

Métis Displacement and the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act

For many decades there was a traditional Métis community homesteaded by Métis families at Ste. Madeleine, located between the Manitoba-Saskatchewan border and the Assiniboine River just north of St. Lazare, Manitoba and the old Fort Ellice. However, under the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act of 1935 Ste. Madeleine was designated to become a community pasture. When the pasture was designated the people who had paid their taxes up-to-date were to get comparable land in return. However, this expropriation happened during the abject poverty the Métis experienced in the “Dirty-30s.” The Métis were experiencing the worst effects of the Depression and almost no one had paid their taxes. Thus they lost their farms and got nothing in return.

The Métis who were to be moved were not involved in the decision and had not given their free and informed consent to the move. The relocation was poorly planned, was not supported by adequate resources, and was implemented in an inhumane way. Between 1938 and 1940 the people were forced out, their homes burned, dogs shot and their school and church were torn down. Community life had centered around the Ste. Madeleine Mission church located on Section 32 and the Belliveau School located to the south on Section 29. However, the homes were scattered along the trail heading south to the St. Lazare Hills. The homes were spread out from 100 yards to a quarter mile apart.

The Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act Administration

The Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA) was a branch under Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, a department of the Federal Government of Canada. It has since been integrated with National Land and Water Information Service (NLWIS) and Agri-Environmental Policy Bureau (AEPB), as part of the Agri-Environment Services Branch (AESB).

The PFRA was established by an Act of Parliament in 1935 in response to the prolonged and disastrous drought, which led to farm abandonment and land degradation of the 1930s. Between 1931 and 1941 an estimated 247,000 people left the prairies and the 1936 census reported a total of 13,900 abandoned farms comprised of almost 3,000,000 acres of land. The PFRA was established to deal with the problems of soil erosion and lack of water resources for agricultural development. The emergency programs that were instituted included on-farm dugouts for the conservation of water for livestock, strip farming to prevent excessive soil drifting, seeding of abandoned land for community pastures, and extensive tree-planting projects to protect the soil from wind erosion. To address the lack of water resources the PFRA engaged in large scale water development and conservation projects such as the St. Mary River Irrigation Project, the Bow River Irrigation Project and the South Saskatchewan River Irrigation Project.

Its role was to:

"... secure the rehabilitation of the drought and soil drifting areas in the Provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, and to develop and promote within those areas, systems of farm practice, tree culture, water supply, land utilization and land settlement that will afford greater economic security..."

With this mandate, the PFRA served to promote sustainable development on the rural prairies for over six decades in the areas of air, water, soils, and biodiversity. Its mandate included detailed examination of various devices for soil conservation and enrichment.

Although the goal was to turn abandoned land into community pastures this was not the case with Ste. Madeleine since none of this communities land had been abandoned. Additionally, none of the other measures and programs were applied to the Ste. Madeleine area.

In a chapter on “Relocation and Responsibility”¹ the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples sets out a number of criteria for the relocation of Aboriginal people:²

1. Government must obtain and follow appropriate authority before proceeding with relocation;
2. The people who are to be moved must give their free and informed consent to the move and should be participants in decision making regarding the relocation;
3. The relocation must be well planned and implemented and supported by adequate resources;
4. Promises made concerning the relocation should be kept; compensation should be adequate and persons relocated should have ample opportunity to maintain or improve their standard of living;
5. The relocation must be carried out in a humane manner, respecting the rights of persons keeping with Canada’s international commitments and obligations;
6. Governments actions must conform with the government’s fiduciary obligations to Aboriginal peoples.

The Commission makes the assessment that:

The relocation of the Métis of Ste. Madeleine fits the pattern of “development relocation” in two fundamental ways: Aboriginal land was needed for another purpose (pasture in this case), and the people on it were in the way. Little thought was given to the implications of the move for the community or its long-term effects. In this respect there is an element of arbitrariness in the actions that displaced the Métis residents of Ste. Madeleine.³



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¹ Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. “Volume 1: Looking Forward, Looking Back,” *Report on the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*. Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services, 1996: 505-512.

² Op. cit. p. 512.

³ Op. cit. p. 475.