



May 4th is the 150th anniversary of the death of Charlotte Small, wife of David Thompson.

Charlotte was born on September 1, 1785 at the North West Company post of Île-à-la-Crosse on the Churchill River in what is now Saskatchewan. Her mother was a northern Woods Cree and her father was Scottish fur-trader Patrick Small. Patrick Small retired to England in 1791 leaving his country wife, or wives, and his 3 young children - Patrick, Nancy and Charlotte.

Very little is documented of Charlotte's childhood, some is gleaned from David's spartan notes. Charlotte learned the skills of living off the land, and understandings of climate, ecosystems, wildlife, and wilderness travel. She also learned the language and culture of her mother's Cree peoples. Straddling two worlds Charlotte would have had familiarity with life at a trading post, although there is no documentation on whether she was raised in the trading post or with the band. She knew English and likely some French.

Although she was of mixed Native and European parentage historians Jennifer Brown and Philip Goldring says that it is inappropriate to assign the designation Métis to Charlotte. At this time, in the 1790's Metis did not have the separate economic, geographical, and political identity that they would create in the Red River after 1812. There is no documentation of Charlotte identifying herself as Métis.

In this era girls marrying young was not uncommon. Charlotte was 13 and David 29 when they were married in the "fashion of the people" on June 10, 1799. Various writers have fictionalized the romantic meeting of David and Charlotte as love at first sight. But historical fact is sparse. If they had met previously it could only have happened a year earlier when he passed through on route to Lac La Biche. There is some speculation that the marriage may have been arranged, however how the couple met and why they married is unknown.

According to Goldring, "this was not a typical fur trade marriage of the 18th century, contracted to cement relations between a trader and his Aboriginal customers. As soon as Charlotte and David confirmed their choice, she embarked on the first of some 20,000 kilometres of travel with her husband, travel that no other Cree girl of that time from Île-à-la-Crosse would ever experience except, significantly, her sister Nancy."

Their marriage is one of the great love stories in Canadian history and would last 58 years. According to Jennifer Brown, Charlotte and David had the longest documented pre-confederation fur trade marriage.

Far more than a companion Charlotte became an essential partner in Thompson's success through her understanding of the fur trade, Cree culture and survival skills. She also mothered their children. She would have 3 children by the time she was 21 - Fanny born at Rocky Mountain House in 1801, Samuel on the Peace River in 1804, and Emma north of Lake Winnipeg in 1806. Charlotte and the first 3 children were with David on the danger trip that established Kootenae House was established in 1807. For the remainder of David's Columbia enterprise Charlotte would stay east of the mountains seeing him only during his trips to meet with North West Company partners. When David was away she had the life of most Aboriginal wives of fur traders, managing the domestic life of the trading post while also hunting and gathering food, making moccasins and clothing. Two more children were born in the west - John at Boggy Hall in 1808, and Joshua at Fort Augustus in 1811.

In 1812 the Thompsons and their five children would leave the west to brave the demanding social world of the east. In September the couple took a step that few fur trader families had done, they baptized their children. On October 30th they renewed their 17-year union with a church marriage. At first the family lived in Montréal then moved to the loyalist settlement of Williamstown where as wealthy landowners Charlotte would have adapted to being a gentleman's wife and the lady of one of the best houses in the neighbourhood. Charlotte's sister Nancy, who also married a fur trader, would settle nearby only to be abandoned for a European woman. David remained steadfast to Charlotte.

Eight more children would be born in Upper and Lower Canada. In total ten of their thirteen children lived to adulthood, a significant achievement for that era.

Economic disaster struck with the collapse of the old North West Company and Thompson investments turned sour. He resorted to survey contracts that kept him away from the family for extended periods. The family would move back to Montréal and Charlotte's world would contract around her aging husband and their shrinking means. Eventually the children grew up and moved out of the home but it would be a long time before the children were able to help support David and Charlotte.

No image exists of Charlotte. A grandson remembered her as wiry, lively and energetic, but focused on her family. The couple spent most of their later years together either talking or gazing at stars.

David died on Feb 10, 1857 and Charlotte passed away 3 months later on May 4th. They are buried side by side in the Landell family plot in Mount Royal Cemetery, in Montréal.