

## THE MÉTIS AT RED RIVER

### CHECK FORWARD

You will learn more about the Métis in Chapter 7.

As you learned in Chapter 3, the Métis culture was a result of the French fur trade. As the fur trade expanded north and west, Métis communities began to emerge along some sections of the St. Lawrence River, around the Great Lakes, into the Northwest, and even as far north as the Mackenzie River. It was the Métis of Red River, however, who grew to have a culture that was representative of their mixed ancestral background, as well as their geographic setting. At Red River, a new culture began to take form.

The Red River settlement was made up of two settlements: one at the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers and a smaller settlement farther south at Pembina. Many men in the community worked as guides or voyageurs in the fur trade, at first for the French, and then for the Montréal-based companies that emerged after the fall of Nouvelle-France in 1760. Eventually, most Métis men worked for the North West Company.

In time, the Red River settlement also became home to many Country-born families, most of whom had connections to the Hudson's Bay Company. While the Métis community tended to be Roman Catholic and depended mainly on the fur trade and buffalo hunt for their livelihood, the Country-born families tended to be Protestant and relied more upon farming for their living, although many also worked in the fur trade and hunted. After around 1870, many Country-born families came to be considered Métis as well. However, these broad definitions did not always apply to everyone. Even in the early nineteenth century,

some people who might have been considered Country-born identified themselves as Métis. These exceptions tended to occur in families where people intermarried with Métis families. Today the term Métis includes all people with both European and First Nations ancestry and origins in the Northwest.

**Figure 5-8** This illustration showing a Métis camp near Pembina in 1859 was published in *Harper's Monthly* magazine in 1860.



## GROWTH OF A CULTURE AND A NATION

Members of the Métis Nation did not solely identify with either European or First Nations ways of life. The Métis culture was, and continues to be, based on a combination of European and First Nations traditions.

### LANGUAGE

A unique language called **Michif** evolved as the Métis Nation grew and prospered. By the 1820s, Michif had developed a consistent character and became a dominant Métis language. In general, Michif nouns and adjectives are derived from French, and its verbs are a reflection of Ininew (Cree). However, it also has elements of English and Anishinaabe (Ojibwe/Saulteaux).

### MUSIC AND DANCE

Métis culture was also reflected in music and dance. Musical instruments that the Métis used included the fiddle, the concertina, the harmonica, the hand drum, the mouth harp, and finger instruments such as bones or spoons. The main instrument was the fiddle, which was introduced by French and Scottish immigrants. It was often handmade from local maple wood and birch bark. A distinctive fiddle tune called the “Red River Jig” is sometimes considered the unofficial Métis anthem. It was developed by the Desjarlais family of Red River and was often played at gatherings in the settlement.

The traditional dances of the Métis include the waltz quadrille (a dance with four couples arranged in a square) and various reels and jigs. Dance steps include footwork from traditional First Nations, French, Scottish, and Irish dances.

### MÉTIS WOMEN

Métis women played a critical role in the development of the Métis Nation and in the fur trade. From their First Nations heritage they knew how to make moccasins, prepare pemmican, and net snowshoes. Each of these items was of high value in the fur trade, and many women worked for the trading posts to supply these goods. During buffalo hunts, Métis women cleaned and tanned hides, collected fat and bone marrow to make pemmican, and prepared meat for winter storage. Métis women were also known for their intricate needle, bead, and porcupine quill work on clothing.



Go to the *Shaping Canada* web site and follow the links to learn more about the Michif language.

**Figure 5-9** This illustration of a Métis dance in Pembina, Manitoba, appeared in *Harper's Monthly* magazine in 1860. What evidence do you see in this picture of both First Nations and European traditions?



**Figure 5-10** Métis women continue to be known for their intricate beadwork on clothing. This deerskin jacket is thought to have belonged to Louis Riel.

## THE BUFFALO HUNT

The Métis developed their own style of buffalo hunt that was distinct from First Nations techniques. Before horses were available on the prairie, First Nations killed as many animals as they could at one time by herding them off buffalo jumps (cliffs) or into a buffalo pound (a corral where bison were killed). As horses were acquired, First Nations adopted new hunting techniques. Hunting in small bands of horseback riders, they still used the buffalo jumps, but they also began to ride closer to the herd and hunt

**Figure 5-11** Using the Métis technique called “running the herd,” a skilled hunter could kill up to twelve bison in two hours.



with bows and arrows. Their success depended on the swiftness of the horses and on their people’s skills as hunters.

The Métis took this technique and modified it. They used muzzle-loading guns instead of bows and arrows, and preferred to hunt in larger groups. Using a Métis technique called “running the herd,” Métis horse riders would charge a herd of bison, causing the animals to stampede. The hunters would ride their horses into the herd, select an animal, and fire at close range. When the hunt was finished for that herd, Métis women and children were responsible for skinning and butchering the carcasses.

The buffalo hunt eventually grew to be massive in size. It involved organizing hundreds of men, women, and children to travel hundreds of kilometres to the bison herds. At the hunt, tons of bison meat and hides had to be processed and then transported back to the settlement. The buffalo hunt provided the key ingredients for pemmican, which the Métis valued as a food staple and trade good. The buffalo hunt was a dominant feature of life for Métis communities in the Northwest. By 1820, there were usually two organized hunts each year: one in the spring and one in the fall.

**Figure 5-12** *Late 1800s Buffalo Hunt*, by William Armstrong (1822–1914). This drawing helps give some idea of the size of and preparation needed for the Métis buffalo hunts.



## MÉTIS GOVERNMENT

Because the buffalo hunts were large and involved so many people, the Métis formed a government to oversee each hunt. A captain (also called the president) was elected to lead the hunt. Under the captain, a council of lieutenants was also elected to represent the hunters. The council decided when and where the hunt would take place, along with how many animals would be killed.

Buffalo hunts were carried out with military-like precision. Strict rules were necessary in order to manage the large numbers of people involved in a hunt.

## THE RED RIVER CART

According to the journal of NWC fur trader Alexander Henry, **Red River carts** made their first appearance in 1801 at Pembina. Red River carts were large, two-wheeled carts made of wood tied together with leather and typically pulled by oxen or horses. They were well suited for the prairie environment: the carts were easily repaired, and at 1.5 metres high, the wheels were stable enough to be drawn through mud and marsh. The carts were also buoyant and could be floated across streams and rivers, and were strong enough to carry loads as heavy as 450 kilograms.

The carts were closely associated with the Métis. They were first used by the Métis to bring back meat from the buffalo hunt. By the 1850s, organized brigades of carts were making long-distance journeys for hunts and supplies. Important trade routes emerged from these cart journeys, notably the Carlton Trail from Fort Garry (Winnipeg) through Fort Ellice and Fort Carlton (Saskatchewan) and on to Fort Edmonton; and the Red River Trail, an 885 kilometre journey from Fort Garry to St. Paul, Minnesota. These trails, and the Red River cart, were an instrumental part of the development of the Northwest.

Figure 5-13 The Laws of the Prairie

These laws were recorded at Pembina in the 1840s. What values do you see protected by the laws?

- No buffalo to be run on the Sabbath Day.
- No party to fork off or lag, or go before, without permission.
- No person or party to run buffalo before the general order.
- Every captain, with his men, in turn to patrol camp and keep guard.
- For the first trespass against these laws, offender is to have his saddle and bridle cut up.
- For the second offence, his coat is to be taken off his back and be cut up.
- For the third offence, the offender is to be flogged.
- Any person convicted of theft, even to the value of a sinew, to be brought to the middle of the camp, and the crier is to call out his or her name three times, adding the word "Thief" each time.



Figure 5-14 Métis communities used Red River carts in the buffalo hunt and for transporting other goods for trade.