

**The Kelly Lake, British Columbia Métis**  
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**Module Objective: To inform the students about the development of a Métis identity in northeastern British Columbia.**

**Historical Introduction.**

Although there was interaction between First Nations groups and Europeans beginning in the latter part of the eighteenth century on the West Coast, the conditions necessary for a Métis identity to arise simply did not exist or were not in place long enough. The climate of the West Coast played a significant role in limiting the extent of the interaction between the two different cultural groups. It was mild enough in this region that special survival skills did not have to be learned from the resident First Nations as they did on what are now Prairie, Central and Atlantic Canada. As well, the fur trade was dominant in the region for less than a century, before giving way to agricultural settlement and the gold rush. Therefore, a symbiotic relationship never developed between the Europeans and First Nations, nor were alliances with First Nations groups deemed necessary. There was no official support for intermarriage, and for the Métis that were produced on the West Coast the fur trade was not in existence long enough for them to secure a position of economic and cultural value. As a result, a distinct Métis identity did not develop since the larger Euro-Canadian and First Nations communities subsumed the mixed blood populations.

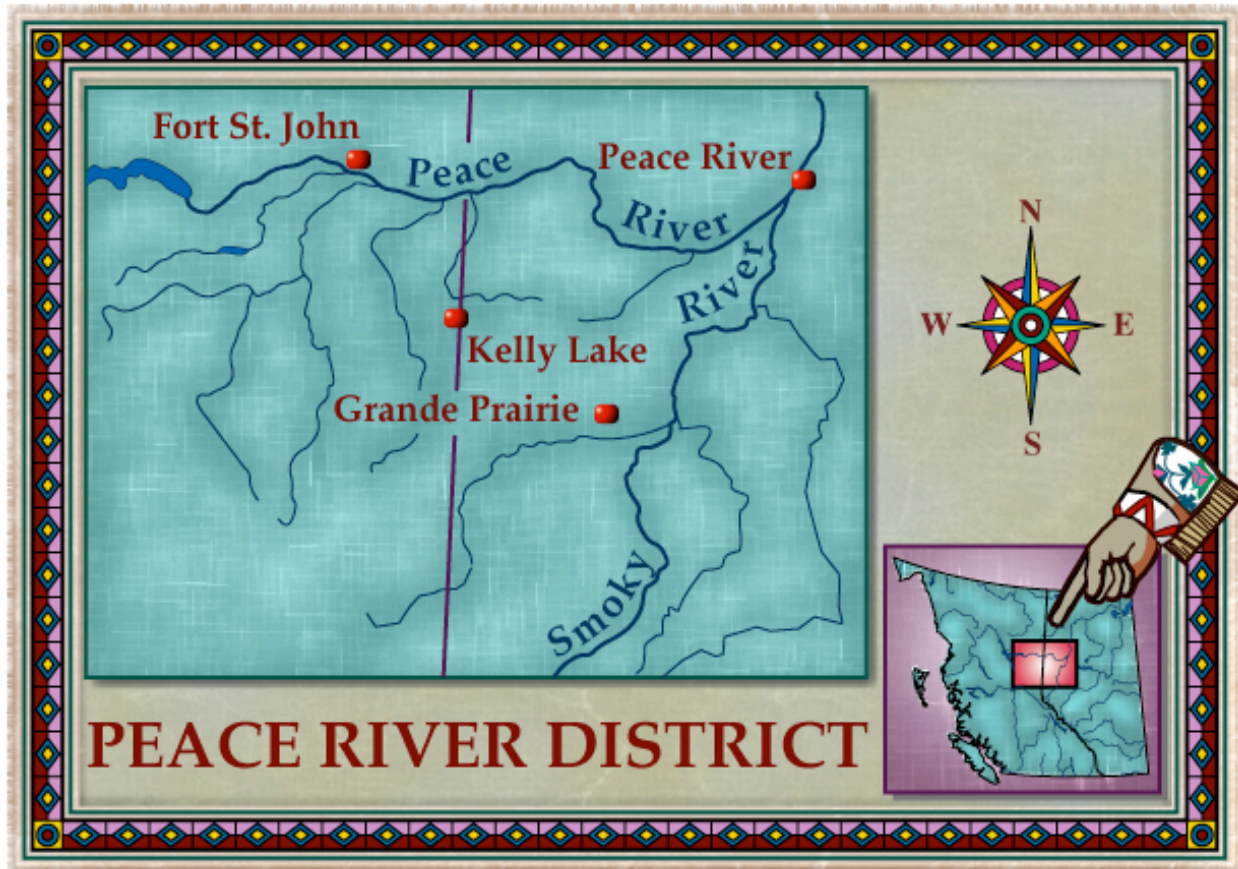
There was some recognition of these mixed bloods, however, as in the 1920s in British Columbia's Caribou and Peace River District, the Métis were referred to as "halfbreeds" or "breeds". In the Caribou region, in the northern interior of the province, ancestry was Shuswap maternally, and varied paternally due to the wide range of miners and fur traders of European heritage. In the Peace River area, in British Columbia's northeast corner, the more traditional concept of the Métis held true as they were predominantly of French Canadian-Cree heritage. "Métis" was never a common term in the province;

it was only after the Second World War when thousands of Métis migrated into the province, mainly from Prairie Canada, that it became a recognized term.

### **British Columbia's only indigenous Métis Community: Kelly Lake**

The Kelly Lake region was the traditional territory of Beaver, Sekani and Carrier (all Athapascan or from the Na-Dene super family of languages) First Nations. The fur trade was established in the Upper Peace River area in the 1700s. During the early 1800s, Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) and Algonquin Freeman arrived from Lower Canada (present-day Québec) to trade with the First Peoples. Many of these traders retired in the region and intermarried with local First Nations women. Métis outposts and communities were formed throughout the area. For instance, in 1798, Fort St. James was created and in 1805 Fort McLeod was established among the Sekani people.

Mixed-descent families trapped and settled in the Peace River district and communities in what are now present-day northeastern British Columbia and northwestern Alberta. The first Métis communities were regional bands of 150 to 500 people connected by small extended family units and kinship ties. Some regional Métis settlements similar to Kelly Lake were Dunvegan, Jasper House and Grande Cache (all in Alberta).



The Kelly Lake people are of mainly Cree-Métis ancestry with the exception of the L'Hirondelle, Thomas and Calliou families, which claim Iroquois paternal ancestry. These Iroquois voyageurs from the St. Lawrence Valley worked their way westwards as trappers, hunters and labourers for the NWC in the 1800s. Common Métis family names in Kelly Lake are Belcourt, Gaucher, Calliou, Campbell, Gladu, Grey, Hamelin, Letendre, and Supernault. The region was once mainly populated by Beaver First Nations; however, many were decimated by disease. Some of the surviving Beaver people intermarried with the Kelly Lake Métis.

In response to the flood of settlers moving into the Prairie Provinces, Kelly Lake was established around 1910 by Métis migrating west from the short-lived settlement of Flying Shot, Alberta. This marked the end of a century long migration north and west

from the Red River, and covered three generations. Most of the original Kelly Lake Métis were born in Lac Ste. Anne, Alberta between about 1850 and 1890. In fact, many in the community still make annual religious pilgrimages to this settlement every July. Kelly Lake itself is located 1.6 kilometres inside the B.C. border, 56 kilometres south of Dawson Creek and 40 kilometres west of Beaverlodge, Alberta.

Kelly Lake is circular, and is about two kilometres wide and is fed by many underground streams. The area around the lake includes hay meadows, muskeg with tamarack and black spruce. On higher ground, there are jack pine, white spruce, aspen, and some white birch. The elevation of the lake is almost 914 metres. The Rocky Mountains are to the west of Kelly Lake. This location was chosen because it offered good water, wild hay, logs for cabins and fuel, and an abundance of moose and smaller game for subsistence.

Moose was the principal meat hunted and was plentiful. Rabbits, wildfowl, and fish supplemented moose meat when the large animals were scarce. Fishing was done year round. Ice fishing in the winter was important if other animals were scarce. Bear, beaver, and lynx were also eaten as occasion required. The men of Kelly Lake were expert hunters and trappers. The meat was used fresh, frozen, dried, or made into pemmican. Berries and roots supplemented the diet and were gathered by the women and children. The community still harvests natural resources. For instance, berry-picking excursions still persist, however, instead of being weeklong treks with horses, they now involve a one-day trip by truck.

Animal hides were tanned and handcrafted by the women into moccasins, gloves, jackets, bags, and rope. Kelly Lake Métis women like Annie Gladu, who lived during pioneer times, were noted for their skill in making rabbit skin robes. When finished

these blankets could be two inches thick. The women also made lynx-paw robes, which were warm, durable, and beautiful. The women would snare animals such as rabbits, weasels, and muskrat. Some of the children did this, too. The women also did beautiful work in silk embroidery and beads on moose and caribou hide. They made moccasins, gauntlets, jackets, and other day-to-day items.

Most of the Kelly Lake men carried a "fire bag" or *Kuskipitakum* of moose hide, often embellished with embroidery or beads. In the bag would be a supply of plug tobacco, Red Willow, and matches. Dried bear-berry leaves were used as an alternative to Red Willow. The smoking of plug tobacco was a regular pastime. Tobacco was shaved off a half-pound (227 grams) plug. The shaving were crumbled by rubbing them between the palms. Then the tobacco was packed into the pipe but not too tightly. The tobacco was smoked individually or was mixed with red willow bark shavings. In this process, the red outer bark is scraped off and discarded. Then the soft inside cambium layer is carefully stripped down the slender stem and may be left attached in spirals at the end. These are then dried or toasted by sticking the stems in the ground around a campfire, or they may be dried in an oven.

In 1923, the local fur trader, Jim Young, established Kelly Lake's first school in his store. According to Gerry Andrews, the first teacher, the original aim was to teach the Cree-speaking Métis children enough English so they could communicate in an ever changing environment. He taught basic reading, writing, and arithmetic the first year since many children could only speak Cree.

### The First Students at Kelly Lake 1923-24:

Name/ Age:	
Henry Belcourt	14
Billy Gladu	14
George Hamelin	11
Colin Gladu	11
Adolphus Gladu	9
Alec Gladu	8
Sarah Campbell	14
David Gray	7
Alfred Campbell	9
Jimmie Letendre	6
Mary Belcourt	7
Josephine Gladu	6

The school was supported by Métis families and in the first year about a dozen children consistently attended. In 1925, the school was moved to an abandoned cabin previously owned by William Callihou to accommodate for the increased student population.

In 1996, Kelly Lake, a community of roughly 400, had one school from Kindergarten to grade nine. The Métis students leave the community for grades 9-12. Kelly Lake has never had First Nations teachers but the community is strongly trying to promote traditional First Nations culture in the school system. The community is concerned about reviving their Métis culture and Cree language, which was lost in the Euro-Canadian style education system. Nevertheless, Kelly Lake is a close kit community and the people have a great deal of community pride. The isolation of Kelly Lake has allowed the Métis people to retain their unique cultural identity.

Kelly Lake residents are currently pursuing land claims through the British Columbia Treaty Commission process. The community of Kelly Lake was excluded from the Treaty 8 process of 1899-1900 although it occurred within Treaty Eight geographical boundaries. The Treaty Eight Nations recognize the area surrounding Kelly Lake as the traditional territory of the Métis community. Kelly Lake is the first Métis community to

pursue land claims in British Columbia because it is the only distinctly Métis community in the province.

*Whatever happens we want a land base. We believe that the land base that we are going to be asking for is an inherent right of the Métis. We have been here for over one hundred years and we plan on being here for another hundred. We are just asking for the land that the trappers were using in the early 1800s and kept using into the 1900s. That is what we are asking for. We have documented proof that we have been there since 1870.*

Lyle Letrendre, President of Kelly Lake Métis Association – 1990s

In fact, the Kelly Lake Métis have an outstanding land claim. Unlike the majority of the Western-Canadian Métis **scrip** was not issued to Kelly Lake residents. The nearest scrip commissions took place in the Athabasca District in Northern Alberta. In 1899, Scrip and Treaty commissions visited Lesser Slave Lake to issue treaty and take scrip applications. Indeed, Kelly Lake is in a unique position. It is the only majority Métis community in British Columbia. In other communities, the Métis are usually in the minority. In Kelly Lake, the community has always been and still is predominantly Métis.

In the 1970s, things started to change in Kelly Lake, which at the time was made up of log cabins, a one-room schoolhouse, and a one-room church. The community had no telephones or running water. In that decade, Tumbler Ridge Coal Development was started and the road through Kelly Lake to the development became a major transportation route. The increase in traffic led to an increase in access to hunting and in a few years the game was drastically reduced. However, with recent resource development in the area, the community is fearful of losing its traditional livelihood.

*Over five generations of our people have kept our Cree language and culture. The community spirit is strong. Our Elders play a strong role in keeping our culture and spiritual beliefs in the community and we'd like to pass on it to our younger generation to keep it alive. The government's assimilation policies have taken their toll. Today's younger Métis can barely speak their own language and have lost their sense of identity as people. It is funny that the government spends millions of dollars of fisheries, forestry and other resource bases but not on the people that it has sworn to protect. Our culture in Kelly Lake is slowly going down because of government policies not recognizing the Métis.*

Derwin Calliou, Kelly Lake Métis Association

The late 1960s and early 1970s also brought political activism to Kelly Lake. For instance, a chapter of the Union of British Columbia Métis and Non-Status Indians was formed in Kelly Lake in 1968. The organization changed its name to United Native Nations (UNN) and made its membership open to all Native people. Also about this time, the British Columbia Association of Non Status Indians (BCANSI) was formed in March 1969 in Vancouver by H.A. (Butch) Smitheram and three other Métis and one Non-Status First Nation person. This organization dealt with issues effecting the province's urban Non Status First Nations and Métis, specifically regarding increasing their levels of education, training and opportunity. Membership was open to those "unregistered person[s] of native descent, who [have] one quarter or more First Nations blood, but do not have...First Nations treaty rights." This one quarter provision was the same as that in the major prairie Métis associations, and the organization was also open to the spouses of those who were eligible.

The Métis were already a minority in British Columbia when this organization first started and became an even smaller minority with the change in membership in 1976. When the *1982 Constitution Act* (Section 35-2, which states "In this Act, "aboriginal (sic) peoples of Canada" includes the Indian, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada), included the Métis as one of three Aboriginal peoples, British Columbia's Métis pulled out of the UNN. Furthermore, the amendment of the *Indian Act* in 1985 allowed most Non-Status First Nations to regain their status, which led to a reduction in the UNN rank-and-file. Within Kelly Lake, some of the descendants of the Beaver First Nation have become Bill C-31 and this has caused some political changes and divisions among the community. As a result, the Métis left to take part in exclusively Métis organizations such as the Louis Riel Métis Association. Hence, the Kelly Lake UNN local became known as the Métis Nation local. For a time, the Kelly Lake Métis tried to get their needs addressed and their rights recognized through the provincial Métis organization. However, this did not help the community so they therefore changed



their political organization's name to the Kelly Lake First Nation Community Association and have submitted a land claim to the provincial and federal government. Regardless of the name changes, the people of the community have always identified themselves as Métis.

The 1960s and 1970s produced many dedicated community activists, including Jarvis Gray, who was born in Kelly Lake, but now lives in Fort St. John. Jarvis is a Cree-Métis and currently works for the British Columbia Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks. Mr. Gray is a board member of a number of organizations including the National First Nations Head Start Program, the R.C.M.P. and the University of Alberta's Northeast First Nations Advisory Committee. He is particularly proud to serve Aboriginal people in his new home of Fort St. John British Columbia: he has been the president of the Fort St. John Friendship Centre. He is a compassionate, thoughtful, knowledgeable and civic-minded individual, who believes that respect is a value, and all people and all things have value. Mr. Gray also respects his First Nations traditions. Mr. Gray has the following advice for Aboriginal youth:

*It is everybody's responsibility to make our children happy and safe. To survive as a people we need to teach the children to gracefully balance between tradition and mainstream society. Our youth must learn to live bi-culturally. We must honour our traditions, commit to the present and look to the future.*

### **Questions and Activities:**

- 1) How is Kelly Lake distinct from other communities in British Columbia?
- 2) Which Métis populations are the Kelly Lake Métis most similar to, and why?
- 3) Why did the Métis initially choose to settle at Kelly Lake?
- 4) Make a map listing the migration of First Peoples and Métis to create the unique Métis community of Kelly Lake. Make an inventory of all the First Nations that are ancestors of the Kelly Lake Métis. How is this Métis population different than that in Saskatchewan or Manitoba?

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