

## She Had True Grit – The Incredible Journey Of Marie loway Dorion

Published on Monday, 14 October 2019, 9:32 AM  
I'm indebted to an article in the November/December 2018 Daughters of the American Revolution magazine, **American Spirit**, entitled: "**On The Oregon Trail**", by Bill Hudgins, for first bringing to my attention the now almost forgotten American hero, **Marie Dorion (ca. 1786-1850)**, and from which article I quote and paraphrase freely. Other sources from which I quote somewhat freely will be listed at the end.)

Marie loway Dorian (ca, 1786-1850) as she would have appeared during her long trek across the

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Published: Monday, 14 October 2019 15:32

By W.H. Lamb

Hits: 542



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her long trek across the early American West.

By W.H. Lamb

This unique 64 or 65-year-old woman was buried beneath the altar **inside** the old wood-logged Roman Catholic church in St. Louis, Oregon on Sept. 6, 1850. This was undoubtedly a great honor at the time. Marie Aioe Dorion Venier Toupin (as she is identified by Wikipedia), was known in her latter years by her fellow settlers in the Willamette Valley in Oregon as “**Madame Dorion**”, and it was said that “*she was looked up to and revered as an extraordinary woman, the oldest in the neighborhood, kindly, patient and devout*”. Those “extraordinary” accomplishments of Marie Dorion were well known to many Americans of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but except for a few history buffs, her name is virtually unknown today in the country that she helped open to the vast migration from east to west that occurred during most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to the Hudgins article, I had never heard of her.

When that old log church burned to the ground in 1880—including all of the burial records—and the new church was rebuilt in 1885, the exact location of Dorion’s grave was forgotten, and basically remains lost to this very day. In 2014, the Champoeg DAR Chapter in Newberg, Oregon placed and dedicated a memorial grave marker as near as could be determined to where Dorion was originally buried. Dorion’s life was

a mixture of challenges, adventures, and accomplishments, to such an extent that several books have been written about her over the years. Her life easily could be the subject of one or more “adventure” films. But as Mr. Hudgins remarked in his article, “*History is often a collection of firsts—as the saying goes, ‘No one remembers who came in second’.* So it is that **Sacagawea** is famous for crossing the continent with the Lewis and Clark expedition. Far fewer people know the story of **Marie Aioe Dorion, the second woman to make such a trek, and whose experience was far more gripping and perilous than Sacagawea’s.**”

Marie Ioway was born into the Ioway (or Ioway) Tribe of Native People in the Kansas/Missouri area, ca. 1786. Marie was considered as a “*Metis*” (half-breed), whose mother was a full Native American of the Ioway Tribe, and whose father was a French Canadian, whose name might have been ‘Laguivoise’. If she ever had an Ioway Tribal name, it was never recorded in the historical record. (I was unable to discover the meaning of her middle name—AIOE—which I suspect is a *transliteration* of the Anglicized word, “Ioway” or “Iowa” which may be why Marie’s middle name is often listed as “Ioway”.) With a French Canadian father, Marie is thought to have been baptized in the Roman Catholic Church as a child. She did give Christian names to her two sons, Jean Baptiste and Paul, by her first husband, Pierre Dorion, Jr., whom she is assumed to have married around 1806 (or earlier, according to some sources). Pierre’s father was also French Canadian, while his mother was a member of the Sioux Nation that lived near modern Yankton, South Dakota, which made him “*Metis*” also.

French Canadian men were considered at this time to have better and more respectful relations with Native American women than were American men of other European origins, and they often assimilated easily into their wives’ tribes. So it was that Pierre and Marie set up their homestead

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Hits: 542

near his mother's tribe in South Dakota. He made a living for his family in the fur trading business that was in its heyday at this time, and his wife often went with him on his buying and selling trips over large parts of what are now North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri, and Arkansas, and Marie became familiar with large areas of what would become the central U.S. within a few decades.

Eventually they moved to St. Louis, Missouri that was then the center of the fur trade, and better suited to Pierre's business. This was providential, because John Jacob Astor, the New York "fur magnate", decided at this time (around 1808) to expand his huge fur trading "empire" far beyond the Great Lakes and create a business that would dominate all of the existing trade in furs. He intended to extend it all the way to the Pacific Ocean, establishing a trading center at the mouth of the Columbia River in Oregon, and smaller fur trading posts inland along portions of the historic Lewis and Clark route of several years earlier. He was aware that the British fur trading companies would not welcome his presence in what they claimed was "their" area through their Canadian enterprises, the *North West Company* and the *Hudson's Bay Company*.

Astor recruited several business partners, some of which eventually sailed from New York City to their new Oregon trading center, named "Fort Astoria" in his honor, and some he directed to go overland from Missouri to Oregon, more or less following Lewis and Clark's trail, with some exceptions. In 1810 Astor hired 29-year-old Wilson Hunt, a St. Lewis merchant, to lead his overland expedition. (Some sources claim his name was William, and he lived in New Jersey). In any case, Astor instructed Hunt to hire the best scouts and translators for this journey to Oregon and pay them more than the competing Canadian fur trading companies paid. As an interpreter, he hired half Sioux Pierre Dorion, Jr, but to his dismay Dorion insisted that his wife, Marie, and their two small sons, were also to come on the journey with him. Marie initially refused her husband's request, and fled into the forest with her two sons. She returned the next day and agreed to accompany her husband to Oregon. Hunt agreed reluctantly, but since both of the Dorions were multilingual—knowing several Native American dialects in addition to sign language, English, French, and Spanish, he paid them a larger than usual advance. (Some sources indicate that Hunt hired the Dorions **after** his expedition was in its first winter camp beginning in November, 1810, during which time he returned to St. Louis and met and hired them).

In any case, Marie was the only woman on Hunt's expedition, which consisted of 62 men and her two young sons, ages 4 and 2, and may not have known at the time that she was pregnant. But she was. Hunt soon proved to be relatively incompetent as an expedition leader, and made disastrous decisions at times. His **first bad decision** was to not leave St. Lewis until early September, rather than in early spring like the Lewis and Clark expedition had done. Hunt's group barely made 400 miles before having to set up winter camp in November, 1810. They broke their winter camp on April 21, 1811 and resumed their trek westward. About a month later they came across three bedraggled Kentucky trappers who were the only survivors of a trapping party that had disappeared in 1810, all of whom except themselves, Hunt was informed, had been massacred by Blackfoot warriors. Hunt persuaded these three to accompany his expedition to Oregon. They in turn urged Hunt to disobey Astor's instructions to keep on the Missouri River and

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follows Lewis and Clark's trail as far as possible, and instead take what they claimed was an easier but more southern route overland to avoid another encounter with the Blackfoot tribe or other hostile groups of Native People.  
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Hits: 542

Hunt listened to the advice of these experienced trappers, and after only a few more safe days on the Missouri River, and worried about a possible attack by unfriendly Indians, he decided to change his route, thereby **ignoring Astor's specific instructions**. On June 12, 1811 they reached an Arikara Indian village at the mouth of Grand River, in what is now South Dakota. There they met the famous (at that time) *Sacagawea* and her husband, *Toussaint Charbonneau*, who were traveling with a rival fur trader's expedition. It's probable that Marie Dorion and Sacagawea met each other during Hunt's stop in the Arikara

village. It was reported that the two women didn't speak a common language and relied on their husbands to interpret for them. Thus, the paths of two of the most famous women of our early 19<sup>th</sup> century history crossed, if only briefly. I wonder what they talked about?

Hunt experienced more problems than he expected in obtaining horses and supplies for his expedition from the Arikaras. But on July 18, 1811 the expedition proceeded westward with 82 horses and 10 to 15 TONS of gear and trading goods. According to Bill Hudgins, "...the leaders of the party rode horses. The rest of the men shouldered heavy packs and walked. The Dorion children were allowed a horse, but Marie, who was three months pregnant at this point, walked, sometimes carrying her younger son. Members of the expedition would later recall her toughness and stamina."

After only one week, Hunt stopped for two weeks at a Cheyenne village to buy more horses, which he used not only for pack animals but which were killed and used for food throughout the trek, forcing him to be constantly on the lookout for new horses to buy (or in one case, to steal from a group of Shoshone Indians). He pushed off again in early August, and his expedition went smoothly as they trekked from South Dakota into Wyoming and toward the Big Horn Mountains. Coming to a large river (today's Snake River), the three Kentucky hunters assured them that it would take them all the way to the Columbia River, their goal. Making **another bad decision**, Hunt built 15 large dugout canoes and left ALL of their horses with friendly Shoshones, and shoved off down the Snake River in the middle of October, 1811, with winter swiftly closing in on them.

Unfortunately, these Kentuckians were unfamiliar with the severe rapids on the Snake River, which often narrowed into gorges full of harrowing swift water. The party often had to portage (carry) their canoes and supplies along the high bluffs above the river's banks. After only a week or so, a major calamity struck, as one of the canoes smashed into a rock as it attempted to run a dangerous rapid, killing one man and washing away many needed supplies of food. After scouting ahead, Hunt declared that the Snake River was not navigable. Winter was almost upon them, and food and supplies were getting scarce. Hunt split his expedition into two (some sources say three) groups, abandoned his canoes, and with groups on both sides of the Snake, they continued on foot. By this time Marie was about 8 months pregnant, but it was later reported, "*She travelled*

## She Had True Grit – The Incredible Journey Of Marie loway Dorion

without a mule and kept pace with the rest of the expedition.”

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Bill Huggins continues: “In his log, Hunt wrote the group ‘was now made up of 32 white men, a woman eight months pregnant, her two children, and three Indians. We had only five puny horses to feed us during our trip over the mountains.” As her time got close, Hunt gave Marie one of the horses to ride, and on Dec. 30, 1811 she went into labor at a Shoshone winter encampment near today’s Baker City, Oregon, and gave birth to a son. She and Pierre told the party to go on ahead. **Incredibly, Marie and Pierre caught up with Hunt’s group the next day.** However, due likely to exposure or to the deprivation of food that Marie suffered, her baby died after only about a week. A few weeks later, on Feb. 15, 1812 Hunt’s party finally arrived at Fort Astoria in Oregon.

Of the original 62 members of Hunt’s expedition (some sources claim 60), 45 made it to their goal, failing to blaze a dependable trail to Oregon. But they did discover and document the South Pass through the difficult Rocky Mountains through which large numbers of future settlers would later trek along what became the Oregon, California, and Mormon Trails. A significant portion of Hunt’s route did become part of the famous Oregon Trail, so their efforts were not totally in vain.

### INTO THE WILDERNESS AGAIN

With Marie and Pierre and their two sons at their trek’s destination, you’d think that’s the end of the story. But you’d be wrong. By the time that Hunt’s expedition arrived at Ft. Astoria, it had been well established by those who had arrived by ship and, despite some hostility and violence from some of the local groups of Native People, they began a fur-trapping business network among the area’s tribes. The arrival of Hunt’s group boosted everyone’s morale and enabled the partners to send a number of their party up the Columbia River to establish trading camps in the Oregon wilderness. But at this time, President James Madison declared war on England, and it was November, 1812 before the Ft. Astoria group found out about the hostilities. Fearing that the English would send a warship to take their settlement by force, they determined to leave and return to St. Lewis. However, by the summer of 1813 the British had not arrived at Ft. Astoria, and the “Astorians” made a deal with local Canadian trappers to spend the rest of 1813 and early 1814 trapping with them, and then leave in the spring.

Several “Astorian” trapping parties set out into the interior of the Oregon wilderness, with the Dorions joining a group on the Snake River in southwest Idaho, near the mouth of the Boise River. In October, 1813 Astor’s partners sold Ft. Astoria to the North West Company. On December 12, 1813 a British warship, *Raccoon*, arrived at Ft. Astoria. Its’ captain took formal possession of the property, renamed it Fort George, and raised the British flag. The Astorians were allowed to spend the winter months freely with the new British owners, and in early April, 1814 they departed in groups, including one group that planned to follow the North West Company’s inland waterway network back to civilization. As this group approached the mouth of the Walla Walla River they heard a child’s voice calling from behind them—“Stop—Stop” in French. Three canoes joined the Astorian flotilla, who were amazed to see Marie Dorion and her two sons in one of them.

## She Had True Grit – The Incredible Journey Of Marie Ioway Dorion

The famed author, Washington Irving, wrote a book titled, "**Astoria**" in 1835 which told Marie's tale. As Irving wrote, "**she had a story to tell.**" Paraphrasing from Bill Hudgins' article, Marie told them that she and Pierre and their trapping party had built two crude camps on the Snake River. Irving's story was based on an account given by Alexander Ross, one of the group that had previously left Astoria (now Ft. George). Other accounts of this event differ in some details, but according to Ross, sometime in early January, 1814, Pierre Dorion and a few other men left their base camp (on the Snake River) to check traps at the other camp while Marie, their two sons, and the rest of the men stayed behind. Around Jan 10, a friendly Shoshone came to Marie and the others and told them that a band of hostile Shoshones had attacked the other camp, had burned it down, and were on their way to do the same to Marie and her group.

Ever courageous, Marie mounted a horse with her two sons and rode off ALONE into the wilderness to try to find her husband. Unfortunately Marie got lost in the forest and ran into a winter blizzard. It took her three days to finally get to her husband's camp. Sadly, her husband and all of the men except one had been killed and scalped. She struggled to take this wounded man back to the other camp, but he died en route. When she finally arrived at her base camp she discovered, to her horror, that it had also been attacked and burned down and all of the men killed and mutilated.

Marie decided that her only chance to survive with her two sons was to return to Ft. Astoria (now Ft. George), a very long trip in the middle of winter. She scrounged the ruins of her camp for all the food and fur pelts and other survival items she could salvage, put her sons on the horse and started walking west. Nine days later, as she struggled through deep snow in the Blue Mountains she halted her journey. Marie killed her horse, smoked its meat, and built a primitive shelter out of the fur pelts and from the hide of her horse she had butchered and smoked there in the wilderness. After **53 days** surviving in this crude shelter, and surviving on horse meat plus squirrels and rats she caught, she decided that the weather had improved sufficiently to resume her trek back to the British fort.

Marie Dorion struggled on for around 15 days, and had run out of food and almost out of her will to persevere. Barely able to walk, she staggered out of the Blue Mountains and saw smoke rising in the distance. Now desperate, Marie dug a snow shelter for her two sons, wrapped them tightly in her buffalo robe, and staggered and crawled all alone to seek help and save her sons. She discovered that the smoke was from a camp of friendly Walla Walla Indians, who took Marie in and went back and rescued her two sons. A few days later, she joined up with that canoe flotilla that had left the Astorian site.

Now a widow with two young children, those Astorians took Marie and her sons to Ft. Okanogan, a Canadian fur trapping outpost now in today's Washington state. Marie lived there for several years, and in 1819 she and French Canadian fur trapper, Louis Venier, had a daughter, Marguerite. But disaster struck her again when a group of hostile natives killed Venier, leaving her a widow for the second time. Later, Marie met a French Canadian interpreter, Jean Baptiste Toupin, at Fort Nez Perce, a North West Company trading post. Jean and Marie had two children,

## She Had True Grit – The Incredible Journey Of Marie loway Dorian

Francis born in 1825, and Marie, born in 1827. In 1841 they joined a party that eventually settled in the French Prairie area of the Willamette Valley, near present day Salem, Oregon. Her neighbors called her, “*an impressive and admirable woman.*” Marie and Jean were married on July 19, 1841 and lived until her death in St. Louis, Oregon, on Sept. 5, 1850. The next day, as I stated at the beginning of this article, she was buried under the altar of that old log Catholic church.



**/Marie loway Dorian (ca. 1786-1850) near the end of her life.**

Marie Dorion’s story became very well known throughout her lifetime through the published recollections of Astoria’s pioneers and Washington Irving’s book, “***Astoria***”. Now many American know, once again, the impressive story of this stalwart and courageous Native American/French Canadian early pioneer who helped to build America!

### SOURCES:

1. ***On the Oregon Trail***, by Bill Hudgins; an article in the Dec./Jan. 2018 edition of **American**

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- Published in **Spirit**, official magazine of the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution;  
Monday, 14 October 2014
2. The blog: **History of American Women: Native American on the Astor Expedition**, by  
By W.H. Lamb  
John Clymer;
- Hits: 542
3. Article: **Marie Aioe Dorion**, published by **WikipediA**;
  4. Article: **Imagine You Are Marie Dorion**, by Lenora Good, from her book: **Madame Dorion—Her Journey To The Oregon Country**, published by S & H Publishing, 2014.  
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