

ALEXIS ST. MARTIN COMMEMORATED

Following its twenty-sixth annual meeting at Laval University in Quebec, the Canadian Physiological Society on the ninth of June 1962 unveiled a tablet to the memory of Alexis Bidagan dit St. Martin, Dr. William Beaumont's patient. The Society thus brought to fruition a project which had begun in 1957 when, at the suggestion of Dr. Charles A. Mitchell, professor of bacteriology at the University of Ottawa, a committee was formed to locate the grave of Alexis St. Martin and mark it with a commemorative stone or plaque. The members of the committee were Drs. E. H. Bensley, Chairman, Roméo Boucher, Guy E. Joron, Charles A. Mitchell, Eugène Robillard, James A. F. Stevenson, and Lloyd G. Stevenson. The committee has remained unchanged from 1957 to the present except that Dr. Robillard replaced Dr. Bensley as chairman in 1960.

The first task was to determine the exact site of the grave. It was known that Alexis St. Martin had died on June 24, 1880 at St. Thomas de Joliette, a small village in the Province of Quebec adjoining Joliette about 40 miles northeast of Montreal. In the record of burial his age at death was stated to be 83 years.

Committee members visited the priests of the Parish of St. Thomas and were able to verify in the parish registers that Alexis St. Martin had indeed been buried in the cemetery there on June 28, 1880. However, the churchyard contained no tombstone bearing the name of an Alexis St. Martin dying in 1880. The parish records were of no further help. There was no record of sale of a burial plot since it was not the custom at that time to sell plots, the churchyard cemetery being available to all families in the parish.

The oldest parishioners of St. Thomas remembered Alexis but did not know where he was buried. Finally descendants were traced and in particular two granddaughters, Madame Angéline Thibault and Madame Adéline Duval. The elder of the two, Madame Angéline Thibault was seven years old when her grandfather died. She now lives in Montreal, but kindly consented to come to St. Thomas to identify the site of Alexis' grave. She stated that there was common agreement within the family on the site of the grave and pointed out a spot in the churchyard near the west end of the south wall of the church. This dear old lady, who had very discreetly whispered this secret, later confided that she had only done so after much hesitation. On the wall of the church facing this spot the Canadian Physiological Society has erected a bronze tablet.

It is interesting to note in passing that the committee succeeded in adding three years to St. Martin's life. Thanks to the help of the Institut Généalogique Drouin of Montreal, a copy of Alexis' birth certificate was obtained. This states that Alexis Bideguin (a variant of Bidagan) was born at Berthier the 18th of April 1794 and not in 1797 as was previously concluded from the record of his death. When he died Alexis was therefore 86 and not 83 as has been thought. He was the son of Joseph Pierre Bidagan (or Bideguin) and Marie Des Anges Angélique Guibeau, both of whom were born in Canada. Alexis' grandfather,



Près d'ici repose
Alexis Bidagan dit St-Martin
né à Berthier le 18 avril 1794
décédé à St-Thomas le 24 juin 1880

Patient du Dr. William Beaumont à la suite d'un accident dont il fut victime à Michillimackinac le 6 juin 1822, il consentit à se soumettre aux expériences scientifiques de son célèbre médecin.

Vous qui lisez cette inscription, offrez, en souvenir de reconnaissance, une prière fervente pour Alexis St-Martin et tous les malades qui, en se prêtant aux exigences de la recherche scientifique, contribuèrent au soulagement de leurs frères et à l'avancement de la Science.

Société Canadienne de Physiologie,

juin 1962.

In Memory of
Alexis Bidagan dit St. Martin
Born April 18, 1794 at Berthier
Died June 24, 1880 at St. Thomas
Buried June 28, 1880 in an unmarked grave close by this tablet

Grievously injured by the accidental discharge of a shotgun on June 6, 1822 at Michillimackinac, Michigan, he made a miraculous recovery under the care of Dr. William Beaumont, Surgeon in the United States Army. After his wounds had healed, he was left with an opening into the stomach and became the subject of Dr. Beaumont's pioneering work on the physiology of digestion.

Through his affliction he served all humanity.

Erected by The Canadian Physiological Society,

June 1962.

Pierre Martin Bidagan was the first of the Bidagans to arrive in Canada. The surname St. Martin most probably comes from his middle name, Martin. The grandfather had come from Masparraute, a small community in the southwest corner of France which at that time was part of the diocese of Bayonne in the former province of Navarre.

The ceremony of unveiling the tablet took place on the afternoon of June 9, 1962 and brought together members of the Canadian Physiological Society, many parishioners of St. Thomas and a large number of the St. Martin family - all descendants of Alexis, several of whom had come from the United States for the occasion. Having signed the Golden Book of the parish the members were welcomed by Mr. Isadore St. Martin, great grandson of Alexis who represented the mayor of St. Thomas. Dr. Edouard Pagé, recent past president of the Canadian Physiological Society, reminded the gathering that the Society and in particular Dr. Charles A. Mitchell, deserved credit for having initiated this undertaking. Dr. Pagé drew attention to the presence of distinguished guests in the audience: Colonel Joseph R. Blair, representing the Surgeon General of the United States Army; Mr. Frederick G. Kilgour, curator of the medical library of Yale University; Dr. Cecil Pace, representing the Canada Department of Health and Welfare; Dr. Louis Poirier, representing l'Association Canadienne-Française pour l'Avancement des Sciences; Dr. Camille Roussin, Mayor of Joliette; Dr. Jacques Lussier, dean of the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Ottawa; Dr. Eugène Robillard, representing the Medical Research Council of Canada; Dr. Albert Geoffroy and Monseigneur Omer Valois of the Société Historique de Joliette, and M. l'Abbé Zotique Beauchamp, pastor of St. Thomas. Dr. Eugène Robillard then recalled the memory of Alexis Bidagan dit St. Martin. Following this Dr. Alan C. Burton, president of the Canadian Physiological Society, unveiled the tablet and delivered a short address in French. Finally the tablet was blessed by Monseigneur Omer Valois and the Reverend Father Beauchamp made a few appropriate remarks and invited the audience to enter the church for a short religious service which was enhanced by the singing of the Sisters of the Parish.

After the ceremony the members of the Society mingled with the members of the St. Martin family for numerous photographs and were guests at a civic reception in the Town Hall of Joliette. This was followed by a congenial family gathering in the home of Mr. Isadore St. Martin in St. Thomas.

In recalling the memory of Alexis St. Martin the Canadian Physiological Society wished to encompass in its tribute all the passive collaborators of science, all the patients who without prospect of immediate benefit contribute nonetheless to the growth and development of science. But most of all the society wishes to pay homage to Alexis, this uneducated man who consented to make the long trips of several months duration in the great canoes, to be separated from his family for years on end, and to endure who knows how many other forgotten discomforts, in order to be of service to that pioneer of physiology William Beaumont.

The Committee of Commemoration of
Alexis Bidagan dit St. Martin of the
Canadian Physiological Society