

Métis History

The exact date when Métis history began is hard to determine. However, Métis Ethnogenesis, or self-identity, emerged in the mid 1750s, in the Great Lakes region, as Canadien-Algonquian mixed-bloods recognized their distinctness and sought each other for marriage/trading alliances. Later this self-awareness crystallized in the Red River when the Métis challenged the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC)'s attempts to curb their lifestyle as fur trade provisioners and free traders. It was here, on June 19, 1816, that the Métis or "*Bois-Brûlés*" led by Cuthbert Grant defeated a party of HBC men and Selkirk Settlers at Seven Oaks. This self-identity further blossomed after the 1821 North West Company-HBC merger when hundreds of Métis or "*gens de libre*" circumvented the HBC's fur trade monopoly in the 1830s-40s, fought the Dakota for access to the rich bison-hunting grounds of the Dakotas in the 1840s-50s and resisted the Canadian state from 1869-1885.

In 1869, the Métis were not consulted about the transfer of their homeland (Rupert's Land) to the new Dominion of Canada. Angered, they formed a Provisional Government that was eventually led by Louis Riel. From these negotiations emerged *The Manitoba Act*, which the Métis saw as a treaty between the Métis Nation and Canada. For the Métis, the act's most important provisions included bilingual denominational schools, judicial and parliamentary systems (Section 22) and perhaps most importantly, through Sections 31-32, the extinguishment of their "Indian" title to the land, through the granting of 1.4 million acres of land to "the children of half-breed heads of families." For those Métis living in what is now Saskatchewan, *The Dominion Lands Act* (1879) (Section 125) also included provisions to extinguish the Métis' Indian title. This was done through the Scrip system whereby Scrip Commissioners gave the Métis land or money scrip in exchange for their Indian title. The system, however, was fraudulent and most Métis did not receive or hold title to any land.

After 1870, increasing racism within Manitoba forced hundreds of Métis to move to present-day Saskatchewan. They founded settlements such as Wood Mountain-Willow Bunch, St. Laurent, St. Isadore-de-Bellevue, and Batoche, which augmented pre-existing Métis communities such as Cumberland House and Ile-à-la-Crosse. Despite moving west, the Métis' many grievances – such as not having their Indian title properly extinguished, lack of proper political representation and poor economic conditions – led them to send dozens of petitions to the federal government. Their reasoned pleas for redress were received with silence. In 1884, the Métis brought Louis Riel back to Canada in order to negotiate their grievances with Ottawa. Alliance building occurred throughout the fall and winter of 1884, but as 1885 approached, it became apparent that the French-Métis' coalition with the English-speaking Métis, First Nations and Euro-Canadians had shallow roots. The Northwest Resistance broke out in late March 1885. After having the upper hand early on – due to Gabriel Dumont's leadership and their superior marksmanship – at Duck Lake (March 26) and Fish Creek (April 24), the

Métis succumbed to the larger, better equipped Canadian volunteer force at Batoche on May 12, 1885.

After 1885, the Saskatchewan Métis were marginalized. Many dispersed to parkland and forested regions, while others squatted on land along the approaches to road allowances. Hence, the Métis began to be called the "Road Allowance People" and settled in dozens of makeshift communities such as Crescent Lake and Little Chicago. In most instances, they did not own title to the land and thus paid no taxes, which precluded their children from obtaining an education. With this marginal existence emerged a myriad of social problems including poor health and self-esteem, and a lack of viable employment opportunities. And yet, the Métis lived in their own communities, spoke their language, Michif, and served their country with great distinction in 1914-18 and 1939-45.

After 1945, the Métis slowly entered the province's mainstream. In order to rehabilitate the Métis, the CCF government, in the late 1940s, created Métis Farms such as those in Lebret and Green Lake, which proved paternalistic and ultimately failed. In the 1950s, James Brady and Malcolm Norris were addressing the Métis' economic, social and political marginalization. In the 1960s-70s, Métis societies advocated Métis empowerment, while increasing numbers of Métis began moving to the province's larger cities. Out of these efforts emerged the social-cultural and educational apparatus of the Métis Nation – Saskatchewan. Since the mid-1990s, the province's Métis have worked towards the building of self-governing institutions, obtaining a land base in north-western Saskatchewan and having their Aboriginal rights such as access to full hunting restored.

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Further Reading: Barkwell, Lawrence J., Dorion, Leah and Préfontaine, Darren R., Editors. *Métis Legacy*. Winnipeg and Saskatoon: The Louis Riel Institute and the Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2001; Chartrand, Paul L.A.H. *Manitoba's Métis Settlement Scheme of 1870*. Saskatoon: The Native Law Centre, University of Saskatchewan, 1991; Peterson, Jacqueline and Brown, Jennifer, S. H., Editors. *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America*. Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 1993; Shore, Fred J., and Barkwell, Lawrence, J., Editors. *Past Reflects the Present: The Métis Elders' Conference*. Winnipeg: Manitoba Métis Federation Inc, 1997; Sprague, D. N. *Canada and the Métis, 1869-1885*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1988.