

## **Métis Seasonal Cycles – Darren R. Préfontaine, Patrick Young and Todd Paquin**

**Objective:** To provide students with an overview of how the Métis traditionally interacted with their environment, in particular how they harvested resources around various seasonal cycles.

Ever since their emergence as a people, the Métis have harvested natural resources for themselves and for others. The Métis' close ties to the environment, a gift bequeathed to them by their First Nations relatives, gave them a clear advantage over non-Aboriginal people when they harvested natural resources. This included bison bone collecting, wild rice harvesting, commercial trapping and hunting, fishing, farming, wood supplying and the collection of Seneca root. Traditionally, they produced almost everything they needed to survive from nature. Métis families, extended families and communities traversed the landscape, following the reproductive and ripening flora and fauna cycles, which meant adapting their lives to the seasonal cycles. The Métis had to be flexible in order to work well together in times of plenty, or work independently when resources were scarce. Seasonal cycles are therefore delineated in both time and place. Métis seasonal cycles, like those of the First Nations and Inuit, have also been affected by the emergence of a wage economy. As a result of varying climates, geography, natural environments and human factors, there are several Métis season cycles in Canada.

The semi-nomadic nature of the seasonal cycle is affected by the availability of employment opportunities or the cultivation of garden crops or cereal agriculture. A family may have spent the late spring and early summer in a home community where they planted a garden and a plot of wheat, or they might also spend the late summer involved in bison hunting, the fall in berry collecting, the winter in trapping or as part of a winter bison hunting camp, and the early spring at a fishery.

Weather conditions also play a role in the harvesting of resources. For instance, during periods of frequent drought, a situation quite common on the Prairies, the harvesting cycle for such animals as bison, moose, wapiti (elk), white-tail or mule deer, is adversely effected. Berries such as saskatoons and chokecherries also grow sporadically in periods of prolonged drought. In such situations, Métis that followed the seasonal cycle had to substitute those scarce resources with other resources, often further a field. This may have meant trapping and hunting smaller fauna such as muskrats, prairie chickens (sharp tailed grouse) or harvesting fish such as pike, pickerel or sturgeon. As a result, there were not one but many seasonal cycles.

The traditional seasonal cycle of the Métis had to be diverse since it provided families with the majority of their food, lodging, transportation, and recreation. As a part of any given seasonal cycle, the Métis hunted, gathered, trapped, fished, farmed, and gardened. Natural signs indicated to the Métis when it was time to begin a particular activity and when to finish others. For instance, for the Métis of the Paddle Prairie region of northern Alberta, the seasonal cycle began in *Niskipesim* or Goose Moon (March), when geese begin their migratory flight to northern nesting grounds, announcing the arrival of spring. All exposed grass, stubble fields, and dead leaves are burned at this time to renew the forest and meadows. Taking part in a seasonal cycle was also a spiritual exercise because the participant was part of a holistic system with all things in creation. Resources, both animate and inanimate, were gifts from the Creator for all humans to share. Therefore when harvesting resources, traditional Métis always left a gift for the Creator, usually tobacco or tea. If a gift was not left when a resource was harvested the community would run the risk of losing that resource.

The traditional lifeways of the Métis and other Indigenous peoples that follow(ed) seasonal cycles were not arduous and starvation-prone as non-Aboriginal academics once postulated. The basic needs of people following a seasonal cycle were met much sooner than for us today. While families spent a great deal of effort harvesting and processing resources, they also had a significant amount of leisure time since they pooled their resources and shared their bounty. This allowed families to be together, and for communities to work together. Berry picking was not just a chore, but was rather, a favourite activity for Métis families since it was a great way for families to spend time with one another. When the harvesting of resources was completed, families, extended families and communities engaged in a variety of social activities including jigging, story telling, playing cards or traditional games such as the "Michif" knife game. Elders and older family members taught young people, through story telling and experiential learning, the on-going dynamics of the seasonal cycle. The dissemination of Traditional Knowledge and the Oral Tradition between Elders and youth ensured that generations of Métis could successfully live off the land and its resources.

Those Métis who were nomadic or semi-nomadic had a good knowledge of the country and environment. Being dependent on seasonally varied resources, they had to know the cycles of many animal and plant species in order to successfully make a living. This included knowing when and where berries ripened or in which streams and rivers large numbers of fish spawned. For instance, the seasonal round at Fish Lake, northern Manitoba in the 1920s consisted of spending part of the summer in houses, whereas the rest of the year was spent moving around to hunt moose, ducks, to fish and trap, and to pick rice according

to the season. Trapping was a peripheral activity to buy goods from traders in June.

Not only would the Métis need a well-rounded knowledge of the environment, they had to work well together in groups to extract sufficient resources from the land. Hunting and wintering parties were flexible in composition, bound by an ethnic consciousness and centred around kin ties. As such, people lead by knowledge and expertise shared what they acquired and were free to join or leave the group by choice.

Many Métis Elders believe that the social cohesion of families and communities began to unravel when many Métis were forced off the land in the 1930s and 1940s. Around this time, government policies began to severely impact the Métis' ability to harvest resources and live a traditional lifestyle. Governments imposed stringent conservation laws, which restricted the Métis' ability to harvest resources. Consequently, many Métis families, particularly in the southern Prairies, were no longer able to follow the seasonal cycle. In addition, *The Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act*, from the 1930s, legislated an end to Métis road allowance communities since it gave government officials the power to confiscate lands, which the Métis had squatted upon, turning them into communal pastures for non-Aboriginal farmers and ranchers. After 1945, the Métis seasonal cycle was also altered once parents were forced to send their children to school in order to receive Family Allowance payments. As a result, families often moved to urban centres to find wage employment or struggled to find seasonal employment in their home communities. Those Métis who lived in northern locations managed to continue following the seasonal cycle, but supplemented this lifestyle with seasonal employment as guides or forest fire

workers. The implementation of a wage-based economy has greatly altered how the Métis interact with the land. The social policy of previous generations has ensured that many Métis children no longer participate in a traditional lifestyle.

Michif-speaking Métis living in the Red River Settlement, in the nineteenth century, had the following season cycle:

Spring	Summer	Fall	Winter
Hunting ducks, geese swans, prairie chickens, pheasants, partridges, moose, deer, wapiti and bears.	Hunting bison in order to pay off debts to the Hudson's Bay Company incurred in winter and to restock food supplies.	Hunting bison to provision posts and secure winter food supply.	Trapping weasels, skunks, mink, otters, beavers, muskrats bears, foxes, and lynx.
Catching spawning fish such as pike, walleye, sturgeon with weirs, nets, spears or traps.	Hunting wolves, coyotes, bears, prairie chickens, rabbits, moose, deer, and wapiti.	Hunting moose, deer, wapiti, bears, prairie chickens, and migratory ducks, geese, and swans.	Hunting bears, wolves, coyotes, prairie chickens, rabbits, moose, deer, wapiti.
Trapping or hunting mink, otters, beavers, muskrats, rabbits, coyotes, and wolves.	Trapping bears.	Fishing spawning fish, such as whitefish and salmon with weirs, nets, spears or traps.	Ice fishing with nets.
Collecting birch bark for canoes and house hold items.	Gathering seneca root, blueberries, saskatoon berries, raspberries, currants, gooseberries and chokecherries.	Trapping or hunting bears, wolves, coyotes, mink, otters, beavers, muskrats and rabbits.	Hunting bison in winter camps
Sapping birch and maple trees.	Fishing with nets.	Harvesting ripening wild rice, chokecherries, saskatoon berries, and highbush cranberries.	
Seeding wheat and other grains.	Seeding and harvesting barley.	Harvesting wheat.	
	Shearing sheep.	Slaughtering livestock.	

## Gathering

### Fruit and Berries

Berry picking and root picking were important subsistence activities. Girls were taught how to weave red willow into baskets or make birch bark baskets for collecting berries. Berries such as saskatoons, blueberries, raspberries, currants, gooseberries, high bush cranberries (*li pabbinans*), low bush cranberries and other small fruits were picked by women and older couples in July and August. These fruits and berries could be eaten fresh, dried, introduced into pemmican, or turned into preserves and jellies. Chokecherries were made into wine, which was consumed at feasts and dances. Women also gathered honey.

### Roots

Roots such as seneca, wild onions, wild turnips and breadroot were also dug. Wild onions, wild turnips and breadroot were important food items, while seneca root was an important for use as a medicine, particularly as an expectorant. Wild turnip, when dried and ground, made a tasty soup base and seasoning.

Seneca root is a perennial plant 25.4 cm to 38.1 cm tall with a 155.5 gram root which was used in the preparation of medicines for colds, pneumonia, rheumatism, croup and whooping cough. The Métis and First Nations traditionally gathered it for its medicinal use. Many families pick the root as a wage-earning activity for cough syrup and cough drop companies. The best time to collect the root is when the plant is in flower, in the summer or fall, as it is easier to recognize among the hay and other weeds it grows among. Families would camp out for weeks at a time in the summer to pick the root.

Even when families had taken up farming full time, members would venture out to pick seneca to supplement their income, often leaving behind one person to collect eggs, milk the cows and mind the livestock. Such cooperative ventures were an asset to commercial gathering. The roots would be sold in nearby towns and then shipped to the pharmaceutical companies in eastern Canada.

The Interlake Region in Manitoba was one of the best places to find the root because it had not been disrupted by cultivation. Prior to cultivation, it could be found throughout southeastern Manitoba and occurred up to York Factory. Manitoba is the largest exporter of the root and in 1929 it exported over 226.8 metric tons worldwide. Because of its price per pound, a family can easily supplement their income by picking seneca root in the summer, a common practice in areas where the land is not suitable for other crops. During the 1930s many families did pick sennaca root as a source of income and were paid from 15¢ to 25¢ a pound.

#### Miscellaneous gathering

Other roots, berries and barks were gathered for their medicinal purposes. While unable to effectively heal people suffering from diseases originating from contact with Europeans, these medicines were and are remarkably effective for health problems indigenous to North America. A winter cold medicine concocted by a Métis women from Grand Marais, Manitoba was made by collecting cedar brush, balsam bark and cherry bark. These ingredients were boiled together and drunk to help with coughs and loosen tightness in the chest. Muskeg tea was gathered to help relieve fever. Pine and spruce needles were gathered for chest and sinus congestion. Chokecherry bark and roots were gathered to ease sore throats, stomach pain and diarrhea.

Bulrush and cattails were also collected to make flour, especially for bannock, if European flour was not available. Waterfowl eggs were also garnered in the summer. Because the eggs are easily broken, these would be hardboiled on the spot so they could be eaten on the move.

While not an edible gathered product, the cutting and collection of wood was a necessity for people who did not have oil heaters or other modern heating devices. This was commonly the activity of women and, frequently, children. However, in some communities there existed an active wood trade as a commercial venture, and men, women and children were involved in cutting and stacking wood. Wood gathering was an activity, which was required by the posts and many of the Métis children living around the posts were employed to cut, gather and transport firewood. Young men and boys would yoke oxen and hitch them to a sledge and spend days collecting firewood for posts as well as for their households.

Birch bark was another non-edible item, which was necessary to collect from time to time. For centuries, the First Nations had been exploiting this resource in order to build and maintain their canoes. The Métis people did likewise. The use of the canoe increased dramatically in the fur trade and it was the Métis who, time and time again, were employed in the procurement of birch bark and the building of these canoes. Birch bark was not just gathered for canoes; the bark, when wrapped around a flesh wound would speed healing and reduce the chance of scarring. The bark from the red willow or red osier dogwood was desired as an ingredient in *kinikanik*, a mixture made for smoking in pipes.

## **Sugaring**

The Manitoba Maple was tapped for its sap, which was turned into sugar, syrup, and even vinegar. The maples were almost always tapped in spring, along the rivers and lakes with rich groves of the tree. The practice of maple sugaring increased after the Red River colony developed. An area where it was tapped was Riviere aux Ilets de Bois southwest of present-day Winnipeg. This was an area also visited for wildfowl and bison hunting, for fuel and timber, and for water. Other areas in present-day Manitoba which were regularly visited were Lake Dauphin, and along the Assiniboine and Red Rivers.

By making a slanted cut with a sharp ax at the base of a maple and placing an object that functioned like a spout in the cut, it was possible to guide the flow of sap into a birch bark basket or some other container. This was done on the first warm spring morning following a frosty night. Care was taken not to damage the trees so they could be re-tapped in later years.

The sap would be boiled until it had enough water evaporated to turn it into syrup or sugar. The end product would be stored in containers, which were originally made of birch bark. The maple sugar became a trade item at several North West Company posts, noted by Alexander Henry, where it was stored in 100 pound (45.3 kilogram) kegs. However, the amount of sugar produced for consumption was greater than that for trade; at one sugar camp near Red Lake, in present-day Minnesota Alexander Henry recorded that 300 pounds were consumed, 1600 pounds (725.8 kilograms) were brought back to the post along with 36 gallons (163.7 litres) of syrup.

Maple sugaring in Manitoba quickly ended as the land was parceled out to non-Aboriginal pioneers, and by the cutting down of the maple stands for fuel and building.

## Commercial Wood Cutting and Hauling

Chopping and hauling wood was a wage earning activity which many Métis took part in. They did this throughout the year, even in the most bitter of winter. In the early twentieth century, a man might get \$3.00 for a cord of wood, which he chopped and hauled for twenty miles. Métis women, too, were involved in this hard labour. One woman, Mary Jean Donaldson, cut wood and hauled it to the town of Fort Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan to sell. She made \$2.50 per load, enough to feed her family for a week.

Lucie Beaudry, a Métis sister with the Grey Nuns recalls the role of wood gathering during her youth in Vassar, Manitoba during the early twentieth century. Her father ran a store, which, amongst other items, bought wood to use and sell for heating and building. Many of the people in the community were poor and lived off the wood trade. When seasonal jobs ended, such as fishing, people could turn to cutting and hauling cordwood to supplement their incomes.

Farmers often wanted poles for building fences around pasture land and cultivated land. Patrice Fleury, a Métis who worked for Hillyard Mitchell on his ranch in the Batoche area, was hired to cut and haul wood at a rate of \$5.00 per hundred poles or pickets for a load of 2,000. The Métis who once farmed in the Duck Lake, Batoche and St. Louis, Saskatchewan region often were hired by French-Canadian settlers who received title to these lands to hew and haul firewood for them. Destitute Métis, after the Battle of Batoche, sometimes cut and hauled wood for the North West Mounted Police for provisions. In addition, the fur trade posts hired people to cut and haul wood for boat building, fence building and for fuel. Older children as well as adults would participate in these ventures to earn additional income for their families. These activities were referred to in several instances in the Lower Fort Garry labour records. The pay

for the jobs varied if the person was hired to do a job per trip or per day, week, or month. Some of the job descriptions and wages for the financial year 1868-69 at this post include:

<u>Job</u>	<u>per X</u>	<u>Wage</u>
Cutting wood	week	7 shillings
Cutting wood	day	1 shilling 6 pence to 2 shillings
Cutting cord wood	cord	1 shilling 6 pence to 2 shillings
Cutting fence posts "Chopping at Pines"	100 posts day	2 shillings 2 shillings 6 pence to 3 shillings
Putting up fencing	day	3 shillings
Hauling wood for mill	day	2 shillings

### **Fishing**

Fishing was a common subsistence activity and provided a regular diet for many Métis, as well as being a staple for men working at the inland trading posts. Numerous species were caught, the most common being whitefish (also known as tickameg), pike, walleye, goldeye, catfish, sturgeon, perch and carp. Narrows, river mouths and rapids were areas where large numbers of fish could be procured. A common way of catching fish was to build a weir across one of these areas. Driving numerous upright poles into the channel bed, lashing them together and constructing a walkway along the poles could build such an obstruction. A small opening would be left in the middle of the weir. The fish, unable to swim through the obstruction would, naturally, funnel through this opening. People waiting on the walkway could scoop the fish out with hand-held nets as they passed through the opening. In this way, large numbers of fish could be caught with relative ease for hours on end.

The problem with catching such great numbers of fish was keeping them from spoiling before they could be eaten. In the winter, fish could be frozen but during the warmer seasons of the year a great many fish would rot if not

preserved. By beheading and gutting the fish, and then fastening them to poles laid horizontal on a rack, the fish could be dried in the sun or smoked. In this way, the flesh would last much longer and would be considerably lighter to carry as people moved around. And, the fish could be eaten without additional preparation making it very useful while traveling on the river highways.

Netting was another common means of catching fish, both for personal and commercial use. People were adept at making their own nets and used rocks for sinkers if they could not afford those at posts or a post was not nearby. Men, women and children all aided in the procurement and preparation of fish. This is particularly true during spawning periods when a large host of people was necessary to catch enough fish to last through a winter. In 1872, it was estimated that, through various means, the Indian and Métis living on the shores of Lake Winnipeg caught up to 50 000 fish. Often those fish, which were not consumed were traded for tea, clothing and tools at Hudson's Bay posts.

Fish were caught year round, as is indicated in trader's journals, but the most prolific times of the year to catch fish was during spawns. In the spring, after the ice had broken, people would set up their camps at river and stream mouths or rapids. During the spring, fish like pike and walleye spawned in the thousands and made easy targets for people with nets or fish spears. Later in the year, in the fall, other species such as whitefish spawned at many of the same spots and people would gather to gather their winter's worth of fish.

These gathering spots, known as aggregating centres, were used for thousands of years in the Pre-Contact period. These were commonly located in areas where fish spawns took place and, as such, were important as food supply centres. People would return to the spots annually or semi-annually to take advantage of the spawns. In the post-contact period, these aggregating sites were noted by traders and used as building sites for posts. The traders noted that these sites

were well known to the First Nations and Métis. The traders felt that, by building posts on these sites, they could capitalize on an already existing movement pattern of trappers and hunters as they returned year after year to the spots.

Fishing with nets continued in the winter. One hole would be cut into the ice and a person would tie a line to an ice runner made of wood. Holding onto the line, the person would release the runner into the hole. It would then slide under the ice following the current. When it reached an appropriate distance, a second person would cut a hole in the ice where the ice runner had arrived, retrieve it and pull the line through. The first person would have attached the line to the fishing net and, as the second person pulled the line, the net would be set in place and ready to catch fish under the ice.

Fishing was a small but not unimportant occupation at the Red River settlement. It was a means by which people could provide for themselves a store of winter food if they were not successful in their agricultural practices (early agriculture in the district was as often a failure as it was a success). Catfish, walleye, pike, goldeye and sturgeon were abundant in the Red and Assiniboine Rivers and people who wanted variety in their diet were drawn to them. While these rivers were regularly fished, the greatest activity took place at Grand Marais on Lake Winnipeg and Oak Point on Lake Manitoba. The Grand Marais fishery was well used by the Swampy Cree and the Métis. This was primarily a whitefish fishery, operated in the fall. It is interesting to note that these catches were preserved by hanging them by their tails, whole, to drain and dry in the cool October air. The Oak Point fishery became a Métis settlement which grew into St. Laurent. Pickeral, pike and tullibee were netted and dried to form the winter food supply for, principally, those Métis from White Horse Plain.

Fishing also doubled as a wage-earning activity, particularly in northern communities with rich lakes. Certain groups, however, did not sell some fish, for commerce. For instance, sturgeon was not always for sale or trade –the Métis at Grand Rapids consumed all the sturgeon they caught.

Fishermen would receive supplies each year on credit and would pay back the supplier from this earnings through the year. However, if it was a poor year or if the species had been over-fished, it would not be possible for the fisherman to get out of debt. Large scale commercial fishing was, generally, a product of the twentieth century. For instance, this vocation became a big economic activity among the Métis of Cochin, Saskatchewan only after World War I.

Government-imposed fishing regulations impacted the way of life for many Métis who relied on fishing for both their subsistence and livelihood. In Manitoba, these restrictions were initiated in 1865 to restrict the use of fish weirs and soon after licenses were required by people who wanted to fish commercially or for personal consumption. Any person, regardless of family background, was required to purchase a license if they were fishing as a wage earning activity, and one for each species to be sold.

Fish inspectors would confiscate any illegally taken fish, even if it was caught simply to feed a family and their dogs. It was suggested, however, that First Nations and Métis who subsisted through continuous fishing would receive licenses to permit this lifestyle to continue. In Saskatchewan, special fishing permits were given to Aboriginal peoples free of charge with the stipulation that the fish they procured were for domestic consumption, not for sale.

Some of the small lakes, which people fished commercially, however, simply could not take the strain on their stocks and were soon over fished. This, combined with the advent of the large-scale commercial fishing industry and government regulations on catch size forced many Métis out of the fishing industry. Those people who remained in the commercial fisheries often could not make enough money to survive because of increasingly shortened fishing seasons. In the Cochin, Saskatchewan area, the fishing season is only two weeks long.

The regulations on personal fishing also meant that the traditional diet of many families was disrupted. Whereas families might take several hundred, if not thousand, fish during a spawning period to stock their larders for winter, they soon were restricted to only a fraction of that amount. Expensive store-bought foods, frequently of lower nutritional value, soon began to replace fish as staple items.

Métis in different communities such as Lac la Biche and Gift Lake in Alberta have attempted to establish fishing cooperatives to ensure the survival of the industry and the resource and to protect the fishermen. Fishermen paid a membership fee, a small tax was levied on fish caught to ensure that nets and equipment would remain fixed, and all the fishermen would receive a share of the cash earned from the sale of the harvest.

## Wild Rice Harvesting

Harvesting wild rice for economic gain is not a new activity. The Great Lakes, the Lake of the Woods and the Rainy River regions had great expanses of naturally occurring wild rice. In Manitoba and Ontario early fall is the time Métis families harvested wild rice. Wild rice is an annual aquatic grass, which grows in shallow bays and marshes, which have light currents, which are necessary to its growth. Today, the natural stands of wild rice are located in Manitoba, Ontario, Québec, Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan. The First Nations and Métis living near posts in these regions found a ready market among the traders for this food supply.

The distribution of wild rice has expanded due to human intervention, with stands now present into northern Saskatchewan. Wild rice was often planted in areas where people were trying to encourage the muskrat population. As a result, its range has increased compared to the period prior to human intervention. The introduced blocks of wild rice have grown to the point where they can, now, be profitably harvested in addition to the naturally occurring blocks.

Wild rice was used by Europeans to supplement their diet of corn wild meat and fish, or when wheat and other grains were in low supply. In addition, many furbearing animals favoured it and thus time spent in wild rice regions was doubly beneficial. However, it was not a staple like pemmican because it was not an immediate food supply and was available for a restricted season. Wild rice was regularly stored for winter use after being gathered and transported.

Wild rice is planted in the fall, in late September, right after harvest. In this way, the grains are fresh and have not dried out or spoiled. The seeds can be sown by

hand from a canoe and 9 kilograms (20 pounds) per acre is the recommended amount. The best place to sow is in water from 2 centimetres to 1.22 metres in depth whose level does not vary much in July and August. The water should be slow moving but not stagnant. The harvest begins in late August, when the grains are firm and ripe and the top portion of the plant head is a purplish colour. The grains ripen over a three-week period so a patch might have to be revisited in intervals to harvest all the rice.

The rice is harvested from canoe, where one person bends the plants over the gunwhale and beats the ripened grain off with a stick, filling the canoe. In an average day, men could collect (91-136 kilograms (200-300 pounds) of rice this way. A modern harvesting technique is to use an airboat with a collecting bucket mounted at the front. As the boat travels over the water at eight to ten miles an hour, the gathering bucket pushes against the rice stalks and the ripe seeds shatter into it. About 365 kilograms (800 pounds) of rice can be gathered per hour using this method. To avoid spoiling, the rice is bagged in 23-27 kilogram (50-60 pound) sacks and delivered to a processing plant.

Processing of the rice is done mechanically. The grains are allowed to ferment for several days under controlled conditions, and are then parched in large, slowly rotating drums, which are heated. The husks are removed mechanically and the grains are separated into different sizes and grades. When it is finally processed, the rice has little water content. Traditionally, the wild rice was allowed to dry in the sun for several days to prevent it from spoiling. It was then toasted, or parched, in a pot while being stirred. To loosen the husks after parching, the rice was put into a shallow pit and people jumped or tramped on

the grains. Winnowing the rice by tossing it into the air and letting the wind blow the husks away separated the husks and grains.

### **Trapping and Hunting**

Winter was a time for trapping and hunting, though animals were always a source of food the year round. Animals that were and are commonly trapped and snared included the beaver and the muskrat, along with ermine, weasel, fox, lynx, marten, otter, fisher, raccoons. Other skins, which were important commodities, included bison, caribou, deer, bear and wolf. Sometimes the parents would attend the traplines while the grandparents took care of the kids, while at other times the entire family would move and rarely settle down.

Trapping was not just a fur trade economic activity. Long before the introduction of metal traps from the trade posts, the First Nations devised numerous snares and traps from the materials around them. These skills were passed on to the Métis children who would have used them as survival skills while following their subsistence and wage earning activities in the country. The flesh food trapping and hunting provided was an important part of the diet of many families and the skins and hides it produced were vital in clothing and housing people. Other animals which were hunted and used for both their flesh and skin included deer, elk, caribou, and moose. It was not just husbands and fathers who hunted and trapped.

Many women and children were adept with the gun or could set deadly snares to add food to the meals. Squirrels were commonly taken, as were rabbits, game birds such as partridges, prairie chickens and grouse, waterfowl such as ducks, geese and swans, and larger game animals such as moose. Each member of the family contributed to the survival of the group as best they could, and many wives were as able in hunting and trapping as their husbands.

Game birds and waterfowl were staples in the diet of Métis people. Waterfowl was particularly important as a seasonally rich resource in the spring and fall when geese and swans were migrating between their summer and winter areas. While out on the prairie busied in freighting and carting many people, in lieu of bison, which were disappearing from the plains, hunted prairie chickens, owls, rabbits, muskrats, coyotes and foxes in order to survive. However, hunting restrictions imposed by government agencies which were meant to help preserve wildlife stock often were detrimental to Métis families who depended on country foods for survival but who did not have the hunting privileges of Treaty First Nations.

Trapping cycles were dependent on when animals were in prime condition –this related primarily to the condition of the fur. Fox and lynx have short “prime” periods, between November and January. Mink, otter, beaver and muskrat remain prime longer because they are semi-amphibious. Today, muskrats are can only be trapped in the spring whereas before they could be trapped fall, winter and spring. Wolves could be killed at any time.

People involved in a hunting and trapping lifestyle were rarely able to establish residence for more than a short period of time before having to move on. This is particularly true in the north, in the boreal forest. Because the resources (e.g. game animals, fish, fur bearing animals, vegetable and fruit sources) varied seasonally and were generally widespread, people had to exploit large territories to feed themselves as well as supply posts. This would mean that a family would make use of a hunting, fishing and trapping territory which encompassed several hundred square kilometres. While there might be several instances in the spring and summer for people to come together in larger regional groups, which were commonly based on kinship ties, for social, economic and ceremonial reasons

people frequently operated in small extended families throughout the fall and winter seasons because of resource scarcity.

Métis living along reserves and crown lands do not have special hunting or trapping rights. And, regardless of whether Métis were involved in trapping for subsistence or as a commercial industry, resource depletion from over-trapping combined with government regulations seriously affected people's means of making a living in the bush. An additional factor leading to the downfall of hunting and trapping as a traditional lifestyle was the implementation of schools which required regular attendance of children if families wanted to receive Family Allowance payments. Since the family could no longer accompany the fathers in their hunting and trapping exploits, the fathers had to hunt in a much more restricted area, which led to the depletion of fur and game animals in the local region.

While subsisting on country-derived foods, the Métis had a protein-rich diet. A diet of meat, potatoes, and bannock was common, supplemented only occasionally with a few other vegetables. Since the introduction of European foods, primarily packaged and canned foods, the diet has shifted to one high in carbohydrates and sugars leading to a decline in nutrition and health.

### **Questions and Activities:**

#### **Seasonal Cycles Fast Facts:**

- 1)** For sugar, the Métis collected sap from Manitoba maples to make maple sugar/syrup, which was used as a sweetener in much of their cooking.
- 2)** The Métis also collected wild fowl eggs and hard-boiled them so they would not break while the family was traveling.
- 3)** The down from wild ducks and geese were also used for pillow stuffing.

- 4) The Métis made their own medicines, which were effective in treating all sorts of illnesses.
- 5) In the Métis tradition, women were usually the healers who gathered the herbs, made and applied the medicines. In this instance, Métis healers resembled the village wise woman-healer and midwife tradition of Europe and First Nations.

### Research Questions

- 1) Discuss how the Métis traditionally provided most of everything they needed to survive from the natural environment. What goods did they purchase from Euro-Canadian traders?
- 2) Compare a typical Métis seasonal cycle with a First Nations season cycle. How were these the same and how were they different? Make a pie or bar graph outlining these different seasonal cycles. Once you have finished this task you will better appreciate the various activities, which the Métis and First Nations engaged in to survive in an often-hostile environment. For an example of a First Nations (Swampy Cree) seasonal cycle consult Ken Carrierre, *The Bulrush Helps the Pond*. Saskatoon: The Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2002.
- 3) How was information about living in the natural cycle transmitted from generation to generation? Has the method of teaching these survival skills become eroded in our time? Is this means of transmitting information still used by Aboriginal people?
- 4) Discuss how the Métis practiced communalism within the various seasonal cycles.
- 5) How did governments affect the various Métis seasonal cycles in Canada? Did these changes sound the death knell for the Métis seasonal cycle?
- 6) What kinds of herbs, shrubs, and berries were collected for traditional Métis medicine? What medicinal qualities did these have?
- 7) What were some of the remedies for particular illnesses, which a Métis medicine person would have used? Research various kinds of traditional and folk medicine as practiced in North America.
- 8) What time of the year was most conducive for Métis medicine people to gather their herbs? Why was this so?
- 9) Make an inventory of traditional items in a typical Métis medicine chest and pouch. Then compare these with ingredients used in current Western medicine. Are these similar or different? Do western pharmaceutical companies use the same ingredients as those used in traditional Aboriginal medicine? If so, why?
- 10) Sapping trees was an important aspect of Métis gathering practices. How widespread was sapping among the Métis? Who usually did the sapping within a particular Métis family or community?

- 11)** Where in Canada did the Métis tap maple trees? What happened to the original stands of Manitoba Maple? What does this say about past peoples' conservation practices? What sort of natural environments are most conducive for maple sapping? Which province produces most of Canada's maple syrup?
- 12)** Do you think there is a link between exhaustive maple sap extraction and the over-exploitation of the bison by non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal interests? That is, did people in the past, even Aboriginal people, always live in harmony with their environment?
- 13)** Prairie Métis collected what sort of berries, roots and wild vegetables? How were (and are) these prepared?
- 14)** What was the importance of timber to Métis gatherers? In traditional subsistence economies why is timber such an important resource?
- 15)** What was and is the importance of birch bark to the traditional Aboriginal subsistence economy? List some of the items which Métis and other Aboriginal people made from birch bark. If you have the opportunity try and collect some birch bark. Your best bet would be to take a sample from a younger tree, a young sapling preferably, and be sure not to damage the tree. With a sharp knife cut the young sapling, all around the circumference of the tree in two spots roughly a metre apart and few centimetres thick. Then gently pull the bark from the tree. This will be easy to do because the tree will be full of sap. In fact, the outside layer or bark is in a concentric ring and is easy to pull off. The exposed layer will, in turn, become tree bark. By doing this you are using and appreciating how the natural environment can be used without exploiting it, while doing a traditional Aboriginal task. Take the birch bark home and let it dry on a shelf. Once the birch bark has aged you can then make something with it. Consult an Elder, the World Wide Web or a library for books on how to make baskets and other items from birch bark. Once you start working with this material, you will notice how versatile it is and you will soon understand why it became a staple of the Aboriginal economy.

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