

Metis Salt Making:

The two most common methods of early salt production were natural solar evaporation and induced evaporation through boiling the brine. Solar evaporation of brine at the salt springs, especially during a hot, dry summer produces thick crystalline salt crusting around the edges of the spring.

The earliest known mining in Manitoba was the extraction of salt from salt springs situated on the Red River and the valley of La Rivière Salé and on Lake Winnipegosis between the present towns of Winnipegosis and Camperville. At Lake Winnipegosis, the voyageurs and their Metis sons were operating these salt works as early as 1798. Later, it was found that the saline water in this area contains 6 percent salt. The salt was extracted by putting the water in kettles, pans and troughs that were heated to speed evaporation.

By 1818, James Joseph Monkman was competing with the imported salt sold at the Red River Settlement.¹ By the mid-1800s, Monkman was joined in the business by his two sons, John² and Joseph. The Campbell family also operated a large salt operation at about the same time as the Monkman brothers. They were producing between 160 to 200 bushels per year. It is reported that before 1874 more than 1,000 bushels of salt produced from the main salt works at Monkman's springs was transported by York boat to Oak Point on the east side of Lake Manitoba, then by Red River cart to settlements and trading posts throughout Western Canada.

In 1858, the Monkman salt operation was visited by Henry Youle Hind and his party during their exploring expedition of the Saskatchewan and Assiniboine region for the government. Hind's description:

The soil at the Salt Springs is a very retentive yellowish, white clay, containing small limestone boulders and pebbles . . . The wells for obtaining a supply of brine are sunk wherever a small bubbling spring is observed to issue from this retentive clay. The springs are constantly changing their position, and as the wells become exhausted . . . A fresh excavation is made where a new spring is observed to issue.

The wells at present are twenty five in number; but some of them appear to have been lately abandoned, and others have long since ceased to yield brine. They are situated 400 yards from the lake shore and were worked forty years since by James Monkman. This enterprising individual, struggled for many years against the importation of English salt, which sold in the settlements at a cheaper rate than he could afford to manufacture salt at Lake Winnipegosis. He has made salt at Swan

¹ He started the salt works at Red Deer peninsula on Lake Winnipegosis (now called Salt Springs Point). The operation was continued by his sons Joseph and John in the 1840s as a family operation until c1874, when it was sold to a Mr. McKay. In the 1860s they were the main suppliers of salt to the Hudson's Bay Company, producing 200 bushels per season.

² John Monkman was born about 1822. He married Mary Richard on 23 December 1847. He lived in St. Laurent and ran the salt works along with his brother Joseph. In an argument over salt pans he was stabbed by Paulet Chartrand on August 6, 1861, and died a few days later.

River and Duck River. The manufacture is now carried on with profit, at Swan River and Lake Winnipegosis by Monkman's sons.

At the "Works" there are two small log houses and three evaporating furnaces. The kettles, of English construction, are well made rectangular vessels of iron, five feet by two . . . and one foot deep. They are laid on two stone walls, about twenty inches apart which form the furnace . . . at one extremity is a low chimney. At the close of the season the kettles are removed, turned over . . . the furnaces permitted to go to ruin, to be rebuilt the following spring.

The process of making salt is as follows: When a spring is found, a well five feet broad and five feet deep is excavated . . . near it an evaporating furnace is erected. The brine from the well is ladeled into the kettle and the salt scooped out as it forms, and allowed to remain for a short time to drain before it is packed in birch bark roggins for transportation to Red River where it commands twelve shillings a bushel or one hundred weight of flour . . . fish, pemmican or buffalo meat according to the circumstances. The brine is strong. From one kettle, two bushels of salt can be made in one day in dry weather. There are nine kettles at the "Works", seven being in constant use during the summer season. The half-breeds engaged . . . complained of the want of fuel - in other words, of the labor and trouble of cutting down the spruce and poplar near at hand, and the difficulty of hauling it to the furnaces. An objection of no moment, but characteristic of some of the people, who are generally unaccustomed to long, continual hard labor . . . I spoke to John Monkman, who now makes salt here, of pumps and solar evaporation. Of a pump, he knew absolutely nothing. He had heard such an apparatus had been contrived, but had never seen one. He readily comprehended the advantage to be derived from pumping the water into shallow troughs, dug in the retentive clay near the springs, and strengthening the brine by solar evaporation.³



Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell
Coordinator of Metis Heritage and History Research
Louis Riel Institute

³ Henry Youle Hind. *British North America: Reports of progress, together with a preliminary and general report, on the Assiniboine [sic] and Saskatchewan exploring expedition, made under instructions from the Provincial Secretary, Canada: Presented to both houses of Parliament by command of Her Majesty, August 1860.* London: George Edward Eyre & William Spottiswoode for H.M.S.O, 1860: 104.