

## Traditional Métis Socialization and Entertainment – Todd Paquin, Darren R. Préfontaine and Patrick Young

**Module Objective:** The Métis have long been a festive and social people, who despite adversity also managed to have fun. In this module, the students will be informed about various traditional forms of entertainment, which the Métis played among themselves. These include children's games and sporting activities among adults. They will also learn about: the history of Métis dancing and will be introduced to some of the more popular dances; the history of Métis fiddling and its importance to the community and traditional Métis folk songs and how important these were to a semi-nomadic society. Finally, the students will be provided with a brief overview of the Métis' traditional Christmas and New Year's Celebrations.

### **Métis Socialization**

The Métis have always been a festive people, who love to socialize. In fact, the Métis have been described as having a social life, which mixed the cooperative tribalism of their Cree foremothers and the *joie de vivre* – joy of life – of their French-Canadian forefathers. At any time, the Métis were capable of having a good time given an opportunity. Visiting is an important pastime and the Métis place a great emphasis on relationships and friendships. Overtime, the Métis have established common gathering places for visiting. For instance, while marriage and funeral ceremonies took place in a church, it was the social activities in the home, which drew the most people into close association for mutual support, comfort and celebration. House parties could occur whenever people felt like visiting. Women brought sandwiches, cake, pie and coffee and tea and the men played music. Sometimes the host or hostess did not know a party was on its way to their house until it arrived, unannounced! In some Métis communities after church, people gathered for ball games, card games or to have dinner together. Socialization led to the development of a rich and varied entertainment life among the Métis.

## **Métis Children's Games**

Métis children, like children throughout history, traditionally played a variety of games. While a means to pass time in the winter or to engage children while caregivers were involved elsewhere, these games, while fun, also taught the children a variety of critical thinking and manual dexterity skills, including developing keenness of observation, hand-eye coordination and the ability to make quick decisions. In many instances, games helped children learn skills needed for survival and making a living in the different environments and climates of Canada. Several of these games were adopted from plains and boreal forest First Nations, such as the Dene and Plains, Woodland and Swampy Cree.

Some games, like tag, hide-and-go-seek and hop-step-and-jump, required no equipment and were played outside by children with siblings, cousins and friends. In earlier times, boys pretended to go on buffalo hunts with their scaled-down bows and arrows or wooden rifles.

A distinctly Métis game, the map game, helped develop children's ability to give and follow directions and promoted interaction between boys and girls. One of two teams hid while the captain drew a map for the opposing team, detailing the position of the hidden children. The map could be made very confusing, but had to be legible. The opposing team would have to find the hidden children using this map. Once all the children were found, the opposing team hid and the captain drew a map. At each turn, the captain changed to allow every child an opportunity to draw a map.

Games of dexterity commonly involved some form of apparatus, which emphasized the player's hand-eye coordination. The most common of these

involve toss-and-catch movements and are called ring and pin games. The underlying objective was to catch a ring or an object with holes drilled in it on a pointed piece. Some of the game pieces were very simple while others were composite apparatuses. For instance, a person attached a pin made out of bone to a patch of leather with sinew or a hide tether. Several cones made from deer or bison foot bones would be strung between the pin and the leather patch. The object of the game was to stick the pin into one of the holes in the leather or to catch one or several of the cones while holding onto the pin. Spearing the leather patch was the most difficult objective and was worth the most points.

There are many variations on this type of game, all of which require the player to toss an object into the air and then catch it on a pointed hand-held portion. Some of the games required score keeping, typically those, which had several pieces, which could be caught (as above) or those, which had multiple holes that could be speared with the hand-held portion. Other game varieties did not involve score keeping, typically those which you try to catch a simple ring or a similar object on a pin.

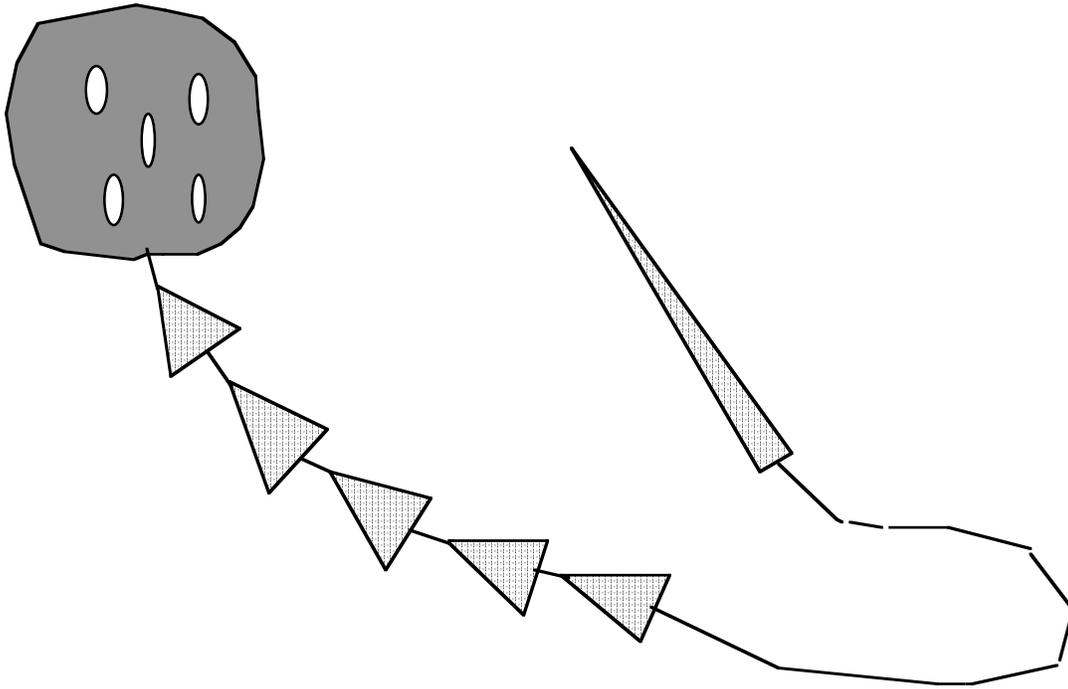
String games and string toys also kept children amused and entertained. Buzzers, which were popular first among the Cree and Dene, became a source of enjoyment for Métis children. These objects were constructed by threading a string through two holes in a button or drilled wooden disk. The ends of the string would be tied together to form a loop and the button formed the centrepiece. By tightly winding the string, then alternately pulling on both ends of the loop and relaxing the tension, the button spins rapidly. The faster the person was able to spin the button by pulling on and releasing the string, the louder the buzzing became. While a button or disk was the common buzzer

centrepiece, people were creative and carved imaginative buzzer pieces to get different pitches and sounds.

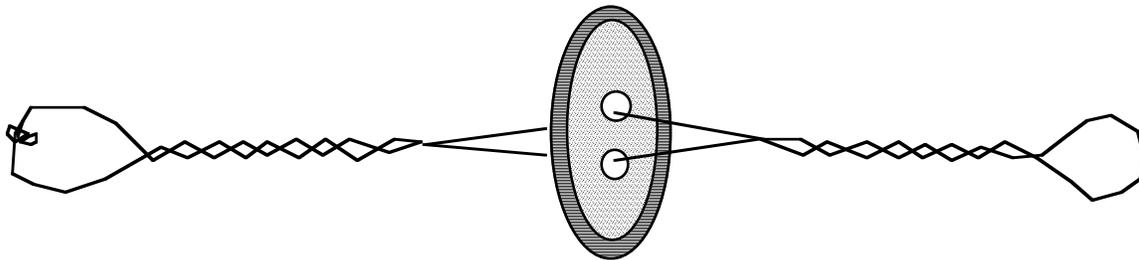
String could be used on its own as a tool for entertainment. Cat's cradle is a popular game, which has its origins among the First Nations and Inuit. By looping a string, which has its ends tied together, around and between the fingers of both hands, the participants are capable of making intricate designs. The looped string designs can be passed back and forth between people who build on the designs using their fingers, teeth and even toes.

Some of the designs are simple enough to be created by one person manipulating the string, while others are so complex that they require people working in partnership. For instance, a running caribou pattern can only be executed through the cooperative efforts of two people, while patterns representing items such as brooms or individuals can make geometric designs.

Some people feel that recreation in the past was more creative and centred on the family, involving both parents and the children whereas today there is more emphasis on organized recreation and toys.



Toss and Catch Game with Pin, Cones and Leather Patch



Buzzer made from a button and a loop of string

## **Métis Games and Gambling**

Métis games and gambling are an amalgamation of both First Nations and European activities. While some of the games were modified within Métis communities, many are still played in their original forms. Various games provided people with an opportunity to develop physical fitness and skills, to redistribute wealth and to socialize with their friends and family. With the advent of bingos, casinos and other large-scale gambling facilities and games, gambling has become more of an opportunity to gain personal wealth. The smaller scale events, such as card playing in the home, still maintain their role as a socializing activity.

The Métis have long enjoyed playing cards – an activity very popular among their voyageur ancestors. In fact, in the times of York boat transportation, men frequently played poker to pass the time when weather would not permit them to travel. Many Métis, except those who do not participate because of religious principles, enjoy card games. Card games can spring up wherever and whenever time and space permits. For instance, women cooking for social events can quickly get a game going while the food is in the oven. People dropping by Indian and Métis Friendship Centres can often be seen enjoying card games while visiting. Men loved to gamble and card games could go on for days, until the player's pockets were empty.

Card games of European origin have long been a form of social gambling for the Métis. One popular card game at the Beaver Métis Colony in Alberta is a form of rummy called "50 points". People gamble small amounts of money while playing the game, generally on the order of 25¢ per game. Both women and

men gamble on card games, though women generally gambled among themselves, as did the men. Other games that the Métis commonly played included "euchre" ("à l' écarté"), "quatre-sept", "caino voleurs" ("casino bandits"), "la bataille" ("war") "penny-ante poker", "whist", "Le Major" and "pitro". These are small-scale events, which, generally, include friends and family. Most games involved a great deal of arguing about cheating, the accusations most commonly made by the women about their husbands.

A favourite children's card game in St. Laurent, Manitoba, was called "*la penitence*". Losers of the game would be given a penance to complete. Examples of penance include walking around the house in the dark holding the ace of spades, which represented to some people the fork of the devil, or planting a kiss on a visitor's baldhead! Obviously, children were quite adept at making up imaginative penances for their playmates.

The Métis have also been fond of other forms of gambling such as games of chance, which include guessing games and dicing. Many of the guessing games were played with an accompaniment of singing or drumming. Games involved dice, sometimes made from the flat bones of animals such as bison, had fewer rituals and simply involved talking and laughing.

One popular guessing game was the hand game, which involved two people or teams. One player had to guess in which hand another player was holding a special game piece, such as a marked wooden cylinder. To confuse the guesser, the player passed the game piece back and forth under a blanket or behind the back while making strange facial expressions, body movements, and outrageous comments.

Another popular game, the hidden ball game, followed rules similar to that of the hand game. A player hide a ball in one of several containers such as moccasins, and the opponent had to guess where the ball was hidden. To confuse an opponent, a player tried to use slight of hand while hiding the ball. Items were wagered on this game as well.

Horseracing was another favoured activity in which the Métis participated in, watched and bet on. In the summer, the horses ran on the roads and in winter they ran on the frozen rivers. In Red River, horse races were held on May 24, and people lined the racecourse for kilometers to watch the contest. Horseracing was a common event on July 4. People did not have or know about Dominion Day (now Canada Day), so on the American holiday residents of Red River offered a salute by gunfire and held horse racing and other sports. In addition to racing on horseback, riders dashed along in chuck wagons and chariots to the delight of numerous spectators. The Métis were master horsemen and it could be expected that any horserace would be run hard, furious and at full speed. Horseracing is still a popular pastime and attraction today. Children as well as adults ride horses.

### **Traditional Métis Folk” Entertainment: Singing, Fiddling and Dancing**

Singing, fiddle playing and dancing were an important part of Métis culture when people lived free on the prairie, following the bison herds. So was storytelling and joking. These activities promoted a sense of communal identity for a people who were semi-nomadic and cherished opportunities to meet with friends and family. While camped out on the prairie or in the forest, people congregated around campfires and listened to older people tell stories while smoking their pipes, and sang songs until the late hours.

## Métis Music

The Métis possess a vibrant oral culture and as a consequence, possess a rich musical heritage. Métis music is poignant, passionate, and memorable. Traditional Métis songs in French, Michif and Cree, have been passed down from the Oral Tradition and have been transcribed and put to music only recently. Translation problems have plagued transcribers since the lyrics of many of these old songs are in archaic French. To this day, the Méis continue to write songs and sing about their experiences. Métis musicians currently participate in all levels of the music industry. Many like Don Freed are committed to ensuring that Métis youth become proud of their culture through song.

Métis songs owe a great deal to the Métis' Aboriginal heritage. First Nation chants and lyrics figured prominently in the singing repertoire of Métis families. For instance, some Métis songs are exclusively in Cree. Still others contain a mix of Cree and English, in addition to the occasional French word. Two songs of this genre include "*My Girl is an Irish Girl*" and "*Asay niganun takasin*" ("Rabbit for Lunch"). There are a fair number of songs in Michif; some of the more popular include "*La Montagne Tortue*" ("We're going to Turtle Mountain"), and the ever popular "*Kispin Kisakahin*" ("Kiss me if you love me"). The Métis also translated other songs into Michif as well.

Most folksongs song by the Métis, however, are in French and are of French and French-Canadian origin. Lyrics for these French folk songs often change, even if the tune and rhythm remain the same. Many of these songs were originally based on ballads, which were first song in Mediaeval and Renaissance France and brought to what is now Western and northern Canada by French *coureurs de bois* and French-Canadian *voyageurs*. Some of these songs include "*La rose*

*blanche* (“the White Rose”), “à la claire fontaine” (“the Clear Fountain”) and “*si tu reviens dimanche*” (“If You Comeback Sunday”). The Métis would, after hearing these songs, change them to better reflect their family or local circumstance. After the 1890s, other French songs brought to the Prairie West by French-Canadian, French and Walloon (French Belgian) pioneers, were song, and adapted by the Métis. One of these more recent songs includes “*Napoléon dans sa prison*” (“Napoleon in His Prison Cell”), which was song around Duck Lake and St. Louis, Saskatchewan.

The Métis themselves in fact composed many well-known songs. The first-recognized Métis songwriter was Pierre Falcon (1793-1876). Falcon, the “Bard of the Plains”, was not only an adept songwriter and poet, but was also a fine raconteur of events in contemporary Métis society. His “*La Bataille des Sept Chênes*” or “*La Chanson de la Grenouillère*” (“*The Battle of Seven Oaks*” or “*The Ballad of Frog Plains*”) was an unofficial Métis anthem. The song encapsulated the spirit of resistance during the Métis victory at the Battle of Seven Oaks, June 19, 1816. Here’s the first stanza to the first recorded Métis song:

*Voulez-vous écouter chanter* (Would you like to hear me sing)  
*Une chanson de vérité?* (A song of truth?)  
*Le dix-neuf de juin, la bande des Bois Brûlés* (On June nineteenth, the Bois-Brûlés)  
*Sont arrivés commes des braves guerriers.* (Arrived like brave warriors.)

A North West Company employee, Falcon composed stirring songs praising the Métis’ martial prowess, or their exciting and efficient bison hunts. At other times, he made up songs that poked fun at the Métis’ proclivities and mocked the pretensions of their enemies. For example, his song “*Les tribulations d’un roi malheureux*” (“The Trials of an Unfortunate King”), mocked William McDougall’s attempt to proclaim Canadian sovereignty before Louis Riel and the Provisional

Government negotiated the region's entry into Confederation. Unfortunately, his final song about the Red River Resistance has become lost.

During the Red River Resistance and the 1885 Resistance, the Métis sang a number of songs to keep their spirits high. At the Battle of Fish Creek (April 24, 1885), for instance, the Métis resisters began singing and playing "*La Bataille des Sept Chênes*" and "*Malbrouk*". After the 1885 Resistance ended, the vanquished Métis sang the M.-A. Gérin-Lajoie's classic "*Un Canadien Errant*", which lamented the defeat and exile of French-Canadian rebels from the 1837-38 Lower Canadian Rebellion to Australia. However, the most poignant song from the 1885 Resistance is the haunting song "*C'est au Champ de bataille*", ("The Battlefield") or "*De tous champs de bataille*" or "*L'adieu de Riel*" ("Riel's Farewell") written by Louis Riel prior to his execution. The song is a lament about the futility of war, the sacrifice of youth and the pain which mothers feel when their sons go off to war. Less sombre was Louis Riel's "*La Métisse*" ("The Métis Girl"), which salutes the piety and patriotism of Métis women during the Red River Resistance.

The Métis incorporated singing into all aspects of their existence. Music provided them with a creative outlet and enabled them to survive through hardship, while maintaining their heritage and kinship and community bonds. For instance, Métis women sang while working around the house, often singing lullabies to their babies and young children while putting them to bed. Women also helped pass Métis history on to their children through the songs they sang. Songs that reflected the migratory nature of the trapping, freighting, and boating lifestyle were called "songs of separation". They poignantly describe the agonizing necessity of leaving loved ones behind while traveling for extended

periods of time. In addition, songs were invaluable as they aided men in keeping time while paddling or rowing. In fact, employers viewed men who could sing as better employees and were sometimes paid better wages.

Singing was especially important at family gatherings, at work or while traveling. The Métis would sing while *en portage* in a canoe, York Boat or Red River Cart. They sang while picking seneca root, or processing bison carcasses. Singing was also popular at Christmas, New Years celebrations, at weddings and at wakes. While camped out on the prairie or in the forest, people would congregate around campfires and sing songs, listen to stories, and smoke their pipes into the late hours. In fact, lyrics to popular songs were often composed to celebrate marriages, births, and to commemorate deaths. Métis Elder James Lavalley had this to say about how important singing was to his family:

*We were quite small when my father sang those songs, and I don't think there's many people that could sing those old songs today, now...Again, I remember on New Year's there was a few people that might sing, but particularly her father used to sing songs. Yeah, I remember my dad used to sing that song à Montréal'. (Darren Préfontaine, Interview with Stella & James Lavalley, July 1998).*

### **Métis Fiddling**

Canada has long been blessed with a number of vibrant folk fiddling traditions among Acadians, Celtic Maritimers, French Canadians, First Nations and Métis. All these traditions are similar, but distinct. Indeed, anybody familiar with this genre of music can easily differentiate between Celtic, French-Canadian and Métis fiddle music. Nevertheless, all variations of Canadian folk fiddling have a common origin from the Celtic fringes of Western Europe: Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cornwall and Brittany. From these locales the predecessors of today's jigs, reels, and quadrilles defused to England, France and were eventually brought to Canada by the French and Scots.

There are two diffusion points from which the Métis became aware of fiddling. The first, by Scots and Orcadians (or "*Arcayens*" to the Métis) employed with the Hudson's Bay Company, was along Hudson Bay and its drainage basin. The second, along the Great Lakes and Lake Winnipeg's drainage basin, was brought to the Métis by French *coureurs de bois* and later French-Canadian *voyageurs* and Scots bourgeois working with the Montréal-based fur trade. Indigenous North America had no fiddling tradition prior to Contact. Nevertheless, as this culture developed in North America, local Indigenous populations embraced the violin and incorporated distinct rhythms and harmonies into existing European tunes. Today, for instance, strong First Nations fiddling traditions exist among the James Bay Swampy Cree and the MacKenzie River Dene. However, the Métis are the most widely recognized Aboriginal fiddle players.

At fur trade posts, fiddle playing was a common feature in the entire social regimen. Fiddle tunes were played while the men rested *en portage*, and at such social gatherings as balls and dances. In the early nineteenth century, the Métis quickly began playing the fiddle throughout the Red River Settlement. Unfortunately, it is not known who the first Métis fiddle player was or what the first Métis jig or reel was. However, the first recorded reference to the "Red River Jig" appeared in 1860. Apparently, Mr. McDallas composed the tune for the wedding dance of a Métis couple. Père Brocher, who conducted the marriage ceremony, christened the tune the "*Red River Jig*". Others argue that the Desjarlais family at Red River created this tune. Regardless of the "Red River Jig's" true origins, it has become an unofficial Métis anthem, and is played at almost all Métis functions. Others feel that it was based on a widely known French-Canadian tune.

Accounts by missionaries and fur traders and artists' sketches indicate that the gregarious Red River Métis were passionate about fiddling, dancing and celebrating. A Red River ball, with numerous fiddle players and callers, at such places as James MacKay's lodge was the social highlight of the year, and was attended by all the local Métis. However, fiddling within Métis society was very egalitarian since both the elite and the rank and file enjoyed playing the fiddle. Every Métis family had a fiddle player, who, on a mere moment's notice, could play a tune if everybody was in the mood to celebrate. Those who could not play the fiddle, aspired to learn how to play this instrument as Ray P. Houle, a Métis Elder from North Dakota, indicates:

*We used to have a social life where we call them bush dances. People would harness up the horses and some fella in the backwoods would brew up maybe five crocks of home-brew and he'd invite 20-30 people down to his home for two or three days of celebration. See, they would bring their instruments, have violins, guitars. I would lay in the background and practice with these old-timers, you know, and pick up their songs. That's how I learned it. I'd play right along with them. That's the only way I could learn them, see, play with the fiddle. And after I'd play it five or six times I'd go out by myself and see if I could do it and come back and say, 'Is this right?' He'd listen and he'd say, 'No, but it sounds better'.*

Mr. Houle was one of hundreds of Métis fiddle players who learned to play "by ear" – without learning how to read music. Despite the informal training, many Métis became maestro fiddle players. For instance, William Arcand, a Métis originally from Saskatchewan, played for Queen Elizabeth (the Queen Mother) in England. In more recent times, two Manitoba Métis fiddlers: Andy Dejarlis and Eugene Laderoute, who composed the popular "Keystone Reel", were famous throughout the world.

Road Allowance communities preserved the tradition of Métis fiddle playing. After the 1885 Resistance, the Métis experienced a great deal of oppression and marginalization, however, they found strength in social gatherings, especially

dances. In fact, the demand for fiddles was so high within road allowance communities that the Métis resorted to making their own fiddles from maple wood or birchbark when none could be obtained from stores, trading posts or traders. In addition, the Métis did not use guitars to accompany their fiddle music. Instead, according to Métis Elder James Lavalley, originally from the Crescent Lake Métis settlement near Yorkton, Saskatchewan, they corded violins and played them like guitars:

*I remember, a long time ago, they used to play the fiddle...when we were dancing the Square Dance, and they would have somebody cord with a guitar. But year's ago, if they didn't have a guitar, they had two fiddles. One played the fiddle and the other one corded with the fiddle... they would take the bow and cord on the fiddle, and then some people used spoons to cord the fiddle.*

Many from Mr. Lavalley's generation, the so-called "Road Allowance People" still play the fiddle. Today, Métis youth are continuing this tradition and are learning from such accomplished Métis fiddle players as John Arcand, Calvin Vollrath, and Richard Lafferty Sr. Fiddle music continues to be prevalent at dances and social and cultural events in communities across the Métis Homeland including John Arcand's annual Fiddle Fest, which is held near Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Many Métis can tell what community a person comes from based on regional variations of familiar fiddle tunes. Such regional variation has ensured the vibrancy of Métis fiddling traditions. Furthermore, many fiddle instructional booklets, videos and music compilations exist. All these things are ensuring the survival of Métis fiddling traditions for generations to come.

### **Métis Dance**

In the early nineteenth century, visitors to the Red River Settlement were taken aback at the popularity of folk dancing among the Métis and Country Born (English Métis). Every time a formal or informal dance was held, almost all attended, danced, celebrated and reveled in one another's company. Red River

and indeed all Métis dancing originated from mixing First Nations footwork with Scottish, Irish, and French reel, jig, and quadrille steps. The Métis often attended and danced at pow wows. When missionaries arrived among the Métis groups, they felt it was improper for the Métis to be involved in what they considered to be non-Christian activities. Yet, the missionaries felt that European and French Canadian dances were acceptable. Eventually, the Métis modified these dances by including First Nations footwork in them. However, Métis dancing has always been considered distinct from any of its predecessors.

Some popular Métis dances are the "Red River Jig" ("*Oyache Mannin*"), the "Rabbit-Chase Dance", "Drops of Brandy" ("*danse de crochets*"), "Broom Dance" ("*danse de balai*"), the "Sash Dance", and the "Handkerchief Dance" ("*danse de mouchoire*"). In addition, the Métis enjoy square and round dancing, schottisches, quadrilles, old time waltzes and polkas. Today, most cultural events and Métis gatherings include dancing either as a competition to showcase talent or as a social event for both the young and the old.

The "Red River Jig" is the most popular and universally recognized Métis dance. Every Métis knows the music for this fiddle tune, even if they do not know how to jig to it. The music has become an unofficial Métis anthem and is often played at Métis cultural and political gatherings. The first recorded reference to the dance appears in 1860, with a certain Mr. McDallas receiving credit for composing the tune for the wedding dance of a Métis couple. Père Brocher, who conducted the marriage ceremony, christened the tune the "Red River Jig". The "Red River Jig" begins by shuffling the right foot, then the left. In every third shuffle, the participants lift their feet backward, missing a beat of music. The dance's object is to maintain lively, shuffling footwork while keeping the upper

body as motionless as possible. The basic "Red River Jig" step is universal. Nevertheless, dancers always incorporate their own "fancy steps" to the main dance. There are about fifty fancy steps used in the "Red River Jig". These fancy steps can often determine the dancer's home community. Here is a historically documented sequence of "Red River Jig" steps:

- I. Back step four times.
- II. Front step four times. Double.
- III. Front step four times. Single.
- IV. Triple tap four times.
- V. Triple tap four times, accented right.
- VI. Triple tap four times, accented left.
- VII. Triple tap four times, accented right and left.
- VIII. Triple tap four times, accented double.
- IX. Time tap.
- X. Cross over handclasp with triple tap.
- XI. Right tap turn.
- XII. Triple tap four times.
- XIII. Double tap four times.
- XIV. Heel-toe step four times, right foot.
- XV. Heel-toe step four times, left foot.
- XVI. Heel-toe step four times, double.
- XVII. Triple tap, four times, half circle facing each other, cross over, handclasp to places.

In one variation of the "Red River Jig", two dancers face one another. The two dancers change places by clasping hands and crossing over with a shuffle step. As the dancers tire, new dancers jump up and take their place, keeping the dancing alive for hours at a time!

The Métis, of course, are known for many other dances, particularly the "Rabbit Chase Dance", the "Handkerchief Dance" and the "Sash Dance". In the "Rabbit Chase Dance", partners stand opposite each other, in lines divided into males and females. The first couple dances down the middle of the two lines, breaking apart at the end of the lines and moving behind their original line. Then, the man chases the woman around the lines in a figure eight pattern until he catches her. Following that, the preceding couple repeats the performance, but

with the woman chasing the man. In the "Handkerchief Dance" or "*danse de mouchoire*", which was traditionally performed at the end of an evening, a man tied a handkerchief around a woman's neck and danced with her. At the song's conclusion, he kissed her. The woman, then, selected a dance partner by tying her handkerchief around a man's neck. At the end of the song, she kissed him. Eventually, everybody was kissed. For the "Sash Dance", a modification of the "Scottish Highland Sword Dance", a woman dances very quickly across two sashes without touching them.

The Métis are also widely known for their square and round dancing. In fact, square and round dance competitions are always the main highlight of such Métis cultural events as "Back to Batoche Days" or the "Prince Albert Métis Fall Festival". These dances are infinitely more complex than jigs because they require participants to work in couples and to follow the directions given to them by a caller. The caller uses panache, creativity, humour and his musical knowledge to ensure that people stay in time with the music and enjoy themselves. Good callers can keep a dance going well into the morning. While anybody can take part in square dancing under the guidance of a good caller, the spectacle of competitive, enthusiastic and brightly-clad square dancers maintaining a complex choreography and intricate dance steps to upbeat music is very entertaining.

Traditionally, dances were held in Métis communities all year round, in both good and inclement weather. Until very recently, it was very common for the Métis to venture out in sleighs or on snowshoes impervious to the vagaries of climate in order to visit with family and friends, dance to and enjoy lively music. Dances were often very impromptu and were held in homes, schools, or

churches, provided there was enough space in each building for a dance floor, fiddler players and a caller. For house party dances, homes were cleared of furniture to provide the maximum amount of dancing space. At the dance, both men and women wore brightly adorned beaded or embroidered moccasins. Women wore dresses decorated with silk ribbons while men wore ribbon shirts and sashes, a tradition many Métis dancers still follow. Within the community, there was always somebody who could play a fiddle, guitar, accordion or the spoons. Everybody who was able to took part in the singing, playing, and dancing did so.

These dances, while always festive, also had a social purpose such as celebrating important events like Christmas, New Year's, and weddings. Marriages were also great opportunities for festivities. The feasting and dancing alone could last for days. In nineteenth century Red River, a party and dance were held the night before a wedding, the night of a wedding, and the night when the couple went to live with the groom's parents. First Nations relatives, too, would arrive for the wedding and dance. Bringing their own drums and dressed in traditional regalia, they would honour the couple's union with songs and dances.

Each night of dancing involved great feasts of wild game, bannock, pemmican, pastries and cake. The father of the bride served his best wines, made from chokecherries, potatoes, or rhubarb. The dances and celebrations were laced with humour and singing. Toasts would be given to the bride, and the groom would be instructed in the treatment and care of his new wife. While each community might have its own distinctive celebrations, they were all similar in the intensity of the dancing, feasting, and duration.

Kinship and community ties were always renewed each time a dance was held. For instance, dances were the socially accepted means by which young men courted young women. Dances were also frequently combined with feasts, which were often held to honour men who had returned home from the bison hunt or from long, demanding transport trips in Red River Carts, York Boats or canoes. Métis dances could, often to the dismay of the priests, last for several days until all the food, beverages, and the participants were exhausted.

### **Métis Cultural Events**

The Métis have long had a tradition of holding community celebrations. These celebrations started in the nineteenth century out of subsistence activities involving extended families and melded into community events involving the celebration of culture, faith and physical activity.

### **Traditional Métis Social Gatherings**

According to the historical record and numerous accounts by Elders, the Métis really enjoyed summer picnics. Often people held picnics while they were involved in subsistence events, such as berry picking, tree sapping, or fishing. Other times, families traveled to a picturesque spot simply to enjoy each other's company. Annual picnics were also held, often in conjunction with the local church. People participated in sack races, three legged races, baseball, hand games and horse racing.

To raise money for various causes and to promote good times, some communities held basket socials. Women decorated a picnic basket with a lunch inside. The baskets would, then, be auctioned off to a group of men. The better decorated the basket, the higher the bids. Once a basket had been bought, the man and the woman who made it would go on a picnic.

While not a happy social event, wakes involve people coming together in the home for mutual support, friendship, and comfort. A wake gives people an opportunity to pay their respects to a deceased friend or relative in a less formal environment than at a funeral service. The wake is held in the dead person's home or that of a clan member. The person is dressed in his or her best clothing and all his friends and relatives pay their respects. In some communities, religious songs, in Cree, English, or French are sung, rosary prayers are said, and coffee and sandwiches are served throughout the day and night. At some wakes, such as those in Cumberland House, Saskatchewan, people place tobacco on a table as they enter the deceased person's house. When everyone has arrived, they smoke all the tobacco as a sign of respect to the deceased and have a feast in the person's honour. In other communities, such as St. Laurent, Manitoba, people would visit the house to view the body and pay their respects throughout the night and give comfort to the grieving family.

### **Traditional Métis Christmas and New Year's Celebrations**

The Métis have long placed a great emphasis on maintaining strong relationships among families, extended families and communities, particularly when work was hard and the future uncertain. Nowhere were these bonds of kinship and friendship better renewed than during Christmas and New Year's celebrations. While Christmas Day was largely a religious event for most Métis communities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it still remained festive. For instance, at Batoche, in the 1880s and 1890s, from Christmas to Epiphany (January 6<sup>th</sup>), Métis families held ballroom dances by "oil light" (*bals à l'huile*). A Prince Albert newspaper reported in 1889 "at Batoche, during the holidays, balls are the order of the day. Two were held last night, one at Pilon's and the other at D(aniel) Charette's and youngsters had all the chances they wanted of

shaking themselves up”.<sup>1</sup> Métis Elders have recounted that families spent Christmas Eve by attending Midnight Mass, occasionally singing hymns in Cree or French, and then having a large supper and party known as *réveillon*. However, most celebrating during the holiday season was reserved for New Year’s Day. As one Batoche Elder told historian Diane Payment “On Christmas Eve, we went to Midnight Mass, and when we got home, we ate a little, drank some tea and went to bed. The presents were for New Year’s Day”.<sup>2</sup>

Early on the morning of Christmas Day, families traveled by horse and sleigh to loved ones’ homes, and stayed until late in the evening. Prior to this gathering, mothers and daughters prepared food for days to ensure everyone would be well fed. Christmas and New Year’s fare included *beignes* (fried bannock), *boulettes* (meat balls), *rababou* (stew), chokecherries or saskatoon berries served with cream and sugar, puddings, pemmican, wild game, as well as tea, home-made beer or wine. Unlike the commercialism, which permeates our holiday season, traditional Métis Christmas celebrations were modest. One Elder recounts that “we did not have Christmas gifts, only candies, apples and pastry”.<sup>3</sup>

While Christmas was a religious event for the Métis, New Year’s was a grand social celebration. It was not uncommon for several households in a community to hold a feast and dance on different nights so that people could visit and celebrate for many evenings in succession around New Year’s Day. In the 1860s, at Round Plain, in what is now the area around Dundurn, Saskatchewan, a New Year’s celebration lasted ten days! Manitoba Métis Elder Joe Venne had this to say about the Métis’ festive spirit during the Christmas/New Year’s holiday

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<sup>1</sup> Payment, Diane Paulette, “*The Free People: Otipemisiwak*”. *Batoche, Saskatchewan, 1870-1930*. Ottawa: Minister of Supply services Canada, p.54.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.55.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

season: "When it came to the holidays, Christmas and New Year's, we used to go for two, three weeks at a time, dancing every night, partying every night. Other people didn't have that style".<sup>4</sup>

Children were an integral part of New Year's celebrations. On New Year's Eve, children received presents from their parents, usually small gifts of food. One Elder related that "On New Year's Eve children hung stockings at the foot of their bed and would wake up to find all sorts of treats".<sup>5</sup> After receiving their presents, on the morning of New Year's Day, children thanked and blessed their parents, and families hugged and kissed one another.

New Year's Day was usually held at the grandparents' home and was a special time for families as cousins, aunts and uncles attended. It was an occasion for social drinking, and the eating of all sorts of food with people traveling from house to house, dining, dancing and visiting. While visiting house-to-house, everybody would shake hands and kiss, a carry-over of French-Canadian tradition. As a result, some Métis called New Years Day "*ochetookeskaw*" or "kissing day."

It was out of these locally organized extended family events that community events emphasizing Métis culture and physical activity started. In 1884, the Métis communities of Batoche, St. Laurent, and St. Louis, in what is now Saskatchewan, appointed "St. Joseph's Day", July 24, as a Métis "national" day. By this time, the Métis had chosen St. Joseph, Jesus' earthly father as their chosen saint and protector. Prior to that, the Métis had St. Jean Baptiste (John

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<sup>4</sup> Zelig, Ken and Victoria, *Ste. Madeleine: Community Without a Town*. Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications, 1987, (Interview with Joe Venne), p.43.

<sup>5</sup> Payment, *The Free People*, p.55.

*Metis Elders in Interview.*

the Baptist), the French-Canadian patron saint as their protector. The day started with a Mass followed by a country fair with dancing and music. Men competed in shooting competitions, horse races, and arm wrestling. Women displayed their embroidery, quilts, hooked rugs, sashes, and crochet work.

Métis from all over the Batoche area attended the event, which was located on an open piece of land near the South Saskatchewan River. To commemorate the old bison hunts and to provide meat for the feast, an ox was killed with arrows and knives. It was skinned and gutted in the field and roasted on the embers of a large fire. The "St. Joseph's Day" celebration maintained its Métis spirit and social traditions until the 1930s when it changed due to increasing First Nations participation. However, in 1970, people renewed this celebration of Métis culture at Batoche in the form of "Back to Batoche Days"

Present-day Métis community celebrations are extension of these earlier activities. Events such as "Palmbere Days" in La Loche, Saskatchewan or "Samuel Hearne Days" in Cumberland House, Saskatchewan include traditional cultural activities, sporting events, children's activities, and the eating of plenty of good food. These well-attended celebrations are a testament to the festive nature of the Métis community. Many of these celebrations recognize the importance of Aboriginal peoples in the past and look forward to the continued growth of Aboriginal peoples in the future. "Rendevous Day" in Prince Albert is another example of Métis gathering every November 16, the day Louis Riel was executed in Regina to remember the past but take pride in the future. Across Canada many of these Métis celebrations have a local community flare but they all are all based on similar traditional views rooted deeply in the diverse Métis cultures.

To promote a sense of community and ensure that Métis culture stays alive, events such as “Back to Batoche Days”, the “Prince Albert Métis Fall Festival” and the “Métis Cultural Reunion at the Forks” are staged. “Back to Batoche Days” are held annually in July and is an extension of the “St. Joseph’s Day” celebrations of the nineteenth century. People come from many regions to take part in the camaraderie and the cultural and social events. People set up tables of art and craftwork, historical displays and educational displays. There are jigging and fiddling competitions as well as voyageur games. In these events, individuals compete in trap setting, axe throwing, fire starting (without matches!), and flour packing.

The “Prince Albert Métis Fall Festival” has sought to maintain Métis culture in similar ways. It, too, hosts King and Queen Trapper events. People also watch Métis fashion shows, talk with Métis war veterans and compete in fiddling and jigging contests. These activities instill cultural pride in Métis youth by having several role models attend the events. The role models are Métis people who have taken pride in their culture and have a positive approach to life. They are an example to Métis youth of what people can achieve when they make good choices and try to fulfill their dreams.

In Norway House, Manitoba, many Métis participate in the annual event called “York Boat Days”. This annual event brings everyone from the surrounding communities out for socialization and friendly competition. Most of the events are based on skills acquired when the Hudson Bay Company and the fur trade were the main means of employment. Events include bannock making, York boat races, flour packing races and other traditional events. Meanwhile country music is a large part of the event highlighting the local talent.

## Métis Sports Events

The Métis have long enjoyed engaging in contests and sporting events. Some of the games were adopted from their First Nations kin, while others were European in origin. In many instances, the contests pitted people against one another in traditional pursuits from the fur trade or from hunting and trapping lifestyles. Today, the Métis are actively involved in both mainstream sports, such as baseball, hockey and volleyball, as well as more traditional events such as horseracing, dogsled racing and flour packing.

Sports Days occur in many Métis communities and are held in mid-summer, and last for several days. People from throughout a region attend these events. Some of the competitions people enter include horse races, sack races, running races, egg-on-a-spoon races, and boxing matches. Team events such as baseball and football are popular as well. A “smoker’s” race is also held, where older members have to light up their pipes and head for the finish without letting the smoke go out. Everybody who was able bodied took part in the celebrations and activities, and dancing and music was ever-present. While competitive, these events were aimed to bring together people in a region to enjoy the summer and each other’s company, similar to a grand picnic.

Some of the traditional sports events, which the Métis have participated in include:

**Canoe racing** is a long-lived sporting activity. The Métis are naturally gifted paddlers as a result of their voyageur ancestors. Communities, such as Cumberland House in Saskatchewan, which are located on river routes, have always held canoe races in which young men tested their abilities against one

another. One such young man, Solomon Carrierre of Cumberland House, Saskatchewan has been crowned World Champion repeatedly for marathon canoe racing.

**Lacrosse** is a game with a deep history among First Nations groups throughout Canada and was taken up with equal enthusiasm by the Métis. The game consists of two teams whose members attempt to score on each other's goal by moving a ball down a field with poles that have a small net or pouch fixed to their ends. The ball is passed back and forth to team members with these poles as the athletes run back and forth along the field. There are accounts that some fields were as much as a kilometre and a half in length, with the goals placed in different villages. Lacrosse is a fast paced, exciting game. The athletes have to be skillful in the use of their poles and do a tremendous amount of running.

Traditionally, lacrosse poles are made from birch with a loop formed at the end in which a pouch was woven with hide thongs or cordage. The ball was fashioned from moose or bison hide and stuffed with leather or small bones to give it weight.

**Double Ball** was a game similar to lacrosse and was played by First Nations women across the Plains. The game consisted of two teams of women, up to 10 per side, who tried to carry or throw a game piece down a playing field with curved or notched sticks and passed it through a goal. The playing field could be up to one and half kilometres in length, just like in lacrosse. The game piece consisted of two balls tied together with a short rawhide cord. The balls were usually made of stuffed buckskin. Players tried to pass this piece to their

teammates in order to move it towards their opponent's goal, but they could not use their hands or kick the game piece.

**Blanket Tossing** was played by men, women and children. Originating with the Plains First Nations and the Inuit, the Métis played this game by holding a large hide along the edges and tossing a small boy up in the air. The boy was a member of an opposing team and if he cried out while being tossed, the team holding the hide won. If the team holding the hide tired out before the boy cried out, they lost. The game emphasized team cooperation and fun involving people of both sexes and all ages.

**Baseball** is a summertime game, which has incited keen interest in many Métis communities. Baseball caught on quite early with the Métis and ball diamonds have been present in settlements for many decades. Lacking equipment or money to buy new equipment, players often made their own gloves and bats. Baseballs were fashioned from moose hide and team members themselves mended the balls with sinew or string when they split.

In the Beaver Métis Colony, Alberta, the baseball team is the most important community association because members of all the extended families are represented. The team, more so than any other organization, provides the greatest feeling of cohesion in the colony. It is supported by proceeds from bingos and concessions. Numerous colony members attend weekend tournaments in and away from the community to cheer on their team.

**Softball** has quickly become one of the most popular sporting activities young people are entering. Tournaments involving teams from throughout the Métis

Homeland are increasing in number and many are held during cultural events. First Nations and Métis Friendship Centres, as well, hold softball tournaments. The tournaments last several days, with most offering a cash purse to the winning teams.

**The North-American Indigenous Games** allows Métis athletes from Canada to have an opportunity to compete with the best First Nations, Inuit and Métis athletes from across North America every two years. These competitions originated in 1990 and are held in different cities each time. This allows athletes to see some of Canada and the United States, learn about the different cultural traditions within the continent and take part in a very high level of athletic competition. Athletes compete in a broad range of sports at the games, such as basketball, track and field events, wrestling, volleyball, lacrosse, boxing and soccer. The event is hailed by organizers, Elders, parents and the athletes as a very positive experience for young people and promotes healthy lifestyles and self-confidence.

**King and Queen Trapper Events** allow the Métis to participate in physical activity while allowing them to engage in traditional cultural activities. In the past people trapped, started fires and packed flour because they were means of survival or part of their role in the fur trade. Today, as a mechanism to keep Métis culture alive, celebrating the past and highlighting the skills of today's hunters and trappers, different organizations sponsor King and Queen Trapper events. Men, women and children alike take part in flour packing races, axe throwing, trap setting, starting fires without matches, bannock making, and log sawing. This is great way for people to gain an appreciation of the skills and physical prowess that the Métis needed during the fur trade and for participants

to showcase a still-vibrant lifestyle. Aside from competing, people have an opportunity to meet and rekindle friendships and generally have a good time within and between their cultural communities.

The Métis also actively took part in wintertime sporting activities. Some of these activities include skating and hockey, tobogganing, snowball fights, curling, snowmobiling and cross country skiing. It was not uncommon for the people to make their own equipment for wintertime activities, such as skis, from the resources at hand.

Predating organized hockey, the Métis learned how to skate on frozen ponds and rivers with homemade skates. Without having access to, or the luxury of, manufactured skates people took the shoulder blade or hipbones of a bison and fashioned them in the shape of a blade and strap them onto their feet. Hockey has become a favourite sporting event among the Métis. Women frequently played in hockey games prior to the organization of formal leagues. Today, Métis athletes are involved in all levels of competitive and recreational hockey. Some famous Métis hockey players include Brian Trottier, Theoren Fleury and Reggie Leach.

Tobogganing was a favourite winter activity, much as it is today among young and old alike. The toboggans could be made with bison robes, deer or moose hides or shingles of bark from birch or elm trees. Sometimes the children rode on their stomachs or backs while other times they rode standing, holding onto a rope tied to the front of the craft. Dog-sled racing was and is a popular wintertime activity, which arose out of the necessity of having a well-trained team of dogs for use in hunting and on the trap line. In some communities,

people celebrate New Year's Day by engaging in dogsled races. The Prince Albert Winter Festival holds dog-sled races in which a large number of the entrants are Métis and First Nations. Snow shoe races, too, are popular winter events and are regularly run on January 1.

### Questions and Activities

- 1) What were some of the traditional games, which Métis children played? How were these games used to teach children lessons and skills?
- 2) Using the illustrations in this module, find materials and make your own toss and catch game and buzzer. What type of skills would Métis children have used to play these games? What contemporary children's games resemble these traditional Aboriginal games?
- 3) When and why did Métis cultural celebrations begin? What sorts of activities occur at Métis cultural celebrations?
- 4) Try the hand game by dividing into two teams, with one guesser and one person who hides the game piece. People on one side can help sing or chant to confuse the guesser. If the opponent guesses incorrectly, he or she has to relinquish a certain number of tally sticks. This goes on until the opponent makes a correct guess and the game piece is passed over. The game ends when one player earns all the other's tally sticks. Items are frequently wagered on the games. When an agreed upon number of tally sticks are won, the prize is collected. In the past, an older person kept track of the score to ensure the game remained fair.
- 5) When did the Métis sing folk songs?
- 6) What are the origins of Métis singing?
- 7) What themes are evident in Métis folk singing?
- 8) From the sources listed find a Métis folk song or songs and sing it with your classmates. What themes are evident in the song?
- 9) Doing outside research compare Métis folk singing to other types of North American folk music including Acadian, Crape Breton, Québécois, Cajun or Appalachian. How is Métis folk singing different or similar to these types?
- 10) Write and sing your own folk song. Alternatively, if you prefer, revise the lyrics to a folk song so it relates more to your life. Be doing so, you will be the very same thing that the Métis did when they adapted old French folk songs to better represent their current circumstances. What importance did the Métis accord fiddle players in their communities?
- 11) Why do you think that the Métis were so fond of fiddling?
- 12) What are the origins of Métis fiddling? What groups practice similar fiddling to the Métis?
- 13) What fiddle tune is considered as an unofficial Métis anthem? Listen to different versions of this tune. How are they similar? How are they different?
- 14) Have your teacher contact the local Indian and Métis Friendship Centre to see if they know of a Métis or First Nations fiddle player that would be interested in playing at your school. If so, have the fiddle player play a few tunes. If you listen closely, you will notice that he or she plays a variation of a song, which is different from what is on any recorded compact disc.

- 15) Using papier-mâché and strings, construct, design and then paint a play fiddle of your own. What type of symbols might a Métis fiddle player want to put on his/her fiddle? Are these similar to the designs that you have chosen?
- 16) What are some of the more widely known Métis dances? What are the origins of these dances?
- 17) In your Phys-Ed or Native Studies class, have your teacher bring in an Elder or a dance instructor to demonstrate how to do various Métis dances, specifically the "Red River Jig". Is this type of dancing good exercise, why or why not?
- 18) If you are familiar with other types of folk dancing such as French-Canadian or Cape Breton put on a small demonstration for your classmates. Bring somebody to your school who knows Métis-style dancing and have him or her demonstrate their steps.
- 19) Native-Friendship Centres and many inner-city schools in Western Canada have Métis jigging and dancing lessons. If you are interested in this type of dancing see if you can take lessons.
- 20) If the students at your school know how to dance traditional Métis dances, organize a Métis Dancing Competition – have Elders or teachers judge the contest.

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