

The Métis in the 21st Century Conference

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Saskatoon

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Heather Devine: Now these Canadiens were devoted to their families because within Quebec, the fur trade, the military, and the religious complex were all integrated and centrally controlled. It was the custom during the French regime to establish an outpost. You'd have a priest and you'd have your military officers at the same time, and gradually over time it was the practice in Quebec for people to come down and settle in these little settlements, and gradually they'd become, I guess, little carbon-copies of the communities on the St. Lawrence. So what you have happening in this part of the world is you will have voyageurs and Freemen going back to Quebec, bringing their little babies back with them in the canoes to get baptized at their home parishes in Quebec. And the late Mr. Fortier, who used to work at the St. Boniface Historical Society at one time, was compiling a list of the baptisms of all these little babies that were going back in the canoes to get baptized. Because the way these Freemen saw it, their children were part of their home community in Quebec, and many of these men fully intended to go back and retire and settle down there. So these families were part of that larger community.

It was usually the intention of a lot of the British Canadian traders to leave families behind, and what happened then is that eventually those women and children would be protected by Canadian or Métis men, regardless of their ethnic origins. And they would be socialized within a Canadien Métis milieu because if they were labourers they weren't moving up in the Hudson's Bay Company to managerial status, so they were working in a Canadien Métis work environment. Now, just because you have the birth of small "m" métis children doesn't mean they immediately transform into big

“M” Métis with a national identity and collective concerns. Other things have to happen.

As I mentioned before, I mentioned epidemic disease, marital practices, Christianity, and economic conditions in Lower Canada. I'd like to talk about these now. Epidemics. Between 1780 and 1783, there is a devastating smallpox epidemic that goes through Rupert's Land. At that time, this epidemic is believed to have wiped out between half and three quarters of the Ojibwa populations living west and north of Grand Portage. Now, it also wiped out a lot of Cree people as well. And in a final version of this paper I'm going to get those statistics as well. Now, you would say, “Well, yeah, so?” Well, the fact is, this particular epidemic occurs at a very crucial time. It occurs after the Seven Years' War's ended, and it occurs after the American Revolution is over, and people are going back into the fur trade. Now, the Hudson's Bay Company are sleeping by the frozen sea waiting for their Cree and Assiniboine middlemen to bring in furs, and the Cree and Assiniboine middlemen have access to trade goods. They don't need to develop any kin relations with European men. However, if the Canadiens, the French, want to get into the fur trade and compete, they have to establish a wintering relationship with somebody. So if the Cree don't want them and the Assiniboine don't want them and the Blackfoot later on are just not particularly interested in going and trading beaver, how do you do this? Well, as it turns out, the Ojibwa bands after this particular small pox epidemic are devastated. Now, what that allows is the incorporation of outsiders. You start to have shortages of young adult males because they'd been killed by smallpox. It makes it easier for Ojibwa bands to accept outsiders that they once might have spurned.

You have to understand that when a young Canadien engagé comes out there, he can paddle a canoe, he can use snowshoes, he can probably hunt a little bit, but there are many skills he doesn't have. He doesn't have his language skills down, he doesn't know how to fight, he doesn't know the territory, he doesn't know all that stuff. He has to learn it. He's going to be dead weight for a while. He's going to be really useless for a while. And

they're going to have to whip him into shape. So why would they accept somebody who could be a drag on the whole group? They will because he has access to trade goods. They've got a lot of men who've died from smallpox. They need hunters, they need warriors, they need husbands and fathers. So they will take in these guys when they might not have before. Same with some of the Cree bands later on, especially later on when the Hudson's Bay Company is not allowing Cree and Assiniboine middlemen to control everything. The other thing about white guys coming in was that they were outsiders in Ojibwa society. As you know, they have a kinship system and it's based on your membership in patrilineal clans, and the great thing about marrying off a Canadian male to an Ojibwa woman is there was no violation of kinship taboos. He was an outsider. They weren't going to be doing anything incorrect, so he was an acceptable mate. So that helped. And in the 1770s and 1780s, the first of these independent traders make their way from Montreal and begin to establish relations with Native groups. Many of these men formed country marriages with Ojibwa women, and a lot of these particular marriages became the nucleus of Métis communities out here.

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