

The Métis in the 21st Century Conference

June 18-20, 2003

Saskatoon

Day 2, Laliberte Sessions (A)

Heather Devine: (Oh boy. Okay. I'll roll, I'll roll here.) Okay, so you have to understand that the fur traders of all the companies originally discouraged the church from coming out. For one thing, they didn't want an alternative authority to their own out there. And, really, Christianity is incompatible with fur trading. Christianity implies not working on Sundays, staying at one spot to grow crops, which, of course, scares away wild animals, etc, etc, etc. In any case, eventually you do get ministers because of things like Seven Oaks. The liquor traffic had escalated to such an extent that the violence also escalated and things had gotten pretty bad down on the ground. There was way too much liquor abuse. There was way too much violence in families and between groups. Something had to be done. So, reluctantly, both companies permit priests to come out. The problem is the priests and the ministers were only partially successful in their goals. First of all, the priests were asked to Christianize Native people, but they couldn't speak Native languages. This is a problem. So they end up concentrating their efforts on Canadiens and their Métis children who understand French and also have a little bit of prior exposure to Christianity.

Now, what happens as a result of that is that the Métis get all of the attention from the priests, even when Father Belcourt arrives in Pembina. He's a gifted Saulteaux linguist and he is quite capable of converting Native people to Christianity, but he is not interested in going out to Native communities. He believes that Christianization and settlement are the way to go. He believes that you must have a settled community. So what happens is when Belcourt sets up his mission at Baie St. Paul, what happens is that the Métis people there are staying put. They're still going out for their semi-annual buffalo hunts, but they're part of a parish community. Native people,

Saulteaux, are still getting Christianized, they're getting baptized, but they're marrying into that community and they're becoming part of that Métis community. In this case, you've got Indians, Saulteaux, who are being absorbed into the Métis community there. Now, the effect of establishing these missions is that it serves as a locus for the development of Métis communities that are separate and distinct from all the Plains Indian bands outside that are going on seasonal rounds. You have a permanent agricultural settlement with a mission at its heart. It encourages the Métis people that are connected to those places to choose Christian mates from their own communities or they choose Christianized Indian people. Even those Métis who only do a little bit of agriculture and spend most of their time hunting still view those parishes as their permanent home. However, this does not happen in Athabasca in the boreal forest and parkland areas of northern Alberta and northern Saskatchewan. First of all, one of the things that you have happening is that there is a twenty-five year delay for Christian ministers to establish themselves in northern Alberta. 1818, you have the first churches at Red River. You don't get permanent missions in northern Alberta till the 1840s. That's quite a gap. The only thing you have are maybe elderly Canadian engagés teaching their children little Roman Catholic practices. The first priest you get in 1844 and the Protestants come in 1853.

The other impediment to developing a "Métis community," as such, in northern Alberta is an environmental thing. If you've ever been to east central and northern Alberta, it's a parkland-boreal forest traditional zone. Everybody who lives outside Fort Edmonton is involved in the seasonal subsistence round. They're living in small family groups. They're moving around, pursuing game. They have very fluid groups. They get smaller and bigger so that they can incorporate people to help, or if they don't have enough food to go around they can send people away. What is happening is these groups are made up of people of mixed-blood. There are also people who are completely Indian. These groups are intermarrying back and forth, back and forth, and basically they're homogenous culturally and they're an

Aboriginal culture. It's not Métis, it's a mixture. And the ethnic thing is really blurred in this area to the point that when the Treaty 8 people come up, they just let people declare as Métis because some of them don't know if they have European ancestry. They literally do not know. Now, when the missionaries do Christianize hunting bands in the area of Athabasca and northern Alberta, you don't have distinct and separate communities like Indian or Métis. That doesn't happen until later when you get treaties and reserves. The final thing I want to talk about here—and I'm sorry, I know I'm going over, so I really apologize. I'll get through this really fast. It was always the intention of engagés and Freeman to eventually go home to Quebec with their Native families. It was quite acceptable and they just assumed they'd get sucked in and be part of the big family. However, what happens in Quebec is that by 1821 all of the land is gone. The river lots have been divided and subdivided to the point where there's no more left. Then the second thing that happens is young people have to leave, and then you get United Empire Loyalists and people from Britain coming over to live. And pretty soon all the land in Upper and Lower Canada is gone, plus you get an agricultural crisis. So there's nowhere to go. Even if they want to go home to Quebec, they can't because if they try to claim their land as eldest sons or whatever, it's going to put somebody else out in the family. So what happens is these Freeman, they don't go back to Quebec. They don't go back and their Métis children don't get absorbed and become Quebecois or Canadien. They stay back, they stay in western Canada, and they hunt buffalo. They enjoy prosperity and they stay "Métis people." I could go on a lot here, but it's in the paper. But basically it's really a lot of luck and circumstance, and I'll just sum up, again, the presence or absence of European males in the socialization of children, keeping Métis children in Rupert's Land rather than removing them to culturally dominant Euro-Canadian communities back east, a regulating Christian influence in forming families and mission communities as opposed to allowing people to live out in the bush, hunting and gathering versus semi-permanent agriculture, and not being able to go back. That's what I've found has affected the growth of Métis communities.

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