

Metis Holidays and Celebrations

By Lawrence Barkwell

Metis celebrations were designed to bring people back to their home communities and your presence in the community was expected.

All Kings Day: “*Le zhour dee Rway*,” also known as Three Kings Day, is celebrated on January 6th, the twelfth day of Christmas. This date, Epiphany, is a Christian festival which celebrates the manifestation of Jesus to the Three Magi. Metis children born on this day are often named “King.” In some areas, this is the date for gift giving, rather than Christmas Day. Some people would even exchange horses. Norman Fleury remembers his Godfather “*Pchi bon homme Flamand*” telling him that on All Kings Day, if they met someone on the road, he would take off his watch and you would take off your watch and exchange them as gifts, right there on the road. In yesteryear, the Metis would start dancing on New Years and continue until All Kings Day.

Chivaree or Shivaree: A *chivaree* is a noisy celebration or gathering, what we might now call a social. The Metis held chivarees at New Years, accompanied by the men firing their rifles at midnight New Years Eve. The chivaree or social dance following a Metis wedding typically went for three days after the ceremony. Christmas Eve: On Christmas Eve, after Midnight Mass, a feast was held and gifts would be opened (around 2:00 a.m.). Often the Priest would take this opportunity to visit a number of homes.

Feu de joie: A *feu de joie* is a salute of guns fired on ceremonial occasions. In French, this term would literally translate as bonfire.

Kissing Day: New Year’s Day is sometimes called “Kissing Day” (*Ochetookeskaw*), or “Shaking Hands Day” by the Metis. This derived from the custom of visiting everyone in the community and bringing in the New Year with the shaking of hands and kissing. Every household would serve food and baked goods to their guests. New Years celebrations would last for several days, usually ending on Epiphany (January 6th or 7th). The sound of sleigh bells, or the bells on the tapis of the dogs pulling the sleds, always signaled the arrival of visitors. For festive occasions the Metis always decorated their horse and dog teams with plumes, pom poms, ribbons and bells. As people came up to the house guns firing into the air would welcome them.

Metis Nation Day: Metis Nation Day is celebrated on July 24th each year. In Saskatchewan in the Batoche area, “Back to Batoche” celebrations are arranged so that “Metis Nation Day” falls during that week. The events begin with a Mass, during which the banner of the St. Joseph’s Society is displayed. A country fair with sports events, music and dance, and craft competitions and sales followed this. This grew in popularity during the 1880s and 1890s and is still celebrated annually at the Batoche National Historic Site. Diane Payment, in *The Free People—Otipemisiwak* (Ministry of Environment - Parks Canada, 1990: 154), points out that Batoche was the birthplace of the Metis movement to obtain a patron saint and national day distinct from those of French Canadians, who celebrate Saint-Jean Baptiste Day on June 24th. Louis Riel chose

St. Joseph as the patron saint and Saint John the Baptist as a secondary protector. Originally the Metis celebrated their National Day on September 24, 1884, but in 1886, they changed the day to July 24th. They also founded the St. Joseph Society to promote the political and social consciousness of the Metis.

New Year's Eve: At midnight, it was a Metis custom for the men to take two rifle shells, open the back door of the house and fire a shot to the west to see the old year out, then open the front door and fire a shot to the east to welcome the New Year in. The modern—urban version—is to bang two pots together instead of firing shots.

New Year's, "La Bonne Annee": The New Year was always a time for special celebration in Metis communities. Singing and dancing with associated feasts were the highlights of this celebration. The Michif people at Turtle Mountain, North Dakota give this description:

The New Year Celebration is one that has been practiced since the era of French influence in the 1800s. Years ago, this event began on New Year's Eve and extended until January 6th, All King's Day. If a baby boy was born on January 6th, King was added to his name. If you stood outside, you could hear the sleigh bells ringing through the cold night air as families gathered at the homes of their elders (parents or grandparents).

Traditionally, they would go from house to house to toast the New Year, and enjoy the feast. Upon arrival to someone's home you can hear the expression "La Bonne Anee," and receive a kiss and a handshake from everyone in the house young and old. The custom of kissing and shaking hands is an expression of good wishes for the coming year... The feast included foods such as Le'boulete (ground beef made into meatballs and rolled in flour and boiled), bangs (fried bread dough), flat galette (a flattened bread), potatoes, pork, confitre – berries in sauce, beef, turkey, homemade pies, tourtiere pie (a ground pork meat pie served with cranberries), and pouchin (boiled cake).

Revillon: *Le Revillon* is a Metis celebration that derives from their French heritage. On Christmas Eve it is the custom in Roman Catholic families for the older children and parents to attend midnight Mass. At the end of Mass, the bells are rung to announce *Le Revillon* (the awakening). When the families arrive home, they enjoy a special *Revillon* dinner, a multi-course meal that is elaborately prepared. Following the meal, presents are opened. Since it was customary to fast the day before taking Communion, it is fair to say that people were eagerly anticipating this feast.

St. Joseph's Day: St. Joseph is the patron Saint of the Metis. The Roman Catholic Church celebrates St. Joseph's Day on March 19th of each year. In 1884, Louis Riel chose St. Joseph as the patron saint of the Metis and Saint John the Baptist as a secondary protector.

St. Laurent Pilgrimage: The very first pilgrimage took place on August 15th, 1905, to mark Assumption Day. Each year around the middle of July, many Metis First Nations and Fransaskois make the pilgrimage back to St. Laurent de Grandin, Saskatchewan. Ann Ferguson-Charter recalls that on the way they would stop at Batoche to visit grandfather Joseph Ferguson's grave, and as they passed the buildings they were shown the bullet holes in the buildings from the Resistance battle. They would attend Mass at the Grotto, and a last part of the ritual was to visit the buffalo pit near St. Laurent.



Early photo of pilgrimage to the Shrine.





Modern day: Our Lady of Lourdes St. Laurent Shrine

In 2012, the 133rd annual pilgrimage took place on July 15-16.





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