

Métis Trappers and hide working – Patrick Young, Todd Paquin and Darren R. Préfontaine

Objective: The students will learn that the Métis have always been adept trappers. The students will also learn that in the past, the Métis had been more reliant on trapping than currently.

Since time immemorial, First Nations have trapped fur-bearing animals as part of their resource gathering cycle. However, in the early 1500s, the exchange of furs and trinkets and other trade goods between First Nations and Europeans began in earnest. By the seventeenth century, this demand became insatiable as European courtiers and bourgeois acquired a liking for felt hats made from Canadian beaver pelts. Demand for beaver (and fisher, marten, mink, muskrat, lynx, wolf, fox, coyote, bear, bison, caribou, moose and deer) pelts remained high throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Canadian beaver, because of Canada's cold winters, produced a fur, which was greatly coveted in Europe for use in felt hats and other garments. It became the most sought after animal in the world for more than two centuries. As a result, the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and the Northwest Company (NWC) pressured First Nations and Métis to trap for commercial gain, which led to the over-harvesting of resources rather than taking what was needed for subsistence purposes.

While Indian and Métis peoples trapped for their subsistence, the demand for furs in Europe changed their habits. Instead of securing furs out of necessity for clothing, pressure was exerted to trap solely for material wealth. The vast stocks of beaver, and other fur-bearing animals, responded by periodically collapsing. While present in vast numbers at the onset of the trapping industry, they could not reproduce fast enough to bear the constant pressure of people trapping

them with an intensity that had never been present prior to the arrival of fur trading companies.

Other Métis, however, saw trapping as a spiritual exchange in which animals gave themselves so the trapper and his family could make a living. These adherents of traditional spiritualism were more likely to practice conservation. Nonetheless, by 1800, trapping had gradually extended from what is now Atlantic to Central to Western and finally to Northern Canada, with each area having its fur-bearing animal population decimated.

There was no monetary exchange in the traditional fur trade economy. Instead, a barter system, with a “made beaver” or a lush, thick and translucent beaver pelt became the common trade currency. For Aboriginal trappers, the made beaver became the standard by which all furs and trade items were based. For instance, in the early nineteenth century at Fort Simpson, in the Mackenzie River District, a small axe was worth 1 made beaver; a flannel shirt 5, a steel trap 10 and a muzzle-loading gun was worth 25 made beaver. The HBC and the NWC most often bought furs directly from trappers and held their own fur auctions for hat manufacturers. Depending on the distance from major supply posts and the role of inflation due to middlemen and travel costs, the number of made beaver charged for an item could rise dramatically. In other instances, Métis trappers faced a more complex trading regime. For instance, trappers often sold their bounty to a trader, who collected for a dealer, who hired a broker to get his furs to market, who in turn sold the furs to a wholesaler, after which they were bought by a tradesmen who finally sold them to a retailer. In the end, the Métis trapper got the smallest return for his efforts.

A debt and dependency cycle was built into the fur trade from the very beginning. This policy was shrewdly calculated by the HBC to ensure that Aboriginal trappers provided the profit-making resource (the furs) to the Company, while in a state of constant servitude. Métis trappers were usually unable to break out of this vicious cycle. For instance, the HBC provided Aboriginal trappers with free traps and flour on the condition that they pay back the Company for these goods at the conclusion of the trapping season. If the fur harvest was bountiful, the trappers paid their debts and earned a profit, however, if the harvest was poor, they could not clear their debt. Moreover, the Métis trapped almost exclusively in the fall and winter when fur-bearing animals had their thickest coats. This meant that other aspects of traditional resource harvesting such as acquiring food were neglected. As a result, Métis trappers and their families became dependant on European foodstuffs and trade goods such as tea, tobacco, baking powder, flour, sugar, axes, guns and ammunition to sustain themselves during the most critical period of the year. To acquire these goods often meant further debt.

The market for animal fur was never consistent and was plagued by sharp price fluctuations. For instance, after World War I, there was an all-time high in the fur market, which climaxed in 1920. However, in 1958, trappers received only \$1.00 for a lynx pelt in the Northwest Territories. By comparison, the Lac La Biche HBC post listed the price of a lynx pelt at \$2.75 to \$3.00 seventy years earlier. The prices paid for common furs from May 15, 1886 and September 1889 are as follows:

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

In fact, during the late nineteenth century, fox, muskrat, lynx, beaver, mink and marten fur fetched a good price on the Winnipeg, Montreal and London markets. For instance, Georges Fisher sold 930 skins in 1889 at the Winnipeg auction for \$3131.

When fur prices were low or if there were not enough animals present for the community to make a living, the HBC provided relief to Aboriginal trappers and their families in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This caused many families to become perpetual wards of the Company.

Traditionally, whole Métis families and extended families trapped fur-bearing animals in designated family and community hunting grounds throughout the fall and winter months. People trapped, speared and shot these animals when they found their houses and dams. This meant that the trappers rarely established a residence for more than a short period of time before moving on.

The entire family traveled to the trapline and rarely settled down for longer than a few days. Each member of the family had an important role such as skinning animals, stretching and scraping hides, cooking, and maintaining the fire. Once the trapping season was over people engaged in other economic activities

including hunting, commercial fishing, farming, working at church missions or trade posts, working on steamboats, delivering mail by dog-team, or working on construction, forestry, and mining projects.

While people could, initially, trap continuously through the year, increased competition from other trappers and the inability of the stocks to meet the demand required that they return to varied economic activities. Many of the people who trapped only did or do so for certain periods of the year when the animals' pelts were in their prime and when government restrictions permitted. During the remainder of the year they engaged in other subsistence and wage based economies, such as hunting, commercial fishing, farming, working for the church missions or the trade posts, on steamboats, or delivering mail by dog team. It is not unusual to hear of people who trapped for fifty years, living in the bush by themselves and able to provide for themselves almost everything they needed for their survival.

Traditional trapping methods varied. For instance, Muskrats were speared in their huts in the winter. Beavers were caught in the winter by cutting a hole in the ice near their lodge and placing a net underneath it. One person would start to break open the lodge and when the beavers tried to escape they were caught in the net. The trappers would then crack them over the head with an ice chisel to kill them. A very time and labour-expensive method of hunting beaver was to break down the dam they built to drain a pond. The beavers, when trying to escape into the water when the hunters began to break open their lodges, would be shot, speared or killed by the hunters' dogs.

Marshes were a good place to trap muskrats. Camps of Métis men would stay in a productive marsh area for up to a month, setting traps, skinning the catches and stretching and drying the pelts on racks. Such camps set out in the spring from St. Laurent Manitoba during the early twentieth century. After a month of trapping, each person came back with four to five hundred muskrats each, at a value of 40¢ to 75¢ each in 1935.

On the trapline, rather than expend all the energy to break apart lodges, trappers would place their traps in the water under the lodges and collect the kill when he checked the lines at a later date. In other instances, trappers might rig deadfall traps to crush the skulls of the animals. This was composed of a heavy log or rock, which would fall on the animal's head when they pulled on bait, such as fresh aspen or poplar twigs while sojourning on land. The deadfall trap was also used for other animals, with meat being used for bait when carnivorous animals were being trapped.

Snares, made from wire or rawhide, were used to trap animals of all sizes, from mink to moose. Snares made from wire were superior to those made from organic materials because they could not be chewed through. Some of the earliest snare wire was made from brass. The circle of the snare was placed along a narrow trail frequented by the animal sought, and the loose end was tied tightly to a secure stump or tree. When the animal came along, it would get its head stuck in the noose and when it tried to run away, it would strangle itself.

There is considerable preparation required before a person can set out on a trapline. The traps have to be cleaned and waxed to ensure they are in good working order. Then, the proper traps have to be divided up for the different

animals the person is trapping, which means the trapper has to know which animals occur where over the landscape. Once camped out, the trapper or trappers would start out for the day, setting about twenty-five traps.

To set traps for muskrats, a trapper might hammer away at a lodge to see if it was frozen solid or was soft. If it was soft and he heard muskrats splashing as they dove into the water, the trapper would set his traps. He would make a hole in the house and put the trap on the floor near the diving hole so when the muskrats returned, one would be trapped. The trap would be tied to a wicket so that, if the animal wasn't killed, it couldn't dive back into the water. After one day, the trapper would return to the house and remove any dead muskrat, setting the trap again to catch any remaining animals in the house. If the house was frozen, there would not be any muskrats inside and it would not be worth setting a trap.

To trap marten, a small enclosure is built between two close trees using broken branches. A small amount of scented bait is placed at the back of the enclosure, while the trap is placed more towards the front or middle of the enclosure. The trap is covered with grass to hide it. The enclosure is covered with some brush so that the marten has to enter it from the front if it wants the bait.

For mink, the trapper scoops out a hole in the snow on the shore of a lake or river and puts a fish head inside as bait. The trap is placed in front of the bait and covered with snow. The top of the hole is covered with brush, again, so that the mink has to enter the hole from the front, not the top, getting trapped in the process.

Today Métis trappers employ a variety of means to trap each animal. For beavers, trappers brake a hole in the ice and place traps under water by the beaver lodge's exit hole. To set a muskrat trap, the trapper digs into the lodge and places the trap on the floor near the diving hole. The trap was then staked in place. When the muskrats returned, one would be caught. If the animal wasn't killed, the stake kept it from escaping back into the water with the trap. Martens are caught by luring them with scented bait in a small enclosure made of broken branches; as they approach the bait, they're caught in a trap. Minks are caught using fish head bait, which is placed behind a trap in a branch-covered hole along a lake or river shore. Large animals such as bear or moose were often snared with large wire or rawhide nooses secured to tree trunks or are caught by metal traps. While an animal is snared, it will try to pull itself free, only to strangle itself. These traps have to be properly maintained: they are regularly cleaned and waxed.

Different animals were trapped at different times of the year, depending on government regulations, fur quality and availability. Some animals were available year round, though sometimes more so as a food source rather than a furbearer. By no means a comprehensive list, the schedule below exhibits the seasonal nature of trapping. The list is a combination of pre-government imposed trapping and schedules and government restrictions, noted in parentheses.

Spring

- Mink, otter, beaver and muskrat trapping
- Muskrat trapping (government restricted time)
- Bear trapping
- Wolf and coyote trapping

Summer

- Bear trapping
- Wolf and coyote trapping

Fall

- Bear trapping
- Mink, otter, beaver and muskrat trapping
- Wolf and coyote trapping

Winter

- Weasel and skunk trapping (Nov. 1 - May 10 government season)
- Fox and lynx trapping
- Mink, otter, beaver and muskrat trapping
- Wolf and coyote trapping
- Bear trapping

The twentieth century witnessed a decline in the number of Métis trappers relative to the larger population. This is a result of a number of factors. First of all, fur prices shot up after World War I, which led to over-trapping and eventually to declining prices as quantity exceeded demand. Many non-Aboriginal trappers began to trap in large numbers, which squeezed out many Aboriginal trappers, who had less capital to buy traps or who were less ruthless in the exploitation of resources. During the Pioneer Period (1896-1930), the federal and provincial governments imposed restrictions on trapping and hunting seasons, in order to conserve animal stocks. For instance, game laws required Métis (and non-Aboriginal) trappers to obtain licenses in order to trap and required a listing of all animals caught. Government regulations to conserve the fur stock, such as fur conservation blocks and quotas also limited trapping seasons and the amount of animals trapped. Other trappers were forced to work under the supervision of game wardens. In the 1920s, British Columbia, and in the 1940s, Saskatchewan and Manitoba introduced registered trapline programs, which gave trappers the right to trap in a registered area, provided the trapper conserved stock. Provincial governments also implemented aid programs to help Métis trappers. For instance, in 1945, the Saskatchewan government initiated a Fur Marketing Service, which tried unsuccessfully to protect depleted animal populations while attempting to ensure that the trappers received a good price

for their furs. As a result, many trappers living in road allowance communities were forced to rely on relief.

What was commonly lacking in many of the provincial aid programs was an understanding or inquiry into the desires and attitudes of the Métis regarding the trapping industry and what they were looking to accomplish. The different ventures, whether they were successful or not were of benefit to Métis trappers. They provided insight into business ventures, legalities, government bureaucracies and verbal skills in formal situations.

After World War II, incomes for trappers declined further. For instance, the average annual income for trappers working the La Loche trapping blocks in northwestern Saskatchewan in the 1950s was only \$280, and 75% of all trappers in the early 1960s made less than \$500. Even in the 1990s, many trappers look to other sources of employment because average incomes are often less than \$1500 per year. Population concentration, low prices, over-harvesting and government policy ensured that incomes continued to decline. New laws, ensuring that all children had a right to an education, forced many Métis to live near schools. Moreover, in order to receive family allowance cheques, families had to send their children to school on a regular basis. As a result, the northern population became more thinly spread, resulting in a highly competitive local fur harvest. Stores also began offering less credit to the trappers because their declining incomes could not cover their loans. Finally, in 1991, a European Union ban on all furs using leg-hold traps has drastically cut into incomes.

Hide Working

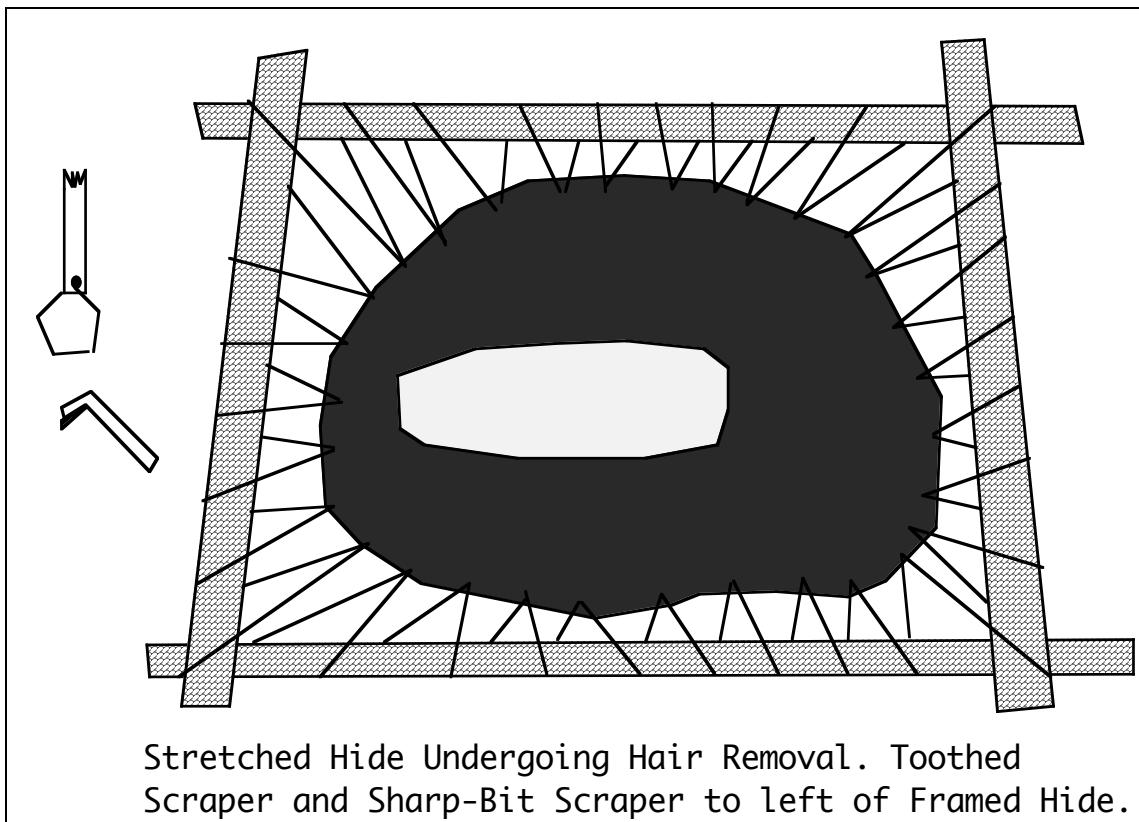
Bison and moose hides were tanned and made into clothing, bedding, and tent or tipi hides. Those that were used for robes, bedding and jackets often had the thick hair left on for protection against the elements. Hides were prepared by women who stretched and dried them on racks and then scraped the inner side with a sharpened bone to remove the fatty material. If the women did not have racks at their disposal, they would lay the hides on the ground and stake them in place with pegs. The hair was then removed with a sharp tool. Some of the prepared hides were treated with a mixture of ashes and brains. This product was known as *shaganappi* and was used to make harnesses for oxen and horses because of its impermeable nature. Because of its stiffness, *shaganappi* could not be used for clothing until it had been worked by kneaded and smoked.

Moose hide tanning involved several stages to arrive at a soft, durable end product. The first was to construct a large, solid frame to which the hide, fatty side out, was lashed with rawhide. The fatty materials would be scraped off with a tool called a *mihkehkwan* (Cree, northern Alberta). The hide was then left to dry for four to five days before the hair-removal stage. Hair removal was accomplished with a tool called a *matahikan* once the hide had been turned over on the frame. By tapping the tightly stretched hide, the worker could tell if it was of a consistent thickness; if it was not those thick areas would be scraped down.

The hide would be scrubbed with brains to oil it, making it water resistant and durable. The brains were worked in using a circular motion until the hide softened. Once the hide was well oiled, it was taken from the frame and washed thoroughly. The worker wrung the waterlogged hide out on a tree stump by

applying a twisting motion with a pole, similar to a tourniquet. Immediately after this, the hide was dried or else it became hard. Two people waved, shook and stretched the hide over a low fire until it was dry. At this point, pulling it back and forth repeatedly over a smooth log softened the hide or a rope tied between two trees. Any hard spots left on the hide were subjected again to this technique.

Smoking was the last working stage before the hide could be tailored into a desired form. The hide was quickly fashioned into a bag, hair side in, which was draped over a frame above a smoky fire. A larger hide or canvas was then put over the hide bag to trap the smoke. The fire was not allowed to flame, and using rotten wood produced the smoke. The smoking process produced a soft hide with a golden brown colour.



Trapping and Hide working Fast Fact:

Many Métis women maintained traplines during times of war when their partners were off fighting.

Questions:

- 1) What means did Métis employ to capture fur-bearing animals?
- 2) How important was trapping to the Métis traditional economy?
- 3) What were such large deer as moose and caribou used for besides food?
- 4) How important was traditional Aboriginal spiritualism to the Métis' traditional hunting and trapping practices?
- 5) Why is the fur business in Canada going through financial difficulty? What ethical questions are always raised about this business? What ecological and environment concerns does this raise? Do the efforts of outside lobbyists affect Métis and other Aboriginal hunters and trappers?
- 6) Was trapping an activity, which the whole family engaged in? How did Métis women and children participate in the hunting and trapping cycle?
- 7) Study a particular animal of importance to the traditional economy of Aboriginal people. Research the animal's behaviour and how Aboriginal people included it in their spiritual system. Did the animal have a special manitou given to it by the Great Spirit?
- 8) What impact did the Treaty process and the creation of "Indian" status have upon the Métis' ability to hunt and trap in a traditional Aboriginal economy?
- 9) When was the most opportune time to trap furs? What animals provided the most valuable returns? What impact has the state had on the Métis' abilities to trap?
- 10) Did Métis families "harvest" animals in hunting and trapping territories similar to farms? Were these practices more individualistic than the hunting activities of the Métis buffalo hunters? Why would this be so? Are there instances when the Métis hunt in extended families?
- 11) What has been the significance of the trapping industry to the Métis economy?
- 12) How did the Hudson's Bay Company ensure that Métis trappers would ply their trade after the end of the great fur trade in the late 1880s? Did the company keep the Métis committed to trapping because of over-extended credit?
- 13) In northern areas, Métis people relied almost exclusively on the Hudson's Bay Company for supplies when trapping. Did the company use this fact to control the Métis trappers?
- 14) How did the Canadian state respond to the over exploitation of fur bearing animals as a natural environment? Were any programs in place to assist Métis trappers in lean years? How were the Métis affected by the actions of the federal and provincial governments? Why did many of these initiatives fail? How does the over exploitation of this fauna resource compare with the great buffalo hunts of the nineteenth century?
- 15) How did the debit and credit system at local fur trade posts? What products were the most expensive items at the post for barter? All told, what fur trade activities did the Métis engage in at Lac La Biche?
- 16) How was the Métis and other Aboriginal peoples' lifestyles affected by the growth of the fur trade since the introduction of this industry in the sixteenth century?

- 17) Comment on the impact of the eventual over-reliance of European trade goods and cultural patterns among the Métis and other Aboriginal people in Canada. Was this development necessary? Did it encourage Aboriginal people to abandon their traditional conservationist attempts to manage the environment for commercial gain?
- 18) Can you think of the various techniques employed by a Métis trapper? Did a trapper's routine vary from animal to animal? What animals were easier to trap and what animals proved more difficult? What are the steps in laying a trap for a large fur-bearing animal?
- 19) What were some of the methods, which the Métis traditionally used to capture and kill beaver? Were these means destructive? Write a profile of the North American beaver population. Where did these animals become trapped and hunted out? Where do they have a stable population?
- 20) How are mink, martens and muskrat trapped and how is this different from how beaver are trapped?
- 21) Outline the organization of the Canadian trapping industry. Was this industry highly organized and regulated?
- 22) Go to your library or use the World Wide Web and try to find information relating to the fluctuating price of furs over an extended period of time. Construct a graph and charts related to this information. You will notice that the price of this staple varies from period to period. Look at years when you notice a get dip in prices. What local, national and international events and factors at this time could explain this sudden drop or rise in prices?
- 23) What impact has European legislation and anti-fur trapping lobbying by European-based environmental protection advocacy groups had on the fur trade in Canada? Is it wise for people thousands of miles away to drastically affect the livelihoods of others?

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