

## Métis Men's Clothing

Traditional garb of the early Métis included, for men, a blue cloth coat called a capote, a brightly coloured vest, fringed trousers, a L'Assomption sash, beaded moccasins and a hat. The hats ranged from a beaver top hat trimmed with ribbons to a fur cap, to a tam-o-shanter. In addition men would wear Bandolier Bags criss-crossed the chest to carry powder horns and shot pouches. Heavy ribbons, leather thongs or tiny sashes were tied below the knees to form a sort of garter. The men's winter attire was the capote; a thigh length coat with full length sleeves which could come with or without a hood or cape. Most had small shoulder decorations made of red stroud. To keep the coat closed there were both thongs and buttons or a sash.



Métis Guide, note crossed straps of bandolier bags.

The men's outfits were often completed with red and black flannel shirts, skin moccasins, sashes and brown homespun or corduroy trousers. Métis men were seldom without a hat or cap, if cloth, usually tweed.

In 1823, William Keating traveled west and described twenty Métis riding out to meet him at Red River:

All of them have a blue capote with a hood, which they use only in bad weather; the capote is secured around their waist by a military sash. They wear a shirt of calico or painted muslin, moccasins and leather leggings fastened round the leg by garters ornamented with beads.

Swiss artist Rudolf Frederich Kurz describes a dozen Métis de la Rivière Rouge arriving at Fort Berthold on July 26, 1851, accompanied by Father Lacombe. They had come to purchase horses either in exchange or by purchase. They had come from a large group in the vicinity of Dog Den Butte.<sup>1</sup>

All were dressed in bright colors, semi-European, semi-Indian in styles – Tobacco pouches, girdles, knife cases, saddles, shoes, and whips were elaborately decorated with glass-beads, porcupine quills, feather quills, etc., in an artistic work done by their wives and sweethearts, but their clothes were of European rather than western cut.

Manton Marble has described the Red River Métis dress of the 1860:<sup>2</sup>

A large camp of Half-Breeds on their way to the plains is a sight to be seen. Their dress is picturesque. Men and women both wear moccasins worked with gaudy beads. The men's trousers are generally of corduroy or Canada blue, and their coats of the Canadian pattern with large brass buttons and a hood hanging between the shoulders. A jaunty cap surmounts the head, often of blue cloth, but sometimes of an otter or badger skin, and whether with coat or without it, a gay sash is always worn around the waist, the bright tassels hanging down the left hip. Into this is thrust the buffalo knife behind, and the fire bag at the right side.

The blue cloth cap was the soft forage or yachting cap with a leather visor (called the "peak" by Englishmen.)

Men wore hats of felt, velvet and fur, which were decorated with beads, ribbons or fringes of black silk. Feathers were sometimes stuck in ribbons wrapped around the hat as extra decoration. For winter headgear, a Métis man might wear a cap made from the fur of an otter or muskrat, or a cap with two peaks called a "wide awake." Top hats were often worn during warmer weather.

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<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Kurz, *Journal of Rudolf Frederich Kurz: An Account of His Experiences among Fur Traders and American Indians on the Mississippi and Upper Missouri Rivers During the Years 1846 to 1852*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution, Government Printing Office, 1937.

<sup>2</sup> Manton Marble, "People of Red River." *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 18, 104, 1859, pp. 169-176.



Paul Kane's portrait of François Lucie<sup>3</sup>

In 1869, Alex McArthur gives a description of the Métis warriors who gathered at La Barrière on the Rivière Sale near the Pembina road, in St. Norbert parish, where they lay in wait for Lieutenant Governor McDougall, in order to block him from entering the Red River Settlement on October 21, 1869 to defend Métis lands and rights:

They all dressed well and usually in cloth of dark or blue shades; of good quality. Their clothes were made in England, and the styles well became them. Vests, however they cared little for; a heavy woolen shirt, loosely buttoned at the chest, supplied the place of that garment.

It was the fashion to wear leggings ornamented slightly, and these being wide, took somewhat from the wearer's height, particularly if only worn from the knee downward, as it cut the leg in two. As cold weather was coming on many of those on the River Salle wore their winter caps; those were quite martial in their appearance being made of the whole fur of the red fox. The skin was merely turned round the wearer's head and the fox tail was then jauntily thrown back over the top.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Harper, J. Russell (Ed.) *Paul Kane's Frontier: Including Wanderings of an Artist Among the Indians of North America* by Paul Kane. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971: 141.

<sup>4</sup> Alex McArthur, "The causes of the Rising in the Red River Settlement, 1869-70" *Manitoba Historical and Scientific Society, Publication No. 1*, 1882: p. 7.



Georges Racette

In 1874, an unknown militia member described a Métis horseman at the Treaty Four negotiations at Fort Qu'Appelle:

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 with 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 with the "tout en semble" 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. Then, at a given signal the soldiers of the party with their hawk's wings, rode forward in sections and passed in review before him at a gallop, towards the fort, and on their return circled around him in a single file displaying some feats of horsemanship while the rest of the camp were dismounted awaiting further orders.<sup>5</sup>

We believe that the man described in the passage above is Georges "*Châman*" Racette, pictured above, born in 1819 at Red River. In 1874, Georges represented the Assiniboine Indians at the Treaty Four negotiations. His display of military strength and strong positions during negotiations led to his being overpowered and locked up during negotiations.

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<sup>5</sup> Bugler Burns, Archives of Manitoba, MG 1A7:2.



Pictured above is a French Half-Breed, a pen and ink drawing by Charlie M. Russell (C.M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, Montana). This is one depiction of how Charlie Russell observed the Métis in the late 1800s. The strong Métis identifiers in this drawing are the bobbed hair, Métis sash, bandana or “wild”, fire bag, beaded shirt, moccasins and “botas” or half-leggings. (Nicholas Vrooman, “Charlie’s Sash, the Métis and Montana Cattle Culture,” *Russell’s West*, Volume 8, No. 2, 2001: 8-9.)

Havard, in the 1870s, notes that the Manitoba Métis wore blue capots with large brass buttons, and blue cloth leggings with worsted garters and a broad stripe of heavy beadwork running down the outer seam.<sup>6</sup>

Joseph Kinsey Howard reports:

“The Métis Plains hunter was partial to buckskin shirts with bright beaded designs in the floral patterns of the [Plains] Cree, black wool trousers bound below the knee with beaded garters, and ornamented wool of buckskin leggings. The “Assumption” sash ... was bound around his waist or looped over one shoulder; tobacco, powder bag, and other articles were tied to the sash or stuffed under it. His headgear originally was a handmade pillbox cap of wool bordered with an ornamental design in beads or porcupine quills; later he adopted a round-crown felt [hat] of the Stetson type, usually black, with a bright feather cockade or beaded band. He was invariably shod in moccasins.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> V. Havard. “The French Half-breeds of the North West.” Smithsonian Institution, *Annual Report for 1879*. Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880: 309-327.

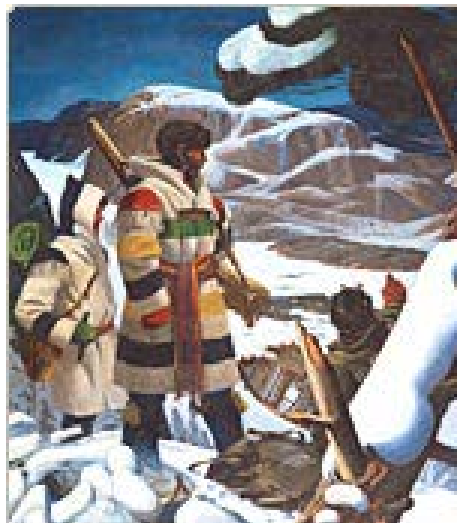
<sup>7</sup> Joseph K. Howard, *Strange Empire: Louis Riel and the Métis People*. Toronto: J. Lewis & Samuel, 1952: 301.

## Capote<sup>8</sup>

The Métis man's winter attire was the capote; a thigh length coat with full length sleeves which could come with or without a hood or cape. Most had small shoulder decorations made of red stroud. To keep the coat closed there were both thongs and buttons or a sash. The colour and style of wearing the capote and sash were indications of the cultural origin of the wearer. If the sash was worn under the capote, the wearer was Métis; if worn over, the wearer was French Canadian. The blue capote was most popular with the Catholic Métis whereas Protestant Métis purchased 100% of the white capotes. The Hudson's Bay Company also sold a gray capote and this style was purchased by both the Catholic Métis (83% of sales) and Protestant Europeans (17% of sales). Capotes were made of both leather and cloth. Initially the Métis decorated the skin coats with painted designs. This gave way to quillwork and beaded floral patterns as well as intricate silk embroidery called "floss" work.



Métis men often wore capotes—coats made from thick, wool Hudson's Bay blankets and tied with a colorful hand-woven sash. They wore leggings, and their moccasins often were beaded with elegant designs. Painting by E. S. Paxson, 1905, MHS Museum.



*R.M. Ballantyne, Clerk and Chief Trader George Barnston Arrive at Tadoussac, Feb. 6, 1846. Painting by Charles F. Comfort, 1941.*

<sup>8</sup> Portions reprinted from L. J. Barkwell, L. Dorion and A. Hourie (Eds.) *Métis Legacy: Michif Culture, Folkways and Heritage*. Saskatoon: Pemmican Publications and Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2006: 109.

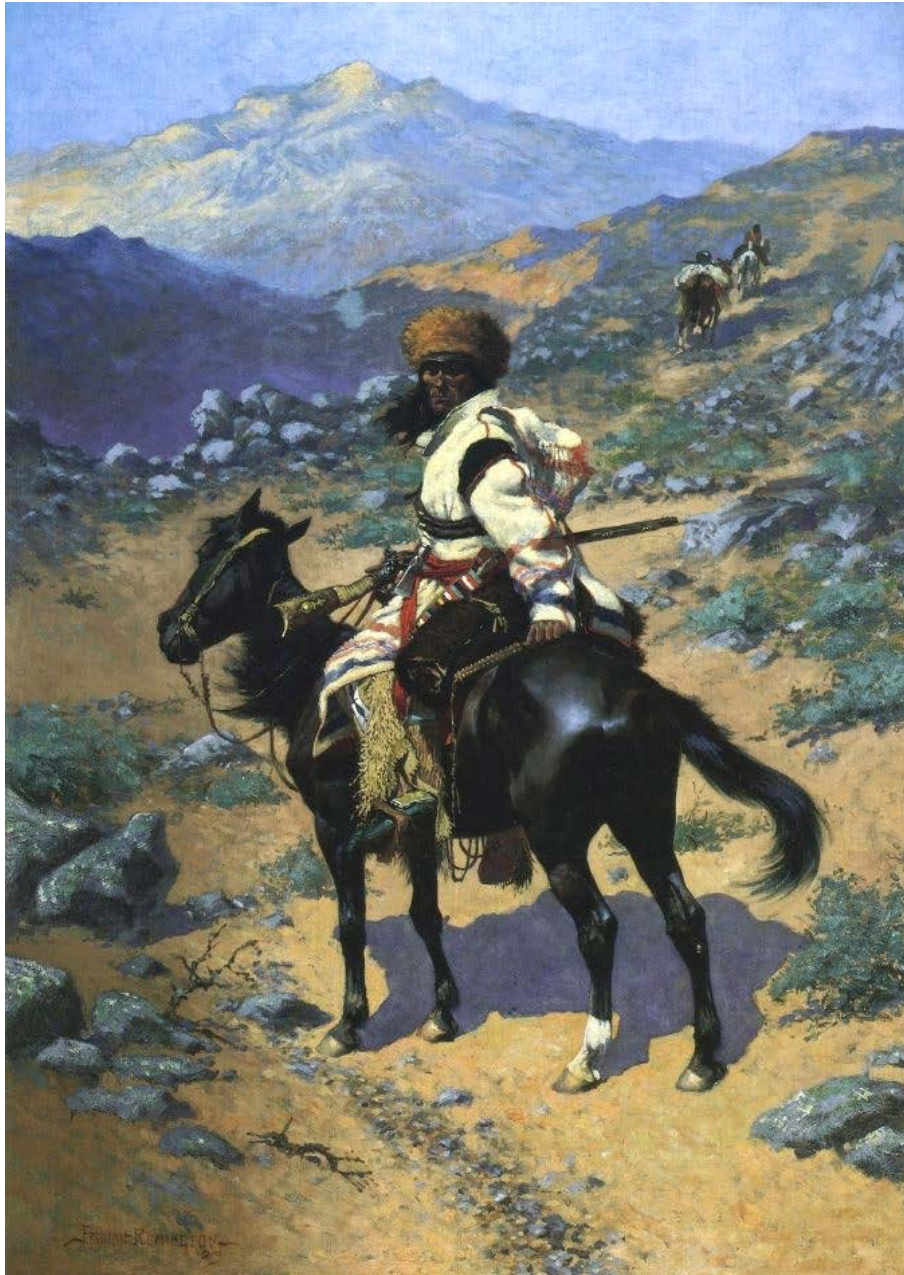


Frederic Remington "The Half Breed" 1902

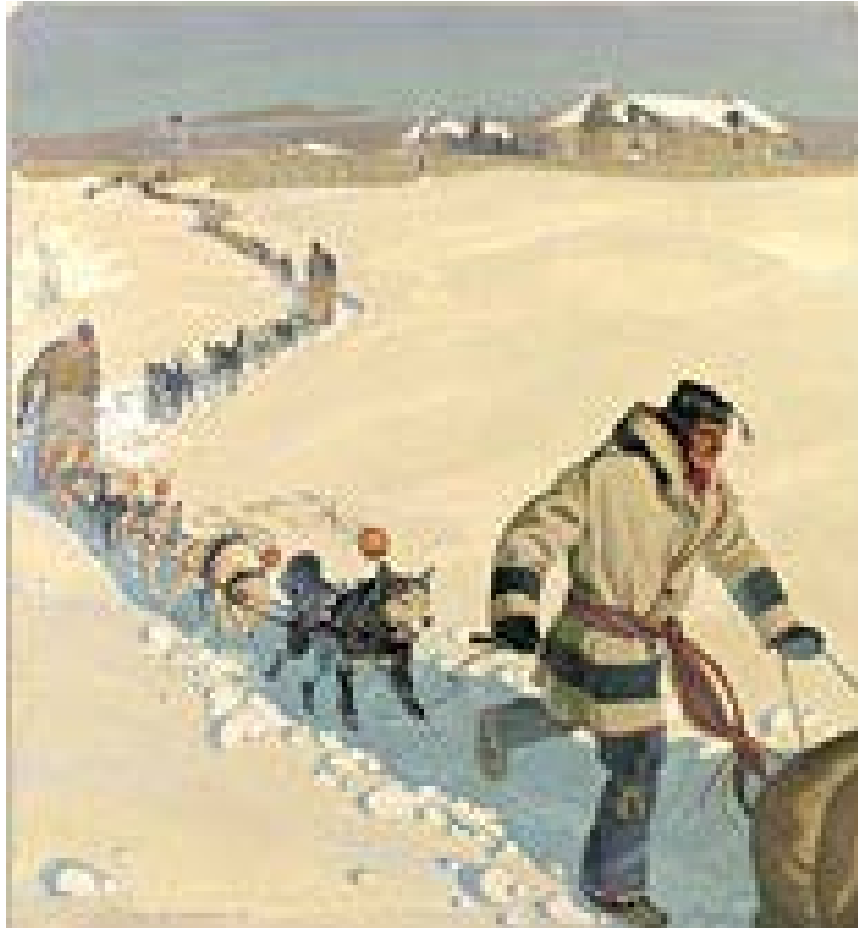


*Free Trappers*, 1911, C. M. Russell, MHS Museum.





Frederic Remington, "An Indian Trapper"



*Last Dog Train Leaving Fort Garry, 1909* by Charles F. Comfort 1927.



Frederic Remington "A Half Breed" 1901.

### **Hudson's Bay Blankets:**

Hudson's Bay Point Blankets were popular trade goods and often used to make capotes. They were manufactured in the late 1770s at Oxfordshire, England. There were also mills at Leeds and Manchester. The indigo blue lines woven into the side of each blanket identified the "points". These were intended to make known the size and weight of the blanket. A full point measured 5½ inches and ½ point measured half that length. The standard for a pair of 1-point blankets measured 2 feet 8 inches wide, eight feet in length and weighed 3lbs. 1oz. each. By 1929, the standard blanket was white with single broad stripes at each end. Other popular colours were red and green. The so-called Chief's Blankets were white blankets with stripes of indigo, green, red and yellow at each end. These were introduced in the early 1800s and are the usual ones sold in Hudson's Bay

stores today. Point blankets were also used as coats both premade as sold by the HBC or recut from a blanket. Métis and Plains Indians often wore blankets made into coats.

### **Métis Bandanas or Wilds**

Wilds are men's bandanas made of silk or cotton, usually worn around the neck to protect against winds, rain, and sunshine. On the Great Plains when the wind blew up the dust the bandanas were pulled up over the mouth and nose for protection. Wilds were also used to wash the face, tie up broken bones or to signal friends. Métis men also cherished fancy silk or cotton handkerchiefs. Before the days of paper bags handkerchiefs were used to carry expensive food items such as salt, tea, and sugar.



Métis Elder Don Beauchesne wearing his trademark black “wild”.  
Photograph by Lawrence Barkwell, Batoche 2015.

### **Smoking Caps**

Smoking caps are a pillbox-style hat with a tassel extending from the middle of the top of the hat and is decorated with beadwork and embroidery. Métis women made beaded smoking caps for their families and for trade. They were circular pill-box type caps made of stroud or melton cloth or of hide. Originally embroidered with silk floss work, with the advent of beads they were more commonly beaded.



Gary Johnson (1943-2008), a Métis artist who lived on the Crow Reservation at Lodge Grass, Montana made the cap featured above. This photo taken in 2001 is part of the Louis Riel Institute collection.



Manitoba Museum beadwork exhibit, smoking cap (centre) pad saddle (top).  
Photo by L. Barkwell



Detail of embroidery

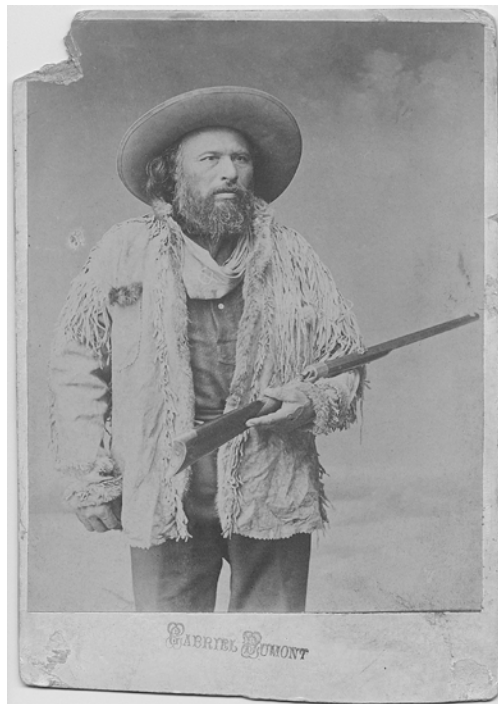


Pictured above is a Métis trapper wearing a capote over his buckskin jacket complimented with a fur hat. This is a 1901 pen and ink drawing by Charlie Russell (C.M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, Montana).

## Wide Brim Felt Hats

The Earl of Southesk<sup>9</sup> in his 1859-60 travel journal describes John McKay: “McKay, powerful in form and strong of muscle, broad-chested, dark, and heavily bearded with a wide-brimmed black hat and unfringed buff coat, and bestriding a large brown horse, resembled some Spanish Cavalier of old.” These black hats were also favoured by Métis buffalo hunters.

Southesk also described George Klyne who belonged to Red River's French Métis community. “Kline, wiry and active, riding Lane— that fine old white mountain-horse, which few but he could capture when loose on the plains— made a gay and cheerful show; his broad-rimmed white hat, with its wavey blue-ribbon streamers, perched upon long curly black hair, and shading a clever, well-bearded face; his chest surmounted by belts of silver and red brocade.. (Ibid. p. 203).



Gabriel Dumont wearing a wide brim felt hat.

The Earl of Southesk also documented the unique dress and head gear of Baptiste La Grace (La Graise). Old La Grace<sup>10</sup> is described as a hunter on his way from Edmonton when he met Southesk and agreed to join his party.

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<sup>9</sup> Southesk, James Carnegie. *Saskatchewan and the Rocky Mountains: A diary and narrative of travel, sport, and adventure during a journey through the Hudson's Bay Company's territories, in 1859 and 1860.* Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1874: p. 202.

<sup>10</sup> La Graise was a well-known guide in the Old Northwest; he was a guide for the James Sinclair expedition to the Oregon Territory in 1845 and also worked as a guide for the Palliser Expedition in 1857.

“Then Lagrace that original and amusing old man, in a purple cotton shirt, tight but very long and wrinkled trousers, a white blanket skull-cap enriched with peak and ears, and decorated with streamers of scarlet cloth, beneath a battered eagle feather which once probably adorned some Indian horses’ tail—that keen-witted ancient traveler who did everything different from other men...—to whom of what shall he be likened, with his brown parchment skin, his keen aquiline nose, his piercing black eyes, long wild locks, and half-mockingly smiling and thin lipped mouth? I know not—unless Mephistopheles have an American twin brother!” (Ibid. pp. 203-204)

The dress of Antoine Blandion was somewhat different. Antoine was a hunter and guide from the Fort des Prairies area.

“Antoine, stout and round of make, of olive-brown skin and long black hair, was clad in a dusky leather shirt already spoken of, and bore on his arm his curious little rifle, and in his belt an immense hatchet-knife; on his head was a dark-tinted Saskatchewan cap. Though long past his youth, he still had the air of a hardy, active hunter, while his whole aspect truly bespoke him a most kind-hearted, honest and agreeable man.” (Op. cit. p. 204)





North West Métis dress.<sup>11</sup>

Another hat-style worn by Métis men called a tam is very similar to the Scottish form from which it originated. These were known as Tam 'O Shaners or Balmoral Bonnets. A Balmoral is a hat that has its origins from 16th century Scottish history. The hat is named after the Balmoral Castle in Scotland. A Balmoral is traditionally made of soft wool and features a pompom on top, a flat crown and a checkered band. The checkered band is typically white and red.



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<sup>11</sup> From V. Havard, "The French Half-breeds of the North West." *Smithsonian Institution, Annual Report for 1879*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880: 309-327.



Frank B. Mayer, Winter Dress of Red River Métis, 1851  
Edward Ayer Collection, Newberry Library, Chicago.

### Leggings, Mitasses, Botas:

The Métis often wore hide leggings over cloth trousers, especially Métis employed by the fur trade companies. This was to protect their expensive cloth trousers from wear. For the Métis riders on the Great Plains these were the typical leggings worn to protect riders from thorns and brush scrapes. In the western United States, half-leggings are known as “botas”. The Métis mitasses worn on the Upper Missouri River are very similar to the chaps worn by the Mexican cowboys encountered on the Santa Fe Trail. In winter both men and women would wear cloth or skin leggings. In the United States, half-leggings are known as “botas” or “botte” from the French word for a high boot.



Mittasses made by Mathilde Carrière-Perreault, Le Musée de Saint-Boniface, photo by Lawrence Barkwell.



Detail from the Perreault Leggings  
Photo by L. Barkwell

Terry Nault-Mimka tells us that she found her grandmother Perreault's leggings rolled up in a trunk in a closet. For safekeeping the family turned them over to Le Musée de Saint Boniface. This is some of the most extraordinary Métis artistry in beadwork that we have seen. The beadwork is done in very small (#14) beads. The dimensions are 36cm. width and 53-cm. length. Given the length and the fact they are fully beaded we assume these were being made for her husband or another male in the family. Women's leggings were usually only beaded in a band near the bottom where they showed below the long dresses of the day.



Gary Johnson Sr. (left), Gary Jr. (right), at Lodge Grass, Montana, both are wearing Half Leggings or Botas.



An example of women's half-leggings.

## Métis Beaded Vests

Métis vests were made out of moose, elk and deer-hide; or from stroud cloth, or velvet and nowadays from Melton cloth. The edging was usually made from silk ribbon, today most edging is done with bias tape or braid. Métis beaded vests and beaded buckskin jackets became a status symbol in the old north-west among army officers and scouts.



Plains Cree/Métis Vest (circa. 1900) collected at Pasqua in Qu'Appelle Valley.  
Smithsonian: National Museum of the American Indian (18/8912)



Boundary Commission Scouts and Métis hunters from the "Big Camp" July 18, 1874.  
Note the number of men who are wearing vests.



Daniel E. "Ma-to-na-pa" (Bear Paw) Mitchell (1864-1940), the son of Isabelle St. Germain (b. 1841) and David Joseph "Bloody Knife" Mitchell (1841-1900) of St. François Xavier.

Alternately, Métis women would decorate vests with embroidery. Margaret Robinson contributed the picture shown above and says; “I recently found an old photo of my great grandfather Daniel Mitchell. His mother was Isabelle St. Germain, a Métis from the Manitoba area. Margaret’s family is from the Assiniboine/Métis group at the Fort Peck Reserve in Montana.



Vest from the Montana Historical Society collection, Helena, Montana.





Métis singer and songwriter, Don Freed.  
(Photograph courtesy of Gabriel Dumont Institute)



Close up of lapel area of a wool Métis vest, with floral beading, ca. 1850.  
Louis Riel Institute, Gary Johnson Collection.



“Three Amigos” in their vests at an MMF Annual General Assembly,  
left to right, Lawrence Barkwell, Larry Haag, and Brian Cyr  
Photo by Vivian Cyr



Métis Scout, Baptiste "Little Bat" Garnier in a matching coat, vest and leggings. These were likely made by his wife Julia Mousseau. Her father was Magliore Alexis Mousseau who married Ellen the Yellow Woman.



Vest on display at the Kelowna B.C. Museum, photo by L. Barkwell



Typical Scout's outfit in the late 1800s



Métis Vest: R.C.M.P. Heritage Centre  
Note the five-petal Métis roses top centre.  
Photo by Jim Steinhart

### **Fringes on Métis Clothing**

Fringed and beaded buckskin jackets, coats, and shirts, became a status symbol on the plains of the Old Northwest. Fringing was usually applied across the back yoke, on the shoulders and down the length of the sleeves. These were favoured by Army and Police officers, traders, Army Scouts and of course tourists to the Old West. Notable examples are General George A. Custer, Buffalo Bill Cody, Annie Oakley, and Theodore Roosevelt.

The Hudson Bay blanket wool capotes were also heavily fringed. A Capote or ‘Capot crait-rien’ was a knee-length wool jacket with a hood. It was made out of a single HBC blanket, and was most commonly tied around the waist with a Métis sash.

Fringes serve a number of practical purposes. The swinging movement of fringes repels mosquitoes and black flies. Fringes were often called “waterfalls” because they served to divert rainwater off the body of the garment. Fringes also add a graceful elegance when dancing.

Fringes are also a symbolic way of extending the person’s body beyond the clothing and into their “aura”. Fringes, since they require additional material, are also a sign of wealth and conspicuous consumption. Where fringes were absent Métis tailors would cut edges of the clothing with pinking shears to produce a similar effect. This leaves a zigzag pattern instead of a straight edge. This serves another utilitarian function on woven cloth. Cloth edges that are unfinished will easily fray, the weave becoming undone and threads pulling out easily. The sawtooth pattern does not prevent the fraying but limits the length of the frayed thread and thus minimizes damage.

This article has been abstracted in part from:

- Barkwell, Lawrence J., Leah Dorion and Darren R. Préfontaine. *Métis Legacy: A Métis Historiography and Annotated Bibliography*. Saskatoon, Gabriel Dumont Institute, Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications and Louis Riel Institute, 2001.
- Barkwell, Lawrence J., Leah M. Dorion and Audreen Hourie. *Métis Legacy, Volume Two: Michif Culture, Heritage and Folkways*. Saskatoon, Gabriel Dumont Institute, Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications, 2007.



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