

Northwest Territories Métis Heritage and Identity – by Patrick Young

Objective: This module will discuss the history and identity of the Métis in the Northwest Territories.

Historically, there were two types of Métis that lived in what is now the Northwest Territories: those indigenous to the region whom emerged from the northern fur trade and Red River Métis who migrated northwards from the fur trade.

"Red River" Mackenzie Métis

Métis moved into the Subarctic with the fur trade in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century traveling the major waterways as canoemen and packers. They were the offspring of French or French Canadian *coureur de bois* and Ojibwa or Cree Women as a result the fur trade further south. Early Métis rivermen settled at trading posts in the southern Subarctic marrying Cree and in a few cases Dene women, and after the 1885 Resistance they were joined by refugee families from the Saskatchewan River region. In the area around Great Slave Lake and the southern Mackenzie District the vitality and traditions of the Red River Métis continued to thrive and were adopted by the local Métis. Unsurprisingly then the predominant cultural heritage of these people today are French Catholic and Algonquian, with a Scottish and Iroquoian minority. Country-French, trade jargons and First Nations languages remained the preferred speech until recently. As in other regions, these Métis had a strong association with the transport industry. There existed an independent attitude among these Métis, and loyalty to their fellows prevailed rather than toward the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC).

Northern Mackenzie Métis

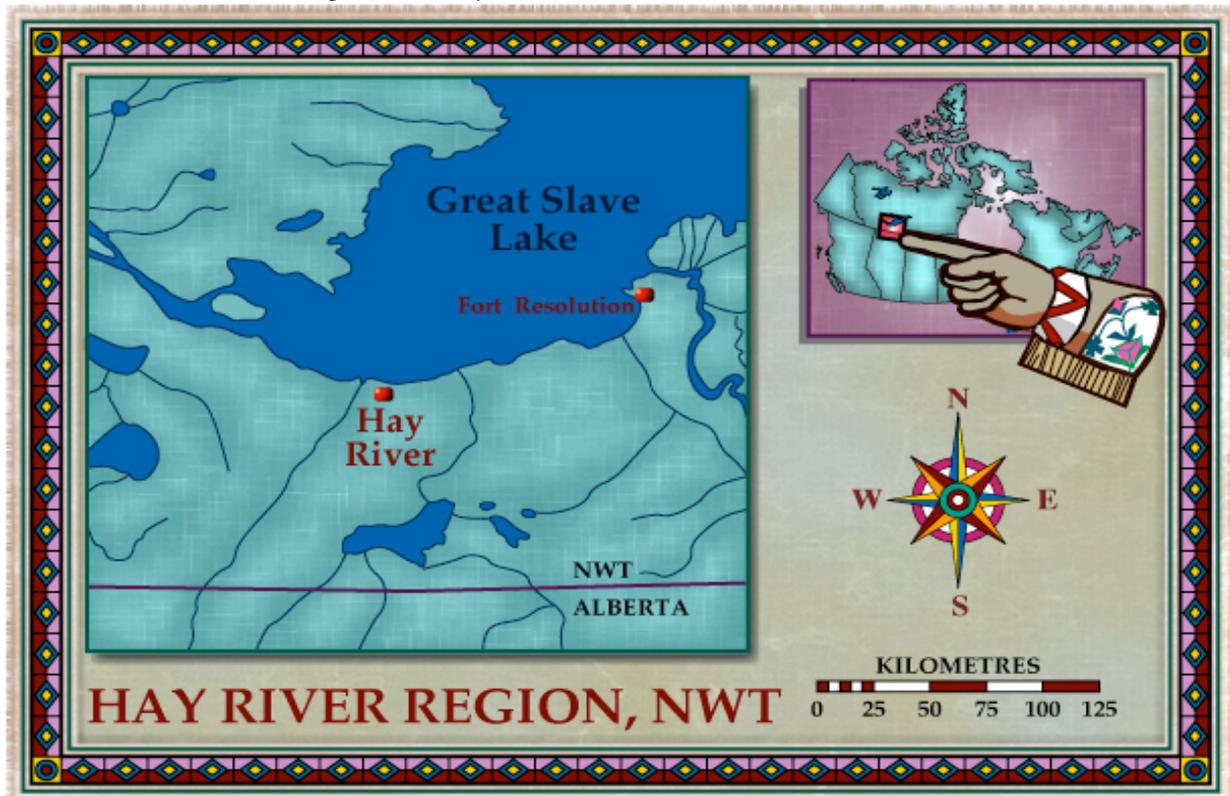
Among the Métis living north of Ft. Simpson, through to the arctic coast and Yukon, the history and heritage is somewhat different than that of the Red River Métis. The northern Métis are distinguished from their southern kin by their predominant Athapaskan maternal ancestry and northern European paternal background. The most common European background is Scottish, due to the almost exclusive arrival of Scottish HBC men to the north, with Scandinavian, English, Irish and German also present. In addition there exists a noticeable minority of Polynesian, Micronesian, African-American paternal background. The Protestant church dominates here and most families align themselves with this faith, although there is a large Roman Catholic minority. With the fur trade opening up much later in this region, original Aboriginal-European unions rarely date back further than the mid nineteenth century. Therefore, unlike their kin to the south, the northern Métis have little tradition relating specifically to Métis status. Rather, there is a strong identity associated with the HBC, who served as the "white father" figure and established a relationship based on dependence and emulation. The term "half breed" was used in this region to refer to the mixed ethnic group but it was meant in a derogatory sense. The term "Métis" itself was little known or used until the 1960s.

Hay River, North West Territories

During the winter of 1816-1817 the HBC sent clerk Auley McCauley to the Great Slave Lake to tap into the regional trade and to offset trade to the North West Company (NWC). The NWC had already established a trading post at nearby Fort Resolution, which was monopolizing the trade. The Hay River post was a prime trade centre for voyageur canoes. It had excellent fishing and was accessible to First Nations coming from all directions. NWC traders forced the First Nations away from Hay River and as a

result, McCauley and the other HBC employees were starved out. Consequently, he had to exchange his trade goods with the rival company for much needed supplies. Although this first attempt by the HBC went for naught, in 1821 the two fur companies amalgamated, and with the advent of the York boat in 1826 activity on the Mackenzie increased to such an extent that in 1868 a second post was successfully established at Hay River about a quarter of a mile north of the original site.

The Hay River post dealt mainly with the Athapascan-speaking Slave First Nations. These nomadic people centred most of their hunting activity around Hay and Buffalo Lakes and in the Caribou Mountain area. Over time some Slave First Nations were hired by the HBC as deck hands on York boats, and when these were replaced in 1855, by steamers the local First Nations and Métis continued to be employed as deck hands. It was here at the Hay River post that many Métis intermarried with the local First Nations such as the Dogrib, Slavey, Sekan and Beaver.





The post, known as Hay River Fort, dealt mainly with the Slave First Nations on the south shore of Great Slave Lake. These nomadic people centered most of their hunting activity around Hay and Buffalo Lakes and in the Caribou Mountain area.

The Hay River is a part of the Mackenzie drainage system, which empties into the Arctic Ocean. The main resources are wood bison and moose. Wood Buffalo National Park located South of Hay River has the largest free roaming bison herd in the world. Small game and fur bearing animals are abundant in the area such as, muskrats, beaver, red fox, fisher, marten, mink, weasel, and rabbit. Fish and migratory birds are important local resources for people at Hay River. Today many Métis families are concerned about the possibility of the lake being fished out, leaving no resources for future generations. Some Métis people work as tour guides and hunting guides for tourists. The region has many wilderness areas such as Twin Falls, Great Slave Lake,

Mackenzie Bison Sanctuary, Wood Buffalo National Park, Lady Evelyn Falls, and Nahanni National Park.

With the arrival of the HBC at the mouth of the Hay River, however, this post became their seasonal rendezvous location. Over time some Slave First Nations were hired on by the HBC as deck hands on the York boats. When steamers eventually replaced these in 1885, the local First Nations and Métis continued as deck hands. However, due to the high cost of supplying the post, factors were encouraged to live as much as possible off the land. This meant not only the annual planting of a garden, but also getting fish and wild game from the First Nations and hiring them on as post provisioners. By the late eighteenth century Slave First Nations began to settle in a small village of tipis and log cabins on the east shore of the mainland about half a mile from the fort. Shortly after this the Anglican Church established a residential school, and the Roman Catholic Church built a mission near the fort. With signs of growth and permanency, the HBC decided to rebuild and in 1904 another larger post was constructed in the heart of the First Nations village. Historically many Métis were employed either with trading companies, the RCMP, or the Church.

Modern Hay River began to develop during the latter part of World War II on an Island across from the original Slave First Nations band village. Hay River is actually a collection of five or six communities spread out along the river. The West Channel fishing village is located on the shore of Great Slave Lake where the predominately Métis fishermen originally settled. The town's growth began with the construction of a wartime U.S. Army airfield and continued in 1947 with the development of the commercial fishing industry. There is an old and new Dene village on the Hay River Reserve on the east bank of Hay River. Vale Island or the "old town" is a mixture of residential and industrial properties. As a result, a non-Aboriginal settlement

established itself on nearby Vale Island where the HBC extended its service, and with the completion of the Mackenzie Highway in 1949 the town expanded to well over 2500 people. In 1964, a severe flood inundated the town and most residents had to be evacuated by air. The townsite was later moved and rebuilt on the higher mainland ground. Some Métis family names common to the Hay River region include Laferté, Bouvier, Beaulieu, Mandeville, Laviolette, Villeneuve and Mecredi.

Questions and Activities:

- 1) What are some of the origins of the Northwest Territories Métis?
- 2) Is Métis identity in the Northwest Territories similar and different from Métis identity elsewhere?
- 3) Visit the library or use the Internet to find other Métis communities in the Northwest Territories other than Hay River? How are these communities similar? How are they different?

Bibliography:

North Slave Métis Alliance, "Strong Like Two People: North Slave Métis History" in Lawrence J. Barkwell, Leah Dorion and Darren R. Préfontaine, Editors. *Metis Legacy*. Winnipeg and Saskatoon: The Louis Riel Institute and the Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2001, pp. 135-156.

Payment, Diane, "The Métis Nation of the Northwest Territories: The Historic Athabasca-Mackenzie" in Barkwell et al *Metis Legacy*, 2001, pp. 157-168.

Slobodin, Richard. *Métis of the Mackenzie District*. Ottawa: Canadian Research Centre for Anthropology, St. Paul University, 1966.