I would die. All I could think about was my

genealogy. I prayed, “Dear God, don’t let me die without finding out if Pig’s Eye is my cousin.” And I had the surgery and recovered and was given more time to conduct my research.

That’s all anyone can expect of me, I figure. Just give it the best shot I possibly can, and let the chips fall where they may. I think if Pig’s Eye knew how much I respected him he would be proud that his former hovel is now a great American city and that some people still remember him with love.



St. Paul in 2010<sup>25</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> J. Fletcher Williams interview with Vital Guerin, 1866, St. Paul, MN, written notes, box 2. Minnesota Historical Society [MHS] manuscript collection of Williams papers. Vital and Pig’s Eye were life-long friends and Pierre told him he came from Montréal.

<sup>2</sup> 1812, January 8. North West Company. Destination: Michilimackinac, Dependances du Nord Ouest, Fort William, Portage de la Montagne. Hivernant (winterer) and function: mileau, three years in the North West. (McTavish & McGillivray). From Montréal, Châteauguay parish. *Mileau* is a paddler who sat in the middle of the canoe who had little if any experience. From “Vocabulary of the Fur Trade,” *French Canadian Genealogists of Wisconsin Quarterly*, Volume 10, No. 4, Summer, 1996, 23-26.

1813 Montréal, North West Company (ref. F. 4/32, fo. 812).

1814 Destination: Cumberland House, Saskatchewan, North West Company.

1815, August 4. Destination: Michilimackinac, function: Gouvernail, (Berthelot & Rolette), from Sault-au-Récollet. Joseph Desautels, Notary. *Gouvernail* was the position of a steersman who attended the helm. See “Vocabulary of the Fur Trade” reference from 1812.

1816, April 25. Destination: Michilimackinac and Drummond Island (Dominique Rousseau), from Sault-au-Récollet. Joseph Desautels, Notary.

1817, February 22. Destination: Posts Indicated. Hudson's Bay Company. From Sault-au-Récollet, Montréal. Joseph Desautels, Notary.

1818. Destination: Point Meuron, Hivernant. Hudson's Bay Company.

1819. Destination: Norway House. Hudson's Bay Company. (ref. A. 16/54, fo. 363).

1821 Retired from Hudson's Bay Company. (ref. B. 239/g/61). This means he resigned from the Hudson's Bay Company and began working for another company, probably the American Fur Company.

Information from Leah Sander, Archivist of Textual Records, *Hudson's Bay Company Archives*, Winnipeg, Manitoba. Web site is [www.gov.mb.ca/hbca](http://www.gov.mb.ca/hbca). Some records are from the voyageur database of the St. Boniface Historical Society, in St. Boniface, Manitoba. *Les Archives de Contrats de Voyageurs*. Database is in French. Web Site: <http://shsb.mb.ca/>. 1818 reference is from Fort William Historical Park, Thunder Bay, Ontario. See web site: [www.fwhp.ca](http://www.fwhp.ca). Information accessed July 14, 2006. Voyageurs had to be at least 16 years old, and usually 18. Thus, the latest Pierre could have been born was 1796. Other information from a presentation by John Rivard, Voyageur Re-enactor, St. Paul Public Schools, April 2002.

<sup>3</sup> St. Boniface Society as mentioned above.

<sup>4</sup> *American Fur Company ledgers*. Missouri Historical Society (St. Louis, 1997), Book T, page 397.

<sup>5</sup> Little Sioux River picture in Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little\\_Souix\\_River](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Souix_River).

<sup>6</sup> Sault-au-Récollet Church in on-line article at <http://www.montreal-travelguide.com/Little-Italy/Visitation-Church-at-Sault-au-Recollet/>. Photo by François Brault.

<sup>7</sup> Jerry Fearing, *The Story of Minnesota: The State's History in Picture Form* (St. Paul: MHS Press, 1977), 53-54. St. Paul's early historian, J. Fletcher Williams, described Pierre as a "coarse, ill-looking, low-browed fellow with only one eye. He spoke execrable English. His habits were intemperate and licentious." One of his eyes was "blind, marble-hued, crooked, with a sinister white ring glaring around the pupil, giving a kind of piggish expression to his sodden, low features." Described by Ronald M. Hubbs in "Who was 'Pig's Eye' Parrant, Anyway?" *Ramsey County History*, Volume 26, No. 3, fall, 1991, 17-18.

<sup>8</sup> *Journals of Lawrence Taliaferro*. MHS. Journal entries of 23 August, 1835 (p. 173) and 12 October, 1835 (p. 214). Roll 3 microfilm.

<sup>9</sup> "Lawrence Taliaferro Biography," *Hennepin County History*, April 1957, p. 5. Nancy and Robert Goodman, in the book *Joseph R. Brown: Adventurer*, however, described Taliaferro as vain and arrogant (Rochester, MN: Lone Oak Press, 1996), 40.

<sup>10</sup> Dred Scott, a slave, had lived in free territory (Illinois and Fort Snelling) and argued that he was therefore a free man. He filed a law suit to obtain his freedom that reached the U.S. Supreme Court. The Court ruled that no black person could be a citizen. This case was a major cause of the Civil War. Gweneth Swain, *Dred and Harriet Scott: A Family's Struggle for Freedom* (St. Paul: Borealis Books, 2004), 20-86.

<sup>11</sup> 1840 and 1842 *St. Croix County, Wisconsin censuses* (Stillwater: Washington County Historical Society), also, *Minnesota Territorial Census 1850* (St. Paul: MHS).

<sup>12</sup> Voyageurs had to be less than 5' 7" so that they would fit in the canoes. Few of them could swim, as their employers wanted them to respect the water. Also, if they fell in the water for six months of the year, they would be dead. Grace Lee Nute, *The Voyageur* (St. Paul: MHS, 1955), 13; also, Rivard lecture mentioned above. Pig's Eye could not read or write according to his own deposition regarding voting irregularities in 1840 about Alfred Brunson for member of the House of Representatives of the Territory of Wisconsin. Several men voted who were believed to be non-citizens and thus ineligible to vote. Pierre stated that he came to the US about 1820 and paid Judge Doty \$5 at Green Bay in 1836 for naturalization. Pierre could not sign his name so just used an "X." He also stated that he didn't know exactly how old he was. Information from *Minnesota Beginnings: Records of St. Croix County, Wisconsin Territory, 1840-1849* (Stillwater: Washington County Historical Society, 1999), 273.

<sup>13</sup> Vital Guerin memoirs as above. The first thirty-five days were from Montréal to Mackinac.

<sup>14</sup> Barbara Huck, et al., *Exploring Fur Trade Routes of North America* (Winnipeg: Heartland Associates, 2002), 75-97.

<sup>15</sup> Virginia Kunz, *St. Paul: Saga of an American City* (Woodland Hills, CA: Windsor Publications, 1977), 8.

<sup>16</sup> Various sources consulted. J. Fletcher Williams, *A History of the City of St. Paul to 1875* (St. Paul: MHS), 64ff. Paul Lareau's web site: *Pig's Eye's Notepad* at <http://www.lareau.org>. Dick Widme, *George Carl's Great Grandfather: Founder of St. Paul* (Minot, ND: self-published manuscript, 1989). Finally, Bev Mindrum, "Lofty Sentiments Gave City Its Start? Not in a Pig's Eye," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, 7 October, 1979.

<sup>17</sup> Anne Kaplan and Marilyn Ziebarth, *Making Minnesota Territory 1849-1858* (St. Paul: MHS Press, 1999), 27.

<sup>18</sup> His address is Brent Peterson, Executive Director, Washington County Historical Society, P.O. Box 167, Stillwater, MN 55082. Web site is [www.wchsmn.org](http://www.wchsmn.org).

<sup>19</sup> Don Boxmeyer spent his professional life writing about people living in the St. Paul area. He was a columnist for the St. Paul Pioneer Press. He died August 10, 2008 in St. Paul and is buried at Fort Snelling.



<sup>20</sup> Manager of the Parent Family database at the web site: <http://www.afpa.qc.ca/>. His address is Jean-Charles Parent, 764 rue Baillargeon, Chicoutimi, QC G7H 2T5.

<sup>21</sup> Conversation with Don Boxmeyer. August 30, 2004. Hand notes.

<sup>22</sup> Pierre Michel's parents were François-Amable Parent and Marie-Louise Cousineau. They were married February 11, 1782 at St. Laurent in Montréal. François had previously been married to Marie Paymentier dit Lafleur. They had two children and then Marie Paymentier passed away at a young age. François and Marie-Louise had ten children. He was a farmer and they moved south of Montréal (Châteauguay) to farm about 1800. *Programme de recherche en démographie historique [PRDH]*, (Montréal, University of Montréal, 1966). Pay site accessible at [www.genealogie.umontreal.ca](http://www.genealogie.umontreal.ca).

<sup>23</sup> *LDS pilot site*. Accessible for free at <http://pilot.familysearch.org>. Under Québec Catholic Parish Records. Parish is Notre Dame de Montréal. December 22, 1816, p. 419 of microfilm.

<sup>24</sup> Burial record is from Sault-au-Récollet Parish. BMS2000 database. (Rimouski, Québec: 1998). Pay site accessible at <http://www.bms2000.org>.

<sup>25</sup> Photo courtesy of City of St. Paul Official Website. <http://www.ci.stpaul.mn.us/>



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Janell Norman is a retired speech clinician from St. Paul Public Schools. She loves learning about Pig's Eye and also Louis Joliet, her eighth great-grandfather. Her great-great grandmother was an Aboriginal Abitibi native from Québec. She is the niece of Earl Belisle, a well-known French-Canadian family historian.

She is a charter member of the local Optimists Club and works with various Boy Scout troupes. She is also a member of the Minnesota Genealogy Society and the St. Croix Valley Genealogy Society. Her hobbies are playing with her identical twin four-year-old granddaughters, knitting, jazz music, old movies, and walking her black lab, Ollie.