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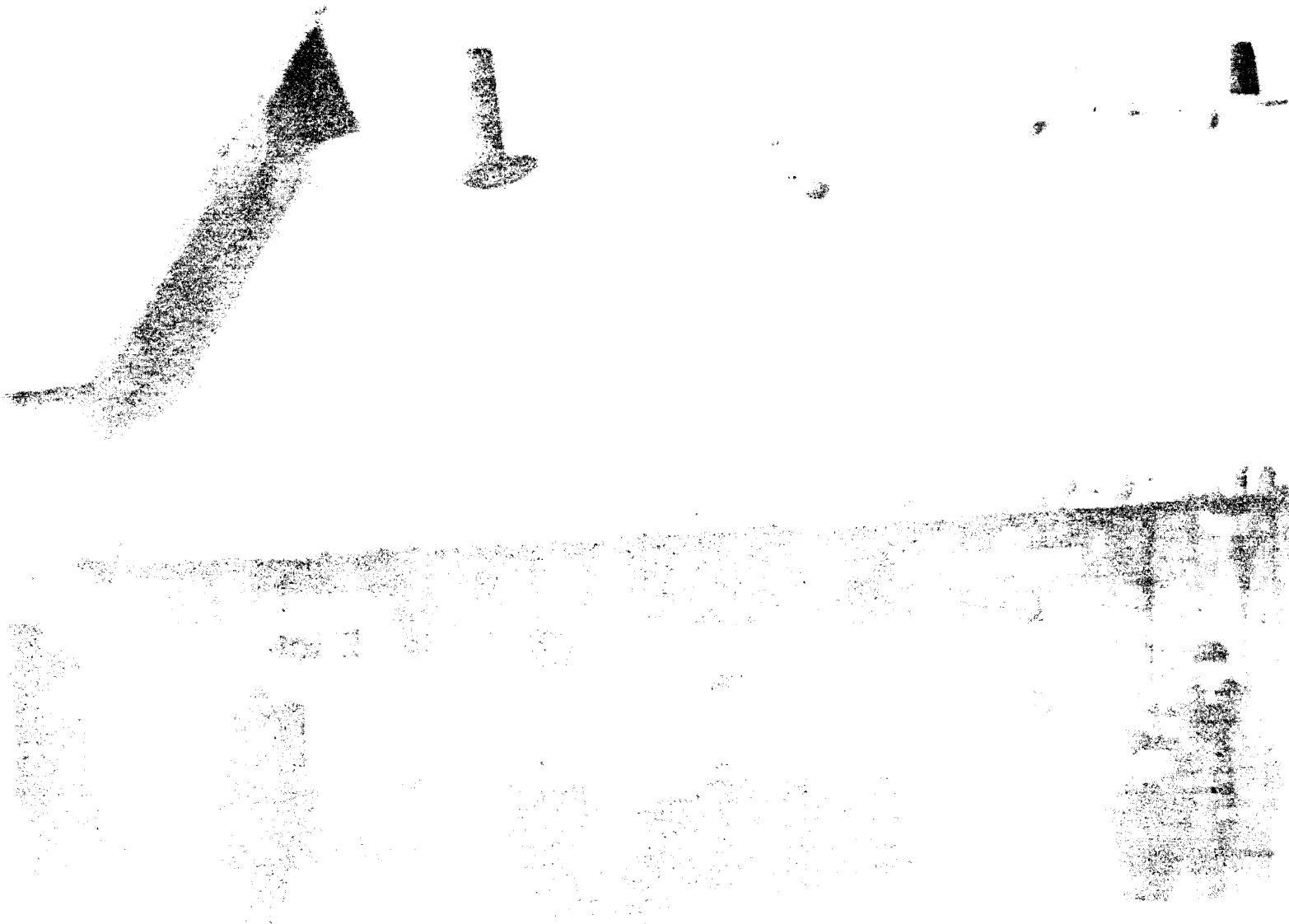
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# Metis of the Northwest Territories

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**T**he Subarctic Metis live in the Western Arctic and Subarctic regions of the Northwest Territories. They number approximately 7,000 people. The Metis are the offspring of three merging cultures - Red River Metis, Euro-Canadian, Dene (**Slavey, Gwich'in, Dogrib, Chipewyan**) and Cree. Family names indicate these diverse origins and histories.

Origins Metis, employed as canoemen and packers in the fur trade for the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company in the late 1700s and early 1800s, **travelled** along the major waterways flowing into the western Subarctic and Arctic. They were mainly descendants of French or French-Canadian men and **Ojibwa** or Cree women. Some of these early Metis rivermen settled at trading posts in the southern Subarctic, marrying Cree and **Chipewyan** women.

The **first Beaulieu** to arrive in the North was Francois **Beaulieu**, who guided Alexander Mackenzie down the river to the Arctic Ocean in 1789 and to the Pacific Ocean in 1793. Thirty-one years later, his son Francois "Old Man" Beaulieu, who had an extraordinary knowledge of the lands inhabited by the Dene and the western **Inuit**, followed in his father's footsteps. In 1820, "Old Man" **Beaulieu** assisted explorer John Franklin with his travels to the Arctic Ocean by drawing a map of the Arctic coast from Bathurst to the Coppermine River.

With the amalgamation of the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company in 1821, the Hudson's Bay Company established fur trade posts at strategic points along the entire length of the Mackenzie River. The post factors (managers) were predominantly Scottish. Many Metis were hired as interpreters, managers, traders, guides and hunters and for other related post activities. The Metis were crucial to the survival of the company as they supplied them with the majority of their business and food.

Alliances were created through marriage between the Aboriginal women and the Hudson's Bay Company men. The male children from these unions were often **educated** and trained to carry on in the **footsteps** of their fathers. They were ideally suited for positions with the trading companies because they were bilingual or in many cases trilingual, as were most Metis, and were adept in both bush skills and western **technology**. The female children often married Bay employees. The women formed the fabric of the culture and the community. Where initially there were only trading posts, communities now developed.

The Anglican and Roman Catholic churches established missions in the communities in the latter half of the 1800s, baptizing people and administering Christianity to their **respective** Metis congregations. Anglican congregations included such **family names** as **Camsell, Firth, Fraser, Gairdner, Hardisty, McDonald, and Stewart**. Roman Catholic congregations often **reflected** a French ancestry with names such as **Gaudet, LeMouel and Bouvier**.

Metis also moved into the south Mackenzie after the defeat of the Metis Nation at **Batoche** in the 1885 War of Resistance. They joined the Metis already living in the southern Subarctic and changed their way of life from buffalo hunting and small-

scale farming to fishing, hunting and involvement in all aspects of the fur trade. The newcomers outnumbered the earlier Metis and their distinctive cultural features and traditions **became** characteristic of **the** Metis in this area. Typical surnames for **this** group of people plus earlier arrivals from **the** Red River area and northern Saskatchewan are **Berens, Bourke, Burke, Delorme, Desjarlais, Houle, Lafferty, Larocque, Mandeville, Mercredi** and Sanderson.

The renowned quality of the furs that initially attracted the major fur companies also seduced trappers and independent traders in the early 1900s. Their legacy remains with us today in the Blake, Clark, Douglas, Furlong, **McNeely**, Norris, Overvold, **Rivet**, and Russell families.

Minerals also drew **prospectors**, surveyors and miners to the North. The lure of gold during the **Klondike** Gold Rush of 1898 brought adventurers and prospectors through the Mackenzie area en route to **the** gold fields. Hiroki (George) Masuzumi of Japanese origin and Henry Jones, a photographer and **ex-British** seaman, were two such men. Oil strikes in Norman Wells, followed by the discovery of **pitchblende** at Great Bear Lake and gold in the Yellowknife area in the 1930s, drew men and women from all walks of life such as the Ardens, whose name has been associated with prospecting in the Western Arctic since then.

With this influx came the need for law and order and game management. Game preserves were established. The North West Mounted Police built their first post at Fort McPherson in 1903 and others were founded as required. Once again the skills of the Metis proved **vital**. Their jobs included interpreting, the care and "mushing" of dogs, and guiding. In the course of their duties as Special Constables, men such as **Fred Gaudet, Archie Larocque, Louis Mercredi, Harry Balsillie, Joe Lafferty, Alex Daniels** and Frank Heron covered thousands of miles in varied terrain during all seasons and in all conditions.

Fish that formerly sustained **the** posts and residential schools **became** of **commercial** importance in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Metis families such as **Buckley, Carriere,**

Carter, Clark, Dumas, Gardner, **Monkman, Nault** and Simpson, left their homes in the three northern Prairie provinces to settle and make a new life fishing on Great Slave Lake. **The** families of **Coutereille, Morin** and Ross, were among the **first** involved in commercial fishing and continue to fish these waters today.

**Transportation** The rivers and lakes have long served as "highways" in the North and the Metis were employed in key roles in this network. The waterways were the main means of entry into the Mackenzie area during the fur trade and into the mid 20th century.

Travel through the 2,000 miles of **the** Athabasca, Slave and Mackenzie Rivers changed during this time from canoes, to York boats, to steamboats. The Metis **physically** pulled commerce into the North. First through the use of the paddle and the canoe, followed by the poling and tracking of York boats and scows, and **culminating** in the wheelhouses of the early steamers and tugs.

The Metis **voyageurs** and **coureurs** de bois incorporated both European and Indians **technologies** to build a superior canoe, which would be durable yet light for these northern rivers and lakes during the short open water season.

The York boats, with their origins in the Orkney Islands in Scotland, were an innovative boon to the ever

increasing demand for goods and trade in the North. In 1822, the **first** York boats were constructed in Fort Chipewyan for use in the North. The strength and endurance of the Metis crews were put to the test, packing, poling and tracking these cumbersome boats upstream.

Sixty years later, in 1882, the **first** steamboat in the Mackenzie watershed, the *Grahame*, was constructed by the Hudson's Bay Company in Fort Chipewyan. The *Wrigley*, constructed in Fort Smith, made its maiden voyage down the Mackenzie River in 1886, becoming the first steamboat to cross the Arctic Circle there. An excellent ability to "read the waters" and a familiarity

with the land were needed to safely transport goods and personnel from place to place. The majority of men who took this responsibility were **Metis**. They were the captains, pilots, skippers, deck hands, mates, stevedores, carpenters and stokers.

**Metis** captains included Jonas Lafferty, Billy **Bird**, and Leonard McKinley. Metis riverboat pilots such as Johnny Lennie, Francis Lepine and James **Sibbeston** were indispensable because of their **expertise** in navigating these waterways before the advent of modern technology. Johnny **Berens** spent 59 years safely navigating the waters of the Mackenzie River for the Hudson's Bay Company. The Government of Canada named the Mackenzie River ferry at Fort Providence the "Johnny Berens" in **honour** of this outstanding Metis riverboat pilot.

**Education and the Church** Until the 1950s, most Metis children were schooled by the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches. The Churches ran residential and day schools with the financial assistance of the Federal government. Children went to school for 1 to 9 years learning the basics of education, religious dogma and skills such as sewing, gardening, animal husbandry and woodcraft.

Several former students joined the **Oblate Priests** of Mary Immaculate (**omi**) and the Grey Nuns and devoted their lives to the people of the North: Fathers Napoleon **Laferte** and Patrice **Mercredi**, and Sisters Delia **Bourque**, Annie Cooper, Alice **Decoine**, Ann **Mercredi**, Agnes Sutherland and Louise **Tourangeau**.

Many of the Metis Anglican students later served as Lay Readers and Catechists for their northern congregations. Sarah Stewart Simon along with her Gwich'in husband the Reverend James Simon, administered the Anglican faith to their people. Sarah, now at the age of 94, has served the Church as Catechist, interpreter, Sunday School teacher and organist. She was awarded the Order of Canada in the fall of 1991.

**Women** Metis women traditionally did not take as visible a public role as did their male counterparts but contributed in their own important way to the economic and social development of the North. Women served as caretakers in the home and in the wage economy. They were the midwives, nurses, cooks, housekeeper, and seamstresses. The strong and independent spirit of such Metis women is **exemplified** by Laura McLeod Loutitt, a career woman and mother of 10. Her capabilities as a cook were legendary having cooked on such boats as the *S.S. Distributor* and *Radium King*. Her sense of **humour**, amusing anecdotes and kin ties welcomed her into homes from the Delta to the south Mackenzie.

**Culture** The joie de vivre of the Metis culture is reflected in its handiwork, music and **dance**. Items were borrowed and embellished with a distinctive Metis style of **decoration** to create a unique collection of Metis material culture. Men's clothing, such as jackets, gloves, "**parkis**", mitts, moccasins, and leggings were often made of caribou or moose hide and colorfully beaded or embroidered with silk thread in floral motifs. Silk ribbon and yarn pompoms were also added.

Brightly **coloured** red sashes were worn daily. Originally, the sashes were finger woven, a Native method of weaving that appears to **be** unique to North America. Sashes were practical as well as decorative and could be used as a pocket or to replace rope or **tumplines** when needed. They have remained important to this day as a symbol of the Metis, **the** different **colours** representing the distinct nations woven together and becoming one. **The** Metis Nation of the NWT recognizes major social, cultural or political contributions by awarding "The Order of the Sash" and "The Order of the Shawl" each year. The sash is presented to the men, and the shawl to the women.

Dogs played an important role in transportation and communication in the lives of the Metis. The drivers and their dogs worked long and hard in the winter on the **traplines**. Metis and their dog teams also carried mail for hundreds of miles, and **took** the sick and injured to get help. At Christmas and Easter, dog teams were colorfully decked out in embroidered or beaded blankets (tapis) and fancy harnesses with bells that could be heard for miles before they came into a settlement. Likewise, the Metis dog mushers were dressed in their finest fancywork outfits designed and crafted by their skillful wives. Women's clothing was much more modest in appearance but their pride and prestige was reflected in the attire of their men.

Music and dance are still an integral part of Metis weddings, family gatherings and Christian holidays. **The** Metis borrowed musical instruments **from** their French and Scottish ancestors which are very portable and often homemade. They include the fiddle, the concertina, the harmonica, the mandolin, the guitar, the Jew's harp, and the spoons. Popular dances were the old time waltz, the square dances, reels and the various steps of the **Red River jig**.

Most of the items needed for daily living **were** hand crafted. The creativity and **innovativeness** expressed by the women through their handiwork was matched by the expert craftsmanship of the men.

Many Metis men were carpenters building boats, furniture, houses and small household objects.

The **calibre** of the work of such outstanding carpenters as Philip **Mercredi**, Frank Stewart and Ted **Trindell** are still in evidence today.



**Social Relations** The large extended Metis families were essential to their existence both **economically** and socially. Marriages between Metis families were encouraged but not required. An intricate family network exists to this day throughout the Mackenzie and the Metis culture continues to thrive.

**Michif** Language is an important facet of any culture. **Michif**, a blend of French and Aboriginal languages was once the lingua **franca** of the Metis in **the** fur trade. It became a cultural identifier and its use was widespread. **With** the introduction of English or French as the main language in the school system, **Michif declined** in **importance**. However, small pockets of **Michif** speakers still exist in the Northwest Territories today,

Present The Metis formed a **political** organization, now known as the Metis Nation - NWT. Two **organizations** created as offshoots of this organization are the Metis Development Corporation and the Metis Heritage Association.

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