Yves de Roffignac Was Here 🍃

The short history and lasting legacy of St. Hubert's top-hatted French counts

by Dave Yanko

(top) Count Roffignac's view from his now long-gone home, which he'd named Bellevue. (above) The Roffignac coat of arms.

GOOD THING THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT MADE DYNAMITE READILY AVAILABLE TO FARMERS back in the 1950s. Indeed, we wouldn't make it across this rolling field of tall brome grass and alfalfa today were it not for the man-made channel draining it. But according to my host, there's still one tricky spot. • I'm riding shotgun beside retired farmer John Boutin in his big white Silverado half-ton truck with four-wheel drive, and we're headed cross country – his country – to a spot near the top of the Pipestone Valley where French count Yves de Roffignac lived in the 1880s. Roffignac was one of a little-known group of French nobles who came here to start a new life. I'm here to learn more about them.

We glide down toward a natural cleft in the land where water drains into a steep and narrow coulee of aspen trees to our right. Boutin brings us to a leaning halt just a few metres above the creek bed that's hidden by brome. There's been lots of flooding in the area and the 79-year-old is not sure what's in store for us down below.

"Ya ready?" he says, more warning than asking. "Guess so," I reply, giggling at the prospect of hurling ourselves into the unknown. Boutin guns the 5.3-litre engine and we shoot down and over what turns out to be a dry creek bed and bounce and

(clockwise from top) Raising horses, one of the noblemen's business forays that would fail (Count Roffignac shown); a Whitewood band in 1904 includes aristocrats from St. Hubert; a count's home in France, the Château des Seyssel; St. Hubert nobles Madame de Beaudrap and Paul de Beaudrap.

bob violently up the five-metre rise on the other side. Soon, we come to a spot where there's nothing but sky in front of us and Pipestone Creek way down below. I hop out of the truck to breathe in the broad valley vista Roffignac beheld when he named his home Bellevue. Sadly, there's nothing left to suggest that the residence of an authentic French count once stood here. The home was moved in 1926 and dismantled in 1941.

This part of the Pipestone Valley was the setting of the original colony of St. Hubert. Located about 15 kilometres southeast of the town of Whitewood in southeast Saskatchewan, it was home to what may have been the largest number of French nobles anywhere in North America. Most were true French counts; Roffignac's family was ennobled in 1248, and another St. Hubert count was a prominent descendant of Cardinal Richelieu, the famous French clergyman and statesman who served as King Louis XIII's chief minister for almost two decades in the 17th century. And yet, the curious story of the French counts of St. Hubert is largely unknown in Saskatchewan, unlike that of the English aristocrats who resided nearby at what is now Cannington Manor Provincial Historic Park.

Nine French counts, a Belgian baron (and his brother) and three "men of capital," as one historian referred to them, arrived in this area in the mid-1880s when it was still part of the Northwest Territories. They were seeking adventure, profit and the prospect of renewing the gilded lifestyle they'd enjoyed back home in France before democratic reforms of the 19th century eroded their positions of privilege. In local histories, these 14 men are typically referred to as "the French Counts of St. Hubert."

As it turned out, their presence was short-lived – all had left the Whitewood district by 1913. Their forays into businesses such as sheep herding, raising horses, sugar-beet refining, cheese production and growing chicory for coffee manufacturing had failed. But the French counts helped spur

Dave Yanko, (coat of arms) Carol Léonard

Courtesy Carol Léonard, (band) Saskatchewan Archives

development of the Whitewood area and left behind colourful tales of high living on the untamed prairie. Their most tangible legacy are descendants of the labourers they brought with them from France to staff their enterprises. Entire families came with the counts, working as gardeners, servants, animal groomers and general labourers. Boutin's maternal grandfather came solo.

"He was adventurous," Boutin would later tell me during a chat at his kitchen table. "He was in the French Foreign Legion fighting in the Boer War. When he came home to France, he decided to join the counts and come to St. Hubert. He ended up being a cheese maker." Boutin's grandfather helped produce Gruyère cheese intended for use among the French immigrants and in broader markets. As with all of their enterprises, however, cheese production hit a glitch. Gruyère produced at St. Hubert had a different taste than the cheese the counts were accustomed to back home in Europe, and the venture failed. "I understand the soil is a different type than what they had

John Boutin in front of the St. Hubert Mission church and its new steel roof; (opposite) only one of the counts' homes remains, though overgrown and in shambles.

in France, a different pH or something. So the milk wasn't right for the type of cheese they wanted to make."

The French aristocratic community of St. Hubert, named after the patron saint of hunters, was organized by Dr. Rudolph Meyer, a German author and proponent of agrarian cooperatives who was living in France before coming to Canada. Historians believe Meyer received about 100,000 francs ($20,000) from a group of investors led by a French man known only as

"M. Lorin" (the history of the counts is spotty and occasionally contradictory). It's believed Meyer named his St. Hubert residence La Rolanderie, roughly translated as "heart of the community," after Lorin's home in France. Meyer served as director of the St. Hubert colony from 1885 to 1889, when he returned to Europe and Roffignac took over leadership of the community, which numbered perhaps 300 people at its peak.

While the counts normally employed their imported labour force for farming work, they occasionally hired local help when the workload was heavy. One story tells of a count who enlisted locals to help prepare his fields for spring seeding and then tromped out into the muddy mess to check up on their work. "The count came out in

full court dress," chuckles Kris Sullivan, a University of Saskatchewan graduate student who wrote his master's thesis on the nobles. "He would have been wearing a top hat, a full suit and an overcoat on top of that, with everything shined up. And everyone just stopped working and stared at him. They were trying to figure out why he thought that was a good idea."

In spite of their notions of privilege, the counts could also be quite egalitarian when it came to special social occasions. Common folk invited to their annual ball at the Commercial Hotel in Whitewood were in

for a glimpse of a lavish lifestyle that left gossips atwitter for weeks thereafter. "Many pretty dresses in the style of the late eighties were in evidence, souvenirs perhaps of better days across the sea," Sullivan quoted one writer in a 2009 presentation to an archaeology conference. "The vivacious Frenchwomen of gentle birth and breeding in fashionable décolleté gowns and jewelled neck and arms lent an air of distinction, in spite of the incongruity of the crude setting."

WHEN THE COUNTS LEFT, MOST RETURNING to Europe, the French immigrant workers stayed behind in the Whitewood district, building successful lives on land that included former property of the counts, some of which was obtained and divvied up by the church. A new community known as St. Hubert Mission sprung up and its Catholic parish comprised some 60 families at one point. St. Hubert Mission thrived into the early 1950s but then succumbed to urbanization and other pressures facing rural towns.

As we retrace our tracks across Boutin's undulating field, I conclude that he is the

Dave Yanko (both pages)

generous if reluctant leader of the descendents of the St. Hubert colony and their unofficial tour guide. Plying the gravel road en route to what remains of St. Hubert Mission, Boutin comes to a slow stop in front of the still-active cemetery situated on the outskirts of the ghost town. His eyes tell me he sees so much more in that cemetery than I do. When we pull up to the church, which now holds services on special occasions only, he proudly points to the new steel roof that sat for months in one of his farm buildings until he could muster enough volunteers for the project.

Unfortunately, there are no good buildings left by which to remember the counts. Only one of their homes still stands, barely, in a shambles in an overgrown and almost inaccessible spot. Owners of the land where Rudolph Meyer's grand Rolanderie home once stood recently destroyed what remained of the old building after one of their cows became lodged in the ruins.

Still, the counts of St. Hubert are remembered at the Whitewood Heritage Centre and Fleur-de-Lis Gift Shop in the restored Merchant Bank building (winner of the 2004 Lt. Governor's Award for Architectural Excellence). Their story is told through photographs, excerpts from written accounts, artifacts and coats of arms of most of the noble families. Boyd Metzler, a retired teacher and volunteer member of the Whitewood Tourism and Heritage Association, would love to see the museum expanded to include a small replica of the St. Hubert area.

The Whitewood Heritage Centre recalls the aristocratic style of the day.

"Visitors who come in here don't have a clue as to where these counts were," says Metzler, adding that even area residents know little about the aristocrats. Effective advertising and more money to interpret and promote the counts would be welcome, he says, and his association is working toward these goals. Drawing more attention to the story of the counts would benefit all tourist attractions in Whitewood, a town rich in history with a surprisingly cosmopolitan past (see sidebars).

There's one artifact that some believe would go a long way toward raising the counts' profile in Saskatchewan, but it's in Manitoba. In the early 1890s, friends and relatives of the counts in France commissioned a French artist to create a statue of Saint-Hubert as a gift to the counts in their new land. But by the time the sculpture reached Winnipeg, one of its sponsors had visited St. Hubert and left with grave doubts about its viability. He stopped the shipment.

Today, the statue of Saint-Hubert, patron saint of hunters and icon of a most romantic period of Saskatchewan's past, sits in the garden of a museum in the Saint Boniface section of Winnipeg.

"They just won't give it up," Boutin says with an air of resignation. "We've tried and tried and they just won't give it up. It's part of their heritage too." ⬛

about town

In addition to the Whitewood Heritage Centre (see main story), the town is also home to several other attractions:

☐ The oldest existing building in Saskatchewan that ever housed a post office (once the workplace of Jennie Lyons, first female postmaster in the Northwest Territories when appointed in 1886).

☐ Whitewood Historical Museum, comprising five buildings of artifacts and displays recalling the town's history, from pioneer beginnings to modern times.

☐ Whitewood Flag Gardens, commemorating the town's rich multicultural roots through a colourful display of national flags.

☐ Chopping's Museum and antique shop, a 17-room mansion with more than 20,000 items on display.

☐ Several wall murals depicting events from Whitewood's past, including the popular Market Day mural, based on an 1880s photograph of farmers bringing their livestock and produce to town for railway shipment to market.

☐ Second Empire architectural-style home, which may have been a tribute to the area's many French settlers.

☐ St. Mary's Anglican Church, completed in 1902, one of Whitewood's most beautiful buildings and one of its few surviving stone structures. ☐ *−D.Y.*

For more on these sites and others, follow the signs from the Trans-Canada Highway to the tourist booth located in the Whitewood Historical Museum. There, you can pick up a free brochure detailing the area's history, attractions and events, as well as a Whitewood Heritage Walking Tour pamphlet, your ticket to a self-guided tour of more than two dozen places of interest in town (most located on Lalonde Street, the main street).

ℹ️ *306-735-2210; townofwhitewood.ca*

whitewood fast facts

☐ Established by French counts in the 1880s.

☐ As home to Finns, Hungarians, Swedes, Germans, Poles, Russians, Czechs, English, Scottish and Irish, it was said to be one of the most cosmopolitan places in the Northwest Territories (NT) in the 1880s.

☐ Home to the first secret-ballot election in NT in 1894.

☐ Home to the *Whitewood Herald* (established in 1892), the oldest continuously operating weekly in Saskatchewan.

☐ Former *Herald* editor John Hawkes became the first legislative librarian for the province in 1907 and created a travelling library system that eventually saw more than 800 libraries of 60 to 80 books "travelling" to communities around the province.

☐ Hawkes wrote the three-volume history, *Saskatchewan and Its People*, in 1924.

☐ Hawkes's spouse, Elizabeth, was the first female newspaper publisher in the province (*The Broadview Express*).

☐ Resident J. F. Guerin was the first dentist in NT.

☐ Guerin and his spouse (name unknown) were also amateur actors who travelled the region performing theatrical shows.

☐ Today it's a popular rest and service stop for travellers on the Trans-Canada Highway and the Saskota Travel Route (Hwy. 9) intersecting it. ☐ *−D.Y.*

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