

## A Mermaid in Lake Superior

People thought highly of Venant St. Germain. He was a wealthy French Canadian *seigneur* (landowner), explorer, fur trader, and merchant. In short, Venant St. Germain was an outstanding citizen. When he said something, people tended to believe him. That's what made his story all the more surprising.

For Venant St. Germain declared that on May 3, 1782, he had seen—rising from Lake Superior—a creature that looked like a mermaid. The *seigneur* was convinced of the fact. He was so sure that he made a solemn statement of his story before two judges in a Montreal court of law.

St. Germain told the judges the sighting had occurred while he was returning from the trading post at Grand Portage (on Lake Superior in present-day Minnesota). He had set out on the morning of May 3. With him were several other men and an elderly Saulteaux Aboriginal woman. The woman was catching a ride in St. Germain's canoe to a spot farther up the coast.

The canoe skimmed along quickly, staying close to the wooded Lake Superior shoreline. By late afternoon it had reached the southern tip of *Isle Pâté*, or Pie Island, near the present-day city of Thunder Bay.

Not a breath of wind stirred. St. Germain and the other travellers heard no sound except the gentle lapping of the water on the shore. They hauled up their canoe and made camp in the shelter of the steep bank that overshadows the island's narrow beach. Soon the fragrance of their cooking fire drifted out over the lake.

After the evening meal, St. Germain left his companions and waded out into the bay to set some fishing nets. He hoped to catch lake trout for breakfast. By the time the *seigneur* had set his nets, the sun was setting. He stood for a moment gazing at its golden rays

glinting across the lake. Then, shivering a little as the evening became cooler, he turned and made his way back toward camp. As he rounded the tip of the island, he glanced back over his shoulder for one more look at the setting sun.

He got the shock of his life. For there, standing in the water not more than a stone's throw away, was the strangest creature St. Germain had ever seen. It didn't look like an animal or a fish. The longer he stared at it, the more he began to think of it as a human being.

The creature wasn't large. St. Germain estimated its size to be about that of an eight-year-old child. It stood quite straight in the water with its right arm raised. In the fading light, St. Germain thought he saw five fingers on the raised hand. The creature's other hand was underwater and seemed to be resting on its hip, or tail.

Bright eyes were the most noticeable feature in its face. It had a nicely shaped nose and mouth. The creature's ears were small but well formed. Its complexion was light brown and the top of its head was covered with a woolly substance something like hair.

For three or four minutes, St. Germain and the bright-eyed little lake-dweller stared across the water at each other. The expression on the "mermaid's" face showed uneasiness, perhaps about being so close to the figure on the shore. It also showed curiosity, as if the creature wanted to know more about him.

St. Germain, realizing how unusual the creature was, decided he must capture it, alive or dead. He reached for his gun.

By this time the other men and the Saulteaux woman had joined him. When the woman saw him raise his gun, she ran to him and grasped his arm, preventing him from taking aim. While St. Germain struggled with her, the mysterious creature sank out of sight under the water. It never

changed the expression on its face and did not appear again.

The woman turned on St. Germain. "You should never have reached for your gun," she said. "For the creature you saw was the mighty god of the waters and the lakes. The god will punish your wickedness. This night there will be a terrible storm strong enough to dash us all to pieces on the rocks. I intend to flee from the danger." She wheeled around and clambered up the steep bank that overshadowed the beach.

St. Germain stood watching her, stunned. He wasn't sure what to say or do. Certainly the creature in the lake was like nothing he'd ever seen before. But he couldn't believe it was a god or that it had unusual powers.

Despite the old woman's warning, he and the other men remained in their camp by the water. They didn't even take the precaution of moving their canoe. They sat around the fire for a while discussing the strange events of the evening. Then they went to bed.

About eleven o'clock they were awakened by a restless wind tearing at their blankets and whirling the sand about, driving it into their faces. The wind mounted into a gale. Soon huge waves pounded against the shore. They threatened to sweep the canoe out into the lake and dash it to pieces on the rocks.

Hurriedly the men dragged the canoe as far from the water's edge as they could. By this time rain was falling in sheets, soaking them to the skin. They seized their blankets and scrambled up the steep slippery bank in search of a sheltered spot where they could wait out the storm. They spent the rest of that night huddled under a dripping pine tree.

The old woman rejoined the men in the morning. She helped them set up camp on a level spot well away from the pounding waves. But she was still angry. She blamed St. Germain for offending the great god of the

waters and the lakes and thus bringing on the tempest. The storm continued for three days. During that time the little party was forced to remain on the island.

When the *seigneur* told his story later, he was always careful to state that he didn't believe there was any connection between the storm and his attempt to capture the "mermaid" he had seen. "It was purely by chance that the gale occurred on that particular night," he said. "It's well known that fish have a habit of showing themselves on the surface before a storm. Perhaps the mysterious creature had the same habit."

Perhaps St. Germain's creature was really a seal. In fact, many of the so-called mermaids sighted over the years have probably been seals. A seal with its large eyes and friendly-looking face can look very human, especially sitting on a rock in fog or dim light. However, seals are saltwater animals. There is no record of one ever having appeared in the fresh water of Lake Superior.

Venant St. Germain later discussed his experience with several other fur traders who had visited the area. They said the Aboriginal people living near *Isle Pâché* generally regarded the island as the habitation of the god of the waters and the lakes. On at least one other occasion, a fur trader had seen a creature like the one St. Germain described.

We still have St. Germain's written statement. He presented it to the Court of King's Bench, Montreal on November 13, 1812. However, as far as we know, no one has discovered any further explanation for his extraordinary experience.