

Interview with Ben Kline

By Oscar Mueller¹

He states that he is now eighty-five years old.² He is of mixed blood but casual appearance would not show this as he is of commanding appearance, blocky, weight when in health was about 175 pounds, medium height, wearing long gray hair, which he states was always white as long as he could remember. He is a substantial citizen, owning a ranch free of encumbrances near Lewistown, Montana, which he homesteaded in 1879 or 1880. He is now residing with a daughter in Lewistown and is gradually growing weaker from old age. He was originally from the Red River Valley country, migrating to Devil's Lake Territory with the Breeds in the early sixties.

The following is the result of an interview held the 2nd of December, 1931. He could not talk only a few words of English when he first arrived in the state or territory in 1866, therefore his English vocabulary is limited, but by the use of signs and motions he was able to picture very vividly the scenes. He was troubled continually by the gathering of phlegm in his throat which choked him and hindered very materially the interview, although he warmed up to his subject. It was impossible to ask him many questions as that would throw him off, although I was able to indicate what I wanted in particular a few times and his response was good.

He lived around Devil's Lake at Fort Totten in the early sixties. He could not give exact dates, but only approximately so. He was a scout assisting a mail carrier from Fort Totten on Devil's Lake to fort Stevenson on the bend of the Missouri River, south of Minot, and about 200 miles west of Devil's Lake. They would leave in the evening, traveling nights only on account of marauding Sioux Indians. They travelled by compass, Kline indicating by signs the methods used. During the day they would usually lay over, hiding in the slough, which is a kind of lake pond with high grass. One would sleep while the other watched. They used kind of a grass cap instead of their regular head wear so as not to be seen when looking out of the tall slough grass. It took two days and two nights to make the trip or at least they were paid on that basis at the rate of \$10.00 per day and per night, or \$40.00 for the trip. They usually arrived at Fort Stevenson in the early morning, and usually did not attempt to go down to the Fort until day light and they would shoot off their guns and make other signs to indicate they were not enemies. They were very welcome as the people at the Fort were delighted to see them. He cut cord wood around Devil's Lake at \$1.50 per cord, but was unable to make a bare living. He heard of the buffalo country in Montana and with other Breeds, their ponies, Red River carts and camping utensils, started for the promised land in 1866. He chuckled when he told me

¹ Mueller, Oscar. "Oscar Mueller Correspondence." Montana Historical Society, SC978.6292. LPL. (December 2, 1931 interview.)

² Ben Kline was born on October 13, 1847 at what is now known as Fort Totten, near Mni Wakan (now called Devil's Lake), North Dakota. His father Michel Klyne Jr. was born in 1811 at Edmonton, a Half-Breed descendent of Michel Klyne Sr. and Suzanne Lafrance a Métisse. His mother was Madeleine Millet *dit* Beauchemin, whose father was a French Canadien, Andre Millet *dit* Beauchemin who had married a Half-Breed Crow woman Charlotte Pelletier. Benjamin's parents moved to Pembina from Red River in the late 1840s. Ben married Angelic "Ayimatch" St. Pierre, the daughter of Francois St. Pierre and Marie Laverdure.

that he was able to borrow \$25.00 from a Jew Merchant at Fort Totten to make the trip and the next year sent him five buffalo robes as payment. Mr. Kline has a keen sense of humor and emphasized the fact that he was able to talk a Jew into making a loan without any security.

He met Mr. Juneaux at Fort Stevenson at the time that Mr. Juneaux was wounded in the hip by a gun shot in a fight with a Frenchman at that place. They arrived in Montana and in groups went buffalo hunting. They had been directed to a group of Breeds somewhere on the Milk River, one of whom had a trading establishment. They arrived at the scene which consisted mainly of just tents.

Kline described vividly that in the early morning after they had arrived they were searched by the Deputy U.S. Marshals led by X. Beidler. This was the first time he met him. They were intending to deprive the Breeds of their ammunition as they had been accused of trading with the Sioux. They plead with Beidler, stating that they would starve to death without ammunition, and finally it resulted in Juneaux, who was in charge of the Breeds at this place, being granted a license to trade with the Breeds. This was the first meeting between Kline and Juneaux since the fracas at Fort Stevenson. The best information I can get is to the effect that Kline arrived in 1866 and for some three or four years the Breeds followed the buffalo in different sections of the Milk River valley or northern Montana without any particular place or establishment or any permanent buildings, using the tent and sometimes crude log cabins. Finally, in probably the early seventies, Juneaux built what was known as Fort Juneaux on Frenchman's Creek. This trading fort was about 180 feet square, built of poles set on end in a trench nine or ten feet out of the ground. Crude log cabins were along two sides parallel and were connected by stockade. In one end there was a large gate built of poles on wooden hinges, all the implements they had being an axe and auger. The large gate was to admit wagons and near was a small opening or door through which the men entered the stockade. One of the cabins near the entrance was the store in which they had a crude fire place. There was also a cabin occupied by Juneaux with a fire place, and a third one by the men employed as clerks with a fire place. Kline was one of the clerks. They traded mainly with the Breeds, having a federal license to do so and of course all liquors were prohibited. There practically no money was used and Kline stated that even so much as 35¢ in actual change would be a curiosity. One incident illustrated their connection with X. Beidler. Juneaux was very fond of liquor as were practically all of them of that day. A bootlegger arrived at the trading post and gave Juneaux a few bottles of liquor. This, of course, was prohibited, and in order not to allow an infraction without some punishment, Juneaux, who was sort of a deputy marshal under Beidler, fined the bootlegger \$10.00, and then pulled a \$10.00 gold piece out of his pocket and paid the fine himself. He then dispatched Kline to the headquarters of X. Beidler with a letter and the \$10.00 which Kline in due time delivered to X. who was very much delighted with the transaction. Thereafter, they had no trouble with X. and his deputies. Kline described very vividly by signs all the details of this transaction and chuckled over the matter. X. was also very fond of liquor and his duties of running down bootleggers, which was one of their main duties at that time; he consumed considerable of the condemned material. Kline told another amusing incident of how X. knowing that one of the Breeds was making moonshine whiskey

would approach him and ask him if he had any. The Breed responded that he had and that he had tried it out on his father-in-law and that it did not kill him, whereupon X. informed him that he was willing to take a chance also.

They stayed at the trading post on Frenchman's Creek for some two or three years and then moved down and located a trading post for about a year or more near where Saco is now located. It was necessary, of course, as you know, to follow the buffalo.

Juneaux, after this, in the latter part of the seventies, abandoned the trading business and became a clerk for a trading post in Canada. He came to the Judith Basin for the purpose of trading and on account of the buffalo having abandoned the north country in the spring, in '79, located on Flatwillow Creek east of Lewistown. Mr. Kline came into the Basin shortly thereafter in the spring of '79 and joined him of the Flatwillow, after which they went on a hunting trip south of the Snowy Mountains and in the summer or early fall, coming in through the Judith Gap to where Lewistown is now located, and found where Mr. Morase camped with his family where the old Reed's Fort post office building now sits adjacent to and south of the town site of Lewistown.

That fall General Miles rounded up the Breeds along the Milk River for trading with the Sioux and gave them their choice to either go to Canada or to Judith Basin. About fifty families with their Red River carts and paraphernalia were brought over to the Judith Basin by the soldiers, crossing the Missouri River by government steamer near the mouth of the Musselshell River. Mr. B. E. Stack, prominent capitalist of Lewistown, now of Long Beach, California, was with the soldiers as a mule skinner. Juneaux that fall built a trading post on the present site of Lewistown where the new post office is now located, for the purpose mainly of trading with the Breeds of this territory. Two years later the town site was located called Lewistown, and the stockade dismantled and later in '83 the outfit was sold to Powers, now operated under the name of the Power Mercantile Company.

One amusing incident of the trip by the soldiers in bringing the Breeds to the Basin occurred on their trip from the Milk River to the Missouri River. The Breeds were lined up in their carts single file extending about a mile in length. The soldiers and some of the Breeds started a run on a bunch of buffaloes. The buffaloes, in order to escape in a group, made a run towards the line of Breed carts, puncturing the line and knocking the Breeds and their carts where they struck them over like a bunch of ten pins. In making enquiry of Mr. Stack whether or not any Breeds were injured, he stated that he did not know because they did not take enough interest in the proceeding to even enquire, as at that time they were considered simply Breeds and subject to the white traders and marauding Indians. The Sioux Indians later robbed the Breeds of all of their ponies and they were finally forced to travel about on their carts by putting their cows in the shafts in lieu of ponies. The Breeds were really a race of their own, developing certain characteristics different from the Indians or the whites.

Statement

I interviewed Ben Kline on the 2nd day of December, 1931, I was very familiar with the facts, but took long hand notes during the evening, and immediately the next morning, dictated the statement, of which the foregoing is a true copy. Mr. Kline was connected with Mr. Juneaux in establishing a trading post at Lewistown, Montana as indicated herein. Dave Hilger made a sketch of this trading post for me, and I have it now in my possession. It was built in the form of a quadrangular stockade with gates in the south end. On the east side entering the gates, and adjacent to the stockade, was a log building used as the store. To the left and west on entering the gate were the cabins, cook house, and living quarters. There were also some log buildings on the north end. It was built in 1879. Hilger saw it first in 1881. Mr. Ben Kline died soon after this interview.

Oscar Mueller,³
Lewistown, Montana.

Editor's notes on Ben Kline:

Ben Kline was born on October 13, 1847 at what is now known as Fort Totten, near Mni Wakan (now called Devil's Lake), North Dakota. His father Michel Klyne Jr. was born in 1811 at Edmonton, a Half-Breed descendent of Michel Klyne Sr. and Suzanne Lafrance a Métisse. His mother was Madeleine Millet *dit* Beauchemin, whose father was a French Canadien, Andre Millet *dit* Beauchemin who had married a Half-Breed Crow woman Charlotte Pelletier. Benjamin's parents moved to Pembina from Red River in the late 1840s.

As a boy Ben attended the mission school where the Chippewa speaking missionary's wife taught him to speak English. In 1886, he married Angelic Ayimatch St. Pierre (b. 1845), the daughter of François St. Pierre and Marie Laverdure. Typical of Metis traders and buffalo hunters their 10 children were born at many locations, namely: Little Missouri, Lebret, Wood Mountain, Cypress Hills, St. Peter's Mission and Hammel Creek.



Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell
Coordinator of Metis Heritage and History Research
Louis Riel Institute

³ Oscar Mueller (1877-1964) was a Lewistown, Montana, attorney and amateur historian. The Oscar Mueller Collection of the MHS consists of primary and secondary research materials on Central Montana history, including papers of James Fergus, concerning ranching; and Mueller's correspondence, writings, research notes, and subject files on the Judith Basin.