

The Incredible Adventures of the Family Talon

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With the much-appreciated assistance of Gail F. Moreau-DesHarnais and Gabriel Sheridan

Have you ever come to a dead end researching a Québécois family? All follows in a predictable progression from arrival in New France, to marriage, to a string of little ones every year or two, and then – nothing?? Where did they go? How to follow those tantalizing dangling threads? Gail Moreau-DesHarnais had this experience while researching the May 1, 1666 confirmations in Québec for the April 2008 issue of this journal.¹ **Lucien Talon** was one of those confirmed that day. He appeared again in the 1667 census as a servant of Jean Bourdon in Québec City. Gail followed him to his marriage with **Isabelle Planteau** on 12 October 1671 at Québec. The newlyweds soon started a family: **Marie-Élisabeth**, baptized 10 September 1672 in Québec; **Marie-Madeleine**, 3 November 1673; **Pierre**, 20 March 1676; **Jean-Baptiste**, 26 May 1679. At this time the family was residing at Dombourg but the baptisms were recorded at Québec.² The census captured this growing family again in 1681, in Neuville: Lucien Talon, age 35; Elisabeth Planteau, age 35; Marie Talon, age 9; Madeleine Talon, age 8; Pierre Talon, age 5; and Jean Talon, age 2.³ Son **Lucien Talon** was baptized 24 August 1681 at Neuville. Then there is no record in Québec of any of them or their descendents for thirty-eight years until Madeleine's son, **Pierre Simon dit Sanscrainte**, a soldier, married **Charlotte Bouvier** on 10 February 1719 at Charlesbourg!⁴ Where were they?

When I saw the name Lucien Talon in the April issue, a bell rang. Yes, that is the family my friend Gabriel Sheridan was researching in relation to La Salle's lost colony in Texas and the massacre there that followed La Salle's murder. Gabe's brother, Steve Sheridan, had told some of the tale in the journal,⁵ but the amazing details deserve their own story.

The Talon family and The Lost Colony

Piecing the story together from many sources,⁶ we see this family of seven returning from France in about May of 1684 with **Sieur René Robert Cavalier de La Salle**. He had discovered the mouth of the Mississippi by land in 1682 and now he wanted to return by sea to colonize this important estuary for the French. Although Madame Talon was pregnant with her sixth child, this intrepid pioneer family had resolved to brave the voyage from Quebec to La Rochelle and then, two months later, from La Rochelle to La Salle's new colony. They were one of the few families to accompany La Salle to found Fort Saint-

¹ Gail Moreau-DesHarnais, "Confirmations: Notre-Dame-de-Québec 1 May 1666," *Michigan's Habitant Heritage* (MHH), April 2008, Vol. 29, #2, pp. 66-68.

² Peter J. Gagné, *King's Daughters and Founding Mothers: The Filles du Roi, 1663-1673*, Vol. 2 (Rhode Island: Quintin Publications, 2001), p. 461. See also René Jetté, *Dictionnaire généalogique des familles du Québec des origines jusqu'à 1730* (Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1983), p. 1061.

³ PRDH #98316.

⁴ Jetté, p. 1052.

⁵ Steve Sheridan, "The Tragedy of French-Canadian Voyageur Gabriel Barbier and the Ruin of La Salle", *MHH*, July 2005, Vol. 26, #3, pp. 124-127.

⁶ I mainly summarize here some excellent scholarly research. For details and citations, I recommend that the reader consult Robert S. Weddle *et al.*, eds., *La Salle, the Mississippi, and The Gulf: Three Primary Documents*, College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1987. In particular, see the chapters entitled "The Talon Interrogations: A Rare Perspective" by Robert S. Weddle, p. 209-224, "Voyage to the Mississippi through the Gulf of Mexico" by Ann Linda Bell, p. 225-258, and "Commentaries on the Interrogations" by Mardith K. Schuetz, p. 259-274. Also see Weddle, "La Salle's Survivors," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* Vol. 75, #4, p. 414-33, April 1973. Some genealogical data in Weddle is incorrect or incomplete. He did not verify the marriage information for Lucien and Isabelle. He also had no birth data for Lucien *filis*. Other sources for this article included web sites:

<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/TT/fta60.html> ; <http://www.texasbeyondhistory.net/belle>
<http://www-sal.cs.uiuc.edu/~friedman/genealogy/Talon.htm> ; <http://www.ccmuseumedres.com/talon.ppt>

Louis, and they were most certainly the largest. In July 1684, this party of about three hundred colonists, soldiers, and sailors set sail in four ships (*Belle, Le Joly, L'Aimable* and *Saint-François*). Fortunately, the Talons were not aboard the *Saint-François*, which was captured by Spanish pirates. They were instead on the *L'Aimable* when, somewhere at sea, the new baby was born, the youngest colonist. This boded well for the enterprise, and La Salle himself served as godfather for his namesake **Robert Talon**.

Although the omens had been favorable, a series of tragedies soon followed. They stemmed from the fact that the party had not sailed to the mouth of the Mississippi as planned. Poor maps and possibly La Salle's less-than-expert navigational skills had led them about 400 miles to the west of it, so that in January 1685, they found themselves in Matagorda Bay (between present day Galveston and Corpus Christi, Texas). This territory was then claimed by Spain and inhabited by unknown Indians. La Salle would have to undertake dangerous explorations to try to locate the Mississippi again.

An early disaster occurred when *L'Aimable* ran aground trying to enter the narrow channel into Matagorda Bay, and many supplies needed by the colony were lost. The first personal tragedy for the Talon family, however, would be the death of its patriarch. All we know about Lucien Talon's death was that it occurred before October, 1685 while he was on a march with La Salle and was "lost in the woods".⁷ Now Madame Talon knew she had a major challenge ahead as the sole parent of six children, aged from a few months to twelve years. And things only got worse. Her eldest, Marie Elisabeth, would soon die of disease in the winter of 1686. Surely this family would need all the help it could get to survive. Perhaps that is why Madame Talon pressed her case for Robert to be considered the firstborn child of the colony. Traditionally, firstborns in each American colony were given special perquisites, but **Gabriel Barbier** was claiming that privilege for his unborn child, asserting that Robert was not born in the colony but on the way to it. The point seemed moot when **Madame Barbier** miscarried but may have been revived when later she did successfully give birth.

Such squabbles lost resonance with La Salle's murder on March 19, 1687. In January of that year, he had set out in search of his former Fort Saint-Louis on the Illinois River, leaving the new Texan Fort Saint-Louis with its twenty-odd remaining inhabitants in the care of Gabriel Barbier. Many colonists had already perished but, after losing her firstborn to disease, Madame Talon had managed to keep her five remaining children healthy. Among those going off with La Salle that January was Madame Talon's eldest son, Pierre, age ten, who was to be embedded with the Cenis (Hasinai or Tejas) Indians to learn their language and ways. He was staying with them, along with **Father Anastase Douay** and others, since the little colony would need the cooperation and assistance of these Indians to survive. Madame Talon must have wept with fear for her son at the leave-taking described by **Père Zénobe Membré** as the most sorrowful he had ever experienced. She did not realize she was in far greater danger than he. She would soon be lost to a massacre while a series of incredible events would be taking her children's lives on amazing twists and turns in North America and Europe.

The journeys of the orphans

Pierre lost his childhood the day before his eleventh birthday. That was when La Salle was killed by his own men. La Salle's murder had been the last of four carried out by desperate men in the East Texas wilderness. Exactly what transpired is still uncertain. Different witnesses gave different accounts. Henri Joutel described a conspiracy headed by the surgeon, Liotot, that led to the axe murders of three of La Salle's men in a hunting camp. This macabre scene was followed the next day by the shooting of La Salle himself. According to Joutel, La Salle had been lured into an ambush and then shot by Pierre Duhaut. L'Archevêque and Grollet blamed "an English gunner" – James. Young Pierre Talon also

⁷ Although Lucien Talon was a carpenter, he is listed here as a soldier. See Henri Joutel, "Relation de Henri Joutel", in Pierre Margry, ed., *Découvertes et établissements des français dans l'ouest et dans le sud de l'Amérique septentrionale*, III, p. 191.

implicated James, but he related a different scenario in which the younger brother of **Pierre Duhaut, Dominique Duhaut**, had killed the others while avenging Pierre Duhaut's death. These blood-thirsty killers put the lad in fear of his own life. He told how he had ridden off with **Liotot**, who was subsequently killed, leaving the boy to escape as fast as his horse could take him.

Meanwhile, at Fort Louis, word of La Salle's assassination had emboldened the Clamcoehs (Kanankawas), and they attacked at Christmastime, 1688. Later Jean-Baptiste Talon, just nine years old at the time, would tell of the horror he witnessed, including the death of his own mother. He and his siblings were spared only through the intervention of the Indian women, who could not bear to see the children slaughtered. They hastily removed Jean-Baptiste and his three siblings, aged four to fifteen, from danger and took them off to live with them.

Pierre remained with the Cenis until 1690, when all but Jean-Baptiste were rescued by the Spanish, whose colonial territory this was. Their rescuers wrote of the grotesque tattoos that covered the children's faces and bodies. The two younger boys, Lucien and Robert, had forgotten their mother tongue altogether. Only Marie-Madeleine could converse with the Spaniards in French.

The children were taken off to Mexico City via San Luis Potosí, arriving by late summer. Within six years, 1684 to 1690, they had gone from French-Québécois to French-Texan to Texas-Indian to Spanish-Mexican. The older children must have retained some memory of France, describing San Luis Potosí as about the size of La Rochelle. Now Pierre, fourteen, Marie-Madeleine, sixteen, Lucien, nine, and Robert, five, would live in the palace of the viceroy, **Gaspar de la Cerda Sandoval y Mendoza, Conde de Galve**, as household servants. Jean-Baptiste would join them there the following year when he was twelve.

For the next few years, the children accustomed themselves to life in this thriving capital city. But the trappings of lush upper class life only masked the unrest of the conquered. On June 8, 1692, the native Indians rioted and burned down the palace. Flashbacks must have terrorized the children as the Count and Countess were forced to escape through a palace window. But order was soon restored, and the children enjoyed kind attentions in the count's home until 1696.

The Interrogations

How do we know all these details? That is the most interesting part of this whole saga. Eventually, the eldest boys would give vital testimony of all these events to the French. But first, they would have some adventures at sea. In 1696, as Conde de Galve's term as viceroy was ending, the three eldest boys, teenagers Pierre, Jean-Baptiste, and Lucien, were pressed into the service of Spain as soldiers in the Armada de Barlovento. They proceeded to Veracruz on the *Santo Cristo*, the admiral's flagship. Meanwhile, the count sailed on to Spain with his wife, **Doña Elvira**, and the two remaining Talon orphans, Marie-Madeleine, age twenty-two, and Robert, age eleven.

But nothing ever transpired uneventfully for the Talons. On January 7, 1697, the *Santo Cristo* was captured by the French warship *Bon* on its approach to Havana. When its French Captain **Patoulet**, of Désaugiers' squadron, learned of the three young Frenchmen aboard, he took them to the Intendant of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti). Rather than rejoice in their repatriation, the boys could only worry about the fate of Madeleine and Robert still on their way to Spain with the count and countess. They wanted to join them there. But the Intendant had other plans for them. They would accompany *Sieur de Boissieux*, a marine lieutenant, to France to be debriefed. But first, he would write to Louis Pontchartrain, minister of the marine (and patron of Detroit's Fort Pontchartrain), for instructions.

Meanwhile, the three eldest boys, still detained by the French, remained uncooperative awaiting reassurance that all efforts would be made to reunite them with their siblings, who were all they had left

in the world. A year later, Boissieux relieved them of their status as Spanish soldiers and *presto* Pierre and Jean-Baptiste were now French soldiers in the company of Feugerolle. Lucien, just sixteen, was declared too young for a soldier and was instead placed as a servant at Oléron, an island off Southwest France. We do not hear of him again.

Immediately on receipt of Boissieux' letter, Pontchartrain appreciated the potential intelligence that could be gleaned from the Talons about the Spanish. He drew up questions for Desclouzeaux, Intendant of Brest, to ask the boys. Pontchartrain was particularly interested in information that might assist **Pierre Le Moyne**, *Sieur d'Iberville*, as he planned his voyage to the Gulf of Mexico to complete the expedition begun by La Salle. In fact, Pontchartrain's hope was to have the boys accompany Iberville on his first voyage, but that was not to be. They were, however, later assigned to the company of **Louis Juchereau** de Saint-Denis for Iberville's second voyage to Louisiana. They sailed October 17, 1699 on the *Gironde* and arrived in Biloxi Bay January 8, 1700.

But first, a few words on the extraordinary documents, dated February 14, 1698, that came to be known as "The Talon Interrogations". These papers present the answers to questions posed by Louis Pontchartrain to Pierre and Jean-Baptiste Talon. What follows is a summary of their responses. The boys began by recounting the family's first years in Québec and their subsequent departure for La Rochelle and Paris where they enlisted with La Salle. When *L'Aimable* ran aground in the Baye du St. Esprit (later known to be Matagorda Bay), La Salle realized they had not reached the mouth of the Mississippi, but they could go no further. He sent *Le Joly* back to France and had only *Belle* left. According to the boys, it was not safeguarded well and it too sank, leaving the colony stranded.⁸

The Talon brothers then gave a detailed report of the fauna and flora and described the terrain and the efforts of La Salle to find a suitable site for the fort. He found the territory suitable for settlement with plentiful buffalo (*boeufs sauvages*), deer, roebuck, and smaller game, including turkeys, partridges, parrots, ducks, plovers, doves, woodcocks, small birds, cranes, swans, and birds of prey. The boys also described a remarkable red bird, as well as lions, tigers, bears, and wolves. They mentioned a river (Rivière aux Cannes) with caimans or crocodiles and canes from which the Indians made arrows. Edible plants were abundant, both domesticated and wild. Tobacco was among the cultigens, which included corn, pumpkins, and others which were unknown in Europe. The Indians also raised horses.

Pierre and Jean-Baptiste described these Indians in interesting detail. They found them perfectly attuned to the climate, living long, healthy lives with the help of their bountiful medicinal herbs. In all the time they were with the Indians, they saw no one die of illness. The boys went on with an ethnographic report (of great value to future anthropologists) about the many nations of Indians they encountered. Pierre was most familiar with the Cenis with whom he said he had resided for five or six years (actually just three years). He described them as farmers, about a thousand in number, who were the most gentle and civil of all the nations they met. On La Salle's instructions he had learned their language very well, but said he had forgotten a lot of it in the ten years (actually seven) he was with the Spanish.

Jean-Baptiste and the other children had lived in the land of the Clamcoehs (Karankawas) for over three years, and he described them as foragers who were the most cruel and barbaric of all the tribes. They allowed the children to pray but mimicked and mocked their prayers and reading. The children found them rude and crude and given to drunkenness, but also loving in their care of them.

⁸ *Belle* saw the light again 312 years after she sank. In 1996, the Texas Historical Commission authorized \$1.5 million to build a coffer dam facilitating the excavations completed in 1997 by James E. Bruseth. The artifacts are on display at Texas A & M University. See James E. Bruseth and Toni S. Turner, *From a Watery Grave: The Discovery and Excavation of La Salle's Shipwreck, La Belle*, (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2005).

The French inquisitors were, of course, interested in natural resources, especially mines, but the boys knew of no minerals used by the Indians. The Spaniards, on the other hand, had established numerous mines. They also wanted an account of the death of La Salle, and Pierre gave them his recollections. Jean-Baptiste told them of the massacre of twenty to twenty-five colonists at the fort by the Clamcoehs, angry at La Salle for taking their canoes and emboldened by his death. All in the fort had been slaughtered except for Jean-Baptiste, Lucien, Robert, Marie-Madeleine, and a young Parisian named **Eustache Bréman**, said to be a relative of the Talons. The Indian women had tried to save Madame Barbier and her baby as well, but the men would not spare them.

Jean-Baptiste explained that these five surviving French children had been raised with tenderness by these Indian women, who subsequently treated them like their own children. They described how they had been tattooed on the face, hands, arms and elsewhere using thorns, as was the custom. This was very painful, and the tattoos could not be removed despite the many efforts by the Spaniards to do so. The boys were trained to hunt and be warriors and to run so fast that there was no horse they could not follow. They wore no clothes and plunged into the river each morning with the Indians no matter how cold it was. They ate the raw animal flesh but were horrified when presented with human flesh to eat; for it was the custom of the Clamcoehs to eat the flesh of their Indian enemies (but not Frenchmen). Jean-Baptiste once went without eating for three days when only Indian flesh was available to him.

Pierre, raised by the more pacific Cenis rather than the war-loving Clamcoehs, related how he always lived with the chief and would go to war with the Cenis, scalping enemies and dancing with the other warriors. Yet, Pierre found these people very kind, and he was never maltreated by them. On the contrary, he was defended from any unpleasantness directed towards him.

Although Spain claimed this area, no Spaniard had ever penetrated this far into what would become East Texas, but they had formed expeditions to the area in response to rumors of French incursion. Unfortunately, they arrived long after the massacre. Pierre had gotten wind of their approach but had tried to avoid them having heard of their cruelty. The Spaniards did capture him, however, and had Pierre take them to the Cenis village. There the Spaniards left three missionaries, who worked on compiling a Cenis dictionary.

Pierre came to trust the Spaniards, revealing to them the whereabouts of his siblings with the Clamcoehs. A happy reunion of Pierre, Marie-Madeleine, Lucien, and Robert soon followed. Unfortunately, Jean-Baptiste and Eustache Bréman were not in the village at the time. They would not be rescued for another year. The Indians were reluctant to let the children go, and the Spaniards wished to remain on good terms with them, so the soldiers agreed to pay one horse for each child. The Indians, however, wanted more for Marie-Madeleine as she was taller and older. They had long admired her, especially as she grew into a lovely young woman. Fortunately, Eustache Bréman had been able to save her honor by scaring them into believing her God would take his revenge on them if they assaulted her. Now confronted with losing her for just one horse, the Indians put up a fight. The Spanish soon prevailed in the ensuing battle, which was followed by a peace made over some tobacco and the payment of just the one horse for her. This wasn't merely a financial transaction, however. Jean-Baptiste reported that the Indians wept bitterly at the loss of the children, especially the younger ones, and mourned for a month afterwards. They were sad to see Jean-Baptiste go too in 1691, the following year, when Domingo Teran de los Rios arrived to take him and Eustache to Mexico City as well.

For the next six or seven years, the children were cherished and well-treated by the Spanish viceroy and his wife in Mexico City. Then the family was split up again with the eldest three boys shipped off as soldiers and Marie-Madeleine and Robert sent to Spain with the viceroy. At the time of the interrogations, Pierre and Jean-Baptiste were still feeling this loss and wanting to reunite with their siblings believed to be in Spain. Did this reunion ever occur? We have no direct evidence of it. If it did occur, it was not until at least 1702.

The ultimate fate of the Talons

It does seem, however, that there must have been intervention in Marie-Madeleine's detention in Spain since she is known to have married **Pierre Simon** in Paris, facial tattoos and all, in 1698 or 1699. Her son, **Pierre Simon II**, was born there in 1699. Did she ever return to Québec? We find no record of her, but we know that her son was in Québec by 1718 as a soldier in the company of Merveille. He was married in Charlesbourg on February 10, 1719 to **Marie Charlotte Bouvier**. (Her family was said to be from St-Paul parish in Paris). And Pierre Simon II was still there in 1722, when his son, **Pierre Simon III**, was born on January 22. There is, however, no record of the family in Québec after this birth.⁹ Did they return to France when his enlistment was up? In any case, it is gratifying to know that part of this Talon family, formed in Québec and traveling so far, did eventually return to its roots, if only briefly.

As to the boys, Pierre and Jean-Baptiste Talon were sent to Louisiana on October 17, 1699 to assist in expeditions from Mobile to the Rio Grande in Texas. They accompanied Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville's expedition from January 8, 1700 to 1702. Their tattoos identified them to the tribes as friends. This, and the fact that the boys recalled much of the Indian languages they had learned, furthered the goals of the expedition. Apparently, the boys had still not learned of Marie-Madeleine's return to France and were still determined to find her since, by special order of Pontchartrain, they were allowed to return to Europe in 1702 to "look for their women".¹⁰

We learn of Pierre again in 1704 when he (and perhaps Jean-Baptiste as well) is said to have been imprisoned in Portugal. Whatever became of Jean-Baptiste after this is not known, but Pierre surfaces again in 1714-15 as a guide and interpreter for Louis Juchereau de Saint-Denis on his historic explorations across Texas to San Juan Bautista (now Guerrero, Coahuila, Mexico). Robert reappears now as well -- for the first time since his trip to Spain in 1696 as a boy of twelve. Now, as a man of thirty, he accompanies his brother Pierre across Texas. (We encounter a familiar name here. It is to Detroit's founder, *Sieur Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac*, now Governor of Louisiana, that Pierre reports with a message from Saint-Denis).

Although we hear nothing of Pierre after 1715, Robert is known to have remained in Mobile where he worked as a carpenter, following in the footsteps of the father he never knew. According to a genealogical website,¹¹ he married **Jeanne Preau** (Prot, Proux), the daughter of **Jean Preau** and **Anne Prevost**. Two children are well-documented: **Jeanne**, born January 5, 1719 (married **Jean Phillippe La Prairie**, one child), and **Marguerite**, born October 3, 1721 (married an Italian, **Jean-Baptiste Montanari** of Parma, and had seven children). Also listed for Robert Talon and Jeanne Preau are an additional five children: Jean-Baptiste, Hélène, Jean, Anne-Jeanne, and Antoine. Robert died in 1745 or 1746 in Mobile, but we know that his branch still survives. A descendant, **Paul C. Newfield III** of Metairie, Louisiana, visited the excavations of Fort Louis in 2000 after remains, possibly those of his ancestress, Isabelle Planteau Talon, were found.¹²

What a long journey has been documented for this Québécois family, which nearly disappeared without a trace -- from the record Gail found of the 17th century confirmation of Lucien Talon to the 21st century electronic postings of his descendants -- an incredible story worth finding and telling. You never know what you'll find at the end of those dangling threads!

⁹ G. Moreau-DesHarnais, "Confirmations: Notre-Dame-de-Québec 1 May 1666", *MHH*, Apr 2008, Vol. 29, #2, p. 66.

¹⁰ Texas Handbook online at <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/TT/fta60.html>

¹¹ <http://www-sal.cs.uiuc.edu/~friedman/genealogy/Talon.htm>

¹² <http://www.CNN.com> "Archaeologists unearth bones at French settlement in Texas", posted November 29, 2000.