

Fringes on Metis Clothing

By Lawrence Barkwell

Fringed and beaded buckskin jackets, coats, and shirts, became a status symbol on the plains of the Old Northwest. Fringing was usually applied across the back yoke, on the shoulders and down the length of the sleeves. These were favoured by Army and Police officers, traders, Army Scouts and of course tourists to the Old West. Notable examples are General George A. Custer, Buffalo Bill Cody, Annie Oakley, and Theodore Roosevelt.



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The Hudson Bay blanket wool capotes were also heavily fringed. A Capote or 'Capot crait-rien' was a knee-length wool jacket with a hood. It was made out of a single HBC blanket, and was most commonly tied around the waist with a Métis sash.

Fringes serve a number of practical purposes. The swinging movement of fringes repels mosquitoes and black flies. Fringes were often called “waterfalls” because they served to divert rainwater off the body of the garment. Fringes also add a graceful elegance when dancing.

Fringes are also a symbolic way of extending the person’s body beyond the clothing and into their “aura”. Fringes, since they require additional material, are also a sign of wealth and conspicuous consumption. Where fringes were absent Metis tailors would cut edges of the clothing with pinking shears to produce a similar effect. This leaves a zigzag pattern instead of a straight edge. This serves another utilitarian function on woven cloth. Cloth edges that are unfinished will easily fray, the weave becoming undone and threads pulling out easily. The sawtooth pattern does not prevent the fraying but limits the length of the frayed thread and thus minimizes damage.



