

REPORT

of the

Royal Commission Appointed to
Investigate

THE CONDITIONS OF THE
HALF BREED POPULATION
OF ALBERTA



Government of the Province of Alberta
Dept of Lands & Mines

Transcribed by David Morin

REPORT

of the
ROYAL COMMISSION APPOINTED TO INVESTIGATE
THE CONDITIONS OF THE HALF BREED POPULATION OF ALBERTA



GOVERNMENT OF THE PROVINCE OF ALBERTA
DEPT OF LANDS AND MINES

CANADA
Governor
PROVINCE OF ALBERTA

(Signed) W L Walsh
Lieutenant

COMMISSION

GEORGE THE FIFTH by the Grace of God of
Great Britain Ireland and the
Dominions beyond the Seas King
Defender of the Faith Emperor of India

SEAL

To all whom these presents shall come
or whom the same may in any wise
concern

GREETING

WHEREAS on the th day of February the Legislature passed the
following resolution:

“WHEREAS the Legislative Assembly recognizes that the
representations and requests of the half breed population of
Northern Alberta as presented to the Government by the
representatives of the said population should receive the fullest and
best consideration by the Government; be it therefore

“RESOLVED that the Government should during the present year
keeping particularly in mind the health education relief and general
welfare of the half breed population continue its study and enquiry
into the problem and present its recommendations to this Assembly
within ten days of the commencement of the next Session thereof ”

WHEREAS it is deemed expedient and in the public interest that enquiries be
made into

and concerning the problems of health education and general
welfare of the half breed population of the Province pursuant to the
provisions of the Public Inquiries Act being Chapter of the Revised
Statutes of Alberta ;

NOW YE KNOW that by and with the advice of our Lieutenant Governor in
Council We

do by these presents nominate constitute and appoint the
Honourable Albert Freeman Ewing a Judge of the Supreme Court of
Alberta; Edward Ainslie Braithwaite of Edmonton Doctor of
Medicine and James McCrie Douglas Gentleman the Commissioners
to make such inquiry and to report thereon;

AND WE DO DECLARE the above matter referred to Our said Commissioners to
be a

matter of Public concern and under the authority of “An Act
respecting Inquiries concerning Public Matters” confer upon our said
Commissioners the power of summoning witnesses before them and
of requiring such witnesses to give evidence on oath orally or in
writing or on solemn affirmation (if they are persons entitled to
affirm in civil matters) and to produce such documents and things as
the said Commissioners may deem requisite to the full investigation
of the matters into which they are appointed to inquire

IN TESTIMONY WHEREOF We have cause these Our Letters to be made Patent
and

the Great Seal of Our Province to be hereunto affixed

WITNESS: His Honourable William Legh Walsh Lieutenant Governor of Our
Province

at Our Government House in Our City of Edmonton this twelfth day
of December in the year Our Lord one thousand nine hundred and
thirty four and in the twenty fifth year of His Majesty's Reign

BY C O M M A N D :

(Signed) R G REID

Provincial Secretary

TO THE HONOURABLE

THE LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR IN COUNCIL

EDMONTON

BY RESOLUTION bearing date the th day of February the
Legislature of the Province of Alberta resolved that the Government should
make enquiry into the condition of the half breed population of the Province of
Alberta keeping particularly in mind the health education relief and general
welfare of such population

By order in Council dated the th day of December the
Honourable Albert Freeman Ewing a Judge of the Supreme Court of Alberta
Edward Ainslie Braithwaite of Edmonton Doctor of Medicine and James
McCrie Douglas of Edmonton Gentleman were appointed Commissioners
pursuant to The Public Inquiries Act being Chapter of the Revised Statutes of
Alberta to make such inquiries and to report thereon

Your Commissioners held extended meetings at Edmonton which
were widely advertised and which were largely attended by the leading officers
and representatives of L'Association des Metis de l'Alberta et les Territoires du
Nord Ouest as well as by those having an intimate knowledge of half breed
conditions such as Rt Rev J Guy Bishop of Grouard Rt Rev E Breyant
Bishop of Mackenzie Rev W H Day J M Dechene M L A Donald McLeod
M L A Frank R Falconer M L A Dr McIntyre Dr Orr and many others Mr
M Christianson Inspector of Indian Agencies for the Province of Alberta was
good enough to give the Commission the benefit of his extensive knowledge and
experience Meetings were held by members of the Commission at High Prairie
at which delegates from the half breed settlement at Grouard and other points
attended Other meetings were held at Lac la Biche Goodfish Lake Grand
Cache Chipewyan Athabaska Groff Frog Lake and Marlboro At the Edmonton

meetings the Association was represented by Mr Pennock Barrister of Edmonton

The half breed situation in Canada has a long and interesting history dating back almost to Confederation. At the outset the Government of Canada embarked on a policy of making the Indian a ward of the Government paying him treaty money annually gathering him on reserves when convenient or possible giving him rations superintending his business transactions training him in agriculture and giving him certain elementary education. The half breed on the other hand retained his status as a citizen and apart from special considerations later given by way of grants of land or scrip was treated in the same way as the rest of the civil population of the country.

The Dominion Lands Act of 1879 gave to the Governor in Council power to satisfy any claims in connection with the extinguishing of the Indian title preferred by half breeds resident in the Northwest Territories previous to the 1st of July 1879 by granting lands to such persons. In pursuance of this power it was decided to issue to each half breed head of a family resident in the Northwest Territories previous to the 1st day of July 1879 scrip redeemable in land. From that time a series of amendments and orders in council gradually enlarged the classes and numbers of those entitled to scrip until the issue embraced practically all the half breeds resident in Western Canada. Parliament took all the reasonable precautions to see that the scrip thus issued was unalienable and that the half breed should be the owner of the land on which the scrip was located. The story of this scrip and its final outcome is still vivid in living memory. The precautions of Parliament were easily circumvented and the scrip passed readily and cheaply into the hands of speculators. The resultant advantages to the half breeds were negligible. The policy of the Federal

Government however extending over a period of thirty years and these issues of scrip throw a strong light on the present problem

In the first place the scrip was issued in extinguishment of any supposed right which the half breed had to special consideration. But the Government of this Province is now faced not with a legal or contractual right but with an actual condition of privation, penury and suffering. The right to live cannot be extinguished and the situation as revealed to your Commission seems to call for Governmental guidance and assistance.

In the next place the scrip issue reveals that the great majority of half breeds have not the so called "land hunger" and are not desirous of becoming land owners or of settling down on land permanently and exclusively as farmers and stock growers. This important fact must we think always be kept in mind in dealing with measures for assisting the half breed.

In the next place the readiness with which the half breed succumbed to the wiles and persuasions of the speculators in parting with the scrip indicates his lack of business foresight. This is not to be wondered at. The half breed played an important part as guide and voyageur in opening up this western country. He lived by hunting and fishing. He was not accustomed to remaining in one place. His native ancestors had lived from time immemorial even closer to nature. His business transactions were of the most simple character. He lived from day to day. He had no training in modern business and was not accustomed to take the long view of life. The influx of the white population has destroyed his former occupations in the settled areas and has rendered them much more precarious in the unsettled areas. The logic of the situation would seem to be that he must either change his mode of life to conform with that of the white inhabitants or he must gradually disappear. This is a hard alternative. Considerations of humanity and justice forbid that we

should calmly or indifferently contemplate the latter alternative. Such a change as is required by the former alternative is not easy. A long process of education and training is necessary. A gradual initiation into the new life is the only possible way. It is during this long period of transition rendered necessary by the white man's organized system of Government for help for guidance and for encouragement. The leaders of the Metis Association very frankly based the claim of the Metis to special consideration on the admitted fact that the half breed is constitutionally unable to compete with the white man in the race of modern life.

It may be well to define here the term "half breed" or "Metis". We are not concerned with a technically correct definition. We merely wish to give a clear meaning to the term as used in this report. By either term is meant a person of mixed blood, white and Indian, who lives the life of the ordinary Indian and includes a non treaty Indian. It is apparent to everyone that there are in this Province many persons of mixed blood (Indian and white) who have settled down as farmers, who are making a good living in that occupation and who do not need nor do they desire public assistance. The term as used in this report has no application to such men.

It would probably be advisable first to state the findings of facts of the Commission classified under their various headings. It may be observed that the half breed population is scattered in various sized groups over a great part of the northern portion of this Province. It is obvious that somewhat different conditions may prevail in different areas, but the Commission has not thought it advisable to deal with such groups separately but rather to deal with those general conditions to which a general policy of assistance can be applied. There are no authoritative figures as to the half breed population of Alberta but the

Secretary of the Metis organization estimates the Metis population at about eleven thousand of all ages

HEALTH

A considerable amount of evidence was given on this subject Bishop Guy who has had a large experience with the Metis in the diocese of Grouard sums up the situation regarding health conditions as follows:

“Health condition are at their worst in many districts:

- (a) Half breeds generally live away from doctors or nurses;
- (b) They have not the means to go to them or pay for their services;
- (c) There is no travelling doctor or nurse;
- (d) Sanitary condition of homes is responsible for Tuberculosis Scrofula etc The propagation of communicable diseases especially V D is easy on account of promiscuity;
- (e) Lack of proper food (even of any food at all) e g fish dried meat (both containing iodine so vital a help for Indians and half breeds) ”

The Secretary of the Metis organization was of opinion that fifty per cent of the Metis population in the settlement with which he was acquainted had venereal disease and that seventy five per cent of this particular population had communicable diseases This would seem however to be an overstatement Two medical doctors with experience among the Metis gave evidence One doctor was of opinion that tuberculosis was more common among the Metis than among the white population The other doctor expressed the opinion that venereal disease was not much more prevalent among the Metis than among white men nor does he think that the percentage of this disease is excessively high It was also given evidence that infant mortality was high among the Metis

The difficulties are apparent. If one of the Metis is ill, it is difficult and often practically impossible to send in medical assistance to the patient and it is equally difficult or impossible to get the patient to the doctor. The nomadic life of these people adds to the difficulty. On the whole, the Commission is of the opinion that while the health situation is serious, it is not, except as to the particular diseases mentioned, more serious than among the white settlers. As to the communicable diseases mentioned, the Commission is of opinion that all possible steps should be taken to stamp them out. In all cases as large a measure of medical attention as is reasonably possible should be given. Recommendations for these purposes will be dealt with later in this report.

EDUCATION

Opinions may differ as to the amount and kind of education which ought to be given to one who is at present living and will probably continue after his school days are ended, to live the life of the Indian or the nomad. Many are of opinion that it is advantageous to take the half-breed child into a large boarding school and teach him the conveniences and amenities of modern life. The argument is that when he returns to his former life, he will do so with a desire to approximate as nearly as circumstances will permit, to the better life of his school days. Others take the view that after his education in modern life, he is bound to return to the mode of life which he formerly lived and by which we will be surrounded, and that he is bound to revert to the type which that life produces. It is not so much that he will revert, but that he has lost contact with this life for a number of years and that he will revert less able and less inclined to meet the rigorous demands of that life. No evidence was given on this point, nor is the experience of the Commissioners sufficient to appraise the practical value of these arguments. Actual experience will probably be the best guide. In any case, the controversy cannot affect the desirability of giving to the Metis child an

ordinary public school education coupled with an elementary training in agriculture and in addition giving the girls elementary training in sewing and knitting

The evidence is that in all these settlements where there are no white schools large numbers of children are growing up without any education. Certain church or denominational schools are doing splendid work on a purely voluntary basis. Bishop Guy points out that half breed children are being educated in the Grouard district without cost to the parents or to the Government. It was stated that per cent of the half breed children of the Province of Alberta receive no education whatever. Even those Metis children who live within an area served by a public school are averse to going to such a school because they are ridiculed and humiliated by the white children.

The same difficulties arise in connection with education as with medical service. Settlements are few and scattered. The people are largely nomads. They go where they can fish at certain seasons and go where they can hunt and gather fur at other seasons. Obviously a teacher cannot follow them. If it is taken to be a matter of public policy that no child within reasonable access shall be permitted to grow up without an elementary education then a fairly comprehensive plan is necessary. This will be dealt with later.

GENERAL CONDITIONS

The evidence to general conditions among the Metis population indicates an unfortunate state of affairs. The plight of those living in or near white settlements seems to be worse than that of those who live remote from settlement. Those living near white settlements have few means of livelihood. They tend to roam about less than those in more remote places. Fishing is sometimes available, game is difficult to get and fur bearing animals can only be caught on distant trap lines. Those half breeds are said to be living in shacks on

road allowances and eking out a miserable existence shunned and suspected by the white population

Those living in more remote places are better off but their living is precarious When the fishing is good and the game plentiful and fur abundant they do well enough When these fail as they do periodically then the Metis in these areas suffer privation Then too they have practically no educational or health services In practically all cases they live in shacks which are often crowded and never ventilated Food is often scarce and clothing is almost always insufficient If illness overtakes a child or member of the group he or she must without proper care or food or medical attention and without any of the comforts of life await the result

RECOMMENDATIONS

Before embarking on recommendations for relieving the conditions herein referred to the Commissioners desire to make a few preliminary remarks:

- In the first place we assume that the problem cannot be properly or adequately met by giving temporary assistance to individuals as the occasion seems to require If met at all the problem must be met by a comprehensive scheme which will go to its roots and offer an ultimate solution
- Your Commissioners understand that this is a time when every Government in Canada is under the necessity of curtailing expenditure No government is prepared to embark on any new undertaking which involves large expenditures It would be easy to recommend a large and expensive scheme which would seem to meet the desired ends Your Commissioners however realize that such a scheme is not feasible at this time All we can hope is to submit a relatively inexpensive scheme which

would be capable of expansion in better times if time and experience show such expansion to be desirable

— Your Commissioners are of opinion that they should not submit a scheme which would give to the half breeds the status of the Indian and thereby make him a ward of the Government. Not only would such a scheme require large and expensive machinery to operate it but we think it is undesirable as well. Such a relationship ought not to be encouraged. It would make the Metis dependent upon the Government for support. It would undermine his initiative, destroy his sense of responsibility and prevent his ever becoming a self supporting citizen.

— We may add that the Metis themselves through their authorized representatives assure us that they will freely assist in any scheme which may be adopted by giving their labour free of charge. For example in the erection of dwelling houses, schools, etc. they undertake that they will cut the lots, supply all the unskilled labour necessary for the erection of the buildings.

As the supply of fur, fish and game gradually (sic) becomes less and as it becomes increasingly difficult for the Metis to earn a livelihood from these sources, it becomes evident that the only hope of making a half breed a self supporting citizen is through agriculture and particularly stock raising. No other form of livelihood is reasonably open for the great majority of the Metis. It may be objected that the great majority of them have for long years refused to follow farming as an occupation. That is true: but it is also true that a considerable number of them have been and are successful farmers. It is also true that because of dwindling results from hunting and trapping the pressure upon the Metis was never stronger than it is now to turn elsewhere for a

livelihood. Apart from this, it is a matter of educating and guiding them along the only line which offers a hope of future independence.

After considering all the representations made and giving their best thought to the problem, your Commissioners are of opinion that some form of farm colonies is the most effective and ultimately the cheapest method of dealing with the problem. The objection is at once raised that this will interfere with their hunting and trapping. We think, however, that over a long period of time the tendency will be to make the half-breed more and more dependent on farming and stock raising. This is the aim and purpose of the plan.

“A”

We suggest that the plan be taken up experimentally at first by selecting say two areas to be set aside each for a farm colony. The main requirements of such an area should be as follows:

- The area should contain a very considerable amount of reasonably good agricultural land.
- It should contain or be adjacent to a lake or lakes from which a supply of fish could be obtained.
- It should have sufficient accessible timber suitable for the erection of log buildings.
- If possible, the area should be capable of being enlarged if the scheme should later require expansion.
- The area selected should be such as will be free from interference from white settlers.

The selection of the areas must be left to the experts of the Government who can gather all the available information and weigh the various requirements.

“B”

Each head of a family should be allotted a parcel of land. The title to the land should remain perpetually in the Crown but the allottee should be assured of continuous tenure both in himself and his heirs so long as there is no forfeiture resulting from misconduct. Opinions differ widely as to the proper size of the proposed parcel, varying all the way from a garden plot to a half section. It may well be that no uniform size should be adopted. The man who is completely indifferent to farming would be content with a garden plot. The man who shows some aptitude for farming might be given a larger area, the size being determined by his capacity to properly use it.

“C”

The final control of these colonies must continue to rest with the Department concerned. The management will be carried out under such superintendents or instructors as may be necessary. As matters develop it may be thought wise to provide for a council to be elected by the members of the colony and to be invested with advisory powers only.

“D”

The buildings should be erected under the supervision of an instructor appointed by the Government, the allottee supplying the logs and doing all the work, the Government supplying merely doors, windows and hardware.

“E”

The colony generally should be under the supervision of an instructor or inspector appointed by the Government. He would, of course, have only such power as might be given him by regulation, but in a general way he should have control of the operations of the colony and should in addition have

the powers of a police magistrate. The Government would supply a limited amount of farm machinery. This machinery would remain the property of the Government and could be used in common by various allottees under the direction of the instructor. It may be hoped that in a short time many of the settlers would be able to purchase their own machinery.

“E”

The allotment of a parcel would be a privilege. No half breed would have an inherent right to join the colony and no half breed would be compelled to join the colony but if he did not join he could have no claim for public assistance. Persons who are familiar with the half breed situation as well as with the half breeds themselves assure the Commission that the half breeds would gladly enter upon a colonization scheme.

Many other regulations suggest themselves but these can be worked out in practice. The allottees should be taught farming, dairying and stock raising. They would get food from hunting and fishing. In the earlier stages the whole of their living would come from these sources. It is to be hoped that they would in time come to rely more and more on their farming and stock raising operations.

The Commission is given to understand that there are certain half breeds who are among the more capable of the Metis population and who make a fairly good living by hunting and trapping. These men would not wish to join the colony but are desirous of getting a location to enable them more efficiently to carry on their work. If there is no reason to the contrary it is suggested that these men be given the use of a parcel of land not exceeding _____ acres to be held on the same tenure as that held by members of the colony and subject to such conditions and restrictions as may be thought proper.

The Commission is of the opinion that the plan could be launched with small expenditure. Whatever expenditure subsequently becomes necessary would be justified on the ground that the Metis problem is being put in the way of ultimate extinction.

It will be observed that this plan would assist much in solving both the health problem and the educational problem. Until such time as a resident doctor became necessary a doctor could visit the colony at intervals, selecting the time of his visits so that he would be able to meet the greatest number. A monthly clinic should be held. A modest hospital could be established which in time would become partially, if not wholly, self-sustaining.

The representatives of the Metis were emphatic in their statements that the Metis wished only such assistance as might be necessary to enable them to establish themselves and that they were anxiously looking forward to the time when they would be self-supporting. Indeed, we are of opinion that the policy of giving something for nothing should be avoided except where plainly necessary.

Schools could be built and the wives and families encouraged to remain in the colony. In any case, all the children could be able to attend during some portion of the year. The children should be taught reading and writing and elementary arithmetic. In addition, the boys should be taught stock raising and farming, while the girls should be taught the elements of sanitation, cleanliness, sewing and knitting. The cost would not be great and the Province could be saved the stigma which attaches to any civilized country that permits a large number of children to grow up within its boundaries without the slightest elementary education.

Finally, the Commission desires to thank the Secretary of the Commission, Mr. T. C. Renkine, for his very efficient work in collecting material.

for the Commission and for the highly capable and courteous manner in which he has discharged his duties as Secretary

We attach hereto the original Commission appointing your Commissioners and also a copy of the evidence taken orally at the various hearings

All of which is respectfully submitted

(Signed) A F Ewing
Commissioner

(Signed) J M Douglas
Commissioner

(Signed) E A Braithwaite
Commissioner

EDMONTON February th