

“My own grandfather was at her funeral,  
and it was from his lips that I first heard the  
tremendous story of his great-grandmother.”<sup>1</sup>



# Marie-Henriette LeJeune (Granny) Ross

## 1762-1860

More than a century and a half after her fabled life and final breath, Granny Ross inspires admiration and competition for bragging rights. Midwife, healer, fierce homesteading pioneer—she’s the kind of woman you want your great-great-great-grandmother to be.

Most of what we know about this medical trailblazer has been passed down through family stories and Cape Breton folklore. The facts are fuzzy and some tall tales have been told. We know that her parents were Acadian. Her ancestors were probably both French and Mi’kmaq.<sup>2</sup> For a time, she was thought to have been born on Acadian soil (now Nova Scotia) before the legendary fall of Louisbourg, making her 117 years old when she died.

In fact, she was born in Rochefort, France, in 1762—a tiny political refugee. Her ancestors had been among the first French colonists to inhabit the new world in the turbulent century before her birth. Her Acadian parents were deported back to France after the Fortress of Louisbourg fell to the British in 1758, four years before she was born.

The LeJeune family longed for the life they had loved in Acadia. They returned when Marie-Henriette was a child, only to be deported back to France a few years later. Undaunted, they made the transatlantic journey again in 1784 when Marie-Henriette was a young married woman.

According to legend, she brought with her from France a sharp knife and a vial containing a serum she would later use to save her community from an epidemic of smallpox. Whether or not this is true, she undoubtedly carried an instinct for survival and a capacity for healing.

Marie-Henriette was twice widowed before the age of 26. Her first husband, a much older widower with children, died in a drowning accident. Her second husband, a cousin, drowned as well. Her third marriage was to James Ross, a sturdy Irish-Scotsman. It was an improbable union of opposing forces: Marie-Henriette LeJeune was devoutly Catholic and proudly Acadian; James Ross was an English-speaking Protestant who had served in the British army. Remarkably the marriage worked. They agreed that their sons would be

1 \ Local historian Elva E. Jackson, in *Cape Breton’s Magazine*, Issue 37, 1984, 41.

2 \ For a history of the LeJeunes in Acadia, see Roland F. Surette’s *Métis/Acadian Heritage 1604 to 2004*, Nova Scotia: Eastern Woodland Métis Nation, 2004.

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The roots and leaves of the pitcher plant have been used in traditional medicine for centuries.

raised Protestant and their daughters Roman Catholic. Marie-Henriette may have given birth to as many as 11 children. Some sources name only four. Two children are known to have survived; a son and a daughter.

The LeJeune-Ross family lived on 200 acres of land at Little Bras d'Or for several years, farming and trading with their French, Gaelic, English, and Mi'kmaw neighbours. This is where Marie-Henriette first distinguished herself as a medical miracle-worker. It is thought that she learned many of her healing skills from a Mi'kmaw grandmother, and that she combined traditional medicine with European practices. But she went further—experimenting with what she found in the fields and forests. She gathered natural ingredients to make teas, poultices, and other cures—sometimes walking dozens of kilometres on rough trails to find what she needed.

A smallpox outbreak tested her skills and the trust of her patients. Smallpox is almost unheard of today, thanks to modern vaccines. But in centuries past it was a highly feared disease. Victims would become tired and feverish, then break out in blisters over their entire body. The clear fluid of the blisters would turn to pus, a grim warning to those who were not yet infected. People were often too frightened to tend to the sick.

Marie-Henriette rose to the challenge. She swiftly organized a tight community program, isolating victims in a log cabin and vaccinating the healthy. She might have used the serum she is said to have carried from France; or she might have made her own, taking a scraping of pus from a victim then transferring it into a healthy person through a scratch lanced into an arm or shoulder. It is likely that she was immune to the smallpox virus, possibly because of earlier exposure to a milder strain of cowpox. But Marie-Henriette had only faith for reassurance, and keen observation to guide her. The science of disease transmission was unknown at the time.



Around 1800, the family relocated to a large tract of land in the Margaree Valley and built a homestead that still stands today. James's three brothers established farms nearby, and relatives of Marie-Henriette followed in time. It was an eclectic community of diverse cultures. Marie-Henriette became the community's most trusted medical practitioner for childbirth, end-of-life care, and all points in between. As the years passed and the babies of the valley had babies of their own, Marie-Henriette became "Harriet" the midwife, and then Granny Ross, the folk hero.

Granny Ross, it seems, was as fearless outdoors as she was in the sick room. She is said to have killed two menacing bears in her lifetime, dispatching one with a shotgun and another with a four-foot shovel. When she travelled in the woods at night, she carried a pine-pitch torch to light her way and a loaded musket for protection. She delighted in long walks, trekking up to 100 kilometres across snow and ice with her husband to fetch supplies from Little Bras d'Or.

We have no record of the ingredients that Marie-Henriette used, but we can make some reasonable guesses. They probably included pitcher plant for smallpox; arnica for boils, bruises, rashes, and sprains; wild ginger to bring on menstruation; sumac to prevent scurvy; purple coneflower (echinacea) to reduce fever and boost the immune system; and many other flowers, roots, grasses, barks, and mosses.

James Ross died in 1825, leaving Marie-Henriette a widow for the third time. He was buried on their land. She remained on the homestead, continuing to walk long distances to attend births, heal the sick, and comfort the dying. In later years, she grew blind and could no longer travel on her own. Ever resourceful, she recruited family members to carry her to her patients—using a sled in winter and an adapted wheelbarrow when the snow melted. Or so it is said.

She died in 1860 at the age of 98 and is buried on the grounds of St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church in North East Margaree.

Separating facts from fiction in the Granny Ross legend may be impossible now. What is certain is that the legend itself serves up a powerful tonic for many proud descendants. If you have roots in Cape Breton, you may have ancestors who were brought into this world by her steady hands. Regardless of your bloodlines, you can claim Marie-Henriette as a granny in spirit if you strive to live as she did, with spunk and compassion.

## And now ...

**Dr. Noni MacDonald** is a modern-day medical pioneer, the first pediatrician in Canada to be certified in pediatric infectious diseases, the first female dean of a Canadian medical school, and now an internationally respected teacher and consultant, based in Halifax. Noni and Granny Ross have a lot in common.

"Her story is truly remarkable," says Noni. "She actually understood viral disease transmission at a time when viruses weren't even identified. She would have had no idea that microbes even existed. But she applied principles that we now use every day to control outbreaks of infectious diseases."

Noni points out that Granny Ross succeeded by building trust. "She was really very good at community engagement, which is now one of the fundamental things we recognize we need if we're going to improve health in a community. She did it beautifully—and this was 200 years ago!"

Granny Ross contributed admirably in her time, and left a legacy that keeps on giving. "Nova Scotia has the highest percentage of people over 100 by population in Canada," Noni adds. "So Granny Ross dying at 98 so many years ago—that suggests her gene pool helped to set the conditions."

Thanks, Marie-Henriette, for the genes and for the story of a long life well lived.

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[Note: This article contains errors corrected by the author in her 1988 article, listed above.]

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