Métis Fur Trade Employees, Free Traders, Guides and Scouts – Darren R. Préfontaine, Patrick Young, Todd Paquin and Leah Dorion

Module Objective: In this module, the students will learn about the Métis' role in the fur trade, their role as free traders, and their role as guides and scouts – positions, which contributed immensely to the development of Canada. These various economic activities contributed to the Métis worldview since many Métis remained loyal fur trade employees, while others desired to live and make an independent living for themselves and their families. They will also learn that the Métis comprised a large and distinct element within the fur trade in which they played a number of key and essential roles. The students will also appreciate that while the Métis were largely a product of the fur trade, they gradually became their own people and resisted attempts to be controlled or manipulated by outside economic forces. Finally, the students will also learn that the Métis' knowledge of the country and of First Nations languages and customs made them superb guides, scouts, and interpreters.

As Metis Elder Madeline Bird explains it, the Metis are mediators, forming a bridge between conflicting actions, dogmas, and beliefs. They emerged as geographers of experience and persuasion, mastering competing situations to the benefit of both land and isolated cultures – serving as trailblazers, middlemen, interpreters, negotiators and constitutional arbitrators[1].

Métis Labour in the Fur Trade

The Métis played perhaps the most important role in the fur trade because they were the human links between First Nations and Europeans. The Métis were employed in every facet of the fur trade and this fact alone ensured that they would remain tied to the fortunes of a trade, which was outside their control. The skills which they had inherited from their First Nations and Canadien ancestors made them highly valued, but all too often under-appreciated employees of the North West Company (NWC) and the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). Also, it should be noted that, while Métis society was consensual and more democratic then British or British-Canadian society during the fur trade era, the HBC was an oligarchic body which had little interest in including its lower rung employees in the decision making process.

[1] Sister Sutherland. *Living Kindness: The Memoirs of Madeline Bird with Agnes Sutherland.* Northern Heritage Series. Yellow Knife: Northwest Territories: Outcrop, the Northern Publishers, 1991, xxiii.

Despite the imposition of a hierarchy, Métis men, from the onset of the fur trade, earned a living in various capacities. It made good sense for the trading companies to tap into the Métis' ready knowledge of the fur trade and the country and use them as employees. The fur trade economy of the nineteenth century required a variety of support workers, both skilled and unskilled. In fact, two-thirds of HBC employees in the 1830s were Métis or French Canadian and in the 1850s the Métis became the largest single group of servants with the Company.

After its 1821 merger with the NWC, the HBC had a fur trade monopoly in all of British North America. This ensured that the Company dictated the employment terms to its employees. As a result, fur trade posts closed, wages and benefits dropped and long-term contracts became increasingly rare. The Métis formed a large temporary workforce for the HBC in Red River after the 1821 merger. This was to the Company's benefit because it did not have to feed and lodge temporary workers. By 1821, the HBC only had fifteen permanent employees in the Red River district. In 1865, those who received a yearly contract could expect to start at £20 per annum and if experienced could be paid over £30. The Métis provided both skilled and unskilled labour to the fur trade companies. These positions can be grouped in transportation infrastructure, trapping, trading, skilled and unskilled labourers, temporary employment, interpreters and various degrees of white-collar employment such as clerks and factors.

Almost all fur trade employees had the terms of his employment spelled-out in a contract. Some contracts[2] listed several duties such as carpentry work and translating, while others listed only a single duty. However, not all workers had contracts. Many employees received food and or lodging while they were employed with the trading companies. For instance, Inspecting Officer E.K. Beeston noted that, in 1889, Louis Ladouceur was employed as an ordinary labourer at the Lac La Biche post in present-day northeastern Alberta. His responsibility was to do the "outside work" for the father at the mission and around the post. His wages were $15 per month and rations, without a contract. The rations were 14 lbs. of flour, a value of 84¢, four lbs. of bacon, a value of 60¢, and 3/8 lbs. of tea, a value of 10¢, for a total of $1.54 for the week. For the year 1888, he was given a total of about $83.00 worth of rations. The Company also revised its employee contracts and created a ranking system to pay various skilled and semi-skilled employees wages based on their varying activities.

Hudson Bay Company Labour System Intercontinental structure [3]

1) London Directors: Owner-managers of the HBC in London

2) London employee: The managerial, clerical, and warehouse staff

3) Sailors: These people manned vessels to the north and west of coasts of America, to Hawaii, China, and elsewhere, linking those places to London and other markets

4) Gentlemen and managerial class: The 'gentlemen' or managerial class in the fur trade country such as, the governor, commissioned officers, and clerks. Some Chief traders and Chief Factors were commissioned gentlemen and were paid a percentage of HBC profits in lieu of salary

5) Permanent servants in fur trade country: This large class included transport workers, general labourers, artisans and craftsmen, some fishermen, farmers and hunters, and some of the lower grades of traders. Permanent servants were largely fed, paid and lodged by the HBC year-round.

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[2] Most HBC contracts are held at the Hudson's Bay Company Archives (www.gov.mb.ca/chc/archives/hbca) in Winnipeg, Manitoba and many North West Company contracts are held at La Société historique de Saint-Boniface /St. Boniface Historical Society (www.shsb.mb.ca), which is also in Winnipeg.

[3] Source: Philip Goldring. *Papers on the Labour System of the Hudson's Bay Company 1821-1900: Volume I.* Parks Canada.

6) Part-time or short term servants: Casual or temporary workers in the fur trade territories, including transport labourers, trip men, hunters, freighters and many farm hands and general workers at the Company's posts at Red River. The work was usually seasonal.

Voyageurs and Boatmen

With his long toque, sash (*ceniture fléchée*) and clay pipe, the hardy, diminutive voyageur was indispensable to the fur trade. Although some Métis were voyageurs, most were Canadiens (French Canadians) and to a lesser extent, Mohawk and Algonquin "Freemen" from Lower Canada (Québec) employed with the North West Company or with various successors to the French fur trading system after 1763. By contrast, the *Coureurs de bois,* a name often used interchangeably with voyageur, were unlicensed fur traders in the French regime in Canada (1534-1760). The Canadie*n* voyageurs and the *Coureurs de bois* married First Nations women *à la façon du pays* (according to the custom of the country) in the Great Lakes region and in the Northwest. They are the ancestors of most Métis in Western and northern Canada.

In the early fur trade, there was a voyageur culture in which Canadiens, Métis and First Peoples shared a great deal of common cultural traits. In this "Middle Ground", a great deal of acculturation[4] took place in which First Nations, Métis and Europeans lived similar lives, used the same technology, believed equally in a supernatural presence within nature, regarded each other as equals, intermarried and borrowed from and acculturated to the cultural patterns of each group.

Certainly, the French and French Canadian Coureurs de bois and voyageurs, most of whom were peasants, adapted First Nations clothing and technology in

[4] Acculturation is the process, which allows one group to become like another through the borrowing of certain cultural traits.

order to ply their trade; however, they also borrowed Aboriginal ideas, including a worldview that was egalitarian, and liberal. Arguably, the freedom of the frontier and its distance from the conformist and hierarchical society of orders (*ancien régime* France and New France had three estates: the nobility, the clergy and everybody else) of the Canadian colony appealed to him. It is also probable that among the First Nations he found kindred spirits who practiced a cyclical and animistic spirituality, which was not all that different from the ancient folk religion of France with its pantheon of saints and ceremonial rituals, leftover from pagan times. Both spiritualisms had supernatural and natural components. This culture was remarkably similar to if not the same as Métis culture.

It was only after the fur trade frontier collapsed that this fur trade or "Métis" culture was no longer needed. Soon artificial and arbitrary racial, cultural and linguistic hierarchies emerged. This was when the Métis became the "other" to Euro-Americans. The "Middle Ground" thesis is best articulated by Richard White, an American historian of Aboriginal-European relations in the Great Lakes region, in his well-documented and highly readable monograph, *The Middle Ground*. White argues that this Middle Ground was a unique cultural experiment.

The Middle Ground is a place in between: in between cultures, peoples, and in between empires and the non-state of villages. It is a place where many of the North American subjects and allies lived. It is the area between the historical foreground of European invasion and occupation and the background of Indian defeat and retreat. On the Middle Ground diverse peoples adjust their differences through what amounts to a process of creative and often expedient, misunderstandings. People try to persuade others who are different from themselves by appealing to what they perceive to be the values and the practices of those others. They often misinterpret and distort both the values and the practices of those they deal with, but from these misunderstandings

arise new meanings and through them new practices – the shared meanings and practices in the Middle Ground[5].

Voyageurs manned fur trade canoes leaving Montréal for Fort William (present-day Thunder Bay, Ontario) and from Fort William to the interior of the Northwest or the Mississippi-Missouri trading system. Canoes leaving Montréal for Fort William, the *canot de maître* or "Master's Canoe", were 11 to 13 metres long, carried ten people plus cargo and weighed about 275 kilograms. At 8 metres and 135 kilograms, the "North Canoe" or *canot du nord*, used along the northern, rockier routes, were smaller and did not carry many provisions. Voyageurs often paddled sixteen to eighteen hours a day in birch bark or freight canoes from 2:00 a.m. until 9:00 p.m. when they would stop for supper and a few hours of sleep. Their travails were complicated by voracious black flies, mosquitoes, and arduous portages, which forced them to carry hundreds of kilograms of goods overland from one river to the next.

With the merger of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and North West Company fur trading systems in 1821, the world of the *Canadien* voyageur ended. After this time, the Métis carried on the legacy of their voyageur fathers by manning York boats, loading and unloading provisions and hauling furs along such river systems as the Mackenzie, Saskatchewan, and Red Rivers. Yorkboats, with their larger, more rugged frame, proved more durable than canoes on often-tempestuous northern waterways and could carry heavier loads. The Métis soon became very adapt at using this odd looking watercraft.

The most skilled members of York boat crews were known as bowsmen and steersman or *boutes*, the French term for the ends of the boat. As leaders of the

[5] Source: Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*. Cambridge University Press, 1991, p.X.

brigades, these Métis men required experience on the waterways, technical skill in boating, and acceptance by their superiors and fellow boatmen. Bowsmen sat at the head of the boat, fended off rocks with a large pole and guided the boat through fast water. A bowsman became a steersman only after gaining several years of experience as a bowsman. The steersman was the most important member of the boat crew.

Métis men often worked as boatmen for the HBC in order to rid themselves of debt incurred while trapping or hunting. From 1831 until 1871, salaries ranged from £21 to £16 for steersmen, £18 to £14 for bowsmen and £12 to £16 for midmen. Deflation of salaries led to many of these workers becoming perpetually in debt to the "Company". Since many of these Métis boatmen were indentured labourers, they had a tradition of resistance when they felt their wages were too low or if their missions were too dangerous. Various "strikes" and other work stoppages occurred quite frequently in the forty years previous to the Red River Resistance in 1869-70. Not surprisingly, the Métis boatmen were the main group, which supported the Provisional Government during this Métis-led resistance.

Today, the Métis still honour the spirit of their voyageur and boatmen ancestors. Some of the more popular events for such celebrations as "Back to Batoche" are Métis "Strong Men" or "Voyageur" games.

Fur Trade Transportation

The fur trade could not exist without a healthy transportation infrastructure. This infrastructure involved ocean going ships, freight canoes, York boats, Red River carts, dog teams and humans. The Métis were integral to this fur trade transportation infrastructure. By the mid-nineteenth century, they were responsible for transporting the vast majority of furs and other goods in what is now Western Canada and the Northwest Territories.

Métis freighters on water routes

Observations on York Boat Labour:

One day in camp I was concerned to see a man having bad lung haemorrhage. Next day he was working as usual. Right there I discovered that there were worse conditions of labour than negro slavery. When carrying began the road was dry. When the work was done the way was muddy, wet with sweat dropped from the faces of the carriers.
Rev. F. G. Stevens

In those days each man had a hard task. Often sweat would be running down his face all day due to the heat and hard work. It was a hard way to make a living but many a time freighting was the only way to earn food to feed the families. Many a white man doesn't believe what a hard tough life we had in the olden days. Some think an Indian had a soft life but Ne-chee, Kesanagun. (Friend it was hard).
Ross, Aboriginal Elder

The Métis provided the trade companies with a large labour force to work the inland water routes. They were adept at using the canoe to cross the large expanses of land between posts and trappers. Métis in the employ of posts who moved goods and furs from post to post spent backbreaking days, paddling sixteen to eighteen hours a day and made arduous portages carrying hundreds of kilograms of goods overland from one river or stream to the next. A workday for these men began at 2:00 in the morning and they would paddle until 8:00 a.m. when they would have breakfast. They paddled until noon, when lunch was eaten in the canoes and commonly consisted of pemmican. They resumed paddling until 9:00 at night when they stopped for supper and sleep, to begin again at 2:00 a.m.

The freighters and packers had to portage the canoes or York boats overland when they had to change waterways or couldn't run a section of the river, such as rapids. When a York boat could not shoot a set of rapids or could not be portaged, the men would track the boat along the lake or river shore. Using ropes and harnesses, the men pulled the boat through the water until they bypassed the treacherous stretch. In order to do this, the men often had to wade chest-deep in the freezing water.

Each summer, one or more HBC ships brought supplies and trade goods into Hudson Bay and returned with furs and other country produce destined for England. The posts would then send freighters out to meet the ships with their furs to bring back the supplies. The men at the posts would be employed to load and unload the supplies and furs. For instance, freighters made an annual or biannual trip from Red River to York Factory via the Hayes River, through Norway House and Lake Winnipeg. Freighters were also sent to more isolated posts to provision them with supplies and trade items. Before leaving, the freighters, who were engaged at the place where the brigade is organized, were paid a stipulated sum for the trip.

The goods that were transported throughout the trading territories were carried to and from watercraft and over portages between waterways manually. The Métis and First Nations were used extensively in the packing industry. People loaded packs, generally of 40 kilograms each, on their backs and shoulders when they were loading or unloading boats. When covering a portage, it was desirable to do it in only one, or a minimum of trips. If people could carry several packs at once, they could get their canoes or York boats into the water quicker.

What is astonishing is that they did not just carry one pack at a time. Rather, it was commonplace to carry a minimum of two packs when walking (80 kilograms). And, while two packs was a common packing weight, some men carried in excess of 170 kilograms at a time! This was accomplished by tying a strap across a person's forehead and around a pack, which was slung across the back. One or more packs could then be placed upon this pack, across the person's shoulders. These packers had to have strong necks and backs to be able to support this weight, and there are accounts that people broke their backs and necks while carrying very heavy loads.

The pace with which packers were expected to traverse portages with a load was astounding. They were expected to cover more than a kilometre in ten minutes, with a two-minute rest between marches. Bent over, carrying very heavy packages across their backs and shoulders, the packers would quickly shuffle single file over the portages. The portage trails were not even, flat paths either. Many of them had dips and sharp rises and were often rocky or crossed with tree roots.

Men were not the only ones who packed freight. Women, too, were adept at hauling heavy loads. It was not an unusual sight to see husbands and wives working side-by-side packing freight over portages or from a post to a boat. The women could carry a significant amount of weight themselves, frequently shouldering two packs using the same head-strap technique as the men.

Métis Freighters on the Land

While the Métis played a preeminent role in the water transportation infrastructure of the fur trade by the 1840s, it was on the land where their skills as fur trade freighters eventually excelled – to the point where they later used these skills to become free traders. Red River carts transported goods overland much the way boats did along waterways. These two-wheeled carts were the mainstay of the overland transport system, crisscrossing the Plains and Parklands of the present-day Prairie Provinces and North Dakota and Minnesota, particularly in the post-1821 period. The carts became popular because one vehicle, which was hauled by one horse or ox, could carry the load of four horses. In addition, these vehicles which could haul large amounts of bison meat over long distances with a minimum of horses held a strong attraction for fur traders dependent on provisions and provisioners.

Trains of Red River carts were divided into brigades of ten carts each under the supervision of three men, one of which was the main authority. One individual oversaw the entire train and was paid considerably more than any of the other men. He moved on horseback from brigade to brigade, supervising the party throughout the journey. Such trains, loaded with their often-precious cargoes, represented fortunes, which the Métis themselves would generally not reap benefit from other than a small salary. Some of the trade items included sugar, tobacco, tea, powder, shot, bullets, Hudson's Bay blankets, cloth, vermilion, axes, knives, files, copper kettles, guns, alcohol. Carts also carried furs back from trading as well as bison meat from hunts.

Independent Positions tied to the Fur Trade

While most Métis involved with the fur trade worked directly for the fur trade companies, others worked independently and sold their services or products to the fur trade companies. These workers included trappers, traders, guides and scouts. While working for the HBC, these workers laboured on short-term contracts, selling their services or products. These workers included trappers, traders, guides and scouts. While under the contractual employment of the HBC, these workers – trappers, traders, guides and scouts – had a more independent spirit than permanent employees.

Trapping

Trapping has been a facet of Métis livelihood and wage economy since the early fur trade. At times it has been a profitable means of making a living, when prices were high and a demand existed for the furs. The profitability of trapping decreased as the number of people who became involved in the handling of the furs increased. The trapper sold to a trader who if he did not work for the HBC collected for a dealer. If the HBC was not the dealer, the dealer used a broker to get furs to market. The broker then sold the furs at an auction mart to wholesalers. Local tradesmen bought from the wholesalers. The tradesmen then sold the fur to a retailer. The trapper, of all of these people, made the smallest amount of money. Down below is a comparison of prices for some common furs from May 15, 1886 and September 1889 at the Lac La Biche post:

Fur	1886 Price ($)	1889 Price ($)
Beaver	2.75-3.25	2.50-6.00
Bear	9.00-12.00	6.00-14.00
Fisher	3.50-5.00	5.00
Cross Fox	2.50-5.00	2.00-6.00
Red Fox	not available	1.50
Silver Fox	" "	40.00
Wolf	" "	1.25
Muskrat	0.12-0.17	0.08-0.10
Mink	0.75-1.00	0.50
Marten	0.80-1.00	1.50
Otter	8.00-10.00	6.00
Wolverine	not available	4.00
Skunk	0.25-1.25	0.50
Lynx	2.75-3.50	not available

Métis Traders, Guides, Provisioners and Scouts

During the nineteenth century fur trade – in what's now the Prairie Provinces, the Northwest Territories, northern Ontario, and the northern Plains States – the Métis were best known as traders, guides, provisioners, interpreters, and scouts. They were the fur trade's transportation and communications infrastructure – a role they continued to play until the Prairie West was incorporated into the Dominion of Canada in the 1870s. Those Métis who continued to ply these trades after 1885 did so in more northern and remote areas. Their prominent role in opening the country for trade abruptly ended when Euro-Canadian and European settlers and their support infrastructure – federal nation building polices, railways, mounted police and responsible governments – took control of prairie lands, reducing many Métis to live on road allowances or in the northern bush.

Métis fur traders operated over a vast expanse of territory, taking in furs from trappers in exchange for goods they received from the trade posts. In order to make a profit, the traders greatly inflated the price of the goods. While furs were priced in terms of currency, Aboriginal trappers took their earnings in goods rather than cash. The posts and trading companies, then, had to establish

equivalencies between goods and furs. This, of course, was in the favour of the fur trade companies, who charged much more than the actual cash value for an item in "*made beaver*[6]" to make a handsome profit.

It was a common practice for post managers or inspectors to establish low fur prices while keeping the price of goods high to maintain a profit. For instance, a good buffalo robe was worth about a dollar and a quarter in the late nineteenth century. A trader gave the trapper one pound (454 grams) of tea and half a pound (227 grams) of sugar for the blanket. The pound of tea, bought at Fort Garry, was worth twenty-five cents a pound while the sugar cost ten cents a pound. When the cost of goods was high and the price of furs low, the traders could easily clear a profit.

The traders might work for trade posts themselves or as independents. Sometimes young traders started their careers under the supervision of an older trader. This was beneficial for both parties because the younger man would gain from the experience of the older man, while the older man could pay the younger a lowered wage, thus making a profit, and extend his trading range.

By 1889, several outposts were established within a 80 kilometre radius of Lac La Biche, in present-day Alberta at Jack Fish, Heart and Buck Lakes. Antoine Moostatup (Cardinal) operated the Buck Lake outpost in 1889. He took a 10% commission on the trade done and whatever he could make on the prices of goods and furs. Louis Janvier operated the Jack Fish Lake outpost, and also took a 10% commission on the trade conducted plus whatever he could make on the prices of goods and furs. This post was in danger of failing, however, as too

[6] "Made Beaver" was the standard from which all other beaver furs were judged. Essentially, these adult "prime" pelts were extremely lustrous and thick.

many Chipewyans (Dene) had been given debt. The Heart Lake outpost was operated by a man named Fabien Mooneas and, unlike the other outpost operators who worked on commission, he was paid an annual salary of $300.00. The outposts charged the same prices for furs as did the Lac La Biche post, and they bought their goods from Lac La Biche at the main post's prices.

While many Métis traded for the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) in the early and mid-nineteenth centuries, other Métis preferred to work for themselves. Historically, the Métis resisted outside coercion. They called themselves "*gens du libre*", or "O*tipemisiwak*" – "Free People" or "those who owned themselves". In 1816, for example, the Métis resisted a HBC proclamation, which forbade them to provide pemmican for the fur trade. The aftermath of the so-called "Pemmican Proclamation" and other HBC actions was the first instance of Métis nationalism – the Battle of Seven Oaks in what's now Winnipeg, Manitoba. From that moment, most Métis were passionate free traders. The Métis were among Canada's first free traders. They practiced free trade with the Americans, at Pembina in the Dakota Territory shortly after 1821 and then in St. Paul, Minnesota, long before any Canadian government[7]. Soon this trickle became a flood as hundreds of Red River carts went to the Dakota Territory and the Minnesota Territory to trade with the Americans.

With the 1821 merger of the two fur-trade giants, the HBC and the North West Company (NWC), the reformulated HBC was determined to break the spirit of the independent Métis traders because it had a trade monopoly for Rupert's Land. While some Métis worked for the amalgamated company, most resisted

[7] The British North American colonies had Reciprocity or free trade in agricultural products and some manufactured goods during the American Civil War. However, this deal expired and Canada would not have free trade with its large and economically powerful neighbour until 1989, despite attempts in the 1870s, 1891, 1911 and 1945.

the trading monopoly. The Métis felt that their Aboriginal heritage entitled them to trade however they wanted. The HBC, the sole European governing agency in Rupert's Land from 1821 until 1869, resented the Métis' independence. Through the HBC-appointed Council of Assiniboia, the Company had arresting authority, and could interpret criminal law. Not surprisingly, the HBC resorted to arbitrary measures in order to preserve its monopoly. For instance, starting in the 1820s, the Company made trading and exchanging of furs for gifts among Aboriginal people illegal, and the Company gave its employees the power to search residents without warrants to see if furs were being used to contravene the monopoly, and if so these were confiscated. However, it did not have the manpower to engage in operations necessary to stop the much more numerous and powerful Métis. It could call upon 300 hundred British regulars and the local militia, made up of Selkirk Settlers and Upper-Canadians.

Of course, the Métis free traders resented these arbitrary measures. In 1845, the Métis community enlisted the support of Alexander Isbister – a Scottish mixed-blood, who was educated in Scotland – in order to plead the Métis' case before the Colonial Secretary in London. Isbister argued against the illiberal tactics of the Company, and was backed by a petition signed by 977 Red River residents. However, the Imperial government sided with the Company and its monopoly. Despite this setback, the Métis continued to trade with the Americans. On May 17, 1849[8], the Company decided to make a stand against the Métis free traders by arresting Guillaume Sayer, a known free trader.

[8] Incidentally, also in 1849, the Anglophone bourgeoisie in Montréal signed and circulated a petition calling for the immediate annexation of Canada to the United States after Britain repealed the Corn Laws or free trade with the colonies. In their anger, the Molson's and McGill's and the rest of the bourgeoisie burned down the parliament buildings in Montréal.

Sayer was tried for contravening the Hudson's Bay Company monopoly. Before the trail, several hundred armed Métis heard an impassioned speech by Louis Riel, *le père*, in favour of free trade. After which, everybody went to the trail to hear the proceedings. The magistrates, fearful of angering the Métis, found Sayer guilty, but granted him mercy. In jubilation, a free Sayer exclaimed to the gathered crowds "*Vive la liberté! Le commerce est libre!"* or "Long live freedom! We have free trade!" This was a key moment in the development of Métis nationalism. It was also a testament to the historic Métis' ability to resist coercive authority. The HBC and the Métis eventually reached an understanding by 1857, for they had a common enemy: the Province and later Dominion of Canada.

As traders, the Métis operated over vast expanses of territory via Red River carts, canoes, York boats, horses, snowshoes and foot in order to intercept trappers on their way to trade their furs at a post. Both independent and Company traders traveled to First Nations or Métis trappers to exchange goods for furs, which was more efficient for the trappers than going to the fur trade posts. In addition, the free traders usually offered the trappers a better price for goods than the trading posts. Furthermore, an independent trader not only had more freedom in conducting business, but he also made more money on his own than for a salary or a commission for a fur trading company.

Earlier in the nineteenth century, the Métis traded primarily for beaver pelts, but by mid-century, they traded largely for buffalo robes with American merchants in the Dakota Territory and in Minnesota. An insatiable demand for bison robes was occurring in the rapidly industrializing and urbanizing eastern and central United States. As a result, in the early 1850s to the 1870s, hundreds

of Red River carts traversed the Canadian Prairies and American Plains trading for buffalo robes. At times, this was a risky venture, but it also proved highly lucrative. For instance, in the late 19th century, a trader exchanged 30¢ worth of tea and sugar for a good buffalo robe worth about $1.25. The 95¢ gross earnings the trader made on this transaction paid his expenses and his wage.

Feeding fur trade workers was also an ongoing activity among the Métis throughout the fur trade era. The staple of the fur trade diet was pemmican – ground bison meat supplemented with fat and berries. The HBC's constant need for this staple provided the only steady market for Métis bison hunters and pemmican provisioners. Between 1839 and 1841, the HBC spent £5,000 sterling on provisions supplied by the Métis hunting parties – more money than all the farmers in the Red River Settlement made from the sale of their produce. Provisioning, then, was a very lucrative economic activity. As a result, the Métis buffalo hunts became huge logistical undertakings. For example, Alexander Ross described how, in one bison hunt, over 2500 animals were killed, which when processed equaled 375 bags of pemmican and 240 bales of dried meat after the hunting group was fed. The carts pulled into Red River with enough meat to provide each person in the settlement with 200 pounds (91 kilograms) of meat. However, by the mid-1870s, very few Métis lived off the hunt, which resulted in a sharp increase in pemmican prices.

The HBC relied on the foods it acquired from farmers and provisioners near its posts. These foods included meat, dairy products, vegetables and wheat. Wheat was especially important because the Company had to provide its men with a huge amount of bread and biscuits. It is estimated that the Sixth Regiment of Foot stationed at Lower Fort Garry between 1846 and 1848 consumed 150 pounds (68 kilograms) of bread per day. In response to its role as a supply

depot, and in order to keep its employees fed, the HBC maintained a temporary food handling and processing staff. Interestingly, very women held few of these positions. Some of the food handlers' and processors' tasks and wages are as follows:

Job	per X	Wage
Baking	daily	2 shillings 6 pence
Cooking	daily	2 shillings 6 pence
Cooking	weekly	17 shillings 6 pence
Cooking	monthly	40 shillings
Boy-assistant cook	daily	1 shilling
Brewing	daily	2 shillings 6 pence
Brewing (supervisor?)	daily	6 shillings
Curing pork	daily	2 shillings 6 pence
Packing beef	daily	2 shillings 6 pence
Making pickle	daily	2 shillings 6 pence
Filling wheat bags	daily	2 shillings 6 pence
Smoking hams	daily	2 shillings
Table waiter	monthly	50 shillings

The Métis have also acted as guides and scouts for centuries. Their linguistic abilities, knowledge of the landscape, and their proficiency in bridging the cultural gap between European and First Nations gave them an advantage in negotiating their physical and cultural environment. Famous Métis guides and scouts included James McKay and Jerry Potts. McKay was renowned for his interpreting and guiding skills. John Palliser, of the British-sponsored Palliser Expedition, hired McKay to guide him during his 1857-58 journey across the Prairies to determine the suitability of the land for cereal agriculture. Similarly, the newly formed North West Mounted Police hired Métis scouts and guides such as Jerry Potts to assist in their efforts to police the Prairies. Jerry Potts (1840-1896), a well-known Métis guide and scout helped to break up the illicit whisky trade on the plains, which had plagued the First Nations and Métis for decades. Métis men also worked as scouts, guides, interpreters and provisioners for the 1872-1876 Canadian Boundary Commission when surveyors were establishing the border between Canada and the United States. Today, many

Métis carry on the guiding tradition of their forbears by working as guides with outfitting companies for hunters and fishers among Canada's abundant rivers and lakes. The Métis who are knowledgeable about an area's resources can safely guide the fishers and hunters to the most productive fishing and hunting spots.

The Hudson's Bay Company's Temporary Workforce

The Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) was like any commercial enterprise, profit-driven. As a result, in a money-saving gesture, the Company hired hundreds of Métis as temporary skilled and unskilled labourers. This temporary workforce increased in popularity during the nineteenth century. The permanent workforce, by contrast, was utilized primarily when the trade companies could not be sure of finding men they needed at the appropriate times and places. However, if the trade companies knew they were in locations where there was a steady and reliable pool of workers to draw from, they used temporary labour.

Hiring temporary workers was a shrewd gesture on behalf of the HBC since they paid them less even though the workers did the same work, and they did not have to provide for them in lean times. Hiring temporary workers also provided the Company with increasing flexibility when there was a downturn in fur prices. By the 1880s, the HBC was tending to replace many of their permanent workers with temporary employees as a cost cutting measure. Furthermore, after the HBC-NWC merger in 1821, employees had to supply their own outfits, food and clothing while at the post or on trips because the HBC was now a monopoly, unthreatened by competition. Wages, too, dropped. Packing, therefore, became less well paying because the onus for paying expenses fell on the employees, not the employer.

Temporary workers did various jobs for the Company at different posts and settlements, sometimes being paid on a monthly, weekly, daily and per job basis. The jobs these workers did were the same as the permanent workers, except the duration of their employment was different. For instance, the Company might hire a blacksmith on a temporary basis; his work would not differ from a permanently hired blacksmith other than that he worked for a shorter period of time.

Most temporary positions within the HBC were not very well-defined. Many HBC employees did a number of tasks outside of their official job description. For instance, a labourer might work with a boat builder fetching wood, sawing planks to specifications and operating a steambox to shape the planks. Yet, the worker might only be coded as a "labourer" with no indication of his role or roles. Furthermore, the title or role of labourer and middleman was often interchangeable and its designation spurious. A middleman was a labourer on a boat involved in inland transport. People with the title "middleman" were most commonly Métis and French Canadian, whereas a "labourer" was often Scottish in origin. Nevertheless, contracted labourers were paid relatively well considering many of them did not have any training in trades or commercial skills. In 1865, labourers were hired at a beginning wage of £20 per year, while an experienced labourer could make just over £30. People could also apprentice as labourers, or middlemen, particularly after the 1830 decision by the Northern Department Council to hire young Métis sons in apprenticeship positions. An apprentice through this program earned £75 over a period of seven years.

The number of titles of HBC positions increased through the nineteenth century. The Company was not creating new roles, but, instead, had recognized that

many employees were carrying out tasks not recognized in their work agreements. The Company began to recognize separate functions in assigning titles, status and rates of pay. For instance, prior to 1830, "horseguards" are not mentioned in labour records. On the plains, this role would have been very important. In the period 1840-1870, however, there are several mentioned in every survey year. People had always been guarding horses, but they did so as an extension of their duties as "ordinary labourers". After 1840, however, people were hired specifically as "horseguards", or with this task specifically outlined as part of their work agreement.

There were many unskilled, temporary workers employed at the various posts and settlements throughout territories of the various trading companies. These people would be considered "ordinary labourers", which was a designation of the type of work they did, rather than a contract title. They were not paid as well as the contracted and permanent personnel, particularly since they were not doing skilled trades work or possessed commercial skills and administration abilities.

Temporary workers did various jobs on a monthly, weekly, daily, or per job basis. At Fort Garry, in 1868-69, this included making oars, ox harnesses, stove pipes, tin pans, butchering, milling, shingling, general carpentry, skiff building, sawing, assisting blacksmith, cutting wood, night watching, whitewashing, hauling water, meat and wood, packing furs and loading steamers. Women also washed, sewed and mended clothing at the posts. Of all these activities, carpenters were paid the highest daily wage at 3 or more shillings compared to 1-2 shillings for more menial tasks such as chopping wood or hauling water. A Métis carpenter charged £2 sterling to build a Red River cart. He needed only to build 10 Red River carts a year to make the salary of an unskilled labourer.

Lower Fort Garry was an important supply and transport centre. As such, it frequently hired seasonal or temporary labourers as needs arose, in a great variety of agricultural, food handling and processing, domestic, maintenance and menial tasks. Some of the tasks were paid for on a daily, weekly or monthly basis, while others were paid for on a per job or per item basis. Women made up a portion of this workforce. Some of the jobs they performed at Lower Fort Garry, and the wages they received, in 1868-69 are as follows:

Job	per X	Payment
Making cotton flour bags	bag	2 pence
Sewing bags	day	1 shilling 6 pence
Making butter	pound	6 pence
Gathering peas	day	1 shilling 6 pence
Milking	day	6 pence
Haymaking	day	1 shilling 6 pence
Kitchen work	day	1 shilling 6 pence
Scrubbing	day	1 shilling 6 pence
Mending clothes	day	1 shilling 6 pence
Washing table linen	month	15 shillings

Some of the jobs which men were paid a daily wage to do which fall into the category of general and domestic maintenance include:

Job	Daily Wage
Cutting wood	1 shilling 6 pence to 2 shillings
Night watching	2 shillings 6 pence
Putting up fencing	3 shillings
Hauling meat	2 shillings
Loading steamer	2 shillings
Gathering boat irons	2 shillings
Whitewashing	2 shillings 6 pence
Packing furs	2 shillings 6 pence
Boy hauling water for mortar	1 shilling 6 pence
Cleaning out casks	2 shillings 6 pence
Hauling wood for mill	2 shillings

The Hudson's Bay Company's Skilled, Permanent Labour Force

Most of the skilled labourers, about 10% of all fur trade workers, however, were non-Aboriginal. This dichotomy of labour between Aboriginal labourers and non-Aboriginal tradesmen and clerks was endemic to the fur trade. While it is

true that some English-Scots Métis managed fur trade posts or were high-ranking clerks with the Company, a racial hierarchy blocked their advancement within the HBC. Métis men could apprentice as tradesmen, which would provide them with a better wage and enhanced status. Occasionally, these labourers advanced into administrative positions such as postmaster, clerk or factor if they showed knowledge, commitment to service, and were respected by their superiors and co-workers. However, in the end, the fur trade provided very little upward mobility for ambitious Métis fur trade employees. The North West Company allowed some French-Canadian-Métis to rise through its ranks, however, all upper management positions were reserved for an Anglo-Celtic elite.

Post Masters, Clerks, Managers, Apprentices and Interpreters

The HBC very rarely had Métis officers, clerks or factors. Some Métis managed to be hired on into these positions due largely to merit but also because of family ties – these Métis had influential European fathers in the Company. The HBC also developed apprenticeship programs, in part, to instill loyalty to its young Métis charges: the Company provided for and trained the boys for upwards of seven years. The Company wanted to ensure that the apprentices would remain loyal and not be lured towards free trading for furs.

The HBC employed men to deal with correspondence to and from England as well as within the new territory. The position of postmaster was more of an administrative job as opposed to the physical labour tasks, which so many Métis men undertook with the freighting brigades. Between 1830 and 1880, Métis

men held approximately three-quarters of these positions with the Hudson's Bay Company.

In 1830 the Northern Department Council decided to hire healthy Métis sons of 14 years of age as apprentices to tradesmen. Many Métis sons became apprentice postmasters through this program. For a seven years apprenticeship, they would receive £75. Once they had completed their training, they were employed with the Company, but not in their fathers' or families' districts. The apprenticeships aided Métis sons in gaining an equal footing in the service of the Company with the young clerks sent over from England.

The position of apprentice postmaster was created for Métis sons of serving employees. However, it became a position to direct the promising young (and, sometimes, European) sons of commissioned officers towards the higher ranks of Company service. The postmaster position was, often, a rung on a ladder, which labourers and tradesmen could use to gain entrance to higher level, more administrative positions.

Many times the promotion had very little to do with the post office; rather, it helped to establish a person's status as being competent and capable. As a result of achieving or displaying these characteristics, the person might have been allowed to take charge of a post somewhere in the service. It acted in many instances, then, as a stepping stone position.

In some instances, the postmaster position was a job, which was commonly filled by a class of men who were seen as not sufficiently educated or able to become clerks but whose trading skills were valued above those of an interpreter. For some, then, it was a position, which represented their last promotion within the

Company's service and for others, it was merely a stepping stone to better positions.

Métis interpreters were highly respected and valuable fur-trade employees. Many of the Métis traders who traveled inland to work for the HBC were recognized for their ability to speak several languages. The Métis had, therefore, an advantage in getting promoted to the rank of interpreter. In the period from 1840 to 1875, one in every ten Métis winterers with the HBC were interpreters, while the average for the entire winterer population was only one in sixteen. Interpreters were sometimes tradesmen who, because of their language skills, could perform multiple services for a post. For instance, Charles Price Isham worked as a trader at Cumberland House on the Saskatchewan River but was later employed as an interpreter at York Factory from 1786 to 1787. Interpreters with the HBC during the 1865-1866 financial year made a minimum of £24 per year and a maximum of £40 per year. Pierre Ladouceur, Lac La Biche post 1889, received $35.00 per month on contract with rations and stables and hay for his horse. Also entitled to 100 lbs. of sugar as part of his annual allowance. His weekly rations included 14 lbs. of flour, a value of 84¢, 7 lbs of bacon, a value of $1.05, 1/2 pound of tea, a value of 14¢, and 2 lbs. of sugar, a value of 30¢, for a total of $2.33 per week. In total, he was given about $122.00 worth of rations for the year 1888. The Métis, including James McKay and Jerry Potts, would use their role as interpreters in the various numbered treaty negotiations on the Prairies.

Skilled Tradesmen

Since present-day Western and northern Canada were isolated from the manufacturing centres of Britain and the Eastern United States, much of the manufactures and transportation and storage infrastructure needed for the fur trade had to be constructed locally. In the 1821-1880 period, most tradesmen, including blacksmiths, carpenters, boat builders, tinsmiths, masons, and millers were from Upper or Lower Canada (present-day Ontario and Québec) and Scotland. For instance, blacksmiths, carpenters, boatbuilders, coopers (barrel makers) and tinsmiths made up 1 in 10 of the wintering servants and were distributed to where their services were required. Most were from Canada and Scotland in the 1821-1880 period

Aboriginal tradesmen were poorly represented in 1830s but in the 1850-1865 period, they made up approximately 45% of the tradesmen workforce. The Scottish tradesmen never dropped below 30% of the trades population and peaked in 1870 at about 65%. French-Canadian tradesmen made up 55% of the trades workforce in 1830, then dropped steadily never making up more than 20% of the force after 1840. However, the HBC hired many Métis, craftsmen to build Red River Carts, York boats or to fabricate metal, primarily because their labour costs were lower than that of Europeans. Métis who were trying to gain promotion, however, could become apprentice tradesmen, which would get them a better wage and a better status. The *Native Apprentice Program* ensured the Métis could participate at this level of the service.

Fur trade posts employed people to make canoes and York boats. John Lee Lewes, on March 29, 1818, noted that he sent Antoine Dejarlois, an interpreter and labourer employed in the Lesser Slave Lake District, to Lac La Biche to build

four large canoes for the freighting voyages that summer to Hudson Bay. Lac La Biche has stands of birch with good bark for canoe building. In 1884, York boat builders in and around Lac La Biche, Alberta charged $120-$140 per boat and they furnished the lumber. The buyer has to supply the pitch, iron and other necessary materials. The vessels used and made at Lac La Biche traveled the Athabasca and Mackenzie Rivers. The sizes built for the Roman Catholic Mission and the Hudson's Bay Company post at this community were 10 metres (32 feet) long with a cargo load of 5.5 tons, 12 metres (36 feet) long with a cargo load of 6 tons and 9 metres (28 feet) long with a cargo load of 5 tons.

Some tradesmen could do multiple jobs simply by the nature of their training. For instance, carpenters and boat builders were interchangeable and the skills might be listed together on the tradesman's contract. In other instances, a tradesman might be able to do other work, such as an interpreter. In cases where the tradesman possessed a commercial skill, he would be contracted out as an interpreter and paid as such, though he would still do carpentry when required.

A range of wages for tradesmen working in the 1865 financial year for the Hudson's Bay Company:

Position	Minimum Wage (£)	Maximum Wage (£)
Tinsmith	25	50
Boat Builder	35	40
Blacksmith	25	45
Cooper	35	35
Carpenter	23	40
Miller	40	40
Saddle Maker	35	35

Some of the work that tradesmen did at Lower Fort Garry was paid on a per piece, per job or per day basis. A list of these jobs and their worth in 1868-69 is as follows:

Job Description	per X	Payment
Making oars	1 oar	6 pence
Making ox harness	1 set	8 shillings
Making stovepipe	1 length	6 pence
Making tin pan for water	1 pan	5 shillings
Butchering	day	2 shillings 6 pence
Skiff building	day	3 shillings 6 pence to 4 shillings
Boat repair/carpentry	day	" " " "
Carpentery at mill	day	3 shillings 6 pence
Work at mill	day	" " " "
Shingling	day	" " " "
Carpentry	day	2 shillings 6 pence to 3 shillings 6 pence
Sawing at Mill	day	3 shillings
Whipsawing	day	" " "
Assisting Blacksmith	day	" " "

A list of some of the tasks which skilled labourers performed on a temporary basis for daily or per job tasks include:

Job Description	per X	Payment
Making oars	1 oar	6 pence
Making ox harness	1 set	8 shillings
Making stovepipe	1 length	6 pence
Making tin pan for water	1 pan	5 shillings
Butchering	day	2 shillings 6 pence
Skiff building	day	3 shillings 6 pence to 4 shillings
Boat repair/carpentry	day	" " " "
Carpentery at mill	day	3 shillings 6 pence
Work at mill	day	" " " "
Shingling	day	" " " "
Carpentry	day	2 shillings 6 pence to 3 shillings 6 pence
Sawing at Mill	day	3 shillings
Whipsawing	day	" " "
Assisting Blacksmith	day	" " "

A cart builder charged two pounds sterling to build a Red River cart in the Red River settlement in the late nineteenth century.

Questions and Activities:

1) How did a Métis boat builder construct canoes and other water craft? What materials were used? When did construction of York boats usually begin? Make a list of items used to construct a York boat and make an outline of the various stages in making a York boat

2) The Métis were "jacks of all trades": they cut and hauled wood for Hudson's Bay Company posts. What were the wages paid for such endeavours in 1868-69 at Lower Fort Garry? What other miscellaneous activities did Métis women, men and children partake in at fur trade posts? Do the Métis participate in similar activities today?

3) What were some of the skilled trades people who worked at a typical fur trade post? Do you think very many Métis were hired on for these positions, why or why not?

4) Compare the wages paid to a skilled trades person in the fur trade and compare these with wages from labourers in the fur trade. What positions were the most valued, if salaries can be used as an indication? Compare the wages paid to a tradesperson with each individual task completed. If you have trouble counting British money consult an encyclopedia or the World Wide Web to understand how the British monetary system functioned.

5) What were some of the duties of a typical Métis postman? Why were they such valued employees? Was there any chance of advancement for Métis employees past this position? If not, what factors would have prevented their advancement?

6) What was significant about the role of Postmasters in the fur trade hierarchy?

7) Was the Hudson's Bay Company's apprenticeship program successful? What was the typical age at which a young Métis boy would have been apprenticed?

8) What were the tasks preformed by a Métis labourer? What was another name for labourer in fur trade terminology? How did the wages of a Métis labourer compare with those of a Métis tradesperson? What sort of contracts did labourers sign with the Hudson's Bay Company, why would this be so? What qualities led to a labourer's advancement in the fur trade hierarchy? Were some labourers paid more than others?

9) Why were so many Métis hired by the Hudson's Bay Company as temporary workers? Do these Métis temporary workers resemble today's part-time worker? (Lack of benefits, low paying and poorer working conditions) Do you think a union movement among the Métis fur-trade labourers would have led to better working conditions and better pay? What happened to most of these positions after the 1821 merger between the Hudson's bay Company and the North West Company? Are there modern parallels between this commercial merger and ones today when many people lose their jobs?

10) What were some of the tasks completed by a temporary worker for a fur trade company?

11) What was the role of Métis women as temporary wokers in the fur trade? What tasks did they perform?

12) What were some of the reasons which restricted certain types of employment and advancement to the Métis in the fur trade? Was racism a factor in the granting of upper-management positions in the fur trade? Does the "colour barrier" still play a role in the Métis' failure to become a profession-oriented people?

13) What were some of the dangers which a Métis voyageur would have face while traveling in the old Northwest?

14) Today a popular sport is the "Iron Man contest" which has athletes compete in a number of grueling events over a long period of time requiring near super human doses of strength, stamina and endurance. Was the life of a Métis voyageur or boatman that much different than that of one of these amazing contemporary athletes? Why or why not?

15) Write a daily, weekly or monthly journal for a Métis Voyageur using information obtained from a library, the World Wide Web or an archive. Do you think many contemporary people could live as a voyageur?

16) How important were the Métis free traders to the fur trade? Did they as a group ever rival the monolithic Hudson's Bay Company? What advantages and disadvantages would these trades have over those working with the Company?

17) Conduct some research outside of this module. What were the most expensive and therefore desirable kinds of beaver fur available to a Métis fur trader?

18) Do you think that Métis fur traders would have faced discrimination from their Euro-Canadian colleagues or superiors?

19) What importance did the annual Métis buffalo hunts mean to the Hudson's Bay Company and to society in general in Rupert's Land? Why was pemmican such a vital resource to the fur trade in the nineteenth century? What importance did the provisioning industry become to the Métis?

20) What other animals did the Métis provisioners sell and to whom? Is it fair to say that the Métis provisioners played a key role in integrating immigrants to the Prairies? How did the Hudson's Bay Company keep the Métis provisioners tied to the company?

21) Name some important Métis guides and scouts. Two that come to mind are James MacKay and Jerry Potts. Go to the library or search the World Wide Web and study the exploits of these men or others like them. Write a list of the qualities that these men exhibited. Then write a list of reasons why those who were not that familiar with the Northwest would hire individuals such as these.

22) What advantages would a Métis scout or guide possess which his First Nations colleague may not? Why was the Canadian state so interested in employing them? Do some Métis continue to make a living as scouts and guides? Is this really a means of preserving their indigenous culture or is it merely a means to accommodate the needs of Euro-North American hunters and

sports people, while making a living? What social cost does the hunting of scarce animal resources by outsiders cause to Aboriginal families and communities?

24) Why were the Métis uniquely suited to be interpreters? Why did their varied backgrounds make the Métis so sought after as employees at various fur trade company posts?

25) What were some of the main First Nations languages which the Métis used and why was this so? What are the largest First Nations linguistic groups in Canada? Are most of Canada's Métis descended from this group? What was the role of Métis interpreters during the treaty process?

26) What important role did Métis freighters play in the fur trade? What other provisioning roles did the Métis play on the Prairies before the advent of large scale European settlement? What societal conditions made it impossible for them to carry on this or similar role following the 1885 Resistance? Did the coming of a number of transcontinental railways from 1885 to 1914, in Canada make the Métis provisioners obsolete? Where else in Canada could they have plied their trade after the coming of the railways?

27) What were the implications of the Métis freight trade with the Americans in the Dakota territory and Minnesota for both the fur trade and for society in general ?

28) What were the two skilled boating trades, which the Métis dominated after 1830? What skills were needed for such positions? What were some of the techniques used while portaging? Besides the Métis what other groups usually served as skilled boatmen in the fur trade?

29) What were the skills necessary to be a Métis packer? Could this position be dangerous or harmful to both mind and spirit? Were there Métis women and children packers? What innovations in transportation made the Métis packer obsolete?

30) With the merger of the two fur trading companies many Métis found themselves unemployed. Why?

31) Why was the Hudson's Bay Company opposed to the Métis free trade movement?

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