

Contributions Made by Métis People

We often do not notice that we are continually surrounded by the symbols of Métis culture and heritage. Across the greater Métis Homeland there are many enduring emblematic reminders of the Métis historical presence: the Montana buffalo skull logo, the buffalo on Manitoba's Coat of Arms and on the seal of the Manitoba Federation; the blue Métis infinity flag; the fiddle and sash; the ubiquitous Red River Cart; and the numerous streets named after Métis patriots in cities and towns from Kansas City to Winnipeg, and from Edmonton to Yellowknife. The Métis founded many of our major cities from Green Bay (La Baye) in the east to Juneau, Alaska in the west, founded by Métis gold prospector, Joe Juneau. The unique and world-renowned Michif language is still regularly spoken in four American states and five Canadian provinces.

The ancestors of today's Métis 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 Métis was not a French-Canadian, nor a 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 Métis 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 Métis 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 Métis 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 the ingenious 'jigger' that was used to set nets under the ice.

Before cattle were abundant enough to become a food staple, Métis 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.

Métis buffalo hunts were of colossal size. In 1865, Alexander Ross, a settler in Red River, reported in detail on an expedition which left the Red River Settlement on June 15, 1840. When the role 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 Métis living at Pembina. When these people joined others from the Assiniboia District they would mount hunting expeditions with as many as 5,000 Métis and Indians. These parties traveled an extensive route, some as far as the Missouri River to just below Fort Mandan.

The Métis assisted new settlers in adapting to the harsh conditions of this country. In 1821, Métis cattleman Alexis Bailly drove a herd of cattle from Prairie du Chien, up the Mississippi and Minnesota River valleys and down the Red River to save the disaster-stricken Selkirk Settlement from starvation. Due to Alexis' entrepreneurial venture, a

freighting road was opened between the two communities by 1823. A number of Métis families in Selkirk and Pembina districts began raising oxen to haul Red River carts. Later, it was Métis cattlemen who would provision the influx of prospectors and miners during the gold rush era in Canada and the United States.

Métis men worked as farmers, breeding horses and cattle, clearing land and planting crops while Métis 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. Métis women were integral to all endeavours. They played important roles in commercial and domestic production and in the political life of what was to become the Canadian and American Northwest. Métis women were the clothing designers, doctors, pharmacists, midwives, peacekeepers, artists and agriculturalists. Métis women were the children's teachers and keepers of the Métis languages. Métis women taught the newly arrived Euro-Canadian and European women to prepare and preserve wild game and other foods which were needed to survive the harsh winters. Similarly, they provided the clothing technology and taught the newcomers the techniques and materials necessary to make warm and comfortable clothing.

The York boat, based on an Orkney Islands and Viking influenced design, was invented by the Métis for use on larger bodies of water. These large flat-bottomed boats were up to 13 meters 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.

The Métis were responsible for the development of the versatile Red River cart used to transport goods over both land and water. Today, the Red River cart is one of the best-known symbols of Métis culture. The cart, drawn by either an ox or a 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, 1.5 meters in diameter. The versatility of the cart was unmatched. When crossing water, the wheels were removed and lashed to the bottom to form a raft without having to unload any freight. In winter, the frame could be used as a sled pulled by a horse.

Before the establishment of a police force in the west, the Métis 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 Métis practice of exercising their horses to the music of the jig and square dance. In the evenings, after buffalo hunts, the Métis exercised their horses to music in the fashion of the square dance while the fiddler played quadrilles. 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, as the Métis were instrumental in the growth and prosperity of ranching in the West.

An unknown militia member attending Treaty Negotiations at Kipahikanihk in 1874 has elegantly described Métis horsemanship:

On the first day of the assembly, almost immediately after the dress being sounded by Bugler Burns the whole camp came forward in martial array, led by an enormously large man, riding a very fair specimen of the buffalo hunters of that time, standing about sixteen hands high, dark brown, and showing a strain of good blood, his rider attired in blue cloth capote and brass buttons, cotton shirt (unstarched), moleskin trousers and new deerskin moccasins with broad L'Assomption belt or sash of variegated colours in silk around his waist, Indian pad saddle with heavily beaded saddle cloth, complimented the "tout ensemble" of this would-be leader now riding well in advance curvetting and ascribing circles and half-circles, at the canter or lope, and now and then parading up and down the whole frontage until close up to our Marquee tent. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba, MG1, A7: 2)

Metis language skills were without parallel. The Métis were widely employed as interpreters, as they were valued for their language skills and multilingual ability. The Métis developed their own unique language, which, like their heritage, was a combination of both European, and Indigenous cultures. This language, called Michif, is a mixture of French and Plains Cree and today is still spoken by many of the Métis. Similarly, the Métis created their own syncretic form of music by combining Celtic folk-style with beats and cadences characteristic of Cree and Ojibwa songs. The "Red River Jig" fiddle tune and its unique step-dance are known across North America.

The Métis have militarily served Canada in many international conflicts with many being decorated for their bravery. The Metis fought on the British side warding off the USA invasion of Canada during the War of 1812. Next, the Metis participated in Canada's first overseas engagement by enlisting for the Nile Expedition in 1884-85; followed by the Boer War; the First and Second World Wars; and the Korean War. One example, Henry Nor'West was a lance-corporal with the 50th Canadian Infantry Battalion. He was a sharpshooter who was officially credited with 115 fatal shots and was awarded the Military Medal with double bar. Nor'West was later killed by a sniper's bullet himself. Today, Métis people continue to serve with distinction in the Canadian Forces and the Armed Forces Reserves.

Early in the development of the Northwest, many Métis participated in industry, trade and commerce at all levels. Many became involved with mainstream politics in a variety of capacities. The Métis 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.

In the arts, writers such as Maria Campbell, have produced books like *Halfbreed*, which *The National Post* chose for its list of the twenty best Canadian books of the twentieth century. American Michif author Louise Erdrich who is a member of the Turtle Mountain Band, has received the 1984 National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction. Once named one of *People Magazine's* most beautiful people. Louise is a writer with a

wide popular appeal. She has drawn comparisons to such noted American authors as William Faulkner. Cree/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 Métis 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, Métis are involved in all facets of Canadian and American society and continue to contribute to the building of these nations.

References:

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