

Part I: Making a Living



Frank Goodon stretches a beaver hide with Frances Chalner and child looking on (1960s).

Working for Pay

Making a living for the average family on Turtle Mountain was not as clear-cut a business as we usually regard careers being today.

For families living in the bush, food was often put on the table as a result of a variety of efforts; by working for money to buy groceries, or saving money by growing a garden, hunting, fishing and berry picking.

Money-making activities included managing traplines and selling the furs, cutting fence posts and firewood, working on the odd carpentry job, cutting and selling hay or hiring out to neighbouring farmers to help with stooking or threshing during harvest time. Some of these activities were seasonal, and often a combination of two or more was necessary to make ends meet.

“My parents both worked. Mom was a housewife and Dad did trucking, trapping and hunting, selling posts and wood. He also hauled stuff for other people, like loads of wood or posts. Plus a little bootlegging.”

Roger Goodon

“When I was 13 I worked out for one dollar a day. That was lots of money, I even gave my dad some. I also did some threshing for 90 cents an hour.”

Lorne Conway

“I went to work while I was still going to school. Times were hard with six children and my older sister worked out too. I worked in the hotel in Bois-sevain, cleaning rooms, making beds, etc. I married again and my husband was a carpenter. He had a business that him and a son-in-law and cousin ran. They built sheds and such.”

Esther Canada

Trapping

“Trapping was more important than having steady employment. Even if there was no money coming in, it was part of [our] heritage.” *Mildred Racine*

For many families, trapping on Turtle Mountain was an essential part of their livelihood. For others it was one of many ways to make some money. Trapping was also part of the Métis heritage. Mildred Racine captures it perfectly with her words: “My husband [Manfred Racine] made a living as a heavy equipment operator until fall, then he would go to the mountain to trap. Trapping was more important than having steady employment. Even if there was no money coming in, it was part of his heritage, he made a career of hunting and trap-

ping. He later had a successful guiding and hunting business.”

Children were taught how to trap at fairly young ages. Usually boys would accompany older relatives on the trapline. Sometimes girls were taught how to trap and set snares too. Lorraine Goodon remembers trapping as a young girl: “Us girls set snares. We used to set them on the way to school and when we’d come home we’d take the rabbits out. We’d catch rabbits lots of times.” Roger Goodon passed along a story from his wife Shirley: when she was young she trapped squirrels to buy her first winter jacket. Her grandfather showed her how to stretch the hides.

Beavers were scarce on Turtle Mountain in the mid 1900s and it was illegal to trap them. Many Métis trying to make a living off the land didn’t follow this rule too closely and the game wardens didn’t make too much of a fuss unless they caught someone outright. Francis Goodon remembers eating beaver as a kid: “Mom could make

beaver taste so good, you didn't know what you were eating." Beaver pelts were also high in value, so it's not surprising that a few were pulled out of the bush even though it was against the law. "We could get \$5 for a muskrat skin. We weren't allowed to catch beavers but we did anyways. Fur buyers still bought it for \$30 to \$40 each. We could sell the fur and eat the meat" (Allan Shereski).

A story from Murray King captures the atmosphere of overnight trapping excursions. When Murray was 16 years old, he and Charlie Conway (then 45) went out trapping one March and overnighted in the woods. They fashioned a shelter by felling a few trees and throwing a bundle of hay inside. To keep them warm they each had two army coats: one to serve as a mattress and the other as a blanket. This was in early spring when it still got pretty cold out, so they slept fully clothed except for their boots. In the morning they made a fire so they could have tea and make bannock. They caught up to 22 muskrats a day, which at that time were worth \$3.00 each. Murray got so he could skin a muskrat while they were walking from one lake to another as Charlie could. When it came time to make camp



Credit: Melita-Arthur History Committee. *Our First Century*. Altona: Friesen Printers, 1983. pp 305.

▲ *Trapping furs from Turtle Mountain provided an important*

again, he'd look for a nice patch of snow "with no rabbit turds" to melt into water to make tea. When it melted, sure enough, there'd be a couple floating in the water, no matter how careful he was. He says he just reached in and scooped them out, boiled the water and made tea. "We didn't have time to fuss."

Lorne Conway remembers an overnight trip that didn't go quite as well. "One spring Frank [Lorne's cousin] dropped Ernie and me off to trap. He was supposed to bring food back that night. He didn't come for three days and all we had to eat was boiled beaver and muskrat legs, not even tea or coffee, until Frank brought supplies."

Ken LeForte is Métis, but was raised outside of Deloraine and wasn't a part of the Turtle Mountain Métis community when he was young. This didn't keep him from trapping, though he was the only one in his family who did. He trapped squirrels, rabbits, weasels and mink to earn pocket money for himself. "I didn't like to see an animal

"One time someone skinned a black cat and sold the fur to the buyer as a mink." *Lorne Conway*

in a leg trap so I always checked my trapline. I used to go on horse to get to my trap faster." He had to do chores at home before he could check his traps in the evening and it would be dark before he got back from his trapline. When he got back he still had to help his family with the milking chores. He hunted squirrels with a .22 rifle. Making between 25 and 50 cents per squirrel, he bought his mother a three-brush floor polisher that cost \$315.00. That's over 630 squirrels!

There were several places where trappers could sell their furs locally. One was Maynard's Meatmarket in Deloraine which gave pretty good prices. Other fur buyers included two well-known Jewish merchants known simply as Louis and Max. Others in the community were Stan, Zeff Sexton and Benny. The buyers sometimes came into the bush to pick up furs. The buyer visited each trapper's house individually because a big meeting in one place would attract attention from the law. Getting caught dealing in off-season or illegal furs could earn someone a \$20.00 fine — in the earlier days when a rabbit fur sold for 10 cents, that was quite a hefty penalty. When Max came to buy furs he brought cash with him and sometimes provided extra employment by hiring someone to stretch the furs

She trapped squirrels to buy her first winter jacket. Her grandfather showed her how to stretch the hides.

for him. The fur buyers often couldn't make it around to everyone. When this was the case Willie Goodon sometimes bought furs from his

neighbours and then sold them to the buyers for a small profit.

Trapping still plays a role in the Metigoshe community today, though mostly among the older generation. There are only a few young men who are learning to trap.

"The fur buyer came around, as far as he could with a vehicle, then he'd hire a team to go to each house. He wouldn't just come to one house, because then everybody would know your business. The fur buyer had to shut his mouth. If you got reported, you had to pay a fine. Once someone gave my dad, some deer meat and then ratted and my dad got caught and had to pay a \$20 fine. If you ratted you got money for a reward. Dad used to hang deer meat in the trees to dry it. Once in a while he'd smoke it, not all the time."

Francis Goodon

Wood Harvesting

A common way for members of the Metigoshe community to meet living expenses was cutting fence posts or harvesting firewood from the Turtle Mountain bush and selling it. Once trees were felled the wood was cut up using a swede saw, loaded up and hauled to town to sell. A load of firewood would earn two or three dollars, and a load of fenceposts would earn two cents per post (at this point in time goods did not cost as much as they do today. Then 25 cents bought more candy and ice cream than one person could eat alone). By the later 1950s fenceposts were selling for about 18 cents each.

Sometimes wood cutting was a seasonal occupation, as Martha Bourgeois remembers: "In the summer Dad was away working. In the winter he got out the wood supply and sold some for money to get groceries. He would haul it to town in a wooden box on a sleigh and Mom usually went too."

In the later 1930s, brothers Ole and Karl Olsen moved to the mountain from Norway and set up a sawmill. In 1938 the Nelson family moved into the area, also from Norway. A few years later they too set up a sawmill on their land. The Nelson mill was owned by the father, John, and operated by his grown sons. Other sawmills in the bush were run by Bruce Hathaway and Corny Wall.

The sawmill operators cut wood mostly for themselves and their

neighbours – it wasn't a money-making, commercial venture. Members of the community

who cut wood on Turtle Mountain would take it to one of the sawmills to get cut up into firewood or building supplies. The lumber was used to erect simple buildings; the firewood, for fuel or as a commodity to sell for cash. For providing the service, the sawmill owner would get cash, a percentage of the wood, or simply the promise that a favour would be returned.

The operation of sawmills on Turtle Mountain significantly changed the aesthetics of the community. Soon after they started operating, board houses began replacing log cabins. The first families to erect houses of lumber were usually the sawmill owners themselves, but before long everyone had one. Henry Conway was one of the last people to build a board house, in the late 1940s.

Most of the sawmills near Metigoshe shut down in the 1950s. Near the end they were just cutting wood for their own use.

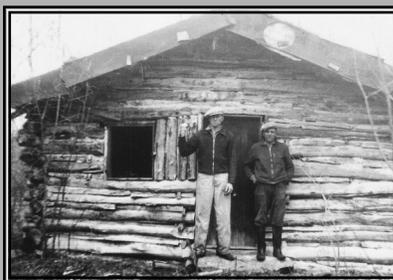


▲ Ernie McLeod cutting firewood (early 1940s).

Perhaps the latest sawmill to be operated in the Metigoshe community was Irvin Goodon's. In 1958 Irvin bought a portable mill from Saskatchewan and started a business sawing logs into lumber. This mill was able to move all over the bush to wherever the wood was. In 1974 Irvin closed down the sawmill as local demand changed from working with rough-cut boards to desiring finished lumber.

Houses: Logs to Boards

The first houses built on Turtle Mountain by the Métis were log houses. They were rarely made out of any kind of tree except poplar. Log houses were often small and imperfectly furnished; some had dirt floors and stretched sugar sacks for windows. Harvey Conway remembers the house lived in by his neighbours, Tom and Lena: "[They] lived in dugout house, dug right into the hillside. [They had] a blanket for a door and a pole roof with dirt on top. The roof wasn't dug in, the poles kept the dirt from falling. They had a table, I don't remember a bed—maybe some buffalo robes."



Log houses had to be plastered every year using a combination of straw, local clay and water. Correctly plastering ensured a warmer house for winter: it conserved the heat that was generated by wood stoves (often one in the living room and a cookstove in the kitchen). After being plastered, the houses were often whitewashed to make them look nicer. The white clay used to plaster the houses was dug straight from the ground, so the process of whitewashing disguised the clay to some extent. In later years the hardware store sold different colours of whitewashing powder. Whitewashing had to be done every year. The outside might be spruced up in spring, whereas the interiors were more likely done just before Christmas when families wanted their houses to look as nice as possible.

Board houses were easier to keep clean than the logs houses, and could be decorated with paint or wallpaper.

"My dad would cut posts and then go trapping right after, so Mom would haul a load of posts to town, whether it was 30 degrees below or not. I went with her when I was older and ran behind the sleigh to keep warm. After we sold the posts we would go to Deloraine or Whitewater and buy 10 to 15 dollars worth of groceries."

Harvey Conway