



R E S I S T A N C E & C O N V E R G E N C E
Francophone and Métis Strategies of Identity in Western Canada

October 20 – 23, 2005, Regina, Saskatchewan

Article by Darren Préfontaine

October 20-23, 2005 saw a remarkable coming together of Métis and Francophones in Regina. Organized by the Institut français, with support from the Gabriel Dumont Institute and the Assemblée communautaire francsaskoise, the colloquium entitled “Resistance and Convergence: Francophone and Métis Strategies of Identity in Western Canada” brought together academics specializing in Métis and Francophone studies, and community people and artists from both communities. The colloquium’s intent was to bring Western-Canadian Métis and Francophones together to begin a “respectful and constructive dialogue” that would enable the two communities to learn from one another in order to better understand the challenges that they as minority groups face, while at the same time providing each community with the opportunity to showcase the vibrancy of their respective cultures. The three-day gathering successfully wove academic, community and artistic components, and included the following events:

- ❖ Keynote addresses by Paul Chartrand, (Métis), Hérméngilde Chiasson, (Acadian) and Charles Willie (African-American)
- ❖ A two-day roundtable between Métis and Francophone community members
- ❖ Two cultural evenings with performances by Métis and Francophone artists
- ❖ Three days of academic presentations on issues relating to Western-Canadian Métis and Francophone history, culture and identity
- ❖ Workshops on Métis and “Canayen” (French-Canadian) storytelling, fiddle playing and folk dancing

All told, over forty academics from Canada, the United States and Europe presented papers at the colloquium. A few of the academics that specialize in Métis Studies who presented at the colloquium included:

- ❖ Peter Bakker, Linguist, Aarhus University, Denmark
- ❖ Heather Devine, Historian, University of Calgary
- ❖ Sherry Farrell-Racette, Artist and Professor, First Nations University of Canada
- ❖ David Garneau, Artist and Professor, University of Regina

- ❖ Brenda Macdougall, Native Studies Professor, University of Saskatchewan
- ❖ Robert Papen, Linguist, Université du Québec à Montréal
- ❖ Diane Payment, Historian, Parks Canada
- ❖ Marie-Louise Perron, Folklorist, Library and Archives Canada

Despite such a wide array of intellectual talent, the colloquium's most memorable exchanges involved community people and artists. These occurred during the two community roundtables and during the two cultural evenings. The Community Roundtable, which was made-up of a broad representation from both communities, was perhaps the highlight of this gathering. Together, the panelists discussed issues of language retention, assimilation and racism. Some of the most passionate interjections came from the audience as they related both their personal experiences and their empathy for the other community. From the roundtable both communities agreed that language and culture were at the essence of their identities, although both communities realized that they also live in very different realities – one Aboriginal and one non-Aboriginal.

Francophone and Métis community people also bonded during the two cultural evenings. Many were taken aback by the similarities between the traditional cultures of both communities. The first cultural evening, on October 21, was held at Darke Hall. Organized by Michel Lalonde, the gala was quite simply magical. For almost four hours, the audience which was equally Francophone and Métis, watched a varied array of artistic talent including:

- ❖ A Canayen Voyageur (Roger Dellaire) serving as Master of Ceremonies
- ❖ Métis Square Dancing
- ❖ French-Canadian Jigging
- ❖ Métis and French-Canadian Fiddle Playing (including the evolution of the "Red River Jig" from the "*Gigue Simple*")
- ❖ Contemporary Métis and Francophone music
- ❖ Traditional Métis stories by Maria Campbell and Jules Desjarlais

Métis musicians – including fiddle players Émile Lavallée, John Arcand, Brian Sklar and Calvin Volrath, singer Don Freed and guitar players Freddie and Clinton Pelletier – played a key role in the success of first cultural evening. Francophone singers and bands such as Annette Campagne, Nadia Gaudet and La Coulée also had very stirring performances.

The second cultural evening on October 22 was equally electric. Held at Regina Métis Sport and Culture Centre the celebration included a traditional Métis meal followed by Métis and French-Canadian square dancing and jigging by the Riel Reelers and the Danseurs de la rivière la vieille.

In the end, the colloquium had the feel of a family reunion. It was an extraordinary rapprochement between these two communities, which have long been estranged from one another despite their shared "Canayen" heritage. When the colloquium started on Thursday evening, both communities did not know what to expect. However, by the second day those in attendance realized

that both Francophones and Métis face many of the same challenges, particularly regarding assimilation and the loss of language. Not surprisingly, both communities demonstrated a great deal of respect for language. For instance, English, French, Michif-Cree, Michif-French, Swampy Cree, "*Joual*" (French-Canadian slang) and "*Chiac*" (Acadian slang) were spoken during and in between sessions. Many of the Francophone participants were very appreciative when Norman Fleury and Rita Flammand spoke Michif-Cree and when Paul Chartrand and Jules Desjarlais spoke Michif-French. The success of this event will lead to a number of follow-up activities including:

- ❖ An exchange of Métis and Fransaskois flags on November 12, 2005 between Regina Métis Sport and Culture and the Assemblée communautaire fransaskoise
- ❖ A broadcast of highlights from the first cultural evening on CBC Radio/Radio Canada, Saskatchewan this fall
- ❖ Exchanges between individual Francophone and Métis community members
- ❖ A joint cultural resource to be produced by the Gabriel Dumont Institute and Institut Français
- ❖ A potential Fransaskois-Métis-Cajun cultural conference
- ❖ A replication of similar (but smaller) events for the province's Métis and Fransaskois communities
- ❖ A printing of the colloquium's papers in both official languages