

Rise of the Métis Identity

A new Nation born on the North Western prairies



Today the Métis in Western Canada are an established Nation who take pride in their history and culture. However, it has been an uphill climb spanning centuries to overcome such obstacles as armed conflict, discrimination, poverty and unequal opportunity.

The Métis were born from and into the fur trade. The growth of the Métis sense of identity was therefore due in part to the motives of that economy. However, there were many other factors that contributed to the Métis sense of nationalism. The western plains in the 18th and 19th centuries presented specific conditions into which the Métis rose as a political and cultural identity.

The mixed-blood group of people that became the Métis had its beginning west of the Great Lakes – mainly the Red River Valley and the interior plains of North America (and to a lesser degree on the western shore of Hudson Bay) as early as 1740. This was where European (English, French and Scottish) trappers met Aboriginal women, creating unions which produced children of mixed blood. By 1770 villages in these areas had large populations of individuals with mixed ancestry, though at this

▲ A sketch depicting the Battle of Seven Oaks (1816). The conflict surrounding this event saw the Métis grouping together to defend their Aboriginal title to land for the first time.

time these people did not identify themselves as a separate ethnic group.

The crystallization of the Métis identity is due in part to the motives of the fur trade. The Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) was incorporated in 1670 out of London and soon claimed a monopoly over the fur trade in western Canada. Up until the 18th Century the HBC found it unnecessary to travel inland, instead keeping its forts on the edges of Hudson Bay and attracting Aboriginal peoples to travel to the Bay to trade with them. In about 1760 fur companies out of Montreal began to move up into Western Canada, forcing the HBC to move inland. A rivalry grew between the HBC and a Montreal company, the North West Company (NWCo) between 1785 and 1821. The primary battle ground of these two companies was the Red River Valley, where violent conflict

sometimes took the form of attacks on one another's forts.

Threat to the fur trade as the primary economy on the prairies was felt as early as 1812. In this year the Earl of Selkirk sought to establish a group of Scottish settlers at Red River. The HBC supported the settlers' presence on the prairies because it brought them a cheap source of labour and provisions, and served to reinforce their trading monopoly over the region. The settlers soon found, however, that they were having difficulty producing enough crops to survive and were facing starvation as winter drew near.

To benefit the struggling settlers, the HBC passed a Pemmican Proclamation in 1814, declaring that no one could export pemmican out of the Red River colony—it would instead go towards feeding the settlers. The NWCo protested this proclamation because it seriously affected their trade. In 1816 the company roused up some of their Métis employees from Qu'Appelle, SK and, led by Cuthbert Grant, they raided an HBC post and stole a supply of pemmican. As they were skirting their way around the Red River colony, government officials led by Governor Semple went out to confront the Métis NWCo employees. Semple argued with the party and eventually a gunfight, known as the Battle of Seven Oaks, ensued. At the end of the battle only one of the official party remained alive and the Métis had suffered only one casualty. This was the first armed conflict entered into by the Métis, and they felt the victory not only as NWCo employees, but also as an emerging cultural group who had an Aboriginal claim to stake in the North West Territories.

In 1821 the rivalry between the HBC and NWCo came to an end when

The crystallization of the Métis identity is due in part to the motives of the fur trade.

the two companies amalgamated under the name the Hudson's Bay Company. Many Métis lost their jobs with the NWCo

as a result of the amalgamation and settled at Red River, swelling the numbers of the colony. From 1820 to 1870 the Métis were the dominant inhabitants of the Red River settlement (what

became Winnipeg) as it developed into their economic and social centre. In the 1871 census the Métis made up 10,000 inhabitants out of a total of 12,000 (over 80%). Here they took on the characteristics of a new nation and implemented their own form of self-government.

With the loss of the fur trade, Métis began looking for another source of income. They found it in the bison hunt, which became their trademark occupation. Twice a year the Red River settlement emptied when the Métis took off to sweep the northwestern plains in pursuit of the bison. These were very well organised affairs and taken very seriously by all involved. From these hunts, the Métis produced pemmican—a compact and nutritious staple which sustained the rest of the fur trade. The bison hunt was one of the most important contributors toward the historic Métis identity. It brought the Métis under a common purpose and became a lifestyle in and of itself.

In 1860 the HBC lost its royal charter and the monopoly of the fur trade. By this time the fur trade was a waning economy and in 1867 the HBC sold nearly all of its land (the watershed of Hudson Bay, an area known as Rupert's Land) to the Dominion government of Canada for £300,000.

The government's primary objective at this time was to ready the West for settlement. It wasn't long before surveyors began their work of breaking up the prairies into the grid system that is in place over southern Manitoba to-

day.

The Red River Resistance was the result of Métis unhappiness when surveyors started running lines over their long lot properties along the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. They rallied behind Louis Riel and set up a provisional government. Riel argued that before a land transfer could take place the government would have to negotiate with them. The demands of the Métis led to the passing of the *Manitoba Act* in 1870 which established the Province of Manitoba and set aside land to be used for the benefit of the children of the Métis in recognition of their Aboriginal title. The Red River Resistance brought the Métis together further into a sense of political cohesiveness.

The government handed out land to the Métis in the form of scrip. Scrip was a certificate that entitled the holder to a specific amount of either money which was redeemable only for land or land itself. However, through the fraudulent activities of land speculators and a Canadian government that was intent on controlling the development of the West, the Métis were swindled out of most of the land that they were entitled to. Many got frustrated by the process and moved west – away from the disruptive influences of the Canadian government – selling their title for a fraction of what it was worth.

Of course, the government surveyors moved west as well. In 1885 they reached Saskatchewan and began running survey lines over Métis properties there. This created a second conflict, known as the North West Resistance

where the Métis again tried to assert their nationalism in the face of government pressure. Enlisting the aid of First Nation allies, the Métis staged a series of battles which culminated in a defeat at the Battle of Batoche.

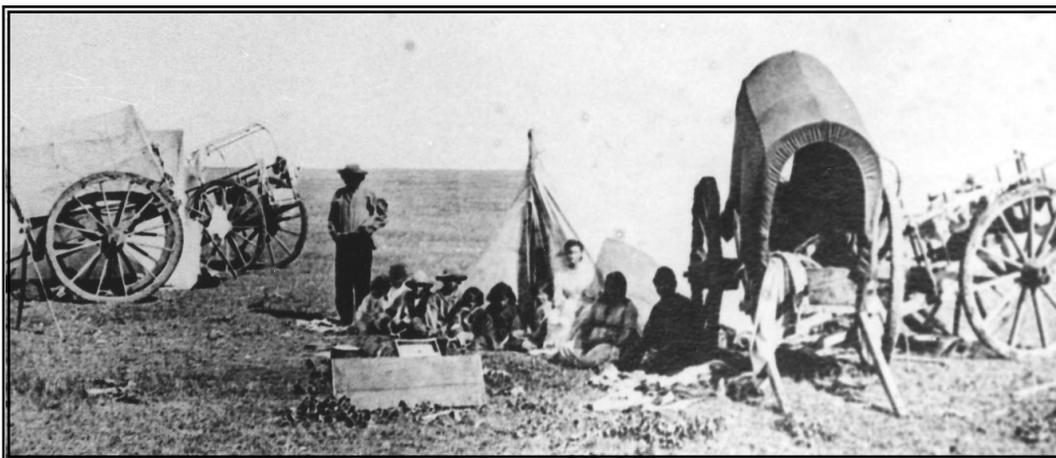
The result of the battle scattered the Métis people and marked the beginning of a period of dispersion. Fearing for their lives Métis people changed their names and fled in all directions, some moving to the United States while others went back to their First Nation families and became treaty "Indians". Others denied their native heritage altogether. These were dark times for the Métis, a time of persecution and extreme poverty due to their landlessness and general lack of education. It wasn't until 1940 that the Métis culture began to make a resurgence. In the mid-1960s Métis organizations started to appear which began working towards boosting the social and economic position of the Métis in Canada. This cultural revival has proven to be of great benefit to communities with significant numbers of Métis – like Boissevain and Deloraine – as evidenced by increases in economic activity and cultural celebration.

The 1982 revision of the Canadian constitution affirmed Métis rights by declaring them an Aboriginal people of Canada and therefore eligible to receive specific cultural rights and recognition. In 1981 the Métis began a decades-long process to claim compensation for the land they feel they were swindled out of in the Red River valley. The Supreme Court of Canada is currently set to consider their argument and the Federal Government's counter argument.

Today the Métis have reason to take pride in their colourful and historically rich culture. Their vitality has brought them through dark times into a place where they deserve to celebrate.

With the loss of the fur trade, Métis began looking for another source of income.

▼ A Métis bison hunting camp.



Sources:

Frideres James and Gadacz, Rene. *Aboriginal Peoples in Canada Eighth Edition*. Toronto: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2008
 Racine, Darryl. Lecture. Intro to Native Studies I. 68:151. Brandon University. Brandon, 28 January 2010.
 Sawchuk, Joe. *The Métis of Manitoba: Reformulation of an Ethnic Identity*. Toronto: Peter Martin Associates Press Ltd, 1978.
 Graphic and Photo Credit: Misc. Materials Relating to the Heritage Resources of the Turtle Mountain/Souris Plains Region of Manitoba. CD-ROM. Winnipeg: Historic Resources Branch Manitoba Culture, Heritage, Tourism and Sport. 2008.

Beginnings of the Metigoshe Community

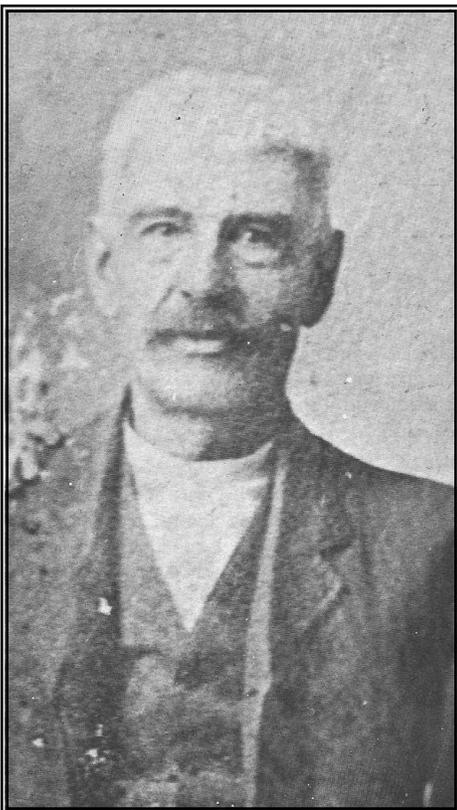
The Métis community on Turtle Mountain is somewhat unique. Its presence raises the question: How did this group of Métis come to settle here? The Métis differ from the average European settler in that they did not immigrate to the Canadian prairies. They were born here.

Red River was the first place that the Métis “settled” in any number. In fact for several generations they made up the majority of the settlement’s population. The Red River Resistance in 1869 and the following North West Resistance of 1885 uprooted Métis families from their homesteads and scattered them in all directions.

The Métis have a long history of interaction with the landform known as Turtle Mountain. To a trapper working for the Hudson’s Bay or North West Company, Turtle Mountain and White-water Lake to the north were prime hunting grounds. Turtle Mountain was also important to the Métis as a part of their bison hunting activities. During the summer and fall hunting seasons the



▲ A gathering of friends, relatives and neighbours at Metigoshe in the late 1940s.



Louis Lee Racine

Métis grew familiar with the plains surrounding Turtle Mountain; the region was favoured by bison due to its rich grazing. As the decades of the 19th century progressed, the bison withdrew farther west due to increased human activity on the plains. Soon the Métis were travelling for weeks before encountering a herd. To cut down on travel, Métis began establishing winter camps on Turtle Mountain (and other such sheltered areas). From these impermanent camps they hunted the bison on the surrounding plains, harvesting the animals’ meat as well as their thick winter coats instead of pursuing them during their long migrations in the summer. Turtle Mountain provided resources from which the perfect winter camp could be built: construction materials for simple cabins, firewood, and shelter from the stiff winter winds.

Yet despite their frequent visits to Turtle Mountain the Metis did not permanently settle there until the early 1900s. Settlement in the area had boomed 25 years earlier, and most of the available homesteads had long been settled – though there were many sections of land that were owned by

The Métis have a long history of interaction with Turtle Mountain.

the HBC or Southwest Colonization Railway and not available for sale. By 1908, when the first Métis individuals moved into the area, there were enough European settlers in the area for a school to open, Marsden School 1.

By 1908, only several quarter sections of land were available to be settled. They were located close to the international boundary and undesirable because much of their area was covered by lakes and bushland. These quarter sections had been left until last due to their unsuitability to agriculture. It

was this bushland, however, which held attraction for the Métis – a people who had a long history as woodsmen and trappers. The lakes that covered the sections were seen as a benefit, because they would attract game and trappable animals.

The first four Métis settlers to take advantage of the bushland on Turtle Mountain were Louis Lee Racine, cousins Elzear (Zero) McLeod and Peter McLeod, and Billy Gosselin. All four

were descended from the Red River Métis, though the latter three had been born at St Francois Xavier. Métis families from St Francois Xavier had been pushed in different directions as European settlement in Manitoba increased and some found a temporary home in Belcourt, North Dakota. It was from there that Billy, Peter and Zero chose to move north over the border. The McLeod men had families that moved with them; Billy was the only single man among the early Métis settlers.

The original motives of these first families for moving to Turtle Mountain are not exactly known. Perhaps they already held Canadian citizenships and moved to Turtle Mountain as the closest place in Canada that was attractive to them. They certainly did not move far into Canada when they came in 1908; they settled on the bush- and lake-covered sections of land that were not even a mile north of the border. They claimed homesteads on section 3-1-22, which was bordered on one side by the Canadian-American boundary and included a section of Lake Metigoshe's northeast shore.

Louis Lee Racine, the fourth of the area's early Métis settlers, was born in Montreal in 1852. He lived there for only a few years before his family moved west. He met his wife, Selina Moren, in Beauford, North Dakota. They married in the late 1890s and had two children, Louis Jr and Elizabeth, before moving to Turtle Mountain in 1908 or 1910. They claimed the southwest corner of section 10-1-22 and built a log home near the shore of Sharpe Lake (then known as Long Lake). Louis paid the taxes on their land by trapping muskrats which were worth only five cents apiece at that time. In the 1920s Selina suffered from an illness which eventually took her life. The family travelled back to Beauford to bury her at the place where she grew up, then returned to Turtle Mountain to live.

One other individual was important to the growth of the Métis community on Turtle Mountain. In about 1920 William (Willie) Goodon left his home at Sandy Lake. At this time he was about 20 years old. He left on foot with noth-

He left on foot with no specific idea of where he was headed.

ing but a rifle in his hands and no specific idea where he was headed. Eventually he turned up on Turtle Mountain, at the door of Louis Lee Racine's home where he stopped to ask for a drink of water. Intending to visit for an hour, his stay stretched into a month. Figuring that Turtle Mountain was a good place to live, Willie and Louis travelled to Sandy Lake to bring back some of Willie's family. They made the trip by horse and covered wagon, which took three days to travel on the way back. Returning to Turtle Mountain they were accompanied by Willie's mother Madeleine and two of his sisters, Alice and Roseanna (Rosna).

Willie's three female family members found husbands at Turtle Mountain. In 1923, Willie's mother Madeleine married Louis Racine Sr. Rosna and Billy Gosselin got married in 1931 and Alice married Louis Racine's son, Louis Racine Jr.

When Louis Racine Sr died, his son Louis Jr took over the homestead. Alice and Louis' descendants still live on Turtle Mountain. One of their granddaughters, Leah LaPlante, was raised on Turtle Mountain and is now head of the Southwest Region of the Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF).

After bringing his mother and sisters to Turtle Mountain, Willie Goodon lived in North Dakota for several years. There he met his wife, Florestine Vilneuve (nee Amoyette) and had three children. After 1926 they returned to Turtle Mountain to live and had four more children. Their descendants still live in the area.

From these core families – the Racines, Goodons, Gosselins and McLeods – grew the Metigoshe Community. More land around Metigoshe became available after 1913 when the HBC and Railway sections that had been reserved became available

for settlement. Much of this land was taken up by Métis families who were attracted to move to Turtle Mountain because they knew they would be among friends and family. The Métis were at this time interested in banding together in order to preserve their culture and identity. Especially during the early decades of the 1900s the Métis were receiving no small amount of discrimination, and sticking together helped them preserve their sense of pride.

European settlers in the area became part of the Metigoshe Community as young people married Métis partners. Outside the ties of matrimony, dependable neighbours created secure ties with the Métis who accepted them as part of their community and social network.

The Turtle Mountain Métis formed two locals of the Manitoba Métis Federation: The Turtle Mountain Local and the Cherry Creek Local. These are self-sustaining, non-profit organisations that hold various cultural activities in the area.

Sources:
Conway, Mary. *The Lilley Family History: A Manitoba Métis Genealogy*. Winnipeg: Conamara Publications, 2002.
Deloraine History Book Committee. *Deloraine Scans a Century 1880-1980*. Altona: Friesen Printers, 1980. pp 462, 630.
Mary Conway's Archival Collection of Interviews.
Photos: Louis Lee Racine—*Deloraine Scans a Century*, pg 630.
Other photos—Mary Conway's Archival Collection.



Willie Goodon and Florestine with granddaughter Beatrice (1940s).