chapter Four

The Espagnols, the Leading

Family of the Spanish River

The more I researched, the more evident it became that the Espagnols were

the most important family in the Spanish River area in the 19th century.

Their legacy resides in place names such as Espanola, Spanish and the

Spanish River, and as signatories for their people in agreements with the Crown.

It is remarkable that so little is known about this family, and especially the

youngest son, Louis Espagnol, who played such a prominent role in the area in the

19th century, and especially on Lake Pogamasing. When I first “Googled” Louis

Espagnol in 2004, I learned that he was the subject of a paper being delivered at

Oxford University by Victor Lytwyn at the Rupert’s Land Symposium.

Part of the intrigue and mythology of the Espagnol family has to do with their

origins. There have been a number of explanations for how they derived their

name, as it is obviously not an Anishnabe one. The most common story that I

found in books and websites involved a group of Ojibwa (Anishnabe) from the

North Shore area who ventured to the southern United States on a trade mission.

They allegedly brought back with them a Spanish-speaking young woman,

either as a captive or as a gift, from another Aboriginal nation from the Spanishcontrolled

territory west of the Mississippi River. She married the son of a chief

and taught her children to speak Spanish. The French-speaking fur traders in the

area recognized the language and called them “Les Espagnoles.” After the arrival

of the British, they became known as the Spanish, and the river where they

lived, the Spanish River.

In spite of the generally accepted theory of the Spanish origin, I believe there

is a more plausible explanation. This version of the Spanish origin was put forth

by a reporter who called himself “The Wanderer” in an April 4, 1885, article

in the *Globe*. He wrote: “Shortly after the [1760] conquest of Canada by the

British, a Spanish adventurer, who appears to have been in the British Service at

one period, wound his way up the Great Lakes to Algoma. His name and lineage

are now uncertain, though two of his grandsons live on Spanish River at present.

One is a pilot on the navigable reach of the river, and his cousin is in charge

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of the [Hudson’s] Bay post at Pagamasing [sic], the point where the C.P.R. main

line crosses the river near its forks.”17

The person in charge of the post on Pogamasing was Louis Espagnol. The

author went on to explain why this adventurer settled in the area (the La Cloche

hills reminded him of the Sierras in Spain) and how he came to be part of the

Anishnabe community when he married the daughter of a chief.

The credentials of “The Wanderer” are unknown, but much of what he wrote

coincides with the memories of Louis Espagnol’s granddaughter, Jane Espaniel

(the anglicized version of Espagnol) McKee. When interviewed for the Native

Canadian Oral History Project, she stated that Louis’ grandfather was the original

Spaniard and that his name was Emmanuel. His son became a prominent figure

in the area and was known by various names such as Frise (curly hair) or the

Spaniard in the Hudson’s Bay records, and Espaniole in government documents.

Photo Missing The family of Louis Espagnol’s son, Alex, with his wife Annie, and children

Bill, Jane (later Espaniel McKee) and Mary. Alex was born on Maggie’s

Island on Christmas Day, 1870. Courtesy of Archives of Ontario, Donald

Smith Collection.

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My sense from the *Globe* article and McKee is that Emmanuel was the first

Spaniard and he came in the late 1700s, from west of the Mississippi River,

which had been under Spanish control since the 1760s. He married an Anishnabe

woman and it was their son who supported the British in the War of 1812.

For his service, the son “was created a chief for his conduct during the war,”

and given a flag and a sword as recognition for his service by the British. This is

supported by a note written in 1837 by T.G. Anderson, a government official

in Manitowaning, to request that the chief ’s flag be replaced as it had worn out.

Anderson identified him as “The bearer (the Spaniard)…and lives in the vicinity

of La Cloche,” which was close to the Spanish River.18

Confirmation of the Louis Espagnol’s father’s existence also comes from John

McBean, the Hudson’s Bay chief factor of the Lake Huron District from 1821 to

1837. In 1827, McBean wrote in his journal that a person he called Frise came

often to the post with his sons. His nickname came from his curly hair, possibly

a trait of his European ancestry, or that he was of mixed race, a mulatto (Negroid

and Spanish). McBean found it easier to call his hunters by nicknames that

he could pronounce and write, since it was too difficult for most Europeans to

comprehend, let alone write, their Anishnabe names. Later, McBean (1834 journal)

used Frise interchangeably with “Spaniard.” Strangely, McBean never refers to him

as a chief, or that he was Spanish-speaking, but there are references to his living

near the Spanish River. Frise may well have lost his ability to speak Spanish, but

he was referred to as the Spaniard due to his father’s ethnic origin.

There is no doubt the Spaniard referred to by McBean is the chief of

the Spanish River band because two of his sons, Pinesse and Naoquagabo,

were both chiefs of the band and were frequently mentioned in McBean’s journal

entries. So we have a government official (Anderson) and the chief factor of the

Hudson’s Bay Company (McBean) referring to the same man as the “Spaniard.”

A further reference to the Spaniard is found in the Manitoulin Treaty of 1836

where one of the sixteen Anishnabe signatories is listed as “Espaniole.”

It was not an Anishnabe tradition to have a family surname. However, as

mentioned earlier, Louis, the youngest of Espaniole’s four sons, altered that

custom and adopted the European tradition of having a Christian and a family

name, possibly because he worked for the HBC. When Louis was born in 1835,

he was given his Anishnabe name, Sakquakegick. His name evolved over time

from being “Louis Sakquakegick” in his marriage papers in 1862, to “Louis

Espagnol (Sakquakegick)” in 1866 when the Hudson’s Bay Company hired him.

The family name, Espagnol, was the logical choice, given that he was the son of

the chief who was known as Espaniole. Louis’s second language was French,

so it was natural that his name had a French version, possibly from the Jesuit

priest who performed his marriage.19

To summarize the origins of the Espagnols: Emmanuel, a Spaniard, came to

the North Shore area and married an Anishnabe woman; they had a son who

supported the British in the War of 1812 and who was a chief of an Anishnabe

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band. Their son was known by one of three names by the Europeans: Spaniard,

Espaniole or Frise. He had one known daughter, Marie Nanjok,20 and four

sons, Pinesse, Naoquagabo, Namassin and Sakquakegick (Louis Espagnol), who

were all chiefs.

In McBean’s journals, there is a strong association with the Spaniards and

the river, so it is easy to understand why the Europeans came to call the river

after the family who lived by it. The Spanish River, however, was not the name

used by the Anishnabe. According to Sagamok elder Peter Owl, the original

name was Minitegozibe, meaning “river of many islands.” From the beginning

of the 19th century, newcomers gave the river various names. The French first

named the river Aouechissaton in 1657 and then changed it to the Tortue in

1774. On a British map of 1809, it was called the Estiaghicks. McBean called

it the Eskimanitigon on his 1827 map of the region, as it was the name he understood

from his hunters.21 However, the Spanish name prevailed, and it was

the name given by the English cartographer H.W. Bayfield on an 1822 map

of the upper Great Lakes. The Minitegozibe name has been reintroduced and

the new Ontario park on the Spanish River is now called the “Spanish River

Valley Minitegozibe Signature Site.”

In this chapter I touched on how the Espagnol father and three of his sons

were recognized as chiefs or leading men. However, it was the youngest son,

Louis, who would establish the most important legacy, both as a chief 22 and as

a manager to the Hudson’s Bay post on Lake Pogamasing. Before we begin his

story, however, it is important to understand how the Pogamasing post operated

within the context of the Lake Huron District of the Hudson’s Bay Company.