

A socioeconomic profile of the Red River Métis - Darren R. Préfontaine

Section Objective: To better understand the demographic make up of the Red River Métis in the early and mid-nineteenth century, which is the basis of contemporary Métis identity.

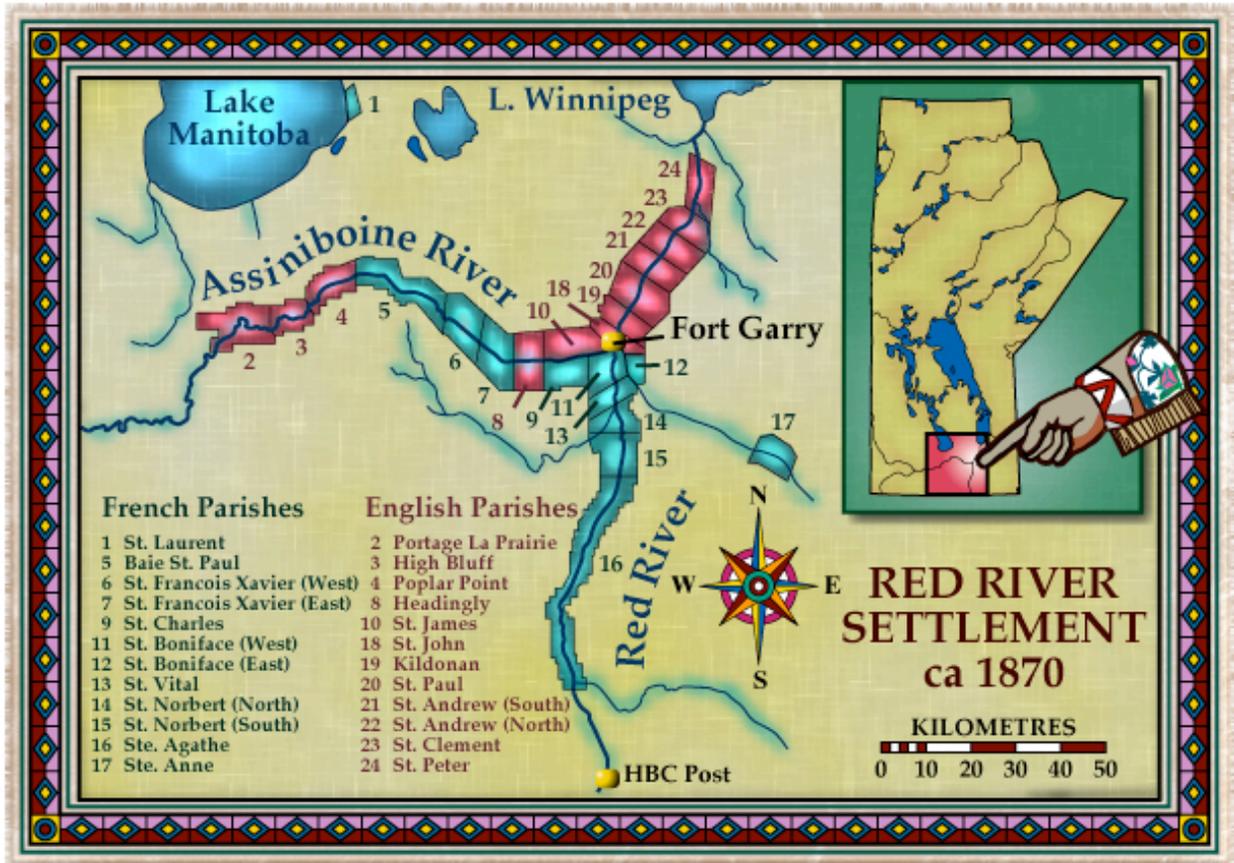
The historic Métis either evolved or in some cases migrated from the Great Lakes region to the Red River Valley and established settlements along the banks of the Assiniboine, Red and Seine rivers. This growing Métis population was supplemented with the emigration of voyageurs from present-day Québec, and the intermarriage of Métis with the local Saulteaux and Cree First Nations. Some of the more prominent families such as the Lagimodière, Louis Riel's maternal ancestors, were French Canadian but married into the Métis population. The Métis, First Nations and French Canadians with whom they intermarried formed the same community, but it was a community with two very different modes of thought. The historic Métis also lived in the same society as their Anglophone and Protestant Country Born cousins, with whom they were easily distinguishable by their different language, culture and traditions.

When the Métis first arrived in the Red River Valley, Rupert's Land, during the late 1700s, the land was very different than it is today. Huge stands of natural grass covered the landscape, which is now covered by wheat and other commercial grains. The prairie was full of bison, and a whole Plains First Nations culture, from the edge of the Canadian Shield to Mexico, was dependent on this once seemingly inexhaustible resource. By 1800, the Métis had adapted their voyageur lifestyle and became buffalo hunters, and in doing so, they came into direct competition with First Nations tribes. The original inhabitants of the Red River area were, of course, the First Peoples. The dominant nations were the Saulteaux, or Plains Ojibwa, the Cree, the Lakota and

the Dakota. While the Métis had family ties with these nations, there was often tension between these nations as they competed for land and scarce resources.



The Red River Métis did not always hunt bison. Most Métis settled, to varying degrees, in farming communities. Early Métis communities in the Red River region included: St. Boniface, Ste. Agathe, Ste. Anne, St. Norbet, St. Vital, St. François-Xavier, and St. Eustache. All of these communities were named after saints, which suggests that the early Métis took Catholicism seriously. Families tended to be large and close knit, and people more often than not married into their extended family. The historic Métis had a vibrant culture and they absorbed many others including French Canadians and First Nations.



The kind of society, which existed in Red River in the early 1800s, was roughly egalitarian and communitarian. When times were hard Métis buffalo hunters and farmers shared their bounty with the less fortunate. When the community was threatened, whether by the Selkirk Settlers, Dakota or Canadians, the Métis repulsed the common threat. Nevertheless, there were some social distinctions among the Métis, with the "progressive" Métis, usually traders, small business people or fur trade bourgeois, and farmers seeing themselves as the social superiors to the nomadic buffalo hunters. Early on in Red River society, there was a divide between the more sedentary Métis and their nomadic confrères. Despite this divide, Métis society was still more egalitarian than society in Lower or Upper Canada (present-day Québec and Ontario). Often, incoming European settlers imposed class and racial hierarchies against the Métis and the Country Born. Colonial attitudes and self-hate among the Métis and the Country Born

also caused divisions within Red River society. Within the fur trade, the Métis were usually segregated as labourers, with no real means of advancement – very few Métis became fur trade bourgeois¹. In addition, the Métis were also effectively shut out of the local governing structure of Rupert's Land, the Council of Assiniboia².

The Red River Métis also utilized First Nations' forms of social organization. Traditional Aboriginal society was relatively devoid of distinctions between classes and other economic groupings. In this spirit, the historic Métis organized their society based on prowess rather than by accidents of birth. The most respected members of Métis society were the good providers, the hunters, gatherers and farmers. As was the traditional Aboriginal custom, they shared their bounty with the less fortunate.

Government structures were informal, consensual and were called in times of need. There was no chief, but often leaders of the hunt – such as Cuthbert Grant or Gabriel Dumont. When emergencies arose, everybody's voice was heard and decisions were made collectively. This was a form of participatory democracy, which was closer in spirit to true democracy than forms of representation that existed in contemporary British North-American society. The historic Métis were liberal, in that they resisted outside authority, which sought to coerce their traditional Aboriginal traditions; however, they were organized collectively, through extended family networks, in order to hunt buffalo or to fend off an enemy. Like most First Nations' cultures, family ties in

¹ **Bourgeois:** A historically significant term, which means middle class or a middle class person. In a Métis context, the word was most often used to describe a fur trade merchant or post manager for the Northwest Company. Very few Métis were bourgeois.

² **(The) Council of Assiniboia:** The legislative and executive council appointed by the Hudson's Bay Company which governed Rupert's Land prior to the territory's incorporation into Canada.

Métis society were also defined through matrilineal descent. Over time, as the Métis population grew, Red River family structures were both patrilineal and matrilineal.

After 1812, the Red River Valley was remarkably cosmopolitan: Selkirk Settlers, French Canadians, Iroquois and Algonquin "Free Men", Anglo-Celts, Anglo-Americans, Country Born, Métis, French Religious, Anglo-Canadians, Dakota, Assiniboine, Cree and Saulteaux intermingled and traded. The French and English-speaking mixed-bloods of the Red River Colony established some kinship ties. The Country Born, however, largely kept their distance from the Francophone Métis. Of all these groups, the Métis had the largest population from about 1800 until 1885. These eighty-five years of settlement saw the rise of Métis nationalism, numerous resistances, the territory's entrance into Canada, and the dispersal of the Métis and the dispossession of their land base.

Like their First Nations relatives, most Red River Métis harvested natural resources and took part in the traditional seasonal cycle, hunting and gathering in accordance to the four seasons. Moose, deer, caribou, bison, fish, muskrats, rabbits, beaver and wild rice and berries were harvested and were prepared in First Nations traditions. This traditional subsistence cycle was also supplemented with cereal agriculture and garden vegetables. In this way, many Red River Métis did not become reliant on one single resource. However, some historic Métis became too reliant on the bison. First Nations technology and modes of transportation such as snowshoes, travois, dog sleds and birch bark canoes were used by the historic Métis to harvest resources. Other First Nation's technological advancements used by the Métis included tipis, birch bark baskets and quillwork bags and clothing.

Traditional Red River Métis Seasonal Cycle – Todd Paquin

Spring

- Waterfowl (migratory ducks, geese, swans) returning north
- Government regulations in 1890s forbid the spring hunting of ducks and partridges.
- Spawning fish such as pike, walleye, sturgeon caught with weirs, nets, spears or traps (traditional pattern).
- Mink, otter, beaver and muskrat trapping (traditional pattern)
- Muskrat trapping (government restricted time)
- Moose, deer and elk hunting
- Bears hunted and trapped
- Wolves, wild chickens, rabbits and coyotes hunted and trapped
- Birch bark collected for canoes
- Maple and birch trees tapped for sap
- Seeding wheat
- Planting gardens

Summer

- Bison hunt for purpose of paying off debts with the Hudson's Bay Company incurred in winter and to restock food supplies.
- Wolves, wild chickens, rabbits and coyotes hunted
- Blue berries, saskatoons, raspberries, currants, gooseberries, chokecherries ripen
- Seneca root ripens
- Fishing with nets
- Seeding barley and harvesting barley
- Sheep shearing
- Moose, deer, elk hunting
- Bear hunting and trapping
- Major bison hunt to provision posts and secure winter food supply

Fall

- Major bison hunt to provision posts and secure winter food supply (continued)
- Major moose hunting season
- Deer and elk hunting
- Waterfowl (migratory ducks, geese, swans) staging and flying south for the winter
- Spawning fish, such as whitefish and salmon, caught with weirs, nets, spears or traps
- Bear hunting and trapping
- Mink, otter, beaver and muskrat trapping
- Wolves, wild chickens, rabbits and coyotes hunted and trapped
- Highbush cranberries ripen
- Wild rice ripens
- Harvesting wheat
- Livestock slaughter

Winter

- Weasel and skunk trapping and hunting
- Mink, otter, beaver and muskrat trapping
- Wolves, wild chickens, rabbits and coyotes hunted
- Ice fishing with nets

- Fishing between October and December forbidden by government regulation in 1890s
- Winter bison hunting camps
- Moose, deer and elk hunting
- Bear hunting and trapping

The Country Born

The Country Born were mixed-bloods of First Nations and Anglo-Celtic and Orcadian (from the Orkneys) descent, who lived in or around HBC posts or in the Protestant parishes of the Red River Colony. The Country Born never had a strong collective sense of identity like their Francophone Métis cousins. Often, they had ambivalent feelings towards their mixed heritage. Their fathers usually encouraged their mixed-heritage children to abandon their Aboriginal heritage. Many Country Born were raised as Europeans, and went to school in Canada or in Britain, where they usually received a better formal education than the Métis. However, since their fathers were only in the territory for a short time, the Country Born usually lived among their mother's bands or in the growing mixed blood communities to the south in the Red River Colony. Many worked in the fur trade, some hunted bison, some farmed and some continued to practice the Aboriginal seasonal cycle. Relations between the Métis and the Country Born were not always cordial, and in times of crisis, the two groups could not agree on a common response.

From their Anglo-Celtic fathers, the Country Born inherited much. First of all, they spoke English, Gaelic, and their patois, or Bunji, which was a mix of Scots Gaelic and Cree. In the Selkirk Colony, many Country Born were farmers and were more prone to a sedentary lifestyle than the French and Michif-speaking Métis. They were devout Presbyterians and Anglicans. They embraced British culture such as Celtic dancing, jigging and fiddling, although as Calvinists, they were more dour than their more festive Métis cousins. Ideas of thrift and industry, in short the "Protestant Ethic", were thoroughly imbued in the Country

Born. Most of these families still managed to preserve their Aboriginal identity despite much acculturation into British colonial society. Such prominent Country Born families as the Mackay's and Isbister's are a testament to this fact.

However, like the Métis, the Country Born experienced racism, especially after European and Euro-Canadian women began to arrive in the Red River Colony. Fur trade employees abandoned their First Nations and Country Born wives for European women in the 1840s. The European women resented that their husbands had relationships with "savage" women, and they ensured that society in Red River would resemble society in Canada or in Britain, where class, gender and race divisions existed. These women were fully Victorian, and had a view of women as the "weaker" and "gentler" sex, a role that their hard-working and bush-living Aboriginal sisters did not quite fit. Country Born women and their children also learned how divisive issues of race and gender were becoming in Red River, and in many instances the Aboriginal women resisted their downgrading. Some managed to keep their husbands, while still others lived independent lives as farmers or independent trappers.

The Country Born also inherited a great deal from their First Nations heritage. However, in most instances they were more acculturated into Euro-Canadian society than the Métis. They could still speak Aboriginal languages including Cree and Saulteaux. Like the Métis, they also served as fur trade labourers, interpreters, guides and liaisons between Europeans and First Peoples. Many Country Born also became nomadic buffalo hunters; a prominent Country Born-Métis buffalo hunter was Norbert Welsh. The Country Born who more strongly identified with their Aboriginal heritage were more likely to have cordial relations with the Métis, and some Country Born married into Métis families.

Some Country Born also embraced Aboriginal spiritualism and the seasonal cycle, although to a lesser extent than the Métis.

Although very similar to one another, the Country Born and the Métis could not build a commonality of purpose, a common will, and an alliance to preserve both their Aboriginal identities. The Country Born were usually more sedentary, and depended on the Hudson's Bay Company or subsistence farming for their livelihood, while the Métis were more evenly divided between farmers and buffalo hunters. During the two great Métis resistances (in 1869-70 and 1885), some overtures of friendship and mutual support were made between the Country Born and the Métis, however little became of this proposed alliance. Ultimately, the Country Born shied away from armed conflict. Some families such as the Isbister's got along well with the Métis and supported them in their struggles. Nevertheless, over time, the two communities melded into one. Today, the descendants of the Country Born and Métis constitute the same nation.

Red River Métis society time line: 1740-1869 (Credit Leah Dorion and Father Guy Lavallée)

Mid-1740s: French/Canadien exploration in the Prairie West

1800: A large mixed-descent community was born.

1770s-1821: Intense rivalry between the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company

1812: The Selkirk Settlement was established.

1814: The Pemmican Proclamations.

1816: The Battle of Seven Oaks.

1820s: Métis began to farm and raise livestock.

1820s: Métis began to hunt the buffalo collectively.

1830s: Missionary work began at Red River.

1821: The amalgamation of the two fur trade companies.

1820s and 30s: The Métis are forced out of the Hudson's Bay Company, and the Métis free trade movement began.

1830s: The emergence of growing racism in the colony.

1835: The Council of Assiniboia is created.

1840s-1850s: The great Métis buffalo hunts were organized and the buffalo robe trade began.

1849: Guillaume Sayer Trial

1851: Battle of Grand Coteau.

1850s and 60s: Canadian immigration to the Red River district.

Questions and Activities:

- 1) How similar were the Red River Métis and Country Born? How were they different?
- 2) Why was not agriculture a profitable venture in nineteenth century Red River?
- 3) Why do you think the Red River Métis were more likely to take to bison hunting than farming?
- 4) What were some of the social distinctions among the Red River Métis? Do you think that similar divisions exist today, why or why not?
- 5) When studying the Red River Métis traditional cycle, what activities strike you as the most prevalent? What does this say about the Métis at the time? How would this seasonal cycle have compared to the contemporary seasonal cycle of the Plains Cree or any other First Nations group? Do any Métis that you know of still follow such a seasonal cycle?
- 6) What societal constraints made the identity of the Country Born less durable than that of the Métis?
- 7)

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