

François Payette

USDA Payette National Forest, Idaho



Fort Boise, where Payette was in charge from 1835 to 1844, as it appeared in 1849. This drawing accompanied the official report of Major Osborne Cross, quartermaster of the U.S. Army's Mounted Riflemen.

By

Kolleen Bean

Heritage Resources

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service

Region 4

May 1999

Introduction

François Payette, the namesake of the Payette National Forest, was one of the most successful of all the voyageurs that served in the fur trade in the Pacific Northwest. This brief biography is a composite of two articles detailing his life. Both articles are published in *Idaho Yesterday* (Haines 1964; Garand 1999) and provide a good outline of his life.

It is believed that Payette's career in the Northwest began in 1812 when he was only 16 years old, and lasted thirty-two years. His travels took him all over the Columbia and Snake rivers. Coming from Quebec, Canada he arrived in Astoria in May of 1812 and joined the Pacific Fur Company. He transferred to the Northwest Company when the Astor partners sold out, and finished his career with the Hudson's Bay Company. Payette was a rarity among the other voyageurs; he was a literate man.

Where Payette was employed during his first year in the Pacific Northwest, or exactly what he did, is not known. However, when a list was made of the Pacific Fur Companies assets, at the time of its sale to the Northwest Company, Payette was named as an employee. We do know that he enlisted with the Northwest Company for one year (1813-1814) for 200 livres per year. He was still at Fort George on April 4, 1814 and was listed as one of the crewmembers of the first canoe that left the Columbia post on May 1, for Fort William.

Snake Country Freeman

The history of his next few years are lost in the annals of time. According to his own later accounts, he remained west of the mountains. The next mention of Payette puts him with the Snake expedition of 1818 under Donald Mackenzie. In Alexander Ross' *Snake Country Journal* he states that it was during this trip the Payette River was named for François.

The next record of his exploits did not occur until 1821 in the form of a large charge to the Sundries Inland account and a credit for furs. This suggests that he was still working in the interior. On May 1, 1822 there is a record of him arriving at Spokane House with letters from John Haldane at the forks, which is presumably located at the mouth of the Spokane River. He was back at Spokane again on May 5th as one of the only four people to spend the summer at that post.

On May 17, 1822 he was sent from Spokane House to Kettle Falls to buy furs. It took Payette one week, but he returned with 810 pieces of dried Salmon and 12 beaver pelts. This revealed one of the few food sources for the Spokane post. Apparently, Kettle Falls was a good source of furs, so good, that Fort Colville was later established there. Payette stayed on at the Spokane House carrying out general duties for the remainder of the fall of 1822. We know this from several journal entries during October and November.

The activities of Payette during 1823 are a bit uncertain. He was listed as an interpreter at a wage of £22 10/ for the year by the Northern Department, and was also listed in Ogden's Snake Country Journal as a freeman with the Snake Country brigade. It is known that he was with the Snake brigade of 1824-25. Payette was number 35 on the list of Snake Country Freeman and is credited with one gun, seven horses and seven traps. This suggests that he was very successful as a trapper.

Payette continued to gain stature with the Snake Country Freeman. On April 1st, 1825, Payette was put in charge of a hunting party of 13. They were to hunt along the Snake River and oppose any American's that might be in the area. They did almost run into trouble, but not by American's. Payette's party had a narrow escape from a Blackfoot war party. They spotted the war party, fled into the bushes and swam across the river to get back to the camp. This adventure cost Payette his horse, his gun, and his traps. Although this was a severe financial blow to Payette, he quickly recovered. The next entry, dated May 6th, reported that Payette and two others went trapping ahead of the party. Three days later the rest of the party came up upon a cache of pelts left by Payette's group that contained 110 beaver. This amounted to about £55 for the three for less than a month's trapping.

During the 1825-26 Payette was employed as an interpreter. He was also sent out in charge of a scouting party of five. He then went back to the status of freeman, but got in trouble once again with the Natives in the area. On October 14 he was checking his traps with Baptiste the Iroquois, when they encountered a party of three Snake Indians who had just stolen seven horses from Thomas McKay. In the ensuing confrontation, one Indian was killed and Payette and Baptiste were severely wounded. Payette had also lost another horse, gun and blanket.

Payette continued to lead scouting expeditions and hunting parties. His next major exploit was an attempt to find the fate of the McKay party. McKay had gone on to the Salmon River to trap but had got caught away from the main party due to an early snowfall. He left on February 12 with two other men with the promise to find McKay. On March 1, he returned; mission accomplished.

Between 1828 and 1829 Payette continued to work with the Snake Country brigade as a freeman. He explored the Powder River in eastern Oregon, the north side of the Snake River and the area that is now Nevada. In 1829 he went to Fort Vancouver and then to Fort Colville where he stayed until he assisted in driving a herd of horses back to Fort Vancouver.

The arrival back to Fort Vancouver brought about an important promotion to Payette. John Work had been selected to succeed Peter Ogden as the leader of the Snake Country brigade. Payette was chosen to assist in commanding the 1830-31 brigade. After spending the winter in the confining Fort Colville, he jumped at the opportunity.

Payette proved valuable to Work during the expedition. He acted as guide for the party several times, provided food through his hunting abilities and led retaliatory parties against hostile Indians. It is during this expedition that one of the few references about Payette's wife is made. On March 18, 1830, John Work notes that Payette's wife, who has been ill for some time, could not be moved so the brigade remained another day in that camp. A later reference reveals that Payette's wife died in 1837.

This expedition was not as profitable as others had been. This was the first sign that the Snake Country was no longer profitable for such a large party. Therefore, it was decided that the party would move into the Salmon River country and across to the Flathead country. Earlier brigades had made good hunts, although they suffered heavily at the hands of the Blackfoot.

Payette was scheduled to accompany John Work on an expedition to Bonaventura in 1832-33. However, he was unable to make the trip due to a severe attack of fever that left him too ill to travel. When he recovered he was sent to Fort Colville by McLoughlin, with orders for Francis Heron to hire him for three years in the plains at £100 a year. His actual duties are not certain, however it is known that he was in contact with the Nez Perce. A report made by Wyeth mentions meeting Payette with four Nez Perce chiefs on June 9, 1833. Payette also had his son with him during 1834. Wyeth later states that he "has learned to speak English, to read, write and cypher tolerably well" (quoted in Haines 1964:18).

In 1835 Payette was assigned to travel with the Kootenai. Apparently there were some problems with his performance judging by a report submitted to the Governor and Committee that states the Indian group had done very little due to the neglect and inactivity of Payette. It goes on to claim he had taken little or no effort to manage and keep the group together so they had spent the year wandering about and doing nothing.

Fort Boise

This report didn't seem to have much of an effect on Payette. The following year he was again signed on at £100 a year, but was transferred to the Snake Party where he was put in charge of Fort Boise. He stayed in this position until 1844.

Thomas Jefferson Farnham provided the most complete description of Payette and life at Fort Boise. He was there on September 13, 1839 and wrote the following (quoted in Haines 1964:19):

Mr. Payette, the person in charge at Boisais, received us with every mark of kindness; gave our horses to the care of his servants, and introduced us immediately to the chairs, table and edibles of his apartments. He is a French Canadian; has been in the service of the Hudson's Bay Company more than twenty years, and hold the rank of clerk; is a merry, fat old gentleman of fifty, who, although in the wilderness all the best years of his life, has retained that manner of benevolence in trifles, in his mode of

address, of seating you and serving you at table, of directing your attention continually to some little matter of interest, of making you speak the French language "parfaitment" whether you are able to do so or not, so strikingly agreeable in that mercurial people. The 14th and 15th were spent very pleasantly with this gentleman. During that time he feasted us with excellent bread, and butter made from an American cow, obtained from some of the missionaries; with baked, boiled, fried and broiled salmon – and, at my request, with some of his adventures in the wilderness.

Payette told Farnham that the post collected twelve to fifteen packs of beaver a year and cured salmon for other posts. He also noted that Payette was constructing an adobe wall at the post to replace the old stockade.

During the winter of 1839-40, Payette decided to return to Canada, and applied for a year's leave of absence. It was not granted and he remained in the Snake country for another three years. On October 8, 1843, Captain John C. Fremont arrived at Fort Boise. He described the post as a simple dwelling on the right bank of the Snake River, about a mile from the mouth of the Boise River. Another member of that party described Fort Boise as the smallest post he had seen, and mentions that it was made of adobe.

Payette Returns to Québec

François Payette retired and left the Snake Country in the spring of 1844. He probably went to Fort Nez Perce where he joined a brigade to the interior, ending up in Montreal in August. He was one of the most successful, financially, of all the voyageurs. This thirty-five year career provided him a total of £1535 17/6, which was a sizable amount of money at that time.

In early November of 1844 Payette purchased some property in St-Cuthbert, Québec, obviously intending to stay in Canada. He was given a farm by his sister and bother-in-law, and purchased the adjoining farm. On November 19, Payette married again to Sophie Généreux, a twenty-one year old woman who was raised on a nearby farm. They had their first child, a girl they named Alix, almost exactly one year later, on November 20, 1845. Their second child, a boy named François-Henry, was born on January 4, 1847. Their other children included a girl that they named Marie-Sophie, born on February 11, 1848, and Marie-Odile born on July 15, 1849.

On October 9, 1864 François Payette died, at the age of 71. His passing was the beginning of several years of tragedy for the surviving members of his family. In February on 1864, Alix passed away, in May of that same year Henry died also. It is thought that they died of tuberculosis. Sophie remarried in August of that year, but she too passed away on January 7, 1867. The last two Payette girls also died young, Marie-Sophie when she was 21, and Marie-Odile when she was 25.

On May 11, 1875, the Payette farm was sold. His dream of seeing his children established at St-Cuthbert was now gone forever. While his name was quickly forgotten in Québec, it lives on more two thousand miles to the west in Idaho.

References Cited:

Garand, Denis

1999 Francois Payette, 1793-1864. In *Idaho Yesterdays* 42(Winter):3-11.

Haines, Francis, Jr.

1965 Francois Payette. In *Idaho Yesterdays* 8(Winter):12-21.