

Michael Ryder

(1828-1877)

By Janice Mattson Gallant

Introduction

My great great grandfather Michael Ryder was born in 1828 in Ireland, and died in 1877 in St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada. For many years, most of our information about him was based on a family history written by his grandson (and my mother's uncle) Paul Daggett (1893-1973).

In recent years, on-line research has yielded much new information about Michael Ryder, including dozens of newspaper articles from his time in St. Catharines. Also, the Internet has allowed email contact with a descendant of one of Michael's brothers, so we now have information about the extended Ryder family. Paul Daggett's account was invaluable in facilitating this on-line research, but the new information shows that Paul's account is not 100% accurate in all details. As with many such family histories, the truth was romanticized and human failings were omitted.

What follows is my attempt to piece together Michael Ryder's life story, using what I consider to be the most credible pieces of information about him. A warning to his descendants: Michael Ryder was an illiterate alcoholic who got into physical fights, beat his wife, and spent time in jail. The newspaper articles also show that he was articulate, witty, even charming. Another thing that clearly shines through is his friendly relationship with the blacks of St. Catharines.

Early years (1828-1845)



Michael Ryder was born in 1828 in Newport, County Mayo on the west coast of Ireland. His father was Daniel Ryder (1780?-1867); the name of his mother has been lost. Michael had at least 4 brothers – Patrick, John, Martin, and James – and one sister, Bridget.

Little is known of Michael's early life. In 1855 – about 10 years after Michael had left County Mayo – his father Daniel appears in "Griffith's Valuation" as a tenant on a rural property, less than 2 acres about a mile northeast of Newport.

All of Michael's known siblings eventually left Ireland. Patrick moved to England; John moved to Louisville,

Kentucky; Bridget moved to Kenosha, Wisconsin; and Martin moved to Chicago, Illinois. The ultimate whereabouts of James are unknown.



From a map in "Griffith's Valuation" in 1855. Daniel Ryder lived on the plot labeled "15".

Service in the British army (1845-1855)

The Potato Famine began in 1845 when Michael Ryder was 17 years old; County Mayo was hit very hard. Michael enlisted in the British army in 1845, quite possibly motivated by the Famine. He served for about 10 years, discharged in August 1855. His military record shows that he served in Gibraltar, Bermuda, and possibly Canada (the hand written record is difficult to read). Years later, Michael may have been referring to his time in Bermuda when he was quoted in a St. Catharines newspaper:

"I've carried me knapsack all over the worlt, since the days I 'listed in the swate town av Nayna... Me

ridgment was so long quathered in the West Indies, that every wan av us became natives av the sile... an' wouldn't I be there to-day, livin in me grate house an' ridin in me coach-an-four, if the haythens had something besides their dirty laygur beer to drink."

– St. Catharines Daily Times, 14 Mar 1870

“The swate town av Nayna” where Michael enlisted is likely Nenagh in County Tipperary.

Michael’s discharge record from the British army in August 1855 notes that he suffered from “Acute catarrhal ophthalmia of both eyes. Not prevalent. From severe cold.” The discharge record describes his character as “Indifferent”; the character of most of his peers was described as “Good”.

United States (1856-1862)

Michael Ryder is thought to have entered the United States via New York in September 1856. According to Paul Daggett, Michael met Rose Joyce (1837-1885) while on board the ship to America. Per Paul, they either married during the voyage or after reaching this country. No record of either Michael’s or Rose’s entry to the U.S. or their marriage has been found, so it is not clear when or how they met or got married. Paul Daggett goes on to say that Michael and Rose went to Louisville, Kentucky, where Michael’s brother John owned a “teaming outfit”. Their son John J. “Jack” Ryder was born in Kentucky in 1860. A daughter Mary was also born in Kentucky, but died during infancy.

Editor’s note: Paul Daggett states that John J. Ryder was born in Kentucky in 1863.

This is not possible because Michael started appearing in the St. Catharines newspapers

in 1862. I am using the 1871 Canadian census as a reference for birth years for Michael and Rose's children. John J. Ryder's age was reported as 11 in the 1871 census.

In September 1861, Michael enlisted in the Union army, specifically the Fifth Kentucky Infantry aka The Louisville Legion. The Fifth Kentucky saw action at Shiloh in April 1862, one of the first bloody battles of the Civil War. Michael's Civil War records show that he had deserted by October 1862. He must have deserted by June 1862, because that is when he makes his first appearance in the St. Catharines newspapers.

Desertion was common during the Civil War, especially on the Union side. Though Michael's Civil War records show that he deserted, they also include the note "Distinguished Service". It is tempting to speculate that after experiencing the carnage at Shiloh, the 34 year old British army veteran decided to desert the Union army, and move to Canada with his wife and young son. Years later Michael may have been referring to his Civil War service when he sang:

*"Och, wanst I ne'er did think I'd be
In this dejected shate,
Like a poor phorlorn effigy
Bowed down by fwhiskey straight
The burds that flutter an the tree
Wid terror strike me hart,
Each sthar I see alarms me
Och, fwhy did I desart?"*

– St. Catharines Daily Times, 21 May 1870

It is not clear why the Ryders decided to move to St. Catharines. The decision may have been influenced by Rose's brother John Joyce, who was a laborer living in St. Catharines.

According to Michael and Rose's granddaughter Mary Ryder Erhard (1891-1981), Michael was a "slave runner" in the underground railroad. There is probably no way to determine the truth of this charming story, but it is clear from the St. Catharines newspaper articles that Michael had a cordial relationship with the blacks of St. Catharines. According to Paul Daggett: "(Michael Ryder) was violently opposed to all forms of tyranny and oppression; this explains his motivation in helping slaves reach Canada and freedom of a sort. Possibly this experience may have prompted moving the family to St. Catharines, Ontario." It is interesting to note that St. Catharines was the final terminus on the underground railroad for hundreds of slaves, as well as home to Harriet Tubman from 1852 to 1857.

Children

Before moving on to the years in St. Catharines, I want to digress briefly regarding Michael and Rose's children. The Ryder family grew to include five children: John (born in 1860), Michael (born in 1862), Agnes (born in 1867), Anne (my great grandmother, born in 1869) and Rose (born in 1873). At least three other children – James, Catherine and Mary – died in infancy.

Young Michael, born in 1862, was probably a nephew or other relative, not a son. When he died in 1914, his death certificate identified his father as "John Ryder"; the informant was John J. Ryder, so the information is probably reliable. A plausible scenario is that back in Louisville in 1862, Michael's brother John and his wife had a baby, but the mother died. Perhaps Rose had recently lost a baby and was receptive to this motherless child. And so in 1862 Michael and Rose took their 2 year old son John and infant Michael to St. Catharines where they raised Michael as one of their own.

St. Catharines – Part 1 (1862-1870)

During their early years in St. Catharines, the Ryders lived in a "shanty" on Division Street in an area known as "The Patch", a rundown part of St. Catharines. During these years, Michael appeared frequently in the local court and jail records, as well as occasionally in the newspapers. None of these appearances was positive:

- 25 Jun 1862 -- Assault. Fined \$10.
- 15 Mar 1865 -- Drunk and disorderly. Fined \$2.
- 4 Dec 1865 -- Beating his wife.
- Jan 1866 -- Released from jail after serving 30 days for assault and battery
- Jul 1866 -- Released from jail after serving 3 months for assault and battery
- 21 Feb 1867 -- Michael Ryder charged Mrs. Judge with demolishing his gate. "Michael ... testified to Mrs. Judge's appetite for ardent spirits, but failed to prove his accusation touching the gate."
- Aug 1867 -- Released from jail after serving 21 days for assault and battery
- 21 Aug 1867 -- Charged by Nathaniel Patterson, with striking him. Fined \$5 or 25 days jail.
- 30 Jun 1868 -- Charged by Daird Powers with using abusive language and calling him foul names. Fined \$1 or 6 days.
- 1 Aug 1868 -- Rose Ryder charged William Barrett "with using obscene and abusive language towards her on the public streets." Barrett was fined \$2.

- 7 Sep 1868 -- Michael Ryder charged Julia Barrett and her son James with setting fire to his house. The charges were dismissed.
- 20 Oct 1868 -- Michael Ryder charged John Courtney with assault and battery. The charge was dismissed, "which exasperated Ryder into using foul language, when he was fined \$2."
- 18 Sep 1869 -- Abusive language. \$2 fine.
- 27 Jan 1870 -- Michael Ryder charged James Freeman and Anthony Garrity "wid stealing me bottle uv whiskey". The case was dismissed.

In the jail records, prisoners were classified as to their Moral Habits (Temperate or Intemperate), and whether they could read and write (Neither, Imperfectly, or Well). Not surprisingly, Michael was identified as Intemperate, as were most of the other prisoners. Like about half of the other prisoners, he could neither read nor write.

Michael Ryder became a well known figure in The Patch, referred to in the newspaper as "Michael Ryder, the notorious" in 1868.

St. Catharines – Part 2 (1870-1877)

Michael's appearances in the newspaper took a more positive turn in 1870. For one thing, the newspapers began referring to him as "Baron von Ryder". The origin of this name is unknown, but there is a humorous quality to these references, for instance this item:

On Saturday evening last, the famous Baron Von Ryder went around Town practicing the fine art of paper-hanging on the dead-walls and fences, and having completed the job to his own satisfaction, rested from his labors in the enjoyment of a "noggin av speerits." Next morning, however, the citizens were amused to find all the bills turned upside down, but firmly stuck on to the walls. The Baron who has been writing poetry on the destruction of Sanacherib, avers that:

"The dimon av fun schwept by on the blast

And turn thim upside down as he passed."

He is repeating the work to-day, having first sharpened his vision by a copious inhalation of Paddy's eye-water. It is hoped that the antics of this mischief maker will not prevent a large attendance at the lecture to-morrow night which the bill announced.

– St. Catharines Daily Times, 21 Feb 1870

During the spring of 1870, there is a wonderful series of articles in the St. Catharines Daily Times. Michael was a regular at Police Court proceedings, even when he wasn't directly involved. For instance, this item:

The noble Baron Von Ryder and his beloved Brudder Payne were early at the Justice Shop this morning. "Shure 'tis meself that loiks to be to the fore, fwhin the fun is goin' on," remarked the Baron. "Faix I'd rather see a naygur in the crib than go widout me bithurs av a mornin."

"Ise ob 'pinion dat de niggah is too ophten put in de fence," retorted Brudder Payne, with a dark frown of injured dignity mantling his noble brow. "'Spose dey'll soon be sayin dat niggahs ought to climb de pole, and showdar -- like de "Com'n Man' does."

The Baron was thunderstruck at the "impudence" of this speech, and was just beginning a terrific volley of Tipperary wild-fire, when the Beak was heard approaching, and silence reigned supreme. (ed note: "The Beak" was police magistrate Thomas Burns)

– St. Catharines Daily Times, 10 Mar 1870

Things took a sad turn later that year, when Michael assaulted Rose:

Yesterday afternoon, the aristocratic neighborhood of Upper Division street (we mean the "Patch,") was disturbed considerably by a friendly discussion, "wid shticks," between Mr. and Mrs. Michael Ryder - said discussion having taken place on the lawn in front of their princely abode. During the progress of the discussion, Mr. Ryder merely intending to give emphasis to his remarks, accidentally allowed his "shtick" to fall rather too heavily on the well shaped head dress and auburn tresses of his lovely spouse. Soon, distressing to relate, the beautiful face, alabaster neck and costly attire, were stained by the crimson flood that poured from the wounds caused by the bit of timber already alluded to. Mr. Ryder, in an agony of remorse and dread at the unfortunate turn events had suddenly taken, exclaimed, in agonizing tones: --

"O willihoo! willihoo! -- wirra! wirra! Biddy, acushla, are ye kilt? Bad cess to the dirty shillela! Sorr a time will I ever touch it again." Then he cast the unlucky cause of the catastrophe to the ground, caught the fair partner of his joys and woes to his manly bosom, strained her in a fond and convulsive embrace, imprinted a kiss on her ruby lips, laid her tenderly on the sward, and then, in company with the Chief of Police, who in the interval had opportunely arrived on the spot, rushed frantically down towards the Lock-up, there to pass the time in gloomy reflections on his domestic sorrows.

The faithful Chief, who took to him like a friend of his youth, poured into the ear of the disconsolate Ryder a plentiful stream of consolation for his afflictions. The surgeon who was speedily in attendance on the fair sufferer, has removed a heavy burden of anxiety from our heart by informing us that - thanks to her abstemious habits (she drinks nothing stronger than Stinson's best), fine constitution and (this spoken sotto voce) thick skull - Mrs. Ryder will probably recover.

– St. Catharines Daily Times, 7 Sep 1870

Michael was found "guilty of common assault" and "sentenced to the common jail two months at hard labor". The following March, he was sentenced to 4 months in jail for being drunk, disorderly, and assaulting Police Chief Montgomery. But after that, he seems to have mended his ways, at least for a while. For the next three and a half years, there is no record of criminal charges against Michael Ryder. In January 1873, he was "repeatedly applauded" for his role as "Deacon Perry" in a local production of "Uncle Tom's Cabin". He is occasionally cited in newspaper articles during this period, for instance:

"Fwhat with whate and mate so high," says the Baron Von Ryder, "a boy can't afford to drink nothing betther nor cider."

– *St. Catharines Daily Times, 6 Aug 1873*

But all was not well in the Ryder household. Perhaps the saddest newspaper article appeared during this period:

Rose Ryder was charged by P.C. O'Keefe, with being drunk and disorderly. He found her last night about 10 o'clock lying in the mud in rear of the Saw Works, with an infant about 3 months old in her arms. She was discharged owing to a flaw in the information. (ed note: infant likely Rose, born Aug 1873)

– *St. Catharines Evening Journal, 4 Dec 1873*

And Michael still had his occasional run-ins with the law. In September 1874, he was sent to jail "for taking home a horse belonging to Mr. Thomas McCarthy without asking permission." Three months later, he was sent to prison for two months for assaulting his neighbors.

Sometime during this period, the Ryders moved from Division Street to a house on Cherry Street, today considered a swanky area of older homes. This house was probably a nice step up for the Ryder family. Unfortunately, the Cherry Street house burned down in 1875, as recorded in the following series of items from the *St. Catharines Daily Times*:

27 Jul 1875: Just as we were going to press an alarm of fire was given. The fire was found to be on Cherry street, corner of Trafalgar. The buildings burned up to this writing were a frame house occupied by Mike Ryder, and a number of out-buildings in the rear of J.V. Lepper's boarding house. The damage will not be very great. Fortunately the adjoining buildings were saved.

29 Jul 1875: Mr. Michael Ryder, who was burned out at the recent fire, says his losses were very heavy. He lost all his clothing, beds, and other things too numerous to mention, and hadn't a dollar insurance on them. Mike feels down in the mouth and says he has now to commence his life over again. He says \$50 wouldn't cover his losses.

9 Aug 1875: Mr. Mike Ryder wishes to return his sincere thanks for the kindness he has received from the people of St. Catharines since he was burned out. He says he had no idea that so much generosity and kindness existed here.

A few months later, Michael had a close call:

An unfortunate man named Michael Ryder had a narrow escape from being frozen to death yesterday morning. He lay in the ditch on George street for about three hours, in a helpless state of intoxication and but for the compassionate assistance rendered by three or four kind-hearted men in that neighborhood, Michael would certainly have suffered the "extreme penalty" of his incurable appetite for whiskey.

– *St. Catharines Daily Times, 1 Dec 1875*

Michael had probably been celebrating the birth of his daughter Catherine on November 29. There is a gap in the availability of St. Catharines newspapers from 1875 until 1891, so this disturbing article is the last newspaper article about the Ryders. Michael died in 1877 in a drowning accident; he was 49 years old. Rose died in 1885 at the age of 48. The death record shows her occupation as Widow and cause of death as "found dead in bed". Michael and Rose, and infants James and Catherine, are buried in Victoria Lawn Cemetery in St. Catharines.

By the time Rose died, her sons John and Michael were already living in St. Paul, Minnesota. They helped arrange for their sisters to move to St. Paul. Rose, the youngest, was only 12 years old, and lived with Michael's sister Bridget Philbin and her family in Kenosha, Wisconsin for a while before joining her older siblings in St. Paul by 1889.

John married Wilhelmina Giese, and worked at newspapers for many years. He had a brief political career. Michael married Jennie Wischek and worked as a hack driver in St. Paul. He had a troubled life, dying in 1914. Agnes married train brakeman John De Witt, and raised five children in Nebraska. Anne married deputy U.S. marshal William Smith Daggett and raised five children in Minneapolis, including Dorothy Ann "Billie" Daggett, future wife of Edward "Ted" Wild. Rose never married, and worked for many years as a domestic in St. Paul and Minneapolis.