

Fort Union Trading Post

THE MÉTIS



A brigade of Red River carts traversing the prairie.

ORIGINS OF THE MÉTIS

The history of the Métis dates back to the mid 17th century, when European explorers arrived in North America. These men did not bring wives with them into the harsh, unknown interior of the continent, so it was common for them to marry Native American women. The Métis people are the descendants of these Native American women – for the most part Ojibwe, Cree, Salteaux and Menominee – and French, Scottish and English men. The word “*Métis*” comes from the Latin word “*mixtus*” meaning “to mix,” which aptly described this new nation of people, who were often referred to as “*Mixed Bloods*” by Euro-Americans.

A NEW CULTURE, A NEW NATION

A distinct Métis cultural and political identity began to emerge, as traditions of the mother’s tribe were blended with customs of the father’s nation. It was neither European nor Indian, but a fusion of the two.

While out on buffalo hunts or transporting goods to trading posts or towns, the Métis camped in tipis. Otherwise, they lived in log homes built on narrow riverfront lots, practiced small scale farming and raised livestock. However, the buffalo hunt was the basis of Métis economy.

French or English fathers regularly sent their Métis sons to New France or New England to receive a formal education. Girls were often educated in local missionary schools. Both learned the traditions and skills of their mother’s tribe. Their religion was a blend of tribal practices and Christianity.

The Métis generally adopted Euro-American clothing styles, but almost universally retained the moccasins, leggings and other quilled or beaded accessories worn by their mothers’ people. However, the two clothing articles most closely associated with Métis identity, the Red River coat and the Métis sash, were their own creations. They

were also known for their floral beadwork designs.

The Métis developed a new language, a blend of Cree and Canadian French called *Michif*. Rather than forming a simplified grammar, Michif incorporated the most complex elements of the two languages.

RUNNING THE BUFFALO

By the early 1800’s, the Métis had gained a reputation as “the best hunters, the best horsemen and the bravest warriors of the prairie.” In response to the growing trade in buffalo robes, they developed the Red River cart, a new form of transportation to haul heavy loads to remote locations.

Running the herd became a way of life, and huge buffalo hunts were undertaken. Whole communities set out on long hunting journeys which could last months and cover hundreds of miles. Métis hunter Antoine Vermette wrote extensively of his experiences of buffalo hunts in the 1860’s: “... we traveled continuously for almost two months before we came to where the buffalo were... Then when the big encampment had all gathered together a vote was taken, and some man elected to head the hunt. Then in turn this captain would appoint his lieutenants, one from each district represented. The hunters became so expert that they could drop a big cow or a bull



Métis Red River Coat, F. B. Mayer, 1851, pencil on paper.



Half Breeds Running Buffalo, Paul Kane, 1846, oil on canvas, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.

with the first shot. You must remember too that this was on the run, and that we did not take any aim: the rifle was lowered and shot simultaneously.”

Hunting provided food, robes and other products for Métis hunters and their families, plus goods to trade. By the late 1700’s the Métis were established as the main providers of pemmican, a highly nutritious food made from pounded, dried buffalo meat mixed with fat and berries. It was the staple food of the fur trade labor force.

FORT UNION AND THE MÉTIS

In addition to ten different Native American tribes, the Métis regularly traded at Fort Union. Rudolph Friederich Kurz, a classically trained Swiss artist who worked at Fort Union as a clerk in 1851-52, kept a detailed journal in which he often wrote of the Métis. On July 26, 1851, Kurz wrote: “A dozen Metisse de la Rivière Rouge arrived... They wanted horses, either in exchange or by purchase. One of the Metisse brought a white buffalo robe to sell and received two good racehorses in exchange.”

In another entry dated November 3, 1851, he wrote: “I heard a noise out on the prairie like the creaking wheels of old carts. There were nine two-wheeled vehicles brought by metifs from the Red River who come to trade, to get work, or

else to seek shelter as independent hunters in this region.”

The Métis had long enjoyed an advantage as middlemen in the fur trade because of their knowledge of the customs and languages of local tribes and white traders. Kurz mentioned Métis men working at Fort Union as interpreters, hunters, horse guards, guides, overseers of engagés, and ambassadors seeking to secure trade with various Native American tribes. He also noted a Métis woman and her daughters employed by the fort to make clothing.

The majority of Fort Union’s employees were young, unmarried white men. It was common practice, from the Bourgeois down to the engagés, to marry Native American women. These women served as an important link between the local tribes and the Company

because of their dual heritage. Their offspring, “the children of the fur trade,” became the second generation of fur trade employees.

THE MÉTIS TODAY

The Métis culture has survived and grown into the present, and today Métis communities can be found in both the United States and Canada. According to the Canadian Constitution Act of 1982, the three officially recognized Aboriginal Peoples of Canada are: First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. All are granted certain Aboriginal rights by the Canadian government. The United States does not officially recognize the Métis as a separate cultural group with distinct rights, and many Métis are affiliated with the Native American tribe from which they are descended.



Fort Union Bourgeois Alexander Culbertson with his Blackfeet wife, Natawistacha, and their Métis son, Joe.