

## Metis Culture

The Metis have a highly distinct culture, however, after the dispossession and oppression that occurred to the Metis after 1870s and 1880s the Metis went underground, and many of these cultural markers were not visible. There has been a resurgence and retrieval of Metis culture since the creation of the Gabriel Dumont and Louis Riel Institutes. Sadly however, Metis culture is still only taught to our children at a superficial level within the education system.

### The Primary Markers of Metis Culture and Identity:

- **A tradition of “Sharing and Caring”** — this tradition is enshrined in the centuries-old “Society of the Generous Ones” which ensured that the aged, sick and disabled in the Metis community received a share of the hunts and the harvest. Gabriel Dumont is the best-known member of this society. After the Metis defeat at Batoche in 1885 he and other Metis men joined Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West show and he also did a speaking tour of the eastern United States and Canada to raise money to support the refugee widows and orphans of the 1885 Resistance who were living in Montana. In the modern day, the Manitoba Metis Federation operates a “Bereavement Fund” and donates to Winnipeg Harvest and the Christmas Cheer Board. Additionally, MMF holds benefit concerts to support these causes. In Metis customary law a man is responsible for the care and support of his brother’s widow and children. In Metis custom a child’s Godparents and/or those present at their Naming Ceremony have a life-long obligation to see to the welfare of that child.<sup>1</sup>
- **High mobility** — arising from control and involvement in the transportation system, freighting and the buffalo hunt. Even today the Metis are heavily involved working for provincial highways departments, the railways, and as long-haul and short haul truckers.<sup>2</sup>
- **Multilingual** — Language skills derive from the Metis’ multicultural ancestry and their mobility as transportation industry employees and their organization of large scale buffalo hunts. The Metis acted as translators for every treaty in the

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<sup>1</sup> In the case of serious illness or when children lose their parents the local Metis community always rallies to hold benefit dances, socials and bingos to support the family. They usually also solicit donations to set up a trust fund for children.

<sup>2</sup> The Metis controlled the transportation system of the Northwest.

- By canoe, voyageurs, the York boats, later they operated the steamships on the large rivers and lakes, by land the carts and dog sleds in winter.
- The Metis controlled the first postal system in the west.
- Metis developed the overland routes to Edmonton and St. Paul Minnesota.
- The Metis had a riverine voyageur culture and a plains horse culture.
- Metis were known as superb horsemen. Some said that they were such good riders that Half-Breed meant half man, half horse

Canadian and American west. Although languages other than English have been suppressed in Manitoba, the Metis community in Manitoba still speak French, Saulteaux, Cree (2 dialects) and Michif. A high proportion of Metis children attend Français school programs and the Division scolaire franco-manitobaine. A majority of Metis families still have a working knowledge of two or more of the languages common to the Metis people.<sup>3</sup>

- **Distinctive dress and clothing** — Due to their high mobility, distinctive dress was an important visual identity marker. They were known as flamboyant dressers as early as the voyageur era. They are known as the Flower-Beadwork People — the distinctive Metis sash made them unique. Their music and dance is equally distinctive.<sup>4</sup>
- **Fierce independence within a democratic tradition** (assemblies as the basic vehicle). The Metis called themselves Otipemisiwak (oh-t-paym-soo-wuk) “The Independent Ones.” Historically they resisted measures to limit free trade and any government structures where they were not represented by democratically elected representatives. The Metis were individualistic in their socio-economic and political structures as opposed to tribal.
- **Entrepreneurial** — The Metis were the small traders across the Northwest of North America; they travelled to every small community in the region. Pascal Breland a Metis member of the old Council of Assiniboia was called “Le Roi de Traiteurs”—“King of the Traders.” The Metis ran all the transportation systems and mail carrier systems in the Old Northwest, i.e. the ferries, the dog teams, the cart trains, and the York Boat brigades. With the invention of the fishing “jigger” to set nets under the ice and the modification of the “Bombadier” the Metis commercialized winter fishing. The Metis were the front line trading employees of the North West Company and the Hudson’s Bay Company. Metis women were the clothing designers and production workers for the garment trade in the Northwest. The Metis ran most of the flour mills in the early Northwest. These were both water driven and wind powered. Louis Riel Sr. was called “the miller of the Seine.” Cuthbert Grant’s mill on Sturgeon Creek was the first mill west of Fort Garry. The Metis opened the first limestone quarries and lime kilns, producing both limestone and lime for the building industry. The Metis were the first high volume salt-makers and were bulk suppliers in Manitoba and throughout the Northwest. With the invention of the Red River Cart the Metis provided a transportation option to riverine travel.

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<sup>3</sup> The Metis were known for their language abilities, multi-lingual, in the 1800s most families spoke five or more languages.

<sup>4</sup> The Metis have their own music and dances, the Red River Jig, the Sash Dance, the Rabbit Dance, the Reel of Eight, Drops of Brandy or the Hook Dance (Danse du crochet), the Duck Dance (le danse de canard), the Handkerchief Dance etc. These dances are a combination of Celtic step dancing and First Nations dance.

From early days the Metis organized coop ventures such as the buffalo hunt. They were among the first to develop fishing co-ops in Manitoba. However, because of their independent nature and entrepreneurship, the union movement is antithetical to their culture. None-the-less Metis people do organize on an ad-hoc basis to protest and remedy unfair labour practices. This dates back to the well-known strikes of the La Loche and York Factory boat brigades in the 1800s. Over the years the Metis have done numerous sit-ins, demonstrations, marches and petitions to protest against railway labour practices, Hydro flooding that destroyed trapping, the treatment of Metis children in particular school divisions, the treatment of Metis children in Child and Family Services Winnipeg (1980s) and the policies of Human Resource Development Canada.

Metis beadwork and Metis fiddle music are the major art forms of the Metis people. Both of these artistic forms were very complimentary to their historic lifestyle on the plains of the Old Northwest, a mobile people with a horse culture and a riverine voyageur culture. They traveled great distances as voyageurs, hunters, itinerant traders and freighters.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Metis were noted for their fine floral design beadwork. They were so closely identified with this work that they became known as the “Flower Beadwork People.” Due to high quality design and craftsmanship this work was much sought after by Indians and Non-Aboriginal frontiersmen, traders and European tourists to the Old Northwest.

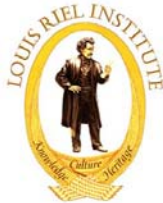
Beadwork provides visual group identity markers; it is also a sign of material wealth and much used for reciprocal gift-giving. Beading was used to decorate the clothing that women made for their children and husbands and was also a commercial activity for Metis women. Decorated apparel given to relatives or friends is believed to bring health and prosperity.

### **Summary:**

The Metis have developed a unique culture, including:

- A tradition of “Sharing and Caring.”
- Distinct folklore and legends.
- A Bill of Rights
- A distinct Flag
- Distinct clothing: sash, the capote, embroidered, quilled and beaded bags, jackets, leggings and saddles;
- Distinct holidays and traditions.

- A military/warrior tradition, they served in the Nile Expedition, the Boer War, WW I, WWII, Korean Conflict, UN Peacekeeping Missions.
- A distinct language called Michif (French-Cree)
- Distinct cuisine, bannock, pemmican, rubaboo, boulettes and baignes.
- Distinct medicines.
- Distinct music: Fiddle music and dance (Red River Jig, Reels); and... of course
- The Red River Cart



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