

CHAPTER THREE

Metis Settlements

in the North West Territories

Under the terms of the Manitoba Act of 1870, 1.4 million acres in Manitoba were set aside for the extinguishment of Metis and Halfbreed aboriginal land claims. This allotment of land was described by a Conservative member of Parliament in Ottawa during discussions on the act as a necessary sacrifice of a few acres of land to the Natives in Manitoba, in order to secure the remaining ninety-nine percent. This, he said, was a great deal cheaper than the alternative, which was sending in an army to conquer the Natives.¹

By 1870, the first Canadian government had learned many valuable lessons from the American frontier experience. American attempts at the military extermination of the Plains Indians were both crude and expensive. Having just finished a civil war, the Americans had turned the force of its army against the Indians of the West. Canada, on the other hand, simply did not have and could not afford to maintain a large standing army. Perhaps the most valuable lesson learned from the American experience was that the use of scrip (negotiable paper notes) was a peaceful and expedient method of extinguishing aboriginal claims in the West.

Following the American pattern, the Canadian government began using scrip to extinguish the land claims of the mixed bloods of Manitoba. The scrip system ensured that the land obtained by the mixed bloods would quickly pass into the hands of the Canadian chartered banks and land speculators. Adams Archibald, the first lieutenant governor of Manitoba, in a letter written in 1870, described how scrip, issued as extinguishment of mixed-blood claims, would free up lands for resale to the banks and land development companies.²

Under the terms of the Manitoba Act, aboriginal land claims of the Metis and Halfbreed population of the new province were deemed to be "extinguished" through the simple expediency of the issuing of scrip.

Most of the scrip issued to the Metis in Manitoba was quickly purchased by the chartered banks and land speculators for a fraction of its face value. The

federal government's Department of the Interior appointed scrip commissioners to generally administer the scrip-purchasing procedures. But department officials turned a blind eye to the blatant breaking and circumventing of regulations by speculators and bankers. The department was not a disinterested party in the scrip affair: scrip tended to take ownership of land away from the people and place it legally into the hands of speculators and bankers. Often wrapped in the verbiage of patriotism, the scrip transactions of the bankers and speculators earned them a fortune at the expense of the Metis and Halfbreed people of Manitoba. The speculators and bankers were the real beneficiaries of the scrip plan.

W. F. Alloway and H. T. Champion were two soldiers who came west with Colonel Garnet Wolseley's military expedition. These two soldiers stayed on as speculators after the provisional government was displaced by the Canadian military in 1870. They speculated heavily in Metis and Halfbreed scrip, earning such phenomenal profits that they soon entered the banking business themselves. By 1879, they had established the banking firm of Alloway and Champion in Winnipeg which merged with the Canadian Bank of Commerce in 1919.³

Ironically, the Natives who benefitted most from scrip were the English-speaking Halfbreeds. Having had a recent history as sedentary, subsistence-level agriculturalists and part-time labourers for the old HBC, the Halfbreeds were more prepared culturally for the changes that occurred after 1870 than were the Metis. The Metis buffalo hunters and fur traders, had had little experience as settled farmers. In 1870, the Metis still equated life associated with buffalo hunting with freedom. More like the Plains Indians in their lifestyle, the Metis were far less prepared than their Halfbreed cousins were to enter the new wheat economy as commercial farmers.

In response to the harsh treatment received at the hands of Wolseley's troops after the unopposed invasion of Red River, and as a result of having lost their land and money scrip, the Metis began an exodus from Manitoba to the North West Territories (now Saskatchewan and Alberta). On these unfenced plains, they hoped to follow the way of life that they had pursued for the previous hundred years.

The new Metis communities that developed in the North West Territories were similar to those they had vacated in Manitoba. As was the case in Manitoba, the new communities were built along the banks of a mighty river. They too developed from an economy based upon buffalo hunting and subsistence-level farming. However, the new communities springing up along the River were designed so that subsistence-level agriculture had a more important role to play in the economy. As a result, the Metis settled the most fertile of the river valleys in the territories to the west of Manitoba. Many settled at Qu'Appelle, and a few settled in Willow Bunch, in what is now southern Saskatchewan.

The most important Metis settlements, however, were located near the branches of the North and South Saskatchewan Rivers, at St. Laurent and St. Antoine de Padou (now Batoche). The Metis settled here in large numbers, recreating the life that they had known before the Canadian takeover of old Red River.

The Metis villages were similar to each other, each consisting of a church, a parish residence, perhaps a store, and usually a few other residences or businesses. Homes were scattered along the banks of the river, stretching for a few miles up- and downstream from the centres of the settlements. Each home was also a farm, which stretched back from the river-front in the long, narrow pattern which their predecessors of Red River had used. This method of landholding was particularly well suited to the Metis economy of the North Saskatchewan River because it allowed each settler some river frontage, providing a source of transportation as well as the necessary water for gardens, livestock and the households. As well, it distributed among the settlers an equal share of the wild hay meadows that usually ran parallel to the river. Most of the Metis eventually cleared some land, usually no more than an acre or two for a garden and for growing feed for the livestock. As long as the buffalo were plentiful on the northern plains, a small plot of cleared land was all that each Metis family needed.

Most Metis families lived in plain log houses built painstakingly from poplar logs squared off with an axe and peeled of bark to prevent rotting. A Metis house usually consisted of one large room with a plain plank floor. The exterior was usually painted white with bright trimmings around windows and doors. The Metis lived well enough in their new settlements in the territories. As was the case in Red River, these Metis of the western plains enjoyed a social life that mixed the tribalism of their Cree mothers with the *joie de vivre* of their voyageur fathers. The Metis of the northern districts loved to party and dance their mixture of Indian and Scottish dances. Their many parties and social events, accompanied by the sound of their homemade fiddles, helped to pass the long winter months. The Metis were also deeply religious. The Catholic Church was not only the centre of their religious and social life, but also provided their only form of institutionalized learning.⁴

The fertile lands at the branch of the Saskatchewan River had been familiar to Metis buffalo hunters for generations prior to the establishment of the permanent settlements. This was the winter home of large herds of buffalo which grazed the treeless southern prairies during the summer months and migrated to the northern river valleys for the winter. Gabriel Dumont, renowned Metis buffalo hunter and prestigious political leader, had long been impressed by the beauty and natural bounty of this country. The area was rich in fur and game animals. Lush and green in the summer months, it usually enjoyed a bountiful rainfall. Thick green meadows were nurtured by a rich,

black soil capable of supporting crops much better than could the light arid land to the south. Gently rolling hills, covered with a profusion of pine, poplar and birch trees, provided shelter from the prairie winds as well as an abundance of logs for building purposes and plentiful firewood for the long winter months.

However, it was not only the beauty or even the natural bounty of the district that attracted the Metis to the forks of the mighty Saskatchewan River. Three men, representing three divergent, perhaps irreconcilable world views, attracted the Metis to the area. They were Gabriel Dumont, hunter-warrior of the Metis nation; Lawrence Clarke, chief factor of the HBC's Fort Carlton; and, Father André, a member of the arch-conservative Oblate Order of the Roman Catholic Church. These three people embodied the material reality of conflicting political and economic factions and institutions that together provided the loose fabric of the Metis society that was developing in the Northwest.

Lawrence Clarke was a remarkably complicated character. He was born in 1832 into a wealthy family in County Cork, Ireland. He spent a brief period as a supervisor of Irish indentured labour in the West Indies. He then entered the service of the HBC, working for several years in the Peace River and Athabasca districts. A well-educated and ambitious man, he was soon transferred to Fort Carlton where he became chief factor. Clarke loved public speaking and enjoyed political and intellectual exchanges with other educated men of the North West Territories. He frequently made the fifty-mile trip from Fort Carlton to Prince Albert to participate in debates and lectures with the local Learned Society. As well as being renowned as a public speaker and an intellectual, Clarke was noted as a philanthropist who could be counted on to contribute generously to any worthy cause. As a result of his popularity and prestige, he eventually became the first elected representative to sit on the North West Council. Clarke was married to a Halfbreed woman from the powerful McKay family, a family with a long tradition of loyal support to the HBC and the Conservative party. Respected locally by the Metis, Clarke nevertheless represented the rear guard of the two-hundred-year-old mercantile empire of the company. As such, he was a master of its policies in dealing with the Indians and Metis.⁵

Father André, a native of Brittany, France, spent most of his life among the Metis in the West, and it was he who, more than any other priest, controlled the politics and world view of the Metis living along the Saskatchewan River. André was noted as a staunch proponent of the ultramontane doctrine within the Church.⁶ It was his adherence to this conservative doctrine that aligned him to the most conservative political forces, locally and in Ottawa.

Although history has largely ignored Gabriel Dumont, he was nevertheless an incredibly powerful man politically, and he contributed much to the

development of the North West Territories. He was, for most of his life, the epitome of the Metis buffalo hunter. He was renowned for his skill as a horseman, for his knowledge and bravery as a warrior and for his honesty and generosity as a leader. Although he could neither read nor write, he spoke six Native languages as well as French. When still little more than a youth, Dumont had been engaged in the battle of the Grand Coteau against the Sioux Indians of the Central Plains. During this battle a small band of Metis hunters defeated a large party of Sioux.⁷ This significant battle solidified the Metis position in the West as the masters of the buffalo hunt, since it ensured their continued access to the buffalo of the central plains.

In the late 1860s, Dumont decided to settle in the northern district at the branch of the Saskatchewan River with his wife. It was largely through Dumont's influence that the Metis from Red River moved to the North West Territories after 1870. But important as Gabriel Dumont was to the founding of the Metis communities in the North West Territories, the importance of the role of the priests in establishing the communities cannot be underestimated. The Metis village of St. Laurent was first a Catholic mission, established twenty-five miles from the HBC's Fort Carlton in the spring of 1871. The Metis built a log house for the priests, and fifty families soon settled around the mission.

On December 31, 1871, in the winter camp of the Metis a few miles south of the settlement, a Metis council was elected to govern the village. Gabriel Dumont was not elected to the council. But Lawrence Clarke was elected chairman, Father André was elected secretary and a Metis named Joseph Emilin was elected vice-chairman.⁸ Lawrence Clarke spoke eloquently at this meeting, describing how the Metis could create a thriving settlement either near or at Fort Carlton. He decried the nomadic way of life now that the buffalo were becoming scarce, arguing that the Metis should settle down at St. Laurent and become educated instead of hunting buffalo. He described how the Metis could begin the transition from the old life of the hunter to the new life of the permanent settler. The Metis, he said, "would have three resources for making a remunerative livelihood, one or both failing, they would have the other to fall back upon — the prairie, the farm, the freighting."⁹

Clarke was supported by Father André, who wished to see the Metis settle down so that the church could exert more influence over them than was previously possible. André reminded those present at the meeting that Clarke had contributed generously to the Catholic mission by contributing a fine church bell. Clarke's words were welcomed by the Metis elders who were present, including Isidore Dumont, Gabriel Dumont's uncle, who also spoke at the meeting. Isidore Dumont said that the buffalo were becoming scarce and that the Metis could no longer depend upon them for their livelihood. He agreed that the Metis should settle down on their river-front lots near Fort

Carlton and take up subsistence-level farming as a means of survival. The cash they acquired as cartmen and labourers for the HBC could be used to ease their entry into the new commercial farming system. In the meantime, they could continue to hunt the buffalo until they disappeared from the prairie. Isidore Dumont said he had been all his life a hunter. He could remember when herds of buffalo covered the prairies from the foot of the Rocky Mountains to Fort Garry. Now they were only to be found in the region of the Saskatchewan, and as the country became settled they would disappear even from there. He was an old man and could tell the young people that the decision to farm was good. They must do like other white men and cultivate the ground, or they must live and die like Indians.¹⁰

The settlement of St. Laurent was established as a direct result of the plans made during the meeting held on December 31, 1871. The Metis took up subsistence-level farming with an enthusiasm that both pleased and surprised Father André. As a result of the community's success, which was based upon the three complementary economies described by Lawrence Clarke, St. Laurent grew rapidly. By 1872 some 250 families had formed a permanent colony at St. Laurent.¹¹

On January 15, 1872, Lawrence Clarke wrote to the company's chief commissioner, Donald A. Smith. In his letter, Clarke clearly revealed the true nature of his involvement in the founding of a permanent Metis settlement near Fort Carlton. Describing the large population of Metis who were settling in St. Laurent, he wrote:

As carriers for the northern districts, it will ensure us a reliable source from which we can draw all freighters we may require, and as the settlement increases in population, so will competition arise amongst them for fuller employment in this their favourite occupation, and enable us to reduce the rates of freight to the minimum standard.¹²

Clarke went on to describe to his superior how this cheaply contracted labour force could soon replace two-thirds of the company's permanent staff:

We will save hundreds of Pounds in oxen, carts, harness and thus be enabled to reduce our staff of employees to a third of our present force and thus diminish our expenditure by the lowest calculation two thousand Pounds sterling per annum.¹³

Clearly, Clarke was applying to the Metis labour force at Fort Carlton the process that had proven so successful for the HBC at Red River. Clarke was using the Metis surplus population to drive down wages as more and more people had to compete for scarce jobs. His plan was to eventually replace two-thirds of the HBC's northern permanent work force with "temporary," or contractual, Metis labour.

In all of this, Clarke was following standard HBC methods and procedures. Years earlier, Governor Simpson had set up the Metis community of Red River for precisely the same reasons. The company had learned that a “free” labour force was cheaper to maintain than its traditional indentured labour force. With people working on a contract basis, the company could simply lay off workers during the quiet season and rehire them as required during busy times. Further, by obtaining small plots of land for its work force, the company could set them up in subsistence farming, so that eventually — as competition increased with immigration — the work force could be paid, not with cash, but with trade goods. Thus, the HBC could exploit them to the limit without starving them, since they could grow their own food on their small farms. An added benefit, from the HBC’s perspective, was the fact that the population would be dependent on the company for its supplies of everyday necessities. The Metis population of St. Laurent would be, insofar as it was in the company’s power, a captive work force and a captive market.

There were other advantages for the HBC as well: for example, the Metis workers could be used as middlemen to buy furs from the Indians, who might otherwise sell them in Manitoba, where competition had driven up the prices paid to the trappers. The HBC had thus established an effective regional monopoly by creating the settlement at St. Laurent. Finally, it was the Metis buffalo hunters alone who provided the company with pemmican, the food staple that had been so necessary throughout the fur-trading epoch, and was still as essential to its operations as ever.

At first glance, the Metis might appear to have been a passive populace shaped and directed by company schemers on the one hand, and by the church on the other. Nevertheless, the idea of moving to the settlement of St. Laurent made good sense. Here, the Metis could continue to hunt buffalo until the buffalo died out. At the same time, the Metis hoped to receive title to the lands they occupied. With the capital which they hoped to earn as workers for the HBC, they might eventually purchase the necessary machinery to move from subsistence farming into viable commercial farming.

The village of St. Laurent developed, then, because the needs of the Metis for capital and land coincided with the HBC’s need for cartmen and suppliers of pemmican. Yet, fortunate as the situation appeared to be at the outset, conflict between the Metis and the company soon arose, particularly as buffalo became harder to find.

By 1872, Clarke’s plans for the acquisition of a cheap labour force were working well in the northern districts. Because of the influx of people, business was booming for the HBC at Fort Carlton. The increase in the Metis population had, as expected, reduced Metis wages. As well, the HBC monopoly over supplies was benefitting the company. Clarke wrote to his superiors: