

River Basin. Here, in a forested region five Metis scouts sited a very large camp of Sioux, containing some two thousand warriors. They rode back and warned the main body of the hunting party, who quickly set about turning the convoy into a military barricade. They placed the Red River Carts in a circle, wheel to wheel with the shafts tilted into the air at a forty-five degree angle, facing outward toward the enemy. Packs, hides, saddles and sacks of pemmican were piled between, and under, the carts. The horses and oxen were staked in the center of the circle made by the carts. Trenches were dug just behind the carts for the women and children. Rifle pits and slit trenches were quickly dug a few yards outside the perimeter of the barricade. Here the Metis marksmen awaited the Sioux.

The scouting party who first saw the Sioux returned to the large encampment in the river flat to parlay with their leaders, but they were immediately taken prison. Two of the scouts made a break for freedom, escaping on their swift buffalo runners, dodging through a heavy hail of arrows, punctuated with some rifle fire. The remaining scouts, named Whiteford, McGillis and Malaterre, were pinned down by their captors. Next, three Sioux approached the Metis barricade, insisting that the three captives would be freed in the morning and that the Sioux did not intend to attack. But it was a trick. They only wanted to find out the strength and the lay-out of the Metis encampment.

A Metis council was quickly called, and some hard decisions were made. A decision was made to fight as soon as any Sioux approached again, even though such action would cost the lives of the three prisoners, because failure to do so would result in the annihilation of all. Counting the boys old enough to handle a gun (including Gabriel Dumont) there were seventy-six Metis riflemen in all. These men felt sure that they could not survive a concentrated attack from the Sioux and resolved to sell themselves dearly.

Two runners were dispatched under cover of darkness to inform the main hunting party of their plight. The anxious

night passed slowly into a crimson dawn. As morning broke, a fearsome array of mounted Sioux appeared along the entire crest of the coteau, their spears and guns glinting in the early morning sunlight. In their midst could be seen the three prisoners, hands bound behind their backs, mounted on their own buffalo runners. Thirty Metis rode out with the intention of bargaining for their safe return. But one of the prisoners, young McGillis, suddenly kicked his horse into a headlong gallop. As he joined the mounted Metis, they wheeled and rode hard for the barricade. The Sioux, quickly recovering from the McGillis escape, charged the barricade, circling it as they fired.

Inside the circle, Father LaFleche held high his crucifix, shouting to the Metis marksman, urging them on. Volley after volley, fired with military precision and discipline, stopped the first Sioux charge, delivering heavy casualties. Then the Sioux regrouped and came on again, their war cries flung defiantly against the Metis fire that was cutting so many of them down. This charge too was quickly stopped, and the Sioux withdrew, appalled at their heavy losses.

On the next day, July 14th, the Metis attempted to retreat towards the main party of hunters. In the early hours of the morning the circular barricade was struck and the carts advanced in four columns. But the Sioux gave chase, and another circle was quickly formed with the carts. For five hours the Sioux pressed their attack. As the smoke and dust of battle obscured the landscape, Father LaFleche once more exhorted his charges to die bravely. But, remarkably, they did not die. Instead, they were rescued by the main body of hunters who were by now supported by the Saulteaux, traditional enemies of the Sioux. The whole adventure had cost only one Metis life – that of the unfortunate Malaterre, who was later found with thirty arrows in him. Incredibly, Whiteford too had escaped in the confusion of the first attack.

This obscure battle of the Grand Coteau, with its decisive Metis victory, established new territory for the Metis buffalo hunters, and it helped in great measure to secure the precarious trade route through Sioux territory, to St. Paul.



FREE TRADE: THE RED RIVER CART AND THE SAINT PAUL ROUTE

AFTER THE SAYER TRIAL of 1849, in which the Hudson's Bay Company revealed its inability to enforce its laws against free trade, Metis commerce grew and blossomed in Red River. Sustained by the illicit free trade to St. Paul, a small class of Metis merchants obtained substantial wealth from the trade and formed the economic backbone of the nascent Metis nation in the West. This free trade was much more than a trickle of wealth being drained from the Hudson's Bay Company's monopoly; it was a major economic force that cut deeply into Hudson's Bay Company profits.

Initially, the Hudson's Bay Company used the St. Paul route as an alternative to the difficult and dangerous northern route to Europe via Hudson Bay and the North Atlantic. But the Company feared the USA and continued to rely on the Hudson Bay route as a politically safe, all-British route that enabled the directors to make long-term global plans for the marketing of furs. But for the Metis, the St. Paul route was a blessing. It enabled them to circumvent the stifling commercial monopoly of the Hudson's Bay Company by setting up their own trade in furs and buffalo hides with the American merchants.

From 1849 onward, free trade grew by leaps and bounds. In 1851, 102 Red River carts laden with buffalo hides and furs made the return journey to St. Paul. Six-hundred carts made the journey in 1858, and by 1869, the last year of Metis independence in the West, no less than 2500 carts made their way to St. Paul from Red River.



Red River Carts in St. Paul, 1859.

Photo credit: Minnesota Historical Society

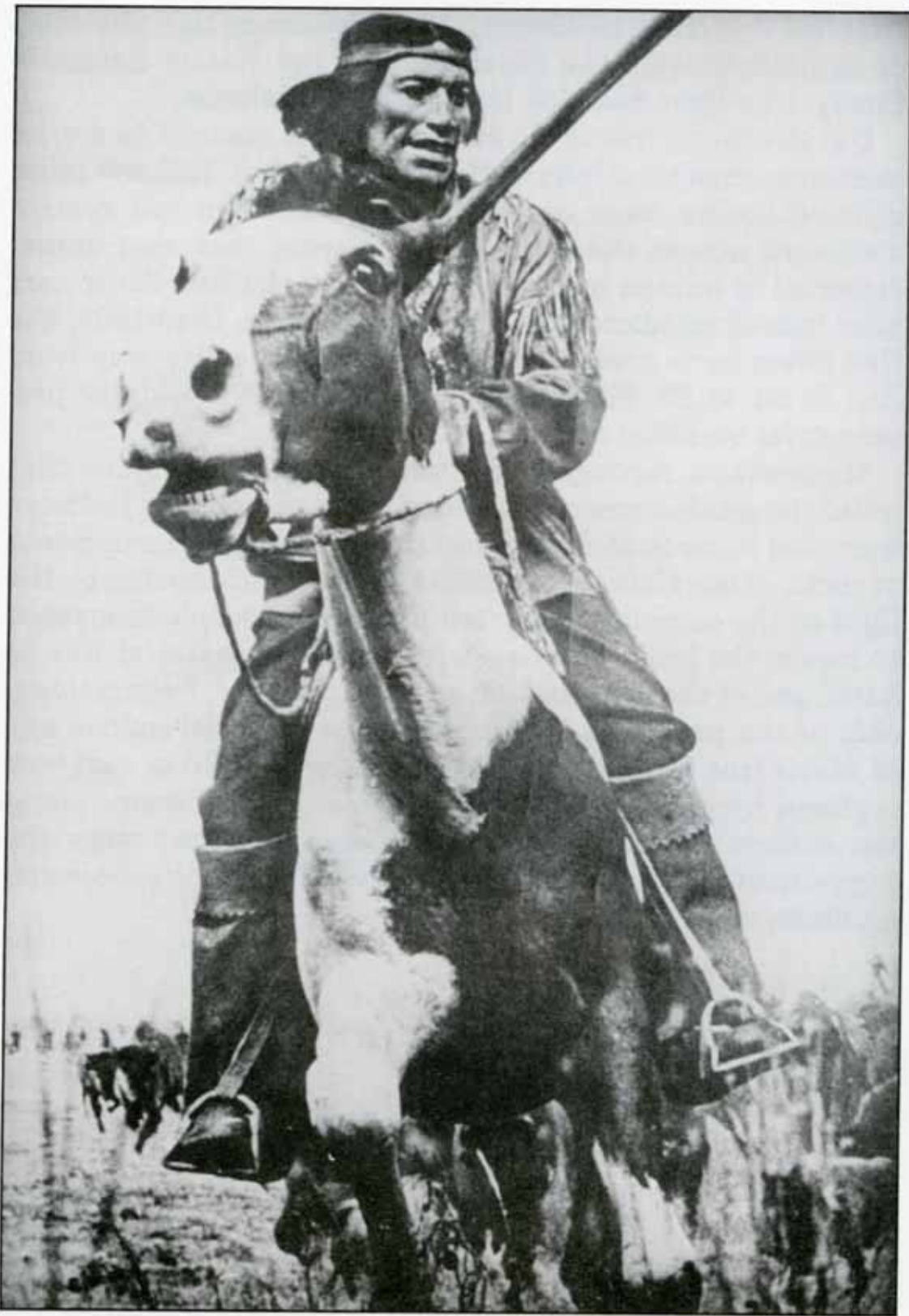
A convoy of Red River carts snaking its way slowly across the prairie was a sight to behold. The carts, made entirely of wood, shrieked with an ear-splitting noise as wooden wheels ground against wooden axles, often lubricated only with fat renderings. In convoys, often as large as several hundred carts, the noise could be heard for miles. The carts were pulled at a snail's pace by huge, lumbering oxen. The driver of the cart was often accompanied by his family, who had to become accustomed to the noise and the clouds of dust.

The Metis (still known by many at the time as Halfbreeds) became so closely associated with the Red River cart that their Indian cousins joked affectionately about them, saying they were "half man and half cart." But the money earned by the cartmen through free trade was no joke. It provided the economic foundation for the Metis nation in the West. Metis families of both Orkney and French ancestry became wealthy

from the free trade movement. Notable among this new class of merchants were the Sinclairs, and the Xavier Letendre family who later founded the village of Batoche.

But the Metis free trade movement was doomed to a brief existence, then total failure. By the 1860s, J. J. Hill and other railroad barons were expanding the American rail system westward across the continent at a rate that was unprecedented in human history. The days of the Red River cart were indeed numbered. But for two decades, 1849-1869, the Red River carts creaked and squealed their noisy way from Red River to St. Paul, financing the last of the idyllic pre-industrial societies of North America.

Metis elders, through their stories, left visions behind that tell of the gentle times connected with the commercial journeys from Red River to St. Paul. They tell of the huge encampments of carts, of the visiting, the fiddle playing and dancing by the light of the campfire. They tell of the way people innovated to repair the broken wheels with whatever material was at hand, and of the co-operation and the gregarious companionship of the people on the journey. But the brief golden age of Metis free trade soon ended, and the Red River cart was replaced by puffing, snorting machines pulling trains along the endless miles of steel rails. These machines were the juggernauts that were soon to roll over the Metis people and an entire way of life.



Metis Buffalo Hunter.

Photo credit: Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature.



THE BUFFALO HUNT

THE METIS OF THE PRAIRIES lived almost entirely from the buffalo. Buffalo provided them with the food staple pemmican, which was so nutritious that virtually no other food supplements were necessary. Buffalo hides supplied much of their clothing, as well as shelter during the nomadic portion of the year when tipis were required. Hunting these huge animals in their enormous herds required a carefully planned strategy and a rigid discipline. Thus a miniature government was formed before the hunt began.

This government, though elected, had absolute control over all aspects of the hunt once it commenced. First, the captain of the hunt was elected. This person, usually an elder, was elected on the basis of his proven ability as a hunter, and as a man of compassion and honesty. Next, lieutenants were elected, one lieutenant for every ten hunters in the party. These elected officers determined the time, place, and direction of the attack on the herds. They were also responsible for deciding how many animals were to be killed. As well, they were responsible for the protection of the hunting party from enemies such as the Sioux and the Blackfeet. These leaders were responsible for the division of the spoils of the hunt among all the people, including the aged and the sick.

A public crier was elected. His duties were to broadcast the rules, orders and recommendations of the council to the people. There were standard rules for the hunt that were universally understood. Although they were never written out, these

"Laws Of The Prairie And Hunting" were an institutionalized part of Metis life. These laws defined crimes and laid out standard punishments for those crimes.

The laws contained orders such as "No person or party to run buffalo before the general order"; and "Every lieutenant, with his men, in turn are to patrol camp and keep guard." Crimes such as theft were rigidly proscribed. Although such crimes were exceedingly rare, they did occur at times. The laws of the prairie dictated that "any person convicted of theft, even to the value of a sinew, is to be brought to the middle of the camp, and the crier is to call out his name three times, adding the word *thief* each time."

The buffalo hunt was a massive community-based event that at times involved nearly 2,000 people. The wives and children of the hunters travelled with them and helped with the skinning and cutting up of the animals. A typical buffalo hunt in 1840 involved 620 hunters, 650 women, 360 children, and required 1210 Red River carts. In addition to the tipis and housekeeping equipment, this expedition carried 740 guns, 150 gallons of gun powder, 1300 pounds of shot, 6240 flints and hundreds of knives, axes and harness sets.

The buffalo hunt was a magnificent spectacle to behold. When the buffalo were sighted, the camp crier rode through the camp, mobilizing the hunters. Then hundreds of riders formed ranks, mounted on their excited buffalo runners – horses that were especially swift and sure-footed. The captains and lieutenants barked commands as the hunting party moved out toward the herd at a brisk canter.

But the buffalo herd also had its captains, and the patriarch of the herd, veteran of many such encounters, had sensed danger even before he had heard the hunter's cries. He snorted with anger. The animals around him quickly sensed his uneasiness and stopped grazing. In a flash, terror spread through the herd, and thousands of the huge animals, as if on signal, started off at full speed across the prairies like an unleashed flood.

Galloping at top speed, the hunters rode alongside the

dangerous flood of animals. The horses plunged ahead, steered by a nudge of their riders' knees as they occupied both hands with rifle and shot. Load and fire. Load and fire. Mortally wounded animals plunged into the dust as horses and riders and thousands of buffalo streamed over and around them. The killing continued, and carcasses littered the prairies for miles behind the dust and thunder of the stampeding herd. Then the signal to stop was given, and the hunters returned to their kills, which were already being processed by the women and children.

Few people today realize the magnitude of these Metis buffalo hunts of the past. Between 1840 and 1850, 4,865,000 buffalo were killed by Metis hunters alone. This slaughter of buffalo provided the economic base for the emerging class of Metis merchants and entrepreneurs who were engaged in illicit free trade to St. Paul, Minnesota. Ironically, leather made from the buffalo hides traded by the Metis to the Americans drove the thousands of miles of belting required by the water-driven machines of the American East. Thus, buffalo hides literally became part of the new industrial system that was soon to replace the old Metis way of life.



LIFE IN RED RIVER

THE RED RIVER SETTLEMENT (now the city of Winnipeg) was for over half a century a name that was synonymous with the fur trade in the West. Indeed, most of the important historical events concerning the fur trade happened in or near Red River.

The Red River settlement was founded at the junction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers in 1812 by Thomas Douglas, the Earl of Selkirk, but the region had been occupied for years prior to this by Metis and Indian employees of the two competing fur trading companies in the West, the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company. Both companies recognized the strategic value of this land. Whoever controlled Red River controlled all the interlocking highways of water from Montreal to Athabasca. Fur trade wars had been fought over the control of this vital region.

When the Selkirk settlers arrived in 1812, they did so not as citizens of Canada, but as a peasantry of the Hudson's Bay Company, whose job it was to lay claim to and settle the vital lands at the forks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers.

Later, after the two warring companies merged in 1821, and peace was returned to Red River, Governor George Simpson of the newly structured monopoly, named after the senior partner, the Hudson's Bay Company, found another important use for Red River. It was to serve as the location for all of the former employees of both companies who had been laid off in 1822 as a result of the merger. Governor Simpson informed his London directors:

It comes to be a serious consideration how these people are to be disposed of. It is both dangerous and expensive to support a numerous population of this description in an uneducated and savage condition, and it would be impolitic and inexpedient to encourage and allow them to collect together in different parts of the country, where they could not be under proper superintendence. The establishment of clergymen and schools at the Red River settlement, where means of religious instruction and education will be afforded them, and where they will be under a regular police and government, by the establishment of Magistrates, under the Act passed last session of Parliament points of the proper mode of disposing of this numerous class of persons.

As the unemployed people from the abandoned North West Company posts were removed to Red River, its population grew until, by 1833, there were just under two thousand people at the settlement.

Red River was not a homogeneous community of pioneers. The community was split along class lines that accurately reflected the ethnic origins of the inhabitants. The former officers of the HBC, men who had also invested in businesses in Montreal and in America, were well off by any standard. In the main, these were the English and the Orkneymen. They had married Native women and now lived in the stately mansions on the banks of the Red River just below the forks. Today, their names are still to be found among the Winnipeg population, names such as Sinclair, Inkster, Tait and Norquay.

Further down the Red River, stretching some four miles along its banks, was the community of Kildonan. Here, on the narrow farms that fronted on the river and stretched two miles back from its banks, lived the reluctant settlers of the region who had been brought in by Lord Selkirk – the Scottish Highlanders. Industrious and steady, these people clung to their old culture. The skirl of the pipes was heard at sunset every evening throughout the short summers, as piper John McLellan

marched in full highland garb around the gallery along the top of the walls of old Fort Garry.

Despite the chiding of the stern Calvinist minister, the Reverend Black, house parties and wedding dances were celebrated with music and drinking, often for two or three days at a time. But even though the Highlanders were successful pioneers who survived and overcame drought, plagues of locusts, crop failures, and floods, they longed, in their poetic souls, for the old homeland from which they had been cruelly evicted. Homespun Red River poetry lamented: "From the lone shieling of the misty island, mountains divide us and waste of seas. But still the blood is strong, the heart is Highland and we in dreams behold the Hebrides."

The French-speaking Metis, like the Highlanders, were less affluent than their English and Orkney officers. The Metis lived along the banks of the Assiniboine River in what is now St. Boniface. Under the strict discipline of Bishop Provencher, the Metis practiced their Catholic religion faithfully. Again like the Highlanders, the Metis were exuberant party-goers whose expertise with the fiddle was often the envy of their Celtic neighbours.

The farms of the Metis, after the fashion of their ancestors along the St. Lawrence, stretched back from a narrow river frontage for two miles. In this way, each family was provided with a share of the wild hay meadows that ran parallel to the river. As well, this system enabled them to share the river frontage that provided water for gardens and gave access to the river highways that were so vital to their way of life.

In the main, the French Metis and the Scottish settlers were congenial neighbours who lived side by side without racial tension. They often celebrated together, and frequently assisted each other in times of need and disaster. Here among the Metis lived John Baptiste Lagimodiere and his wife, Marie Ann. Marie Ann, the first white woman in the Canadian West, was also the grandmother of the famous Louis Riel.

From 1822 to 1869 Red River was home to this rich cultural mix of people who, on the whole, lived in harmony with each

other. Said one resident of Red River, "There is hardly a lock and key, bolt or bar, on any dwelling-house, barn or store amongst us and our windows are . . . without any shutters. We are all like one family." This social harmony was short-lived, however. The social upheaval of 1869-70 turned neighbour against neighbour as the old HBC regime was swept away by the new age.



THE RED RIVER JIG

THE RED RIVER JIG developed within a cultural milieu that was as colorful and dynamic as any in North America – that of the Metis. The Metis culture came into being through, and was nurtured by, the fur trade in Rupert's Land during the two-hundred-year period 1670-1870. There were good reasons for the birth and growth of this high energy, courageous way of life that emerged through the marriage of peoples as different from each other as is possible among the brothers and sisters of the human family.

The Metis culture that developed in Rupert's Land was a symbiosis of the Indian cultures with that of the French and Scots. These Europeans were fur traders who first established a trading relationship with the Indian peoples, and then became blood relatives to them through marriage. Nowhere is the symbiosis of cultures more apparent than in the traditional music and dancing of the Metis. Indeed, the Red River jig presents in an audible and visible way the amalgamation of the rich mixture of the ethnic groups who, together, became the soul of the new Metis Nation.

The Red River Jig was not a highly structured dance. It allowed for some individual variations of the dance steps, although it did have a basic pattern. It consisted of up to thirty different variants of jig steps. It was often the basis of individual dance competitions. Often of a cold winter's eve, people would gather in the log cabin of friends and neighbours, and the inevitable fiddles would be brought out. As the music

grew faster and warmer, one of the merrymakers would take center stage, dancing his best for a time, and then hurling a silent challenge to his friends, he would leave the floor. Now the next dancer would appear, man or woman, elder or child, and give it his (or her) best.

But the jig was not always presented as a challenge, or a competition. Partners danced it as well, circling each other from a distance of some six feet, keeping the body fairly straight, with all the rhythm directed towards the brightly-beaded moccasined feet.

In the intricate steps of the Red River Jig, moccasined feet created patterns of rhythm borrowed a thousand years ago by the Plains Indians from the incredible mating dance of the male prairie chicken, a dance so full of wild and perfect rhythm that once seen can never be forgotten. In the wild skirl of the Metis fiddle the mind's eye can also detect the swirl of kilts and the panorama of brilliant Highland plaids. One can also see the flourish of the full black skirts and the bright homespun shirts of the Quebec *habitants*, as rich and full-bodied in spirit as their homemade maple syrup.

So much social prestige was bound up in one's ability to jig well at Metis social events that tongue-in-cheek stories abound concerning those who sold their souls to Lucifer in return for power to out-fiddle and out-dance all other competitors.

Elements of restraint were introduced into the fiddling and dancing of the Metis by many of the good fathers of the Catholic faith as they ministered to the spiritual needs of the Metis of the North West. Indeed, music and dancing were forbidden altogether during certain holiday seasons such as Christmas, Lent and Easter. But many of the Metis parishioners experienced great difficulty denying themselves these joys over extended periods of time. Thus the happy sounds of the fiddle continued to be heard in the dark of the night, despite the religious ban. A priest was heard to say in exasperation, "Ah, these Metis parishioners – they are half Indian, half French, and they are half devil. We must take their fiddles from them, we will return them only when the holiday season is over."

But for the Metis the sound of fiddle music could not be turned off. Shortly after the last fiddle had been confiscated, music was heard again in the dark of the night. The tone was a bit askew, with a little higher pitch, even a hint of a screech – but the rhythm was as impassioned as ever. It was coming from homemade fiddles. And so the music of Old Red River survived the scrutiny of the good fathers, and it persists to this very day. It survived two world wars and the loss of most traditional music when country music was transplanted to the commercial city markets during the 1950s. It survived rock and roll and the period of punk. Today, it is more alive than ever.



THE RIEL FAMILY OF RED RIVER

LOUIS RIEL, the charismatic Metis leader of the 1870 and the 1885 resistance movements in the West, was the product of a dynamic but tragic Metis family of Red River. The Riel family's history began in the province of Quebec. Louis Riel's grandmother was Marie Ann Lagimodiere, the woman credited with having the first white child in the Canadian West. Marie Ann Gaboury was born into a staunchly religious and hard-working habitant family who farmed a plot of land on the north shore of the St. Lawrence River.

Marie Ann was a headstrong woman who was attracted to the free-wheeling *coureurs de bois* rather than to those steady but boring young swains, the serfs of the seigneurial system in Quebec. At twenty-five, she was still unmarried, a fact that caused tongues to wag in her native village, and she was consequently a source of much discomfort and worry for her parents.

At twenty-six, Marie Ann married Jean Baptiste Lagimodiere, an exuberant *coureur de bois*, but unlike her more passive female peers, she refused to sit waiting month after month for her lover to return from the rivers and forests. So, despite the fears and trepidations of everyone, including Baptiste, her new husband, she went west with him on the long and dangerous canoe voyage to the Red River country. Her first child, a girl whom she named Reine (Queen) was born in a tent while she was accompanying her husband on the trail. The birth was handled by gentle Cree midwives, who so

Louis Riel Family



Louis David Riel

Credits: RCMP Museum

Marguerite Riel

Public Archives of Canada



Jean and Marie Angelique Riel.

Photo Credit: Saskatchewan Archives Board

impressed her with their warmth and kindness that she became their life-long friend, eventually returning to live with them when her husband died many years later.

Julie Lagimodiere was born years later, just another child in a large family among the Metis of Red River. When she grew up she married a dashing young French Metis named Jean-Louis Riel. Jean-Louis Riel was from a relatively wealthy background. He had been sent to Quebec for his education, as was the custom for the sons of the local petit bourgeoisie of Red River. Julie, however, was illiterate, since women's education was deemed an unnecessary luxury.

Jean-Louis entered studies for the priesthood in Quebec, but during his years of study he became acquainted with the revolutionary political ideas of Louis Joseph Papineau, who, together with William Lyon Mackenzie, initiated the rebellion in Upper and Lower Canada in 1837. When Jean-Louis Riel returned to Red River, he did so as a radical free trade proponent. But Jean-Louis was also an inventor and innovator. He constructed the first mill at Red River. Almost singlehandedly, he dug a 15-kilometer canal to obtain additional water for his water-driven mill situated on the bank of the vapid Sein River, a small tributary of the Red River.

The Riel family prospered, since Jean-Louis was not only a miller, but also a subsistence farmer and a free trader doing business with the American merchants in St. Paul. Like his father, young Louis Riel was sent to Quebec at age fourteen to study.

Louis, one of the oldest in a family of eight children, had been a precocious child who excelled as a student in Red River. He arrived at the Petit Seminaire de Montreal in 1858 to begin ten years of study. During this period he missed his family and his community. He was known as a lonely, sensitive and deeply anguished youth, especially after he received word of his father's untimely death in 1864. Jean-Louis died tragically on his twentieth wedding anniversary, leaving Julie and eight children behind.

Louis returned to Red River in 1868. Like his father, he had

abandoned the priesthood for politics. In 1870 he was banished to Montana for his political activity in Red River. His sister Marie died of influenza in 1873, and his brother Charles died of the same disease in 1874. Louis, unable to return, had to mourn their deaths from afar. Two of his sisters were afflicted with tuberculosis, and one, a nun, is rumoured to have died after a fall down a flight of stairs. The family's tragedy was compounded when its small fortune disappeared, as the Riel family became the victims of political persecution.

During his period of banishment, Louis married Marguerite Monet, a petite Metis from Montana who was seventeen years his junior. Marguerite was a slim, sickly woman who nevertheless bore him two children, Jean, in 1881, and Angelique, in 1883. In 1886, Marguerite died of tuberculosis, exacerbated by severe emotional trauma, brought on by the execution of her husband on November 16, 1885. The delicate Angelique died of diphtheria at age fourteen, in 1897.

Jean, the last surviving member of the Louis Riel family, was a handsome young man who resembled his father. Standing over six feet tall, and with a slim build, he was eagerly sought after by the women of Quebec, where he received his education. Jean married a Quebec woman named Laura Casult, and returned to Red River in 1908. But Jean was involved in a buggy accident in May of that year. The accident did not seem serious, but by June he knew that he was dying. He wrote to Honore Jaxon, an old compatriot of his father who was living in Chicago, asking him to write the true story of his beloved father. This had been a task that Jean Riel had set for himself, but he knew that he would never be able to complete it. He died a few days later, at the age of twenty-six. He was buried in the St. Boniface Cathedral cemetery, near his father. Thus, the Riel family who had provided two of the greatest of the Metis leaders, has left no progeny for posterity.



LOUIS RIEL: RETURN TO RED RIVER

LOUIS RIEL completed his studies in Montreal in 1865. He was then twenty-one years old. He had not entered into the priesthood as had been anticipated by his mother; he had instead fallen in love with a petite blonde woman named Marie Guernon. He had also taken a keen interest in politics, despite the warnings of the Ultramontanist teachers of the Petit Seminaire de Montreal.

Louis and Marie had planned to marry, but when his intentions were published in the Church of The Holy Infant, Marie's parents raised such objections to their daughter marrying a Metis that the young couple was forced to part. Remorseful and bitter, Riel left Montreal in 1866 for Chicago. There he joined a colony of expatriate French-Canadian artists and poets, among them Louis Frechette, with whom he lived during his stay in Chicago. But Riel, unlike his affluent French-Canadian friends, had to earn a living. So he moved on to St. Paul, Minnesota, where he worked until July of 1868. Then the urge to see Red River again overtook him, and he left for St. Joseph, where he caught the steamer to St. Boniface.

He arrived in St. Boniface in the early morning hours of July 28th, 1868. He was not, however, dressed in the robes of a priest as had been originally planned. Young and well-educated, Riel was imbued with a strong sense of pride in himself and in his people. But he still hurt from his love affair with Marie – a love that had been denied him by her parents simply because he was Metis. During that summer of 1868, Riel was

a dynamic mixture of youthful vitality and idealism, tinged with the sadness of having recently been the victim of racial discrimination on an intensely personal level. Now he was home – broke and unemployed.

There was a joyful reunion with his mother and family, but it was bittersweet. His father, Jean-Louis, whom he had always adored and looked up to, had died during Louis' ten-year absence. There had been other significant changes in Red River. Speculators, land agents, entrepreneurs – and some settlers – had poured into Red River from Ontario. Unlike the old Selkirk settlers who had gotten along well with the Metis, these new Canadians were often rude, and seemed ruthlessly ambitious. They lived in a new village across the river from St. Boniface. It had for a short period been called McDermotstown, but was now called Winnipeg.

Winnipeg was growing in size daily. Frame buildings with square fronts were emerging on each side of the wide, often muddy streets. In the village of Winnipeg, the taverns of Hugh O'Lone and M. Monchamp quenched the thirst of the Metis tripmen and buffalo hunters as well as the Yankee traders and American deserters from the Indian wars. As well, there were Canadian traders and miners filling the streets and saloons at night, partying, roistering, and getting into fist-fighting melees.

There was also a newspaper in Winnipeg, the *Nor'Wester*, owned by a well-educated but obnoxiously ambitious man named John Christian Schultz. Despite his education, Schultz was a brawler who would not hesitate to use might over reason as a means of obtaining his personal goals. The *Nor'Wester* advocated an end to the Hudson's Bay Company's regime, and pushed for the settlement and development of the region. Schultz equated the Metis with the Company, in that he felt they were both part and parcel of an outmoded system, and he was as hard on the Metis as he was on the Company in his editorials. His Masonic affiliations also added a zealous traditional anti-Catholic and anti-French component to his political leanings.

In fact, Red River, just behind its boisterous, brawling frontier facade, was a hotbed of political intrigue. Schultz and a small powerful cadre of speculators and merchants were pushing for a union with Canada. James Wicks Taylor and other American agents were provoking unrest and pushing for union with the United States. The powerful block of French-Metis who still provided for the basic economic needs of Red River were just awakening to their own ethnic, cultural and national potential. All they needed was a leader in a traditional Metis style – strong, charismatic.

When Riel stepped off the steamer at St. Boniface in the cool pre-dawn hush of July 28, 1868, he was stepping into destiny. His family tradition, his education and his forceful personality were made to order for his inevitable role – that of the political leader of the Metis people during their most critical historical period.



THE NATIONAL POLICY AND WESTERN DISCONTENT

“WESTERN DISCONTENT” is a phrase that is as old as Canadian confederation, perhaps even older. Western discontent did not begin with the prairie farmers during their struggle against the federal government, the grain companies and eastern businessmen; Western discontent preceded the early populist farm movements that fought these bogeymen from the turn of the century until World War II began. It was, rather, the Red River Rebellion of 1869-70 that was the first political manifestation of western resistance to the federal government’s plans for the exploitation of the prairie West.

The government’s plans to colonize the West were spelled out clearly and precisely in the policy statements of Sir John A. MacDonald’s Conservative government shortly after it brought in confederation. The federal government’s informal plans for the settlement of the West were developed during the decades preceding confederation. They were formalized and became the basis for the settlement of the West in 1879. These plans became known as the National Policy.

Central to the goals of the confederation plan was the creation of an agricultural colony in the Canadian West. Eastern Canadian industry, protected from foreign competition through a system of high tariffs, could expand in a lucrative captive market – the prairie West. Capital would be generated in the West to finance eastern Canada’s entry into the industrial revolution that had already taken place in both England and the United States. This plan would require a good deal of

capital, however. A transcontinental railway would have to be built, European immigrants would be brought in, and a new staple product, wheat, would replace the old fur staple of Rupert's Land.

The West would be denied the right to establish local responsible governments, and would be systematically underdeveloped in much the same way as Rupert's Land had been during the Hudson's Bay Company's 200-year regime. Local industry would not be allowed to flourish. Farmers would be forced to buy their machinery from eastern manufacturers at exorbitant prices, protected by a system of tariffs. As well, Canadian banks and merchants would earn fortunes from land speculation and, later, through the grain marketing system.

Initially, any form of responsible government, including the granting of provincial status, was to be denied to the citizens of the prairie West. The original land settlement policies were designed to benefit a small national elite made up of eastern businessmen and friends of the federal Conservative government.

The colonization scheme originally adopted by the Conservative government that ushered in confederation was designed to benefit the colonization companies, not the immigrants who were brought in by them. Vast amounts of land were granted to favoured people by the federal government. In this way, a friendly elite was to be established in the West that would support the federal government in its efforts to prevent the creation of responsible government in the West. But the struggle for responsible government came prematurely, upsetting the federal government's plans for setting the West up as a totally dependent colony.

The Metis of Red River, who had not even been considered part of the new social order following confederation, turned out to be a far more sophisticated people than had been anticipated. When the Hudson's Bay Company sold Rupert's Land to Canada for £300,000 in 1869, the federal government was shocked to discover that the Metis had plans of their own for entering confederation – as a self-governing people who were

ready to take up arms if necessary to achieve recognition through provincial status.

The Red River Rebellion was the outcome of this conflict, and although it did not provide long-term benefits for the Metis, it did benefit the West by forcing the federal government to grant provincial status to Manitoba far sooner than would otherwise have been the case.



1869-1870: THE ROOTS OF CONFLICT

OUR HISTORY BOOKS suggest that the “Red River Rebellion” of 1869-70 was a response to specific grievances that centered around the question of Metis land entitlement. But this is only partially true. The years 1869-70 marked the end of one major historical epoch for Western Canada, and the beginning of another, lasting to the present time.

Never was the division between two major historical periods more clearly marked. Both epochs were simple variations of a common process, however: the process of colonialism, with its structured underdevelopment. From 1670 to 1870, Rupert’s Land was kept as an underdeveloped colony of Great Britain. Its purpose as a colony was to deliver one staple commodity to the international marketplace: fur. After 1870, the West was set up as an underdeveloped colony of the industrial centres in Ontario and Quebec. Its purpose was also to deliver one staple commodity to the international marketplace: wheat.

In order to facilitate the economic exploitation of the western regions, the HBC, and later the Canadian government, opted to deny the citizens of the West the right to establish their own governments. This worked well enough under the old HBC regime. The Council of Assiniboia, a local colonial administration appointed by the HBC governor, was not designed to even resemble responsible government. The free trade revolution ended its effective control in 1849, but the governor and his councillors remained as the titular heads of the colony until 1869, when Riel and his Metis government took over Red River.

The Metis, a people who came into being as a workforce for the fur trade, had learned some valuable lessons about the colonization process. During the final phase of the old HBC regime, the Metis became involved in a struggle for free trade and responsible government, which culminated in 1849 in their successful free trade movement. The free trade struggle produced the necessary leadership to carry the Metis forward into the battle for responsible government when Canada once again attempted to turn the West into an economic colony after 1869.

The lessons learned by the Metis intellectual Jean-Louis Riel through the free trade movements of the 1840s and 50s were passed on to his son Louis "David" Riel. Furthermore, free trade had generated the economic basis of Metis nationalism and of Metis nationhood. It had produced a small merchant class and a small intellectual elite who fuelled and fanned the fires of Metis nationalism.

When the federal government attempted to impose its will on the West in 1869, it came into conflict with a small nation in embryonic form that was just beginning to form its own political and judicial institutions. Small wonder the situation broke into open conflict.

The historical explanations given for this conflict merely touched the surface. True, government surveyors and land speculators trampled over Metis rights by surveying Metis lands before Rupert's Land had been officially transferred to Canada. True, the crops had failed in 1868, and the buffalo hunt had failed as well, threatening the people with starvation. But these events were merely the catalysts that brought the bitter lessons of history home to the people, turning latent forces into active conflicts. Louis Riel was not the author of these conflicts, only an instrument of their resolution.



LOUIS RIEL STOPS THE SURVEYORS

THE FIRST TANGIBLE EVIDENCE the Metis of Red River had of the federal government's intentions came not from politicians or diplomats, but from land surveyors. In the summer of 1869, Metis farmers working in their fields were shocked to see Canadian surveyors trespassing across their fields, surveying their property. This arrogant act was being carried out in the absence of any communication with the Metis whose lands were being invaded.

Indeed, the region was still under the official control of the Hudson's Bay Company. Although secret negotiations for the transfer of Rupert's Land to Canada were under way, the Canadian surveyors had no legal right to survey lands in Red River. Title for the whole of Rupert's Land was originally scheduled to be transferred to Canada by October 1, 1869. But the transfer was delayed until December 1, when Canada officially purchased the territory for £300,000. Yet throughout the summer and early fall of 1869, parties of surveyors had been working with impunity throughout the Red River district.

Needless to say, their unexplained presence on Metis lands created high levels of anxiety among the people. The surveyors' actions soon became the only topic of conversation in Metis homes and at social events, but no one knew for sure what their purposes were.

The Metis knew who their new governor was to be: a man named William McDougall. In fact, by October of 1869, McDougall was in Pembina, a small American community just

south of Red River. McDougall was preparing to make an entry into the territory before it had been officially ceded to Canada.

McDougall, who had negotiated the transfer of Rupert's Land from the Hudson's Bay Company, had not even bothered to consult with the people who lived in the territory. It was McDougall who had sent in the surveyors under John A. Snow, his chief agent. Snow, in turn, had given orders to the Chief Surveyor, Colonel John Stoughton Dennis, to go ahead with the survey. But Dennis had aligned himself with Charles Mair and John Christian Schultz. These were the leaders of the militant group of land speculators who hoped to cash in through the acquisition of Metis lands once Canada acquired the territory from the Hudson's Bay Company. But the cadre of Metis intellectuals in Red River was aware of most of the intrigues emanating from this speculators' network.

The Metis of Red River had for decades been a well-organized people, for the buffalo hunt had demanded organization and discipline. But these were new and complex times. What was needed was an intellectual who could understand the new complexities and take bold action in an appropriate way to safeguard the properties and the political interests of the Metis people.

Louis Riel was already respected as an intellectual. But until October, Riel had not proven himself to the people as a man of action. Then, on October 11, Riel's cousin André Nault stopped a party of Canadians who were surveying on his land. He challenged the party, denying them further access to his property.

The survey boss, a man named Jack Webb, became belligerent. Nault retreated to seek help from his neighbours. They called upon Riel for advice. Riel led the small group of neighbours back across the field, to where the surveyors were working. He quietly requested that they stop the survey. Webb refused. Riel placed his foot on the survey chain that lay stretched across the ground. The others fell in behind him, each with a foot placed firmly on top of the chain. The survey