

Our People: Cumberland House

On September 4, 1774, the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) explorer Samuel Hearne and his crew arrived at *Ministikominuhikosak* (Pine Island) in the Saskatchewan River Delta. The English quickly surveyed land on the island's north shore in order to build a fort – the HBC's first inland trading post. The English christened the fort "Cumberland House," while the local Cree called it *Waskukikun*. The fur trade post was built near a centuries old Swampy Cree aggregating centre. It was a strategic location to build a fur trade post since the region had a large First Nations population and was blessed with an abundance of fauna such as water fowl, moose, beaver, muskrat and fish. The fort was, more importantly, built on the confluence of two major fur trade highways: the Saskatchewan River system flowing to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains and the Grass, Fox and Nelson Rivers draining into Hudson Bay. The construction of Cumberland House was meant to stave off competition from the "Pedlars," independent fur traders based in Montréal, who relentlessly paddled their *canots du nord* or "North Canoes" through the Great Lakes and Lake Winnipeg to reach the Saskatchewan River Delta. They also managed to build a trading post in the region in 1772. Hearne's trading post served as the HBC inland headquarters from 1774 to 1821. The original fort remained in operation until 1794, when a new one was built several kilometres to the west, on the other side of the Bay.

Cumberland House was, from its beginnings, a quintessential Métis community. Métissage was practiced as soon as the community was founded. In 1773, Samuel Hearne, for instance, married Mary Norton, a Métis woman. Hearne's successor, Matthew Cocking, had three Aboriginal wives with whom he raised three Métis daughters. Thus, the foundation was laid for a new bicultural fur trade society. Aboriginal women ensured the community's early survival during the long and harsh winter months. For example, during his first winter at Cumberland House, Samuel Hearne commented on the fact that only two or three Aboriginal women remained in the area. These women proved a godsend because they stayed to "Make, Mend, Knit Snowshoes &c for us during the winter." In fact, it became customary for all factors at the Cumberland House post to have a Métis wife since they had kin ties to local First Nations populations and possessed many survival skills such as moccasin and snowshoe manufacture to food provisioning.

Cumberland House's Métis residents faced a great deal of adversity during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Firstly, Cumberland House's preeminent position within the fur trade's inland hierarchy ended once Norway House was built in 1778. Nonetheless, the community remained an important pemmican depot and supplier of country produce for passing northern brigades. Secondly, in the early 1780s and late 1830s, a small pox epidemic decimated the local *Opaskweyaw* (Cree) population, leaving only a few weakened Métis left in the community – likely as a result of inherited immunity to the contagion from their European fathers. Thirdly,

the local Métis became too reliant on muskrat trapping in the 1820s, which proved detrimental to the community when animal stocks plummeted. Fortunately, many Métis soon became York Boat freighters and packers for the HBC after the 1821 fur trade merger. Fourthly, throughout the nineteenth century, the region encountered several droughts, which adversely affected muskrat and moose populations in the delta. Fifthly, the Cumberland House post was in perpetual decline after 1850 as the fur trade economy lessened in importance in British North America. Finally, after the 1885 Resistance, more southern Métis moved into the region along with non-Aboriginal trappers. As a consequence, natural resource depletion followed.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the apparatus of church and state moved into Cumberland House and replaced the authority of the Hudson's Bay Company. In 1839, for instance, the Anglican Church established the first educational mission at Cumberland for the local First Nations and Métis. The Reverend Henry Budd, the first Métis to be ordained in Western Canada, inaugurated a school at Cumberland House in 1842. In 1875, Père Ovide Charlebois founded St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Mission. A year later, many Cumberland House area Cree and Métis sign Treaty Number 5. After the 1885 Resistance, in 1887, the Dominion government sent scrip commissioners to Cumberland House in order to extinguish the local Métis' Aboriginal title to the land. As a result, many Métis were taken off the treaty pay lists in order to receive scrip. Steamer service arrived in the nineteenth century and provided local residents with a relatively inexpensive means to travel to the outside world until 1925. Many Cumberland House Métis worked on the steamers as labourers, providing coal for the boat's engines or as pilots, as was the case of "Steamboat" Bill MacKenzie. Père Charlebois also oversaw the final construction of a Roman Catholic Church in 1894. In 1901, Dominion Census Officials found that Cumberland House had 191 residents, a Catholic Church, an Anglican Church and a total of 63 homes. Finally, in 1906, some local Métis take treaty in Treaty 10.

By the late nineteenth century, Cumberland House had become an overwhelmingly Métis community as many Treaty First Nations were forced off the Treaty Rolls when they took scrip. Some of the Métis family names in Cumberland House, at this time, included: Carrière, Goulet, Dorion, Chayboyer, MacKay, MacAuley, Fosseneuve, Morin, Cook and McGillvery. Prior to the late nineteenth century, some of Cumberland House's leading families included the Isbisters and the Kennedys. Two Métis from Cumberland House – William Kennedy (1814-1870), who searched for the ill-fated Franklin Expedition and pioneered arctic navigation techniques, and Alexander Kennedy Isbister (1822-1883) who played a large role in founding the University of Manitoba – were famous throughout the British Empire.

Southern society began infringing on the traditional way of life of the Cumberland House Métis in the nineteenth century. However, this trickle became an explosion during the early years of the twentieth century. The new province of Saskatchewan began exploiting the region's resources relatively early in the last century. In addition, non-Aboriginal trappers

moved into the region after World War I and over-exploited resources and displaced Aboriginal trappers. In 1930, as a result of the *Natural Resources Transfer Agreement*, the government of Saskatchewan was given control of the province's resources. Provincial game officials began to more stringently regulate Métis trappers and hunters in Cumberland House. The province also, starting in 1938, began building dams and canals to spur growth in the muskrat population, which provided employment for many local Métis trappers. Two years later the first hospital in the community was constructed. After the war, the democratic-socialist CCF government created the Spruce Island or "Farm Island" community farm as part of its Métis rehabilitation program. In 1962, two years after the HBC surrendered its lease lands south of the community to the province, construction of the "Squaw Rapids" Dam (now known as the E.B. Campbell Dam) adversely affects water levels in the delta, thus affecting floral and fauna populations. As a result, Métis trappers and hunters in the region had great difficulty harvesting resources. Other infrastructure arrived relatively late to Cumberland house; power came in 1968, telephones were installed only in 1971 and a bridge leading to the community was only constructed in the late 1990s.

Cumberland House is one of the most unique communities in northern Saskatchewan. It is an incorporated as a northern village and its population is almost entirely Cree-Métis. The community has produced many talented and proud Métis including Solomon Carrière, a world champion canoeist; the Honourable Keith Goulet, the Saskatchewan Minister of Northern Affairs; and, young Real Carrière, who was recently awarded a \$50,000 college scholarship to Lester B. Pearson United World College of the Pacific in Victoria, British Columbia. Cumberland House is also proud of its war veterans. The community, for instance, had the first entirely Aboriginal Royal Canadian Legion branch in Canada. In fact, during the two world wars, many men and women enlisted. Finally, the children of Cumberland House have even co-written a book and song about the famous Sasquatch entitled *Sasquatch Exterminator*.

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