

## FIRST NATIONS' ROLES IN THE WESTERN FUR TRADE

The fur trade in North America began with the earliest contacts between First Nations people and Europeans. Within a few years of their arrival on the continent, French and British fur traders competed with one another to form trading relationships with First Nations. First Nations traders used British–French rivalries to their advantage. They frequently demanded, and received, better terms and goods in exchange for a partnership.

From the beginning, First Nations people eagerly sought European goods and paid for them in furs. The unit of currency in the fur trade was one “made-beaver,” a prime beaver pelt that had been worn until most of the beaver’s long outer hair had been worn off.


### WHAT ROLE DID FIRST NATIONS PLAY IN THE HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY FUR TRADE?

Like the Wendat (Huron), who had been the primary French middlemen in Nouvelle-France, the Ininimowin (Swampy Cree) and Nakota (Assiniboine) took this role for the Hudson’s Bay Company until the 1720s. Using their pre-existing trading alliances, the Ininimowin and Nakota controlled trade in the areas surrounding the HBC posts for many decades.

The HBC middlemen travelled upstream, especially along the Saskatchewan River, trading for furs with other First Nations. They then transported these furs to the trading posts on Hudson Bay. Many middlemen and their families began to settle near the HBC forts and became what were known as the **home guard**. Some First Nations people worked for the traders, hunting, paddling supply canoes, and making snowshoes.

After 1774, however, as the number of trading posts across the West grew, the role of middlemen declined because more First Nations traded directly with inland HBC posts. In later years, the

home guard First Nations participated in the fur trade by supplying the European fur traders with food and other supplies.

 How do you think the cultures of the home guard changed as the people began living in permanent or semi-permanent villages near the HBC forts? How do you think their cultures remained the same?

**Figure 3-14** Examine this nineteenth-century illustration showing the home guard at an HBC fort. What impression does it give you of the lives of the home guard? How realistic do you think this portrayal is?



## THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY

Even though the Treaty of Utrecht gave the Hudson's Bay Company sole trading rights in Rupert's Land, the voyageurs continued to travel from the Northwest to Montréal every spring with their furs to trade. These men were sometimes called free traders. Many free traders returned to the Northwest as soon as their business in Montréal was complete. They were more at home among First Nations communities than in the villages of Nouvelle-France.

Many French traders took First Nations women as wives in a formal process known as the **custom of the country**. First Nations had a tradition of building alliances with other communities through marriages, so the practice was easily accepted. The fur traders and their masters in Montréal also encouraged these relationships. French officials believed the marriages would strengthen friendships and trade with First Nations. They hoped that marriage to French men would encourage First Nations women and their children to adopt French language, religion, and culture in a process known as **acculturation**. To the surprise and dismay of French authorities, the process of acculturation worked both ways: many of their French traders began adopting First Nations ways of life. In time, a new culture and people arose from these unions: the **Métis**. Métis children were raised with elements of both French and First Nations cultures and were immersed in the fur-trade culture and economy.

**HP** Take a historical perspective to consider the response of French officials to the acculturation of French men to First Nations ways of life. What does their surprise tell you about their worldview?

In contrast, the HBC's London-based directors were concerned about the costs of supporting fur traders' families at their posts. Therefore, the company strictly forbade its employees from marrying First Nations women. However, this rule was regularly violated by HBC employees. By the 1740s, when HBC employee James Isham reported that the HBC traders' offspring around the posts had become "pretty Numerous," the HBC acknowledged the limits of its control and eased off its rule. HBC employee families began to settle around HBC forts and became a significant part of the home guard. The children of the Baymen and First Nations women were known as **Country-born**. Country-born families developed a culture that was distinct from that of the French Métis along the Montréal trade routes.

Some Europeans stayed with their First Nations wives only as long as their posting in the Northwest, while others formed lifelong bonds. Many voyageurs, in particular, retired to live with their wife, children, and their wife's extended family.



**Figure 3-15** This painting, by A. J. Miller in the early 1840s, shows a marriage ceremony in the custom of the country. What aspects of this painting do you think are historically accurate? Which aspects might be a European interpretation of the custom of the country?

## VOICES


One of them [women] can carry, or haul, as much as two men can do. They also pitch our tents, make and mend our clothing, keep us warm at night; and in fact there is no such thing as travelling any considerable distance, or for any length of time, in this country, without their assistance.

— Matonabee, Dene guide to Samuel Hearne, criticizing Hearne's reluctance to take women on his exploration

## FIRST NATIONS WOMEN'S ROLES IN THE FUR TRADE

For fur traders, First Nations wives provided companionship in a land with few European women. In addition, the unions were good for business. First Nations women were indispensable to European fur traders because of their knowledge of how to survive in the North American landscape. They accompanied explorers and fur traders on their long journeys and provided food, prepared furs for travel, and gathered supplies for canoe repairs. Sometimes whole families travelled with the fur brigades, and the women did much of the paddling. Many women also acted as guides.

In addition, women provided European traders with First Nations kinship connections. In traditional First Nations societies, relationships were key. Until relationships were established, business could not be done. By marrying into a First Nations community, a fur trader established a kinship relationship with everyone in that community and, by extension, to other communities as well. These kinship relationships opened the door to trading partnerships.

 In the early days of the HBC fur trade, First Nations wives occasionally accompanied their husbands to Britain when the men retired from the fur trade. Most husbands returned to Britain alone, leaving their First Nations wives with their communities. Take a historical perspective to consider the benefits and drawbacks of each practice.

The women raised families, made moccasins, netted snowshoes, cleaned and tanned pelts, snared rabbits and small game, collected berries and other food from the land, tended gardens, fished, and, each spring, cleaned and scrubbed the posts in the annual spring cleaning. They dried fish and preserved other food, and helped make **pemmican** for the fur-trade brigades. Pemmican consists of dried bison meat mixed with fat and sometimes berries. It is light to transport and keeps well without spoiling. This food, long a staple in the diet of many First Nations, would eventually become the main food of all fur traders, European, Métis, and First Nations.

Most of the tasks done by women in the fur trade were traditional roles for women in First Nations communities. During the fur trade, however, many women's roles evolved as they became translators and intermediaries between their communities and the clerks and traders of the fur companies.

# Thanadelthur

Thanadelthur was a young Dene woman born in northern Manitoba sometime in the late 1690s. There are no written records of her life, but we have come to know her story through the testimony of men who worked for the Hudson's Bay Company and the oral tradition of her people.

Thanadelthur lived at a time when the Dene and the Inineu (Cree) were fiercely competing in the fur trade and regularly raiding one another's camps. In 1713, Thanadelthur was captured by the Inineu during one of these raids.

Escaping her captors, she arrived at York Factory in 1714. There she met the chief factor of the fort, James Knight, who was impressed by her forceful personality. Knight was concerned about the conflict between the Inineu and Dene and believed it was a distraction from the fur trade. He thought that if the Dene and Inineu could make peace, fur-trade profits for the HBC would increase. He hoped that Thanadelthur could help establish this peace.

In 1715, a peace mission was organized. Accompanied by Thanadelthur as the interpreter, plus 150 home guard Inineu people, Knight travelled more than 1000 kilometres north and west to meet with Dene leaders. Historical records contain testimony from HBC officials who said that Thanadelthur had a sharp tongue and was highly persuasive. She was said to have guided the two groups to an agreement through "her perpetual [sic] talking." After almost a year, the party headed back to York Factory, accompanied by ten Dene people.

Thanadelthur fell ill and died on February 15, 1717. The young woman was pivotal in establishing a peace between the Dene and Inineu peoples. This peace helped build trade relations between the HBC and the Dene, leading to the construction of an HBC fort at present-day Churchill, Manitoba.

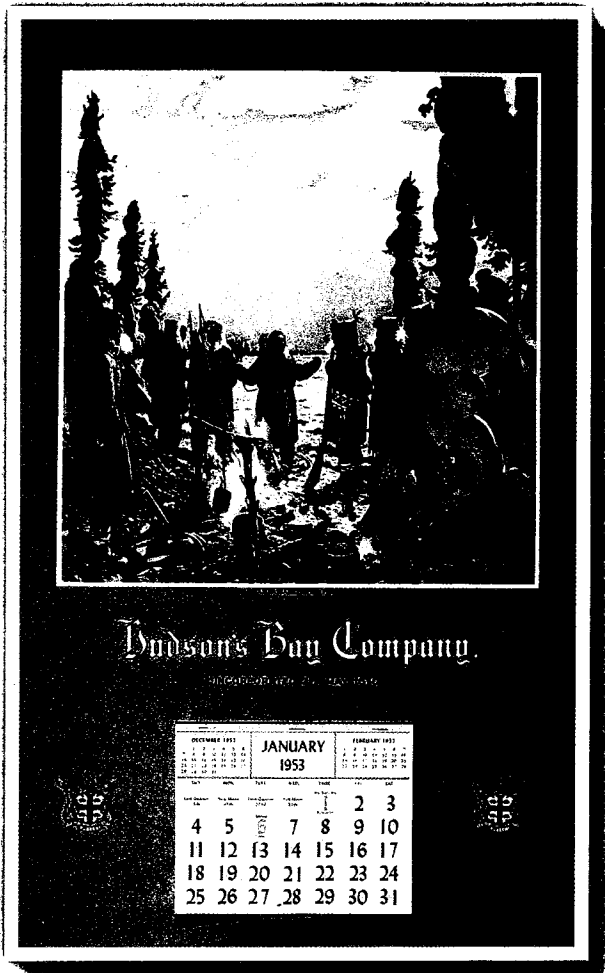


Figure 3-16 This illustration of the Thanadelthur story by Franklin Arbuckle was created for the HBC's 1953 calendar. Thanadelthur was given credit for making peace by both HBC officials and the oral histories of the Inineu and Dene communities involved.

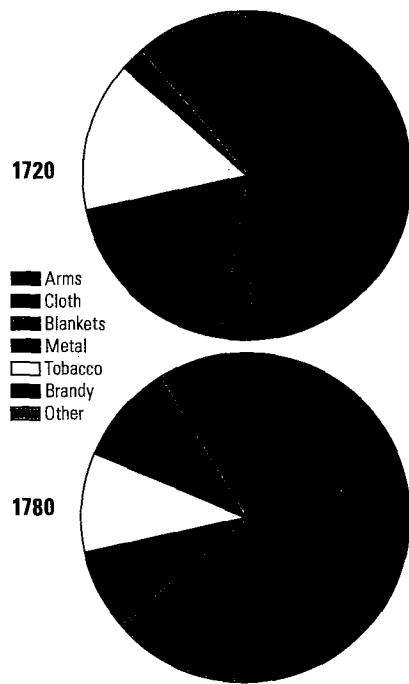
## EXPLORATIONS

1. Name two consequences of the peace facilitated by Thanadelthur.
2. After Thanadelthur's death, James Knight wrote in his journal that "She was one of a very high Spirit and of the Firmest Resolution that ever I see in any Body in my

Days and of great Courage." Research other sources of information about Thanadelthur. Which are primary and which are secondary sources? Explain which information you find most reliable and why. What aspects of Thanadelthur's story are missing?

**Figure 3-17 Trade Goods at York Factory**

What does this information tell you about changes in the lives of First Nations people during this period?



Source: *Historical Atlas of Canada*

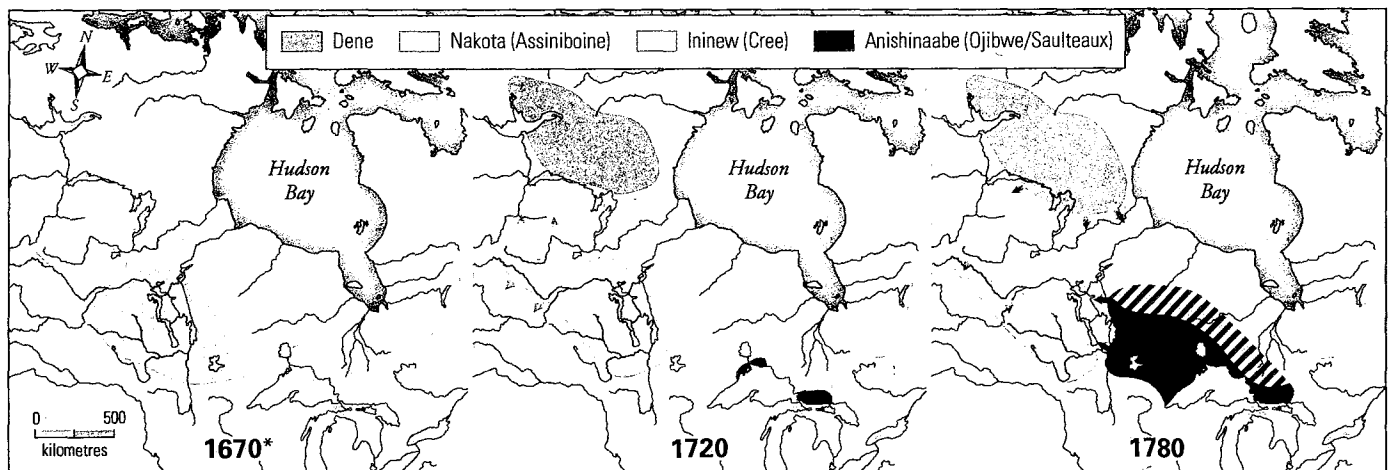
## FUR-TRADE PROBLEMS IN THE WEST

As fur traders moved west, they carried diseases such as smallpox, influenza, measles, and scarlet fever. First Nations on the Atlantic coast and around the Great Lakes had been devastated by these diseases. Western First Nations, however, had had few direct contacts with Europeans until the fur trade expanded. With expansion, however, the diseases spread inland. From 1780 to 1784, a major smallpox epidemic spread throughout First Nations in the West. Entire communities were wiped out. Others were so weakened by the illnesses that they were unable to care for themselves.

As it had near the eastern Great Lakes, the uneven distribution of firearms among First Nations resulted in deadly conflicts between communities. For example, Ininew (Cree) and Nakota (Assiniboine) traders were among the first communities in the Northwest to receive firearms from the HBC. Using these guns, they pushed back other communities and expanded their territories to keep their position in the fur trade. In particular, Ininew home guard used guns to secure their position as middlemen between the HBC and Dene communities to the north. In 1717, soon after the peace agreement negotiated by Thanadelthur, the HBC built Fort Churchill, which was in Dene territory. Thereafter, the Dene had their own supply of firearms, and conflicts with the Ininew did not resume.

**Figure 3-18 Shifting Territories During the Fur Trade, 1670–1780**

Over time, the fur trade depleted fur stocks in some regions and First Nations moved from their traditional territories. What problems do you think these movements caused?



\* Dene territory not recorded

### RECALL... REFLECT... RESPOND

1. In which ways did the cultures of First Nations people of the Northwest adapt to change as the fur trade expanded west? In what ways did their cultures stay the same? How did European cultures change and stay the same?

2. How were these cultural changes historically significant?