

Was George 'Shaman' Racette the only Indigenous political leader recorded as having died by lightning, the very force with which he was spiritually associated?



George Racette, seated with a pistol and knife on his sash, holding a staff - Winnipeg 1875
James Penrose, Photographer

Born: 1819/21 Red River Settlement; Died: June 1877, Missouri Plains by *LIGHTNING*

Also known as: Cheman (“Canoe Man”), Shaman / Shawman / Thunderbird

George Racette (1819/21–1877) was a Métis warrior, leader, and political voice at a moment when resistance, diplomacy, and ceremony overlapped on the Plains. He carried influence not through formal office, but through a presence able to mobilize men, unsettle authorities, and speak across Métis and Indigenous networks. Colonial records frame him as disruptive and dangerous, but a leader who was with Louis Riel; oral history remembers him as a ceremonial man associated with thunder and lightning, healing, and one of the most powerful Indigenous figures described as Shamans in oral tradition during the Resistance era and, some may argue, of all time. His death by lightning on the Missouri Plains stands as a rare and striking convergence of power, belief, and history.

1869

On December 3, 1869, Alexander Begg recorded that a rumour was circulating in the Red River Settlement that George Racette, known as “Shawman,” was on his way toward the Settlement at the head of approximately 1,100 Sioux warriors. The report caused significant anxiety within the Settlement. Begg noted that the rumour was readily believed because Racette was already well known there from earlier years.

According to Begg, Racette had previously been present in the Settlement on multiple occasions and was regarded as a disruptive figure. His arrivals were associated with disorder, as groups described as the most troublesome elements of the community gathered around him, followed by periods of drinking, fighting, and rioting that disturbed the peace of the Settlement. Because of this earlier conduct, Racette was viewed by the Hudson’s Bay Company as an enemy, while members of the Schultz party at times regarded him as useful to their cause. (1)

Execution of Thomas Scott and the beginning of the colonial “Reign of Terror”

Records of George Racette appear only days after the **March 4, 1870**, execution of Thomas Scott, situating him in the record during the most volatile phase of the Red River Resistance’s aftermath.

On **March 14, 1870**, ten days after the execution of Thomas Scott, Sioux leadership under Chief White Cap declared peace with the Métis and neighbouring nations and selected George Racette as their representative, granting him authority to act on their behalf on both sides of the Missouri.

An agreement written by Louis Riel, signed between Chief White Cap and George Racette:

Wood Mountain, March 14th, 1870

The Chiefs of the Sioux Tribe, White Cap,

“When myself and my nation came to understand anything, our idea was to travel on English ground and live with them, and that we have done.

We have made peace with Halfbreeds, Chippaways, Crees, and Assiniboine. This we mean to keep strong.

We have also chosen George Racette to work for us and to do what he thinks is right. We give him our rights on both sides of the Missouri.”

White Cap “X”

Witness – Laurent Godin, Ambroise Fisher, John Fisher, François Poitras

Written on paper by hand of Riel (2)

It is also noted that this was not Louis Riel’s first written agreement involving George Racette. A second letter states that,

November 10, 1860,

Red Stone, Chief of the Assiniboine, and George Racette entered into an agreement. The document states:

“I, Chief of the Assiniboine, give the right of my nation and also the right of our lands from the Long River to the Assiniboine. These rights I give to George Racette to do the best he can, much the same as he would do for himself.”

Certified copy written in Louis Riel’s handwriting, seen by John Fisher, with Antoine Fleury acting as interpreter. (3)

1873

In 1873, George “Shaman” Racette played a central role in political and military organizing on the Plains. He and others established a council in the Qu’Appelle Valley with the intent of forming a government and called for Louis Riel to assist them. During the same year, Racette was reported to be warning Indigenous communities that their lands were at risk of being taken.

At the request of James McKay, Racette spent the winter travelling among American Métis and Plains Indigenous groups who were discussing a combined effort with Canadian Métis and First Nations to resist white settlement. Racette said that such groups could face rejection on both sides of the border and obtained their agreement to remain in the United States. (4)

1874 Treaty Four and colonial response

Racette was present at the Treaty Four negotiations at Fort Qu’Appelle in 1874, where he represented the Assiniboine people. Contemporary accounts describe his prominent display of military strength and his firm position during the proceedings. As a result, colonial authorities overpowered him, placed him in handcuffs, and held him under guard in a tent while negotiations continued. During this period, treaty discussions proceeded in his absence, effectively removing him as a representative voice for the Assiniboine. Racette was released only after agreeing to leave the area. (4)

Oral history and spiritual tradition

In addition to documentary records, George Racette's life is preserved through oral history passed down within his family. Through conversations with Phyllis Racette on February 9, 2026, wife of Larry Racette, and through oral testimony shared publicly by Larry Racette on YouTube, family tradition remembers Racette as a ceremonial man whose spiritual life began in his youth and whose reputation extended widely among First Nations communities.

According to family oral history, as a young man, age 21, Racette undertook a vision quest on an island known as Manitou (Spirit Island), the place for which Manitoba was named, and a location regarded as powerful and feared. Family tradition recalls that many First Nations would not go to the island because of its spiritual presence. Racette is said to have gone there at the request of others. It was on this island that he completed his vision quest and received what was understood as a spiritual gift, inherited through his lineage from his father's mother.

Following this experience, oral tradition holds that Racette established what is now known as the Thunderbird Nest on the mainland near Ebb and Flow Lake, east of Ebb and Flow and west of the Narrows. Interpretive material published by Manitoba tourism and heritage sources describes the Thunderbird Nest as a constructed ceremonial site associated with Anishinaabe Thunderbird tradition. In Anishinaabe belief, the Thunderbird is associated with thunder, lightning, protection, and balance, and such sites were believed to be places where spiritual power could be strengthened through ceremony and isolation.

Within family oral history, Racette is identified as the builder of the Thunderbird Nest and is remembered for conducting ceremonies there, sometimes in the presence of others. Through Larry Racette's oral testimony, it is said that thunder and lightning would appear during ceremonies, even when no clouds were present, and that lightning could come within the blink of an eye. These accounts are presented here as spiritual belief and family memory, consistent with broader Anishinaabe tradition, and not as documentary record.

Racette is remembered by several names. He was known as Cheman, meaning "Canoe Man," reflecting his extensive travel by water as a trader and messenger. He was also called Papanay, meaning "to live through anything," a name associated with endurance and survival. Family accounts describe him as physically imposing, well over six feet tall, and often travelling on horseback with others behind him. He is remembered as a man who did not seek war, but who was never afraid to face it.

Family tradition also recalls that colonial authorities and local settlers later referred to Racette as an "Indian witch doctor," a label reflecting misunderstanding rather than Indigenous views of his role. Within his own family and community, his gift was understood as spiritual, inherited, and used for healing and ceremony. Oral histories speak of ceremonies remembered as powerful, healing, and wondrous.

Phyllis Racette has shared that many additional stories about George Racette remain within the family and are being preserved for a book she is writing with their family. Those stories belong to them to share and are not reproduced here out of respect for that work. (5)(6)



It has been proposed that the Thunderbird Nest (many of which occur in Eastern Manitoba, although this is the only known example west of Lake Manitoba) was constructed to attract the Thunderbird as a guardian spirit. The Thunderbird would then reward the builder(s) with special powers. The process of seclusion and self-denial, referred to as the vision quest, would allow hunters to seek out spirits to ensure their lives against danger and deprivation.

SHARE

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THUNDERBIRD NEST

Thunderbird Nest

The Thunderbird Nest was constructed to attract the Thunderbird as a guardian spirit. A trail leads to five beautiful hand-painted signs describing the legend and a rock formation of the nest depressed in the ground. The Ojibway (Anishinabe) people still perform ceremonies at the site. The legendary Thunderbird is often described as a super eagle, capable of transforming into a man, and able to cause lightning by the flashing of its eyes. It has been thought by the Aboriginals to be the guardian of mankind against his mortal enemy, the horned serpent of the underworld. Tel. **204-767-2101**; Location: 3 km/2 mi. west of The Narrows on Hwy. 68.

AMENITIES

- Birding
- Free admission
- Manitoba History
- Wildlife/Nature Viewing



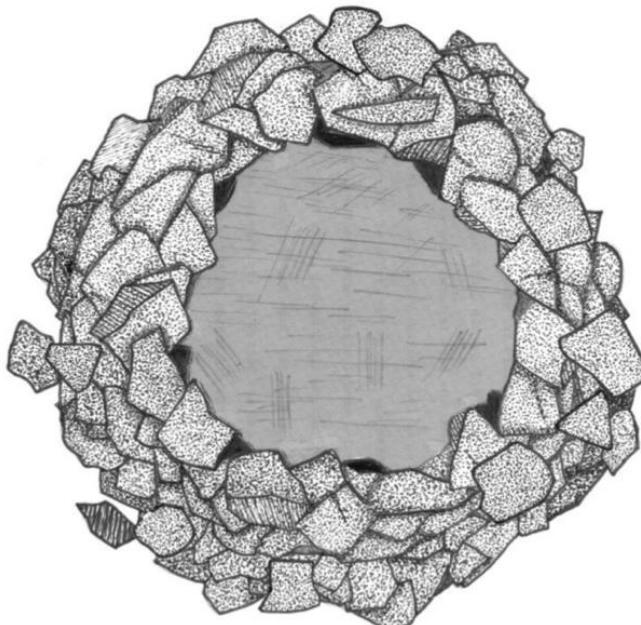
Thunderbird Nests

Leo Pettipas

Manitoba Archaeological Society

Introduction

To the casual observer, it's not much to look at — just a jumbled heap of rocks and boulders that might have been dumped there long ago by the Ice Age glacier. But to the trained eye, it's clear that the rocks had at one time been intentionally and purposefully piled atop one another in a doughnut shape. The stones that comprise these sorts of formations can number in the hundreds, with the largest weighing upwards of 50 kilograms. One such feature was found to measure almost seven metres across; the central depression itself was a metre deep and 1.5 metres in diameter. Since these structures don't appear to be natural, there has to be a human, and in particular, an Aboriginal story behind them one way or another.



Schematic top-view of a Thunderbird nest.



Footage from Thunderbird Nest site -

<https://youtu.be/Gooz8bVAckI?si=TNjwiffeXnWCR0x2>

The location of the Thunderbird Nest is right at the heart of what resembles a bird shaped body of water.



Death by lightning, 1877

Family oral history also preserves an account of the moment of George Racette's death. While written records state that the cause of death was lightning, family tradition recounts that, in the days leading up to his death, Racette was being pursued across the Plains. According to this memory, he evaded those hunting him, returned to a place of rest, and sat leaning against a tree. It was there, family members say, that his life ended when lightning struck. In this telling, he was not taken by those who pursued him, but by the same force with which he was spiritually associated. This account is presented as family memory and oral tradition, preserved alongside the documentary record of his death by lightning. (7)

Manitoba, *not manus illa longa*
Selkirk
Winnipeg
Additional proof from the handwriting of persons regarding
giving the date, of his birth and his having never
made a will

Marie Racette widow of George Racette, of the Parish
of St Vital in the County of Provencher in a former Pro-
vince. Make oath to say:

That George Racette my late husband, died in the
Plains where he was killed by the lightning & where he was bur-
ied on the month of June 1877. The certificate of Burial
can not be produced -

That the late George Racette died Intestate leaving
as sole Heir his child,

Joseph Racette, 16 years of age

That the said deceased was a half breed Head of fa-
mily and resided in the Province of Manitoba on the 15th day
of July 1870 -

That as such half breed Head of family was entitled to re-
ceive a scrip of one hundred & fifty dollars pursuant to
the law in that behalf -

That according to the law in force in Manitoba
at the time of the death of said George Racette, his son
said Joseph Racette is entitled to said Scrip, as
here to appear detailed -

That the said deceased never received, as an In-
dian, any alimony money from the Government, nor
has this claim been preferred elsewhere -

And further deposed saith not the present deposi-
tion being read & explained to her, she has made her mark
in my presence -

Sworn before me at Winnipeg, *Marie Racette*
this 21st day of November 1878 *mark*

Agent of Govt Lands
Approved, see R. Gouley evidence T²⁸
R

Racette's wife was **Marie Larocque**, a Métis from St. Boniface. Her father was Charles Larocque, and mother was Catherine Laboucane Lafournaise. (8)

Life and Presence

George Racette moved through a hard and changing world, shaped by resistance, ceremony, and the wide spaces of the Plains. He unsettled those who sought control, stood for his people when it mattered, and lived according to ways older than the borders closing in around him. He is remembered in records for what he challenged, and in oral history for what he carried. Oral history remembers Racette as a ceremonial man associated with thunder and lightning, the same force that closed the loop and took his life.

No matter how George Racette is viewed, documentary records and oral history point to one conclusion: he was a dominant presence whose actions drew attention from those who encountered him.

Compiled by Patrick Stewart

Edmonton, Alberta

2026

George "Shaman" Racette was married to Marie Larocque, Patrick Stewart's third great-aunt.



“Racette, French Métis of the Red River. Chief of the Sioux.”

Image Notes

- The image originates from a studio photograph taken in Winnipeg by James Penrose, c. 1875.
- A photographic print was sold in 2012 and is now held by the University of Manitoba (confirmed by the dealer) Page 1, top image.
- The photograph was subsequently copied into engravings and sketches at a later date, which introduced misidentifications.
- The engraving was misattributed to Jean-Baptiste Charette in secondary publications; Charette is otherwise documented historically as a guide, not as a warrior or community leader.
- Saint-Boniface archival records formally corrected the identification in 1907, identifying the subject as Georges Racette; this correction was reaffirmed by Saint-Boniface archivists in 2021.
- Racette is independently documented in the Red River community through St. Vital River Lot 20 (1874), registered under his wife Marie Racette, confirming contemporaneous residence.
- There is a second print image above identifying “Racette, Chief of Sioux.”
- Multiple copies of the photo in St. Boniface archives identifying as George Racette

Image Source:

<http://www.bjarnetokerud.com/2012/11/james-penrose-studio-portrait-of.html?m=1> **First Print and Dealer Website Site**

<https://amertribes.proboards.com/thread/3493/dakota-lakota-canada-visual-images> **Second Print**

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/lac-bac/50744124632/sizes/o/> **St. Vital Map**

<https://archivesshsb.mb.ca/link/archives112025> **St. Boniface Archives Photo**

<https://archivesshsb.mb.ca/link/archives144131> **St. Boniface Archives Photo Revision**

Footnotes:

1. <https://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/07240.Georges%20Racette.pdf>
2. <https://archivesshsb.mb.ca/link/archives139154>
3. <https://archivesshsb.mb.ca/link/archives139153>
4. <https://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/04150.Wheretwoorldsmeet.pdf> Section 5.2
5. <https://youtu.be/aHIOJzmXuNI>
6. https://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/ourdept/origin_name_manitoba.html
7. <https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/Home/Record?app=fonandcol&idNumber=1503534&ecopy=e000019693>
RG15-D-II-8-a, Volume number: 1323, Microfilm reel number: C-14932
8. <https://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/150782.Riel%20and%20families%20by%20Patrick%20Stewart%206.2.pdf>