

The Heritage and Legacy of the Metis People³

In the United States and Canada, we are surrounded by many symbols of Metis culture and heritage. Across the greater Metis Homeland there are many enduring, emblematic reminders of the Metis historical presence: the Montana buffalo skull logo; the buffalo on Manitoba's coat of arms and on the flag of the Manitoba Metis Federation; the blue Metis infinity flag; the fiddle and sash; the ubiquitous Red River Cart; and the numerous streets named after Metis patriots in cities and towns from Kansas City to Winnipeg, and from Edmonton to Yellowknife. The Metis founded many of our major cities from Green Bay (La Baye), Wisconsin in the east, to Juneau, Alaska in the west, founded by Metis gold prospector, Joe Juneau. The unique and world-renowned Michif-Cree language is still regularly spoken in four states and five Canadian provinces.

The ancestors of today's Metis Nation were the children of the unions between North American Aboriginal mothers and European fathers. They developed into a distinct people with a group consciousness necessary to promote their collective causes. A Metis was not a French Canadian, nor an English Canadian, nor a Scot. Neither were they First Nations or Inuit. They created for themselves and future generations a unique culture, a group identity, and declared themselves a "New Nation." The Metis forged treaties and declared a *Bill of Rights* that marked this identity as a "New Nation."

Often known as founders of the fur trade, the Metis of what was to become the Canadian and American Northwest participated as trappers, guides, interpreters, factors, dock and warehouse workers, voyageurs, *coureurs de bois*, canoe and York Boat operators, couriers of the first postal services, and Red River Cart teamsters. The Metis were essential in commercializing both the fur trade with the invention of the York Boat, and the buffalo hunt with the invention of the Red River Cart. They were also instrumental in making fishing a year-round commercial industry with their ingenious "jigger" that was used to set nets under the ice.

Metis women were integral to all endeavours. They were the makers of pemmican, the gatherers of fruits and herbs and the skilled artisans who supported their families through the sale of decorative artwork. Metis women were the medical practitioners and the pharmacists of their day. Metis women were the children's teachers and keepers of the Metis languages. At the community level women were the peacemakers.



Red River Carts in Manitoba. Archives of Manitoba, Transportation – Red River Cart 28 (N133)

Before cattle were abundant enough to become a food staple, Metis hunted buffalo to make pemmican. Wild berries and wild vegetables were gathered and sold along with the pemmican, which was used to feed the outlying communities and trading posts.

Metis buffalo hunts were of colossal size. In 1865, Alexander Ross, a settler in Red River, reported in detail on an expedition that left the Red River Settlement on June 15, 1840. When the

roll was called at Pembina, 1,630 people were present with 1,210 Red River Carts. In 1854, Père Belcourt reported that there were about 2,000 Metis living at Pembina. When these people joined others from the Assiniboia District, they would mount hunting expeditions with as many as 5,000 Metis and Indians. These parties travelled an extensive route, some as far as the Missouri River to just below Fort Mandan.

The Metis assisted new settlers in adapting to the harsh conditions of this country. In 1820, Metis cattleman Alexis Bailly drove a herd of cattle from Prairie du Chien, in what is now Wisconsin, to the Selkirk Settlement. Due to Alexis' entrepreneurial venture, a freighting road was opened between the two communities by 1823. A number of Metis families in the Selkirk and Pembina districts began raising oxen to haul Red River Carts.

Later, it was Metis cowboys and cattlemen at locations such as Fort Ellice (established in 1831) who would provision the western forts and freighting operations with cattle and horses. The Metis were the horse and cattle breeders and wranglers of these large operations. The most successful of these was Metis Chief Trader William McKay. All of his colleagues and biographers noted that he surpassed everyone in the West in his horse-trading and judgment of animals. Isaac Cowie, in his book, *The Company of Adventurers*, says: "The only guile I ever heard him [McKay] accused of by anyone was in his horse trading operations which were extensive... In this game [horse trading] 'Billy' had a wonderful advantage of always being able to recognize any horse he had ever seen, no matter how altered by change in condition, season, or age."⁴ This was a serious business because horses, like furs, formed the currency of the country. The horse trade was not only carried out to supply the Hudson's Bay Company, or for trade with the Indians, it also supplied the traders, freighters and other travellers moving between Fort Garry and Edmonton on the Carlton Trail. Fort Ellice was a major source of cattle breeding and trading at least until 1869 and perhaps even later.

In the western United States, the first large ranching operation was that of Edmonton-born Metis, Johnny Grant. Grant was quite successful in Montana's Deer Lodge Valley. In winter he traded with the neighbouring Blackfoot, Shoshoni, Bannock, and Flathead Indians, and during spring and summer he went up the Oregon Trail to trade for cattle with the immigrants. By the late 1850s, he had over 1,000 head of cattle and by 1863 had over 4,000 head and some 3,000 horses in addition. He supplied beef and horses for the Montana gold rush of 1861, and by 1863 his holdings were valued in the neighbourhood of \$150,000. He expanded his businesses by opening a store, saloon, dance hall, gristmill, and blacksmith shop as well as a freighting business. After the Civil War, Confederate refugees flocked to the Montana gold fields, bringing with them an unsavory intolerance for people different from themselves. Subsequently, Grant sold his ranch and herd to Conrad Kohrs for \$19,000 in 1867 and then moved to Manitoba. The Grant ranch site is currently a historic park: the Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site.

Metis men worked as farmers, breeding horses and cattle, clearing land, and planting crops while Metis women taught newly arrived Euro-Canadian and European women to prepare and preserve wild game and other foods which were needed to survive the harsh winters.

The York Boat was innovated in the early 1800s by Metis with Orkney heritage (Viking ancestry) who worked for William Sinclair, a Metis Chief Factor from York Factory. The Metis-made York Boats could traverse larger bodies of water. These large flat-bottomed boats were up to 13 metres long, could hold up to six tons of cargo, and employed a crew of eight men. In addition to their superior capacity, these boats required less maintenance. Both oars and a square sail powered them. Based on an Orkney, Viking-influenced design they



York Boat. Archives of Manitoba, Transportation (51910)

resemble old Norse riverboats.

The Metis were responsible for the development of the versatile Red River Cart used to transport goods over the prairie terrain. Today, the Red River Cart is one of the best-known symbols of Metis culture. The legacy of the Red River Cart is still found in cities such as Winnipeg, Manitoba, which have very broad roadways. Portage Avenue in Winnipeg is wide because it was an original cart trail with carts travelling from three to twenty carts abreast.

The cart, drawn by either an ox or horse, was used to transport meat, buffalo hides, pemmican, trade items, and personal belongings to and from the bison hunt and centres of trade in the United States. The cart could carry 300 to 400 kilograms of freight. It was made entirely of wood with two large rawhide covered wheels, over two metres in diameter. The versatility of the cart was unmatched. They could be used as a raft to cross water. The wheels were simply removed and lashed to the bottom to form a raft. In winter, the frame could be used as a sled pulled by a horse. The first mace used in the Manitoba Legislature was constructed from part of a Red River Cart axle with the hub on the end.

Before the establishment of a police force in the West, the Metis organized themselves in a military style that proved useful in regulating the bison hunt and in the creation of border patrols. In fact, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Musical Ride may have been inspired by the Metis practice of riding their horses to the jig and square dance music. The model comes from the Metis practice of doing square dances on their horses to a fiddle tune as a means of exercise and entertainment. Skilled horsemanship developed with the buffalo hunt and was easily adapted for bronco busting, calf roping and range riding. These skills were put to good use, and as discussed above, the Metis were instrumental in the growth and prosperity of ranching in the West.

The Metis' language skills were without parallel. They were widely employed as interpreters, as they were valued for their language skills and multilingual ability. The Metis were employed as interpreters by the American and Canadian governments for the vast majority of Indian treaty negotiations. The Metis developed their own unique language, which, like their heritage, was a combination of both European and Indigenous cultures. This language, called "Michif" or "Michif-Cree," is a combination of French and Plains Cree and is still spoken by the Metis.

Similarly, the Metis created their own syncretic form of music, which combines a traditional Celtic style with beats and cadences characteristic of Cree and Ojibwa songs. The "Red River Jig" fiddle tune and its unique jig dance are known across North America.



Red River Ox Carts on Prairie between St. Paul and Minneapolis, 1867. Minnesota Historical Society (HE 2.1 P16)

The Metis have served Canada and the United States in the military during many international conflicts, often being decorated for their bravery, including the battle of the Nile Expedition (1884-85); followed by the South African War (1899-1902); the First and Second World Wars; and the Korean War (1950-53). Today, Metis people continue to serve with distinction in the Canadian Forces and the Armed Forces Reserves.

Early in the development of the Northwest, many Metis participated in industry, trade, politics, and commerce at all levels, in a variety of capacities. The Metis have a long history of participation in the legal, medical, and education professions, since they were often formally educated through the encouragement and influence of their European fathers and the clergy who served their communities.

The Metis were instrumental in the entry of Manitoba into Confederation and prepared the way for the Minnesota, Dakota, Montana and Oregon territories to enter the American Union. Today, Metis are involved in all facets of Canadian and American society and continue to contribute to the building of these nations.

In the arts writers such as Maria Campbell have produced books like *Half-Breed*, which *The National Post* chose for its list of the twenty best Canadian books of the twentieth century. Metis singer-songwriter Buffy Sainte Marie has produced the moving peace anthem "The Universal Soldier," as well as "Up Where We Belong," which won an *Academy Award* for best song in 1982 (from the movie *An Officer and a Gentleman*). She donates many of her royalties to a foundation she created for Native education, the *Nihewan Foundation*. In architecture, Douglas Cardinal, a Metis from Alberta, has designed the breathtaking Museum of Canadian Civilization and did the building designs for the Oujé-Bougoumou community of the James Bay Cree, a design that won the "We the People" *United Nations Community Award*.

The *Metis Legacy* book series is intended to be a useful and timely resource for the educational community, and some will be distributed free of charge to selected high school and public libraries. This distribution will ensure this information will be made available to Metis families, Metis students and the general public. In addition, it is hoped that the book will raise broad public interest in Metis issues and history.

The production of this book has been an immense volunteer effort. We are deeply indebted to all of those who contributed and gave freely of their time and expertise.

The reader should note that "Metis" is the modern form of the word "métis." The older form, along with the word "Michif" refers to the people who began the Metis Nation in the Old Northwest in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The term "Aboriginal" refers to First Nations (North American Indian), Metis, and Inuit peoples in the Canadian context. It is always capitalized.

³ This is a revised version of the introductory chapter by Lawrence Barkwell and Ed Swain that appears in *Metis Legacy*: 1-4; and in Saskatchewan Learning, *Aboriginal Education Unit, Native Studies 10 Curriculum Guide*, Regina: Saskatchewan Learning, July 2002: 324-325. Additional contributions are from Audreen Hourie.

⁴ Isaac Cowie, *The Company of Adventurers: A Narrative of Seven Years in the Service of the Hudson's Bay Company During 1867-1874 on the Great Buffalo Plains*. Toronto: William Briggs, 1913: 180.