

**From Women's Hands:
An Object Biography of the McTavish Collection**

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Abstract

Objects have the power to create a concrete connection to our past - a connection we can hold in our hands. Each object in a family collection is connected to an ancestor and their story. It is these stories that ground us in who we are and where we come from; these stories that create our heritage and identity. The McTavish Collection is made up 159 objects and is housed at the Manitoba Museum. The collection belonged to a prominent fur trade family and has been passed down through five generations of women of mixed Indigenous/European descent. Eighty objects were pulled from the vaults and reunited as a single collection for closer study. An object biography was created using a combination of research techniques and perspectives to piece together a deeper understanding of the life of women of the fur trade era. Through these objects, a story emerged and shone a light on the women who made, collected and used these objects. This is a study of that process and those stories.

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Table of Contents

Background on the Collection and Project	1
Purpose, Objectives and Limitations	2
Why Choose a Collection?	3
Objectives	4
Limitations	4
Methodology	9
Importance of the Study	12
The Collection	
Styles Represented in the Collection	16
James Bay Cree Style Beadwork	16
Lake Winnipeg Cascading Lobe Style Beadwork	17
Silk Ribbon Cutwork and Red River Métis Style Embroidery	18
Lake Winnipeg Small Flower Style Embroidery	20
Norway House Style Embroidery	20
Needlework in Rupert’s Land in the Nineteenth Century	23
The Domestic Arts Curriculum in Schools in Red River	26
Time Spent with the Collection: Getting to Know the “Old Ladies”	29
The Makers and Collectors: Who are the women of mixed-heritage in the Fur Trade?	33
The Family: History and Collection Provenance	35
Getting to Know the Sinclair-Christie-McTavish-Rogers-Konantz Family	
Nahoway	40
William “Credo” Sinclair II	42
Mary Sinclair Christie	44
Lydia Christie McTavish	52
Florence Edith McTavish Rogers	59
Enid Campbell Rogers	62
Margaret Rogers Konantz	64
Problems with Identity and HBC Families:	

Looking at Identity from the Outside-In and the Inside-Out	67
Object Biography and the McTavish Collection:	
Letting the Collection Talk	76
Thoughts on the Collection: Talking Back	85
Serendipity: Time, Place and Knowledge	86
The Question: “What Part of the Collection Belonged to Whom”?	88
Mary Sinclair Christie (Possible acquisition dates 1850s – 1870s)	88
Lydia Christie McTavish (Possible Acquisition dates 1860s-1900)	92
Comparisons: The McTavish Collection and Collections of Similar Provenance	94
Final Thoughts:	
Looking at Objects to Read Women’s Stories	96
Objects Carry Identity	101
Recommendations and Future Study: Where do we go from here?	102
Plates	105
Bibliography	130

List of Plates

The plates can be found following page 104.

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| Plate 1 | James Bay Cree style tab (octopus) bag |
| Plate 2 | James Bay Cree style influenced wall/watch pocket |
| Plate 3 | Lake Winnipeg Cascading Lobe style panel bag |
| Plate 4 | Lake Winnipeg Cascading Lobe style garters |
| Plate 5 | Lake Winnipeg Cascading Lobe style leggings |
| Plate 6 | Métis embroidered mittens with silk ribbon cutwork |
| Plate 7 | Métis embroidered mittens with silk ribbon cutwork |
| Plate 8 | Lake Winnipeg small flower style embroidery wall pocket |
| Plate 9 | Detail on gauntlet cuff of Norway House style embroidery |
| Plate 10 | Norway House style embroidery on a hide jacket |
| Plate 11 | Norway House style embroidery on a hide neck tie |
| Plate 12 | Detail of embroidery on moccasins |
| Plate 13 | Detail of embroidery and pleated hide on moccasins |
| Plate 14a | Detail of embroidery and pleated hide on moccasins |
| Plate 14b | Detail of red and navy wool stroud cuff on moccasins |
| Plate 15 | Moccasins |
| Plate 16 | Single moccasin |
| Plate 17 | Moccasins |
| Plate 18 | Moccasins |
| Plate 19a | Moccasins with laurel leaf motif detail |

- Plate 19b Detail of red and navy wool stroud cuff on moccasins
- Plate 20a Hand bag front view
- Plate 20b Hand bag rear view – laurel leaf motif detail
- Plate 21a Métis style embroidered mittens
- Plate 21b Mitten laurel leaf motif detail
- Plate 22 Beaded wall pocket or watch pocket with laurel leaf motif
- Plate 23 Wall pocket or watch pocket
- Plate 24 Photo of Mary Sinclair Christie as a young girl
- Plate 25a Single caribou dancing slipper
- Plate 25b Detail of dancing slipper – quillwork, silk floss embroidery and remnants of fur trim
- Plate 26a Photo of Lydia Christie McTavish
- Plate 26b Photo of Lydia Christie McTavish in detail
- Plate 27 Back page from Lydia Christie McTavish’s Bible
- Plate 28 Edith Rogers on her wedding day
- Plate 29 Edith Rogers, Member of Manitoba Legislative Assembly
- Plate 30 Enid Rogers
- Plate 31 Margaret Roger’s graduation from Miss Spence’s School, New York, 1929
- Plate 32 Margaret Rogers Konantz election win. Shown with children Bill, Gord and Barbara Konantz
- Plate 33 Margaret Rogers Konantz fishing at Lake of the Woods
- Plate 34 Beaded pipe bag

From Women's Hands: An Object Biography of the McTavish Collection

Background on the Collection and Project

The McTavish collection at the Manitoba Museum is an eclectic collection of cultural objects and heirlooms, carefully conserved and passed down from mother to daughter, for five generations and ultimately donated by William Konantz to the Manitoba Museum in 1989. The collection includes 159 pieces of beaded and embroidered articles of clothing, personal items and items for the home made in Norway House and elsewhere in Western Canada between approximately 1840 and 1900. In 2014, two additional jackets originally belonging to the collection, but owned by another branch of the Konantz family were donated to the Manitoba Museum by Dr. Sara Goulet and her mother Gloria Goulet. In 2016, portraits and memorabilia associated with another McTavish ancestor, Sir George Simpson, Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, were donated by Martha Konantz, William Konantz' daughter.

The McTavish Collection project began with Maureen Matthews, the Curator of Cultural Anthropology at the Manitoba Museum, who introduced me to the collection in the museum's storage facility. In the storage vaults artefacts are stored together in "types". For example, in one cabinet a drawer may contain wrap-around moccasins with glass beadwork from various collections and provenance, and in the next drawer, wrap around moccasins with silk floss embroidery. Mittens are held in another cabinet in another part of the vault with other mittens, gauntlets are housed in the drawer below, and so on. The intent of this project, was to pull the objects together that belonged to the McTavish Collection out of the vaults and study them, not

as types but as a collection. This included moccasins and slippers, mittens and gauntlets, belts, straps and garters, bags, and décor for the home.

The McTavish Collection taken as a whole has provenance that enables a multi-generational study of a prominent Hudson's Bay Company family from the fur trade era. The family members associated with this collection include significant public figures in Manitoba history: Nahoway Sinclair, a Cree woman from the York Factory area in northern Manitoba, who married Chief Trader William Sinclair; her granddaughter, Mary Sinclair Christie who married William Christie, Treaty Commissioner for Treaty 4; her great granddaughter, Edith Rogers, the first woman elected to the Manitoba Legislature and; her great, great granddaughter Margaret Konantz, Western Canada's first female Member of Parliament.

Katherine Pettipas identifies the McTavish collection as an important collection because of its strong provenance. "It provides us with a baseline of [Indigenous] items produced for trade during the period extending from the mid-1860s to the first decade of the twentieth century."¹

Purpose, Objectives and Limitations:

It is an understatement to say that the role of women throughout the history of western Canada is crucially important, but all too often the written record does not reflect that. There does exist primary documentation of women's stories, however, and it is found stitched into items they made for loved ones, as gifts, or for sale to feed their families. The unpacking and deciphering of these "documents" requires a respectful historical attitude, a sensitive cultural

¹ Katherine Pettipas, "Konantz Collection Provenance," 1983.

perspective and an artist or maker's feel for the work of others. How can museum collections be utilized to piece these stories together and give insight into the lives of these women and their place in western Canada's history? The purpose of this study is to see what can be learned about Métis and Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) women's history during the fur trade era through the study of their objects in a museum collection.

Why Choose a Collection?

Susan Pearce writes that the importance of studying family artefacts to investigate heritage creation is because family history parallels what is happening in the broader community.² Objects that are collected represent an event or moment in time that links to family history and the broader social, economic and political history of that time. Objects create family heritage and therefore contribute to cultural identity because, as Pearce states, "It's not that some objects *carry* memory, but that all objects *are* memory,"³ Objects remind us where we come from and form a tangible link to the past by providing validation of personal narratives. In a museum, these objects also are powerful teachers. Viewing the "real thing" is one of the greatest strengths of a collection-holding museum and draw the viewer into another story and moment.⁴ The more a collection is studied and the more that can be learned, the more meaningful an object or collection becomes, and the deeper our appreciation of the details and nuances of the story becomes.⁵

² Pearce, "The construction of heritage," 86.

³ Ibid., 99.

⁴ Susan Pearce, *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, (Abingdon: Routledge, , 1994), 20.

⁵ Ibid., 28.

The objectives of this study:

- a. To pull all of the pieces of the McTavish collection from storage and reassemble it as a single body and explore the possibilities of its significance, making meaning of the collection as a whole;
- b. To contribute to a historical understanding of Métis and HBC fur trade families in general, and women in particular; through an analysis of material culture as well as to add to the body of knowledge at the Manitoba Museum;
- c. To connect the study of material culture, social history and family history to learn more about Métis and HBC women's history in the fur trade era in Western Canada.

Limitations:

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth-century most members of fur trade society in what is now Western Canada were of a mixed heritage combining Indigenous and European cultures, languages and beliefs. This at times resulted in an affinity with a specific fur trade company such as the Hudson Bay Company, the XY Company or the Northwest Company. Identifying, defining and describing individuals or families has always been difficult as terms and descriptors have changed over time. Throughout the early literature terms such as “Half Breed”, “Mixed Blood” and “Métis” appear and sometimes used interchangeably. A man employed in the fur trade industry tended to move often throughout his career; marrying, relocating, bringing his wife and her cultural and artistic influences with him across the country. Although the terms “Half Breed” and “Mixed Blood” are common in early documents, today the use of the terms “breed” or “blood” in reference to human beings is not acceptable. In the past, the term “Métis” referred to someone of French Catholic and Cree or Anishinaabe background,

today the term can be inclusive of those from a mixed Indigenous and English or Scottish Protestant background as well. During the Victorian era, the idea of hybridity in culture, race, artistic style and design was seen as a corruption, and some families chose not identify with their Indigenous ancestors at all.⁶ Families of fur trade society were not an entirely a homogenous group, and we can appreciate that this makes identifying a specific artistic and cultural tradition and attributing it exactly to the heritage of the maker quite complicated.

The problem with clearly defining an aesthetic that can be identified as a “Métis” (or “Half Breed” or “Mixed Blood”) art style is in part due to the complex nature of fur trade society, the difficulty of determining how the makers of these objects would have identified themselves within the fur trade communities, the mobility of fur trade families and the economic and material factors which influences artistic production over a woman’s life. The art they created also circulated in various ways, either closely held as a family heirloom, given as a diplomatic gift to an honoured guest, sold in the fur trade proper or to the many tourists who wandered the west. They may then have been sold again or re-gifted into yet another region of the country. The second problem, according to Susan Berry, is that this work was not considered “art” by Western or European criteria.⁷ Women’s work on clothing and objects was considered a “handicraft” by Western art criteria and therefore the name and biography of the creator was not considered worth noting⁸. How can we specifically define what Métis art is without knowing the name of the artist? As more scholarship on the Métis emerges, the mark left upon the cultural

⁶ Phillips, *Trading Identities*, 18.

⁷ Berry, “Recovered Identities,” 32.

⁸ *Ibid.*

landscape by Métis artists can be seen in every corner of Western Canada. Ted Brassier describes Métis art in the Red River area and beyond as “combining the heritage of all regional traditions...an experimentation with the fusion of diverse art traditions. In quillwork, beads and silk embroidery, a decorative art style emerged that made an elaborate use of a large number of small design elements in a wide range of colours...in the early stages a rigidly geometric design elements of aboriginal original predominated, but a floral design become increasingly popular thereafter.”⁹

While it is tempting when working in museums to focus on a specific region or tribal identities, scholars of Métis art such as Ted Brassier (1985), Sherry Farrell Racette (2004), Ruth Phillips (1998), Barbara Hale and Kate Duncan (1989) demonstrate that the broad artistic landscape of Métis people disrupts that, causing curators to re-examine objects and who they are attributed to. Because the names of the women who have created these pieces of art were not recorded at the time, we have to look to the notes and oral histories of the collectors for clues to their identity and to the work itself for commonalities between pieces and collections to identify pieces as “Métis” in design and style. As with identifying the identities of families in fur trade society, the art is also fluid and mobile. This lack of a clear definition of Métis visual culture is an example of a problem imposed by scholarship on objects. It is not the failure of objects to conform to categories that is the problem. It is the demands of the categories which complicate the discussion of Métis art practice. Ruth Philips reminds us to be open-minded to aesthetic

⁹ Brassier, “In Search of Metis Art,” 224–225.

possibilities and social realities of hybridity - saying, “essentialist discourses hate a hybrid”!¹⁰

The McTavish collection can be compared to two other collections with good provenance: the Colcleugh collection of the Haffenreffer Museum (1888-1897) and the earlier Southesk collection (1859-1860). All three collections are comprised of similar objects collected throughout western Canada that point to strong Métis influence or origin. Barbara Hail and Kate Duncan in their study of the Colcleugh collection refer to moccasins that all have similar embroidery on them collected in Grand Rapids, Fort MacPherson and Fort Simpson in the 1890s. There are three distinct styles of silk embroidery in all three collections. The oldest style is executed with fine silk floss in a tiny double-chain stitch on fine native-tanned caribou hide. The floral design is quite realistic and the colours, derived from natural dyes and are relatively muted. The second style which appears is the delicate Lake Winnipeg small flower style and followed shortly thereafter the flamboyant than the Norway House style. These latter styles are executed in silk floss in a fine buttonhole stitch with more vibrant hues made available when aniline dyes were introduced after 1856, and were used to create very vibrant colours that appear to last longer than the previous natural dyes used. Although Hail and Duncan use Colcluegh’s collecting voyage of 1888-1897 to establish a date for all these embroidery techniques, both Sherry Farrell Racette and Maureen Matthews believe the Southesk collection which was acquired in 1859-1860 and includes several examples of double-chain stitch embroidery on caribou, allows for a much earlier date of manufacture for this type of work.¹¹ Farrell Racette and Matthews, who refer to the style as “Red River”, place these objects among the earliest

¹⁰ Phillips, *Trading Identities*, 145.

¹¹ Susan Berry, “Recovered Identities,” 46.

pieces in the collection chosen for this study. They consider it a possibility that they were made as early as the 1830s-1850s, and may be associated with the attendance at girl's schools in early Red River.¹²

The records kept by travelers and collectors such as the Earl of Southesk (1859 to 1860) and Emma Shaw Colcleugh (1888 to 1897) helps us to understand the complexities involved in understanding the difficulty of placing this kind of embroidery in time and place: Emma Shaw Colcleugh describes the maker of a particular pair of moccasins that she purchased in surprising and complicating detail. "The maker was a Dogrib woman, married to a Hudson's Bay trader, who was non-Indian. She lives at Dogrib, but they may have been made elsewhere."¹³ Frank Russell describes a similar pair of moccasins from another collection, acquired in Grand Rapids in 1898 as Métis, and another similar pair from Fort MacPherson as, "made after a Métis pattern by way of Eskimo interpreter."¹⁴ The difficulty of definitely categorizing these artists and their work comes from the mobility of the makers, the ambiguity of their primary identity and artistic influences, and finally, the complex artistic arc of women's work. The style of the double-chain stitch pieces in the McTavish collection, and the other similar pieces from other collections may indeed be associated with daughters of fur traders who went to Red River finishing schools, but could as easily have been learned and executed by anyone with talent, caribou hide, needles and silk.

¹² Farrell-Racette and Matthews, personal conversation.

¹³ Hail and Duncan, *Out of the North*, 176.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 175.

Methodology:

The project involved reunifying the collection, bringing the various types of artefacts out from the museum storage vaults to view as one body. Detailed study of specific objects and groupings made for possible comparisons and connections between pieces in the collection. Written and oral family histories and timelines were added to the groupings of objects to create a story. Finally, the collection was photographed to make it portable and to zoom in on specific detail.

Of the 159 pieces, eighty pieces were identified as pieces that would have been of interest to women in the period from 1850 to 1880, and were either created or collected by women in the family or received as gifts. These pieces were all from the Sub-Arctic cultural and geographic region (specifically northern Ontario James Bay region, Manitoba, Alberta and Saskatchewan), and included porcupine quillwork, glass beading, silk ribbon appliqué and silk floss embroidery.

At the outset of the project, I was not entirely sure which direction the project would take, or what I would focus on, I was simply intrigued by the possibilities the collection and the provenance presented. The photographing, documenting and organizing was like bringing a family back together again. The methodology that finally emerged from the large and diverse collection seemed to be a natural and organic progression.

I selected items of the collection, pulled them from the storage cabinets, examined and then photographed them from various perspectives, angles and detail. The photographs were placed into binders – like a family album, along with any information the museum had on cataloguing or provenance, and the items were returned to storage. This binder of photographs

provided a portable collection of the items for reference, closer study, comparison and analysis. The time spent with the objects during the photo sessions provided an opportunity for an intimate examination of each item, how it was possibly made, what was unique about it, and what other items might be connected to it by style, type, time, place and maker.

An academic study group was formed out of a scholarship grant from the Manitoba Museum for Indigenous Scholars in Residence headed by Maureen Matthews to discuss the items pulled from the cabinets, their styles, histories and how they were made. The group was fluid, with guest artists and historians sharing their knowledge and ideas, but the core of the group included Maureen Matthews, Sherry Farrell Racette from the Department of Native Studies at the University of Manitoba, Amelia Fay Curator of the HBC collection at the Manitoba Museum, fellow graduate students Sharon Dainard and Richard Laurin, and expert needlework artist Jennine Krauchi.

The dynamic of this particular group would have greatly pleased the makers and collectors of these items, I think! We met weekly, over tea and scones and examined the objects, discussed, pondered and opined – each member of the group contributing the perspectives from their areas of expertise. We looked at the objects through the lens of art, archaeology, expression of cultural identity, motherhood, wealth and privilege, and poverty and need, to only name a few. There was much laughter, wonder and delight – an atmosphere I like to think the objects recognized, with women gathering together, stitching and sharing. Jennine Krauchi, guided us through the steps of how these pieces were actually created through hands-on, needle-to-hide attempts at embroidery, which proved to be much harder than it looks! This really helped us

understand the skill required of these women to produce this kind of work.

As the objects fell into possible groupings of style and type, I researched the possible makers, collectors and the context of the collection. The objects were researched as to where and when each object may have been created. For example, what styles were common to what regions and when, what thread colours were available at what time. If the item was machine sewn, I could also place the item after approximately 1860.¹⁵ Armed with information that placed the style and type of objects into a timeframe, provided approximate geographic locations and corresponding historic events, I returned to the objects with new questions and information that enhanced my understanding of the objects. I created a framework of time, place, occupation and lifestyle of the Sinclair, Christie and McTavish families to establish where and when the families had lived in Norway House and elsewhere, and what role they possibly played in the historic events that would connect to the objects in any way, and brought this framework to the group. With dates and locations of the family, the economic, political, and history of that area revealed, a possible hypothesis based on all of these factors was then developed which focused around the circumstance of the collection and the creation of the objects. Members of the Konantz family, were shown the binders of photos and interviewed about the collection, their family's history and identity, and what the collection meant to them to confirm any hypotheses or add to the story of the collection.

¹⁵ Martha Eckmann Brent, "A Stitch in Time."

Importance of this Study

The use of object biography - including contextual economic, political and social history, and family oral history creates a rich picture of lives of the Sinclair-Christie-McTavish-Rogers-Konantz women where there was just a dim view before. This study is a model of how object research and family history using a variety of research techniques, attitudes and perspectives can enable a researcher to piece together the material history of individuals where there is little recorded in the conventional way. It also illustrates the importance of physical objects and material culture in our understanding of historic events and how those events create a museum history by explaining the initial acquisition and gradual changing appreciation and understanding of a particular collection.

The study of women's history in Western Canada during the fur trade era, has been a challenge due to the lack of a written record, particularly from the women themselves. Historians such as Jennifer Brown (1980), Sylvia Van Kirk (1980) and Irene Spry (1981) who were the first to turn their research toward women's history, have opened doors for those who came after. The acknowledgement of a feminine perspective and contribution allows for a richer, more multi-faceted understanding of the fur trade, and an appreciation of the strong women who shaped the country.

While women rarely left a written record of their experiences, they did leave a visual record in the objects they made and the art they created in beads, ribbons, silk floss and quills. Objects do carry layers of meaning and can be "read", in a sense, but it requires a different way of reading. In Cath Oberholtzer's thesis, *Together We Survive: East Cree Material Culture*, she

mapped out the symbolism and meaning encoded into clothing by Cree women in the James Bay region during the eighteenth century. Oberholtzer considers the decorated clothing women produced as, “primary ethnological documents [initiating] a discourse enveloping a number of issues regarding traditions and innovation”.¹⁶

Judy Thompson’s study of women’s art in the Mackenzie River region in, *Women’s Work Women’s Art: Nineteenth-Century Northern Athapaskan Clothing*, cites the Métis of Red River as particularly influential in the region.¹⁷ The Métis had perfected the art of beadwork, embroidery and porcupine quillwork, which they applied to clothing, horse and dog gear, as well as other items. The Métis of Red River employed in the fur trade had settled in the Mackenzie River region and married into the Dene communities. Their beautifully decorated mittens, leggings, fire bags on hide, melton or velvet influenced the local fashion of the region.¹⁸

Unlike Oberholtzer’s work, which looks specifically at the material culture of the James Bay Cree, or Thompson’s that focuses on the Mackenzie River region, the McTavish collection appears to be a culturally random collection of artefacts that spans both temporal and physical space throughout regions of Western Canada. How can we “read” this collection? How can we make meaning of it? How do the women who have created and collected these pieces tell their story through them, and what skills and perspectives do we need to make those stories come to light?

¹⁶ Cath Oberholtzer, *Together We Survive: East Cree Material Culture*, (Hamilton: McMaster University, 1994), 110.

¹⁷ Thompson, *Women’s Work, Women’s Art*, 32.

¹⁸ Ibid.

This quote by Métis artist Christi Belcourt has inspired me throughout this project:

“I was just thinking about this yesterday: that I long for the stories and histories of Métis women. We always hear about the men. This is true for histories written about Peoples everywhere and it’s not a slight against men because I find that history interesting too. But why is Métis history mostly confined to war, battles or movements? What about the lives of women? The struggles, the conversations, the way they brought communities together, the births, the end of life ceremonies, medicines, nursing the sick, creating wearable art, where can we read about the joy and triumph of Métis women?”¹⁹

Although the Konantz family which cared for and passed down the McTavish collection do not identify as “Métis” so much as being a “fur trade” family, they are of a mixed Indigenous-European ancestry, and their fur trade ancestry is of no less importance to our understanding and appreciation of history. Judy Iseke-Barnes captures the need for the stories of these kinds of women to be a part of the greater historical narrative to provide a greater understanding of our history:

“This need for women’s stories reflects the needs of Métis peoples to hear a more complete account of the lives of Métis peoples, including stories about the lives of Cree and Métis grandmothers who are the foundation of communities... We need these stories if we as Métis people are to understand fully ourselves, our culture, and our histories

¹⁹ Christi Belcourt, “The Metis Talking Stick,” accessed 31 May, 2014.
https://www.facebook.com/groups/401742069919055/#_=_.

within the cultural, social and economic history of Métis communities.”²⁰

The importance of the study of women’s history is not just for women and it is not a separate history that appears as a footnote to the dominant story. Intertwining women’s history into the existing record creates a greater, more balanced understanding for everyone.

²⁰ Iseke-Barnes, “Grandmothers of Metis Nation,” 70.

The Collection

Styles Represented

I have chosen Barbara Hail and Kate Duncan's mode of design analysis and categories for my study. Their book, *Out of the North: The Subarctic Collection of the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology*, examines a Subarctic collection of needlework in the Haffenreffer Museum at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, acquired by Emma Shaw Colcleugh between 1888 and 1894 in the Lake Winnipeg region. Hail and Duncan are two of the few scholars who have really taken the aesthetics of women's work seriously. There are pieces in the Emma Shaw Colcleugh collection that are very similar in style, colour and design to the McTavish collection, so comparisons can be made which make it possible to create a temporal reference and start to locate the regions and communities where they were collected. Other studies of similar collections and pieces such as that of Brassler (1976), Susan Berry (2011) and Farrell Racette (2004) also provide comparison.

Duncan and Hail specifically describe four types of floral style needlework relevant for this study: the James Bay Cree style, the Lake Winnipeg small flower style, Norway House style of silk floss embroidery, and the Lake Winnipeg Lobe style of beadwork.

James Bay Cree Style Beadwork

Hail and Duncan describe the James Bay Cree style is characterized by serpentine stems with several small almond-shaped leaves or petals, several distinctive profile blossoms, and

thistles. Hail and Duncan cite this style as among some of the earliest datable Cree floral beadwork.²¹ During the time of the Franklin expedition in the 1840s, Sir George Simpson was given two James Bay style tabbed fire bags (or “octopus” bags), and the provenance of these bags have given this baseline. Simpson’s bags are at the Manitoba Museum, and provide a comparison. The style and influences from James Bay Cree beadwork can be found in the McTavish collection on a tabbed fire bag and a wall or watch pocket, where both pieces exhibit the almond shaped leaves and are executed with the same very tiny beads. Hail and Duncan describe the preferred bead colours in this type of work to be white, pink, blue, green and crystal, which is consistent with the pieces that represent this style in the McTavish collection. Hail and Duncan cite that a probable European influence comes from “whitework” embroidery done by British/Scots women who lived in the Red River, York Factory and James Bay regions as a likely prototype for this particular style.²² (See plates 1 and 2 for examples of James Bay Cree beadwork from the McTavish collection.)

Lake Winnipeg Cascading Lobe Style of Beadwork

The style of beadwork Hail and Duncan describe as Lake Winnipeg cascading lobe style of beadwork is found on panel fire bags, leggings and garters in the McTavish Collection. The defining motifs are “stacked tear-shaped lobes or petals wrapped part way around them.”²³

Farrell-Racette explains that the lobe style of beadwork, especially when the design, colours and

²¹ Hail and Duncan, *Out of the North*, 68.

²² *Ibid.*, 69.

²³ *Ibid.* 71.

beadwork is very dense, was very common in communities in the northern Ontario James Bay area such as the Trout Lake area.²⁴ Pieces in the Manitoba Museum that were created in the Trout Lake area were pulled from storage for comparison. Ted Brassier includes a panel bag with very similar beadwork in his book, *Bo'jou, Neejee!*, he describes as “Red River Métis type, from the second half of the nineteenth-century”.²⁵ The cascading lobe style of beadwork is done on a wool stroud background, but is so dense that little of the wool background shows. Artists used glass beads in as many as twenty different colours, with multiple shades of pink, blue, green and white and cream. The number of beads on these pieces make the garment very heavy! The McTavish collection includes three panel-style fire bags, a pair of leggings and a pair of garters in the Lake Winnipeg cascading lobe style. (See plates 3, 4 and 5 for examples of Lake Winnipeg cascading lobe style beadwork from the McTavish collection)

Silk Ribbon Cutwork and Red River Métis Embroidery

This appears to be the earliest form of embroidery practiced by Indigenous women in Western Canada. Examples of silk ribbon cutwork are found as trim on four pairs of mittens in the collection. The cutwork appliqué is created by cutting, folding and stitching down ribbons of different colours on top of each other to form a cut-out effect. The availability of silk ribbon in large quantities and colour choices dates to the end of the eighteenth century in the western Great Lakes region. The making of silk ribbon cutwork on clothing items travelled westward from the Great Lakes, onto the prairie regions in the 1830s and 1840s, where it continues to be used today

²⁴ Sherry Farrell Racette, personal conversation.

²⁵ Brassier, *Bo'jou, Neejee!*, 35.

to decorate clothing for special occasions and ceremonial purposes.²⁶

The mittens in the McTavish collection have large bands of multi-coloured silk ribbon cut-work in dark green, violet, yellow, turquoise, royal blue and pink at the cuff. The back of the mittens, and in the case of one pair, the back of the thumb, have delicate floral embroidery in both double-chain stitch and buttonhole stitch, in the softer, more muted colours of salmon, gold, light pink and soft orange-red. The colours of silk floss may have originally been more vibrant and it is likely that the silks predate the invention of aniline dyes which would suggest that they were made before 1860. The mittens are similar in cut to the mittens described by Hail and Duncan as “cut large enough to accommodate a wool duffle liner.”²⁷ The embroidery on the mittens falls close to what Duncan and Hail describe as the Lake Winnipeg small flower style, and like the McTavish mittens, also are embroidered in shades of “rust, avocado green and gold.”²⁸ (See plates 6 and 7 for examples of Red River Métis style mittens with ribbon cutwork and Lake Winnipeg small flower style embroidery from the McTavish collection) This cut and style of mitten, like the embroidered slippers was popular among the Métis, so they could have very likely been made and produced in Red River and throughout the Lake Winnipeg area. Ted Brassier describes similar mittens in his article, *In Search of Métis Art*, which he describes as “made by Métis at Fort McMurray in the 1880s”.²⁹

²⁶ Hail and Duncan, *Out of the North*, 163.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, 69.

²⁹ Brassier, “In Search of Métis Art,” Plate 4.

Lake Winnipeg Small Flower Style Embroidery

The Lake Winnipeg small flower style is created in silk floss embroidery. The colours are bright and tend to be various shades of pinks, red, orange, yellow, greens, blue and white, colours available after 1860 and the introduction of new dyes, and the dominant embroidery stitch used is the buttonhole stitch.³⁰ Duncan and Hail suggest that the Lake Winnipeg Small flower style appeared later than the James Bay style of beading.³¹ That said, it is certain that there would have been some definite overlap on these dates throughout the James Bay and Red River area, which is what makes dating this work so difficult. The overlap of dates can be attributed to the movement of families and kinship and trade networks among fur trade communities. The Lake Winnipeg style combines “groups of tiny sinuous motifs of similar scale to form a fluid, asymmetric sprig arrangements” including rosettes, serpentine leaves, and tendrils.³² There is a definitely a direct relationship, or progression from the Lake Winnipeg small flower style to the more elaborate Norway House style. (See plates 8 for an example of the Lake Winnipeg small flower style embroidery from the McTavish collection)

Norway House Style Embroidery

Perhaps the most colourful and showy of all the embroidery styles to come out of the fur trade era is the Norway House style. Norway House, located at the northern end of Lake

³⁰ Hail and Duncan, *Out of the North*, 69.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

Winnipeg was a centre of trade for many years and the principal depot for the Athabasca brigade. Needle workers would have had access to a large selection of embroidery floss colours as HBC store inventory shipments came to Norway House directly from Red River or York Factory.³³ The Norway House style employs silk floss in multiple shades of pinks, reds, greens, blues, violet, dark purple, white and yellows. It can definitely be described as flamboyant! Duncan and Hail date this style roughly from as early as the 1870s, with the style being most popular in the 1890s and early twentieth century in the Norway House area. Maureen Matthews and Sherry Farrell Racette, suggest that the McTavish collection may offer evidence of this style being introduced earlier than the 1870s, but based on the availability of the materials prior to this date, however, we do not have a piece with a solid provenance that dates these pieces earlier.³⁴ The style was also produced in near-by communities such as Cross Lake and possibly Oxford House.

Pieces that are created in the Norway House style are embroidered in buttonhole stitch using fine, tightly twisted silk floss. The characteristic motifs that make up the Norway House style are large, expanded rosettes, with a centre flower composed of long and narrow, tear drop-shaped lobes with a round yellow centre, surrounded by one or more layers of scalloped petals. (See plates 8 and 9) These rosettes are often done in colours of light and dark pink, lavender and orange silk floss. The leaves tend to be long and narrow, with a serpentine “S” shape, with one or more layers of light and dark green silk floss. Tendrils, buds and berries are usually included in the design. The vamps of moccasins done in Norway House style are often rimmed with multiple rows of horsehair strands wrapped in silk. Hail and Duncan describe the style as

³³ Goldsborough, “Historic Site of Manitoba: Norway House.”

³⁴ Farrell-Racette and Matthews, personal conversation.

“dramatic and fluid”.³⁵ Norway House style pieces are well represented in the McTavish collection including six pairs of wrap-around moccasins, three wall pockets, four hand bags, two pairs of mittens and three pairs of gauntlets, two jackets or hunting jackets, and a neck tie. (See plates 7, 8 and 9 for examples of Norway House style embroidery from the McTavish collection. This style of embroidery was still being used until the 1960s in some communities including Norway House.³⁶ (See plates 9, 10 and 11 for examples of Norway House style embroidery in the McTavish Collection)

³⁵ Hail and Duncan, *Out of the North*, 168.

³⁶ Matthews, personal communication.

Needlework in Rupert's Land in the Nineteenth Century

The items from the collection that have been chosen for more in depth study feature bead work and silk embroidery that are typical of Cree, Ojibway and Red River Métis styles found in northern Manitoba, around Lake Winnipeg, and the Red River and James Bay regions throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Determining dates for when the pieces in the collection may have been made based on style is difficult, but a range can be determined from comparing pieces to other similar pieces with well-documented provenance. The exact date of the genesis of floral needlework is impossible to determine, and that is because this was most likely a creative and evolving process of education and experimentation over time. However, Ted Brassier writes that, “increasingly flamboyant floral designs become more common on clothing and personal items produced by Métis artisans by the 1830s,”³⁷ and begin to be recorded as common throughout the region in the 1840s.³⁸

Beaded and embroidered clothing worn by Métis and European people within the fur-trade society had layered meanings derived from diverse heritages. Men wore these decorated pieces with pride. The men would wear these bags in the company of other fur trade company officers as a symbol of their identity as a member of the fur trade society.³⁹ Whether these men had an Indigenous heritage or not, these decorated items identified them as members of fur trade society. Women were admired for their skill and artistry in creating these pieces, and they were

³⁷ Brassier, “In Search of Metis Art,” 225.

³⁸ Hail and Duncan, *Out of the North*, 67–68.

³⁹ Peers, “Many Tender Ties: The S BLACK Bag,” 293.

able to display their art on their men.⁴⁰ Anyone who has ever attempted to bead or embroider an article of clothing, knows it requires innumerable hours. These pieces, when given as gifts to husbands, fathers, son and sweethearts, are visible symbols of love.⁴¹

Throughout the nineteenth century, beading and embroidery techniques were adapted by women and evolved as they experimented, blending cultural and artistic influences from both Indigenous and European sources. The characteristic blending styles in the beadwork and embroidery is what defines it as Red River Métis.⁴² Brassier states that the style developed at the same time the Métis were emerging as a nation. Near the forts and trading posts, Métis or Homeguard women were employed by the traders to produce items such as clothing, snowshoes and moccasins. The influences behind the decoration of these items were, as Brassier suggests, “derived indeed from Swampy Cree and Ojibway traditions, but were modified by a considerable influence from the French mission stations during the eighteenth century”.⁴³

One of the challenges presented by the Red River style of embroidery is that it is found all over the West. The women who created this work in fact moved all over North America. Neighbouring First Nations who came into contact with Métis artists artistically borrowed or adopted from the Métis artists. Métis people travelled and settled throughout fur trade country, the women bringing with them their style and techniques of their mothers and sisters. Members of the fur trade society used the giving of gifts and the practice of trade to build wide personal

⁴⁰ Helm in Peers, “The S BLACK Bag”, (1999), 122.

⁴¹ Ibid., 122.

⁴² Brassier, “In Search of Metis Art,” 222–223.

⁴³ Ibid., 222.

and economic connections. Objects would sometimes travel more frequently and further afield than their makers, bringing their influence far beyond the location of the objects creation.

Brasser describes yet another problem with studying Métis art; that there was a period from the end of the nineteenth-century to quite recently when artists were not making distinctively Métis art, and artistic material culture which either went underground, or ceased to be produced at all.⁴⁴ Many families were not talking about their heritage and Indigenous roots, and “Red River Métis culture and its artistic expression flowered and withered before ethnologists began their systematic collections of documented artifacts.”⁴⁵ Brasser poses this problem with studying Métis art, but falls short with his explanation on why the aesthetic declined in production. Looking outside of the art itself to the social and political climate of Red River in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, we find the Red River Métis in a mass post-resistance diaspora fleeing to other parts of western Canada and taking their artistic aesthetic with them. The link between understanding the social, political, cultural and economic history of a region or specific group of people is essential to understanding the movement and change in their artistic aesthetic.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 228.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 221.

The Domestic Arts Curricula in Schools in Red River

By the mid-nineteenth century, the Red River settlement had become a centre for education of the children of Hudson Bay Company men. Throughout the settlement there were church run schools, as well as private schools that provided training for employment in the HBC. It was far more favourable to send children to Red River for an education, than overseas to Scotland or Montreal. Boys could obtain an education that would ensure an upwardly mobile career within the company. Education in Red River for girls, as Sherry Farrell-Racette states, was “a site for the merger of indigenous knowledge, European notions of a lady’s education, and the enduring demand for female production.”⁴⁶ Girls would obtain skills needed as wives for high-ranking HBC officers and clerks to secure a favourable position in Red River society. Private schools run by women including Miss Mathilda Davis; Mrs. Ingham; Miss Lowman; Miss McCallum; and the Red River Academy are examples of girls’ schools in operation in Red River during this period.

The curriculum set for girls would have included academic subjects such as math, English, French, reading and writing, as well as deportment, music, dance and needlework, both ‘plain’ and ‘ornamental’; skills needed for a woman who could neatly sew her own clothes, execute bead appliqué and silk embroidery on fabric and hide; as well as other skills necessary for running a large, staffed household and organizing and hosting social events.⁴⁷

We do know that there were Roman Catholic mission schools at Pembina, St Boniface

⁴⁶ Farrell-Racette, “Sewing for a Living,” 20.

⁴⁷ Berry, “Recovered Identities,” 49.

and St Paul, in the Red River country, and that needlework was a part of curriculum there, as nuns taught First Nation and Métis girls to sew their own clothes and embroidery.⁴⁸ Sharon Blady, in her work on Métis beadwork says that Métis women's aesthetic choices were from both "Amerindian and European sources".⁴⁹ She also, however, acknowledges several researchers who believe it was the arrival of the Grey nuns in the early part of the nineteenth century that constituted the major influence on needlework style and design.⁵⁰ The nuns brought with them from Quebec embroidered vestments and other needlework for the church, as well as Parisian floral embroidery pattern books. Brasser states that, "Increasingly naturalistic and flamboyant floral designs become noticeable on [Métis] products by the 1830s, shortly after the establishment of Roman Catholic mission schools".⁵¹

The Oakfield School, run by Mathilda Davis is definitely connected to the McTavish collection, as Mary Sinclair Christie sent her daughters Margaret and Lydia there. They would have learned embroidery and sewing techniques at the school, which enabled them to create the level of work demonstrated in the collection, or at least to have an eye for very good work worthy of collecting.

Like the Christie girls, Mathilda Davis was of a British and Cree heritage, and born in fur trade country. Mathilda was educated in England, and had worked as a governess before

⁴⁸ Brasser, "In Search of Metis Art," 225.

⁴⁹ Blady, "Beadwork as an Expression of Metis Cultural Identity," 133.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁵¹ Brasser, "In Search of Metis Art," 225.

returning to Red River.⁵² The school opened in 1840, and was backed by influential members of Red River society, the Hudson's Bay Company, and by the fees paid by the families of the girls who attended. The curricula included instruction in English, French, geography, music, drawing, dancing, history and, like most girls' schools in Red River at that time, needlework.⁵³

⁵² Morley, "DAVIS, MATHILDA"

⁵³ Ibid.

Time Spent with the Collection: Making Connections and Comparisons, and Getting to Know the “Old Ladies”

Spending time with the collection and getting to know each piece intimately, was an interesting experience in itself. Each piece presents questions and clues as to who the maker could possibly be, where the object was made, and what the circumstance of the piece becoming a part of the collection may have been. Sometimes, a trace of ink can be seen, where the original pattern had been drawn on the hide, and the maker decided to take the embroidery in a different direction. One gauntlet, without a partner, had “Property of Heather Rogers” written inside with ink. This clue turned out to be a mystery, as I had found out that this gauntlet never made it into the possession of Heather Rogers, who was described as a “favourite niece” of Margaret Konantz.⁵⁴ Margaret Konantz was one of the last women to care for the collection before her son William donated it to the Manitoba Museum.

As I held each object, turned it over in my hands, I got to know each piece, its personality, its flaws and its beauty. The more I learned about the objects in the collection, the more sense of power and agency the objects had, and the more animate the object became and the closer I felt to their makers and collectors.

The time spent examining the objects was needed. It was not easy to see commonalities between pieces; they were not evident at first glance. These commonalities in style, colour, design and even patterns in mistakes and imperfections, connected certain pieces together under

⁵⁴ Konantz, personal conversation.

one possible maker.

There are seven pairs of wrap-around moccasins and one single moccasin without a partner in the collection that appear to be made by the same hand based on the similarity in the colour palette chosen, commonalities in flower design, and consistencies in the hide. It is quite possible that all seven pairs of moccasins may have come from one single caribou hide, which is of a very high quality and remarkably soft. In explaining the process of making smoke tanned hide of this quality, Maureen Matthews remarked that it requires a considerable amount of physical strength and experience to “know by feel” when all the dermis layers have been broken down to make the hide soft without damaging it.⁵⁵ The colour of the hide, whether it is almost white, or a rich chocolate brown, requires a considerable amount of knowledge about tanning. If it is smoked, one needs to know the type of wood to use in the smoking process, and how much to allow the hide to be exposed to the smoke to create the colour desired. Light coloured caribou hide is not smoked to keep it a pure creamy-white colour. The scraping of the hide must be expertly done, as any blemish will show on the white hide. This is what makes white caribou hide rare and quite valuable; it is often reserved for trim such as cuffs or vamps.⁵⁶ The maker of these moccasins chose to make the vamps and the upper “wraps” of all seven pairs out of light cream colored hide, with the foot of the moccasins slightly darker. Compared to some of the pieces in the collection that are made out of moose hide, or a darker tanned caribou, these moccasins do not have a very strong “smoked” smell. (See plates 12 to 19)

⁵⁵ Matthews, personal conversation.

⁵⁶ Hail and Duncan, *Out of the North*, 111.

All of the moccasins are so expertly and artistically sewn, with fine, tight stitches, it is clear that they were stitched by a very skilled woman. The pleats around the vamp are so incredibly small, even, and tight, it is a marvel that it was possible to create such tiny pleats in a hide garment. Jennine Krauchi explained that the way to make those pleats so small, is by gathering and stitching the hide while it is wet, and it would only be possible with a very high quality hide.⁵⁷

The embroidery on each moccasin vamp is done in a very tiny double-chain stitch. Jennine Krauchi and Sherry Farrell Racette both stated that you cannot get this fine and consistent stitch with anything else other than silk floss.⁵⁸ We went back into the museum storage cabinets and pulled out pieces that were done with a cotton thread for comparison, and the result is a rougher, larger and more uneven stitch. Farrell Racette's research shows that during the First and Second World Wars, when silk embroidery floss was not available, women tried to work with cotton, but the effect was never the same.⁵⁹

The palette of silk floss is shared among all of the moccasins with double-chain stitch embroidery but not all colours are included in every pair. Some colours are faded, while others are still quite vibrant. The palette is made up of pale pink, light green, dark green, salmon (pale orangey-pink), navy blue and violet. Each pair of moccasins are trimmed around the cuff with a layer of navy wool stroud and a layer of red wool stroud. Both layers of trim are edged with

⁵⁷ Krauchi and Farrell-Racette, personal conversation.

⁵⁸ Krauchi, personal conversation.

⁵⁹ Farrell-Racette, personal conversation.

hand pinking, in either inverted scallops or squared (castellated) scallops. (See plates 14b and 19b for moccasins with hand-cut scallop trim from the McTavish collection)

Hail and Duncan describe this style of double-chain stitch embroidery on these moccasins as Cree/Cree-Métis from Lake Winnipeg.⁶⁰ We know that Mary Sinclair was born and raised in this area, and went to school in the Red River area, possibly at the Red River Academy, where this type of needlework was certainly taught. When the collection was brought together as a whole, motifs, designs and colour pallets found in the moccasins could be identified in other pieces as well. It is not unreasonable to assume that the maker of these items was Mary Sinclair. There are no wear marks on the sole of moccasins, so none of these moccasins appear to have been worn. They are extraordinarily beautiful and artfully done, and my hypothesis is that they could have possibly been made as a trousseau gift for a young bride, possibly made by Mary Sinclair, and given to her daughter Lydia at her marriage to William Christie. (See plates 12 – 19 for moccasins from the McTavish collection)

The laurel leaf motif found on the moccasins in photographs in plates 18 and 19, can be found on other embroidered and beaded objects in the collection. The wall pockets, or perhaps they served as watch pockets, in the photos in plates 20, 22 and 23, and the mittens in plates 21 all share the laurel leaf design. The colour palette chosen for the embroidered objects is also similar, even in the beaded wall pocket in plate 22, leading to the conclusion that they may have been made by the same person.

⁶⁰ Hail and Duncan, *Out of the North*, 160–161.

If we conclude that these items were made by the same hand, then why not Mary Sinclair, and why not as gifts for her family, such as a wedding trousseau for her daughter Lydia? Although, as a woman of high social ranking, she would have most certainly had domestic help with tasks such as darning and repairing clothing, Mary would have had time to produce decorative work for her family. Why is there such a strong argument that these are Mary's in particular? There is a stylistic connection specifically between the laurel leaf motif on the moccasins in plate 18 that is remarkably similar to the laurel leaves beaded onto a tabbed bag believed to be made by Mary for her husband.⁶¹ The tabbed bag was given by the Christies to the Earl of Southesk on his travels throughout Western Canada in 1859. The provenance of this bag is fairly strong, as it bears the initials, "WJC", which were the initials of William Joseph Christie. These types of bags were often made by women for their husbands or sweethearts.⁶²

Makers and Collectors: Who are the Women of Mixed-Heritage in the Fur Trade?

The roles of women during the fur trade era from the eighteenth and into the early twentieth centuries in Western Canada, were as varied as the regional and cultural backgrounds of the women themselves. Although the written documentation of the importance and necessity of the varied roles women played in the fur trade is not huge, there is little doubt that they were a key driving force in the industry and building of community relationships at that time. Sylvia

⁶¹ Image of "WJC" bag, "With Utmost Hospitality": William and Mary Christie, Royal Alberta Museum website, accessed 5 Jan, 2017, royalalbertamuseum.ca/exhibits/online/southeask/fortEdmonton_hospitality.cfm

⁶² Peers, "Many Tender Ties: The S BLACK Bag," 301–302.

Van Kirk quotes Chief Factor John Rowand at Fort Edmonton as stating exactly that, “The women here work very hard...and if it was not so, I do not know how we would get on with the Company work”.⁶³

Keith Widder explains that one possibility for the comparative lack of women in the record was due to the specific items Company men were expected to keep records about did not include the women’s activities. As employees of the fur trade companies, these men were hired to record the work of the men, and therefore, recording the work of the women was not their concern and doing so would go beyond the basic requirement of what they were requested to do.⁶⁴

Although the records have been scarce, researchers over the past few decades have been digging through journals, diaries, private letters, and family histories to build a more complete history of women during this time. The roles of women within fort walls, and out in the country with their husbands are described by a growing number of scholars such as, Brown (1980), Van Kirk (1980), Wishart (2006), Widder (1999), Murphy (2003), Olsen (1989), Iseke-Barnes (2009), Farrell Racette (2005), White (2006) and Podruchny (2006) who see women as critical to the functioning of the fur trade. Within the trading fort walls, women planted and harvested the gardens in the summer time; they did all the fishing, and much of the snaring and trapping of animals like marten, weasel, rabbit and muskrat; cleaned and prepared furs and hides, made and

⁶³ Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 111.

⁶⁴ Kieth Widder, *What Lies Behind the Picture: A Personal Journey into Cree Ancestry* (Central Alberta Historical Society, 2006), 100.

decorated clothing, moccasins and snowshoes; aided in running the forts by performing all of the domestic chores of cleaning, cooking, cleaning, laundry and repair; they provided wild rice, maple sugar, dried berries, fish and meat. When the inventories of the forts and trading posts are examined, the bulk of the items listed tend to be domestic in nature: pots and pans, knives, axes, cloth, awls, needles, ribbons and beads, and food stuffs. These items are indicative of the realm of women, and it is clear that these customers are creating a demand; women are making up the consumer body that is driving the trade.

Outside of the fort walls, women were equally important customers and additionally had important roles within the trading network in the field, or out on the buffalo hunts in the manufacture of provisions for the brigades. Van Kirk, Wishart, Widder, and Podruchny describe women's roles within trading parties as interpreters, active traders, mediators and go-betweens, guides and diplomats. Women were instrumental in forming and maintaining trade negotiations. Lucy Murphy describes them as "cultural mediators" in these communities, "moving easily between Aboriginal and European society, solidifying social and cultural bonds".⁶⁵

On the plains, during the buffalo hunt, women were responsible for butchering, cutting and drying the meat. They pounded and mixed the pemmican for sale to the companies and to feed the brigades. Women also provided care for the health and well-being of the community. Iskeke-Barnes describes women in the role of medical care provider, who used both European and Aboriginal medicines.⁶⁶ Victoria Callihoo recalls her childhood on the hunt, where her

⁶⁵ Murphy "Public Mothers," 145.

⁶⁶ Iskeke-Barnes, "Grandmothers of the Metis Nation," 83

mother was a healer to hunters who had fallen or were otherwise injured, or to women who were in need of a midwife.⁶⁷

In the era of transition, during the decline of the fur trade when a shift occurred toward private transporters, women worked with their husbands in the transportation of goods on the cart brigades, and in the running of stables.⁶⁸ When their husbands were away, women headed single-parent families for much of the year. They had the responsibility to run the farm, hire farm hands, care for and direct the work of the children, as well as maintaining informal networks of meal sharing and community gatherings that aided in maintaining a strong community and familial ties. Their role in maintaining communities cannot be overstated.⁶⁹

Among the upper ranks of the Hudson's Bay Company, the wives of officers had the responsibility of running and managing the "big house" in the fort or post. This required women to manage staff that ran the day-to-day operations, plan, coordinate and host guests, events and balls, and essentially serve as "first lady" in a diplomatic fashion. Until the mid-nineteenth century, it was the Indigenous wives of Officers and their daughters who were preferred for these positions. They would have been schooled in etiquette and deportment in Red River private schools, sent abroad to be educated, or informally "apprenticed" under an experienced HBC wife. Letitia Hargrave who described Mary Sinclair's sister Margaret as her "former protégé".⁷⁰

⁶⁷ "Victoria Belcourt Callihoo," in *Footprints*.

⁶⁸ Vernon Widder, *What Lies Behind the Picture*, (Central Alberta Historical Society, 2006), 100.

⁶⁹ Iseke-Barnes, "Grandmothers of the Metis Nation," 93

⁷⁰ MacLeod, *Letters of Letitia Hargrave*, 232.

Kaaren Olsen suggests that the roles of Aboriginal women in the 1800s was as “silent partners” in the fur trade – assisting, educating the children, and maintaining the family home while their husbands were out trapping and trading.⁷¹ But it seems inadequate to describe women as silent partners, considering their active roles as interpreters, guides, negotiators, traders, and consumers whose demand dictated the supply at the forts and posts.

Many historians tend to describe the roles and experiences of women part of a general survey of the life and responsibilities of French Métis and Scottish/English HBC families over time. What is relatively scarce from this survey, but no less important, is representation of the lives of women who were from the upper echelon of fur trade society. These women performed important roles as “head lady” of the fort and big house. They worked as aides to their husbands in diplomacy and hospitality, supervised and coordinated house staff and large social events – a completely different skill set, but no less important to the running of the fur trade operation. As this case study will show, it is necessary to be mindful that even with the lack of written record on women’s histories and roles in the fur trade, there is no need to over simplify, make assumptions, or revert to stereotypes. The roles of women throughout the fur trade era were wide and varied as their social and economic situation, region, and their ancestral/heritage.

⁷¹ Olsen, “Native Women and the Fur Industry,” 55.

The Family

The Family History and Collection Provenance

The Sinclair family tree in Manitoba and beyond is far reaching. Beginning with Nahoway and William Sinclair in the late eighteenth century, all the members of their large family became successful within the fur trade elite. We will only be following the provenance of this particular collection, so that will take us up the family tree from Nahoway and William Sinclair; to the family of their son William “Credo” Sinclair II and his wife Mary Wadin McKay; their daughter Mary Sinclair and her husband William Christie and their daughter Lydia and her husband Donald McTavish; their daughter Edith married Arthur Rogers and had daughters Margaret and Enid. Margaret’s son William Konantz was the family member who initiated the collection’s shift from family property to the public property in the Manitoba Museum.

We cannot be entirely sure that the McTavish collection indeed was passed down from mother to daughter over the generations, but when it comes to objects intended for the home or women’s use, this tends to be the pattern. If my hypothesis that Mary created items such as moccasins, mittens, and wall pockets as trousseau items for her daughter Lydia is true, it would explain why these items, as well as others were passed by Lydia to her daughter. We know for certain that the collection was passed from Lydia’s daughter Edith, to her two daughters Margaret and Enid. Margaret passed her half of the collection to her son William and Enid’s half

burned in a house fire.⁷²

It is possible that some of these items could have come from Mary Wadin McKay and William “Credo” Sinclair, and even Nahoway herself, but we can never really know, as at this time most of the items can be dated to the mid-nineteenth century at the earliest. Understanding the collection better begins with learning more about the family members who cared for it, and most probably made at least some of the pieces.

⁷² Buchanan, “Enid Rogers,” 4.

Getting to Know the Sinclair-Christie-McTavish-Rogers-Konantz Family

Nahoway

This long line of strong women begins with Nahoway, a Cree woman who, according to Donna Sutherland's research in *Nahoway: A Distant Voice*, was born between 1775 and 1780, in the vicinity of the mouth of the Churchill River, near the present community of Churchill, Manitoba.⁷³ The story begins with Nahoway, not because Nahoway's grandmothers were not remarkable themselves, but this is where the written record begins.

Very little is known about who Nahoway's parents were, but Sutherland offers for consideration the idea that her mother was a Cree or Cree/European woman named Thucotch, from the Churchill/York Factory area. Nahoway's father, Sutherland suggests, may have been a British naval officer named George Holt. We know for certain the date that George Holt visited the Churchill area near the time of her birth, as his name is carved into the rock at the landing of Sloop's Cove, as well as the date, 1771.⁷⁴

Historian Sylvia Van Kirk suggests that children born of Indigenous women and European men at that time, would identify more strongly with their mother's cultural heritage.⁷⁵ Sutherland says that Nahoway had "self-declared as a Cree woman." She and her mother with other families of HBC Officers, would have been considered Homeguard Cree. As the wife and

⁷³ Donna Sutherland, *Nahoway*, 1.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁷⁵ Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 15.

child of an HBC officer, they would have resided inside the fort walls, but moved easily between life in the fort, and among the nearby Cree community.⁷⁶ Nahoway would have learned both traditional Cree skills, language and cultural traditions and beliefs, as well as European ones. She would have been the last generation of this particular family line to be called “Homeguard”, as her daughters would not have received that label”.⁷⁷

Nahoway married William Sinclair, an employee of the Hudson’s Bay Company from the Orkney Islands. He had signed on with the HBC in 1782 and became Chief Factor by the end of his career. He and Nahoway were “country wed” in 1790, and throughout William’s career, the couple lived in the territory now called Manitoba, staying for years in York Factory, Oxford House and Jack River House (Norway House).⁷⁸

While living in York Factory, William and Nahoway would have had their own private room inside the fort, on the second floor of the “Octagon” or “residence”, inside the fort walls.⁷⁹ Their room would have had a bed, storage cupboard, desk and chair, and a stove or fire place for heat. They would have had their meals prepared in the fort kitchens, and would have eaten as a group with the other fort residents in the mess. The men, especially those with the rank of officer, would have eaten together away from the women and children.⁸⁰

William and Nahoway had eleven children together: Pheobe, Catherine, William

⁷⁶ Sutherland, *Nahoway*, 53.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁷⁸ Red River Ancestry, “William Sinclair.”

⁷⁹ Parks Canada, “York Factory National Historic Site of Canada.”

⁸⁰ Donna Sutherland, *Nahoway*, 125.

“Credo” Jr., John, Jane Anne, Thomas, James, Anne, Mary, Colin and one child whose name is unknown. Although William did have children with other women as well, he acknowledged the bond he had with Nahoway, writing in his will: “my beloved wife Nahoway”.⁸¹ Nahoway lived out her final years with her two youngest children in the Red River Settlement, and Sutherland surmises that Nahoway probably died in 1863, which would place her between eighty-three and eighty-eight years old when she died. She is buried in St. John’s cemetery in Winnipeg.

William “Credo” Sinclair II (Mary Wadin McKay)

It is William and Nahoway’s eldest son who connects us to the McTavish collection. William “Credo” Sinclair II, like his father, William Jr. worked for the HBC in the capacity of an officer. It is not known how William self-identified, or whether he publicly recognized his heritage, but Sir George Simpson in his “Character Book” and described him as, “a half breed of the Cree nation...”⁸² Sutherland noted that Nahoway dressed her children in hide moss bags and carried them in a tikanaagan (cradleboard), which gives us some indication that she had raised her children in accordance with Cree values and practices.⁸³ In 1798, when William Jr. was just a baby, Nahoway and William Sinclair Sr. were posted to Oxford House, a Cree community located in northern Manitoba.⁸⁴ Here, William would have grown up learning the Cree

⁸¹ Ibid., 10.

⁸² Spry, “William Sinclair.”

⁸³ Sutherland, *Nahoway*, 183.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

language, absorbing values and practices from his mother, the Cree families that lived near them, and the children with whom he played.

William “Credo” Sinclair and Mary Wadin McKay were married in 1823 in Norway House by Reverend West, a Chaplin for the Hudson’s Bay Company.⁸⁵ It is a significant indication of the rank and importance of the Sinclair family, that William and Mary were married by a clergyman, and not in the custom of the country, as his parents, and so many others in the fur trade at that time were more likely to be wed. Mary Wadin McKay was born in Brockville, Ontario. Her mother was Anishinaabe and her father Alexander McKay, was a European fur trader.⁸⁶ Prior to marrying William “Credo”, Mary Wadin had been country wed to Donald MacKenzie and had three children by him.⁸⁷ Donald had left Mary and according to oral family history, Donald had taken their three children with him.⁸⁸ It is likely Mary brought with her into the marriage both European and Anishinaabe knowledge and way of doing things, as well as an Anishinaabe aesthetic in art and clothing ornamentation, in items such as moccasins, mittens and bags.

William Credo Sinclair II and Mary McKay had eight children: William, John, Alexander, James Nicol, Mary, Catherine, Margaret and Maria.⁸⁹ Their daughter Mary Sinclair is the next generation in this family line directly connected with the McTavish collection, and I

⁸⁵ Ibid., 225.

⁸⁶ Berry, “Recovered Identities, 49.

⁸⁷ Horan, “Mary Waddin McKay MacKenzie Sinclair.”

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

propose that she is the maker of some of the objects in the collection.

Mary Sinclair Christie

Mary Sinclair was born in 1833 in the Rainy Lake region of Ontario, where her father, was in charge of the HBC post at Dalles at that time.⁹⁰ His promotion to the position of Chief Trader in 1844, would have permitted Mary access to high ranking Red River society.⁹¹ She would have attended social events, and in all likelihood attended one of Red River's private schools. Susan Berry mentions that Mary's older sister Margaret had attended the Red River Academy, so it is likely Mary did as well.⁹² We can be certain that she was relatively well educated, as her letters written to Mathilda Davis now housed in the Manitoba Archives demonstrate her beautiful penmanship.⁹³ Along with reading, writing, mathematics, geography, history, girls at schools such as the Red River Academy learned deportment and domestic arts, such as sewing and needlework.

Although she was part Scottish, Mary Sinclair's Indigenous heritage and her interactions with other women with Indigenous heritage were probably most influential to her artistry as a needle-worker. She had Cree ancestry from her father's side and Anishinaabe heritage through her mother. She was likely highly influenced by the Anishinaabe community of the Rainy Lake

⁹⁰ Sutherland, *Nahoway*, 270.

⁹¹ Berry, "Recovered Identities," 48..

⁹² *Ibid.* 48-49.

⁹³ Matilda Davis School Collection, 1820-1941, M62-M64, Archives of Manitoba

district, where father was posted several times throughout his career. Mary also lived in Alberta after her marriage, where Métis women were producing beautiful work around the Fort Edmonton area. Throughout her life, Mary would have been stylistically inspired and influenced by the work of women in the communities where she lived.

As a young girl, Mary would have begun to learn sewing, beadwork and embroidery from her mother and other female members of her family and the community. Since her father was a high ranking officer in the Company, it is likely she also studied needlework at school in Red River. (Mary Sinclair as a young girl. See plate 24)

Mary became engaged to William Joseph Christie at York Factory in 1848. Mary could not have done better in terms of her rising social status than to become the wife of William Christie. William Christie was from a high-ranking fur trade family. His father was Alexander Christie, who was born in Scotland in 1792, entered the Hudson's Bay Company in 1809 and was a Chief Factor by 1821. Alexander Christie was Governor of Assiniboia in 1833-39 and 1844-48, and was the Councilor of Rupert's Land in 1839.⁹⁴

Like his father, William Christie would also have a long and influential career as a high ranking Officer with the HBC and make his mark in the Northwestern Territories of Rupert's Land. During the early years of his career, he worked in Red River, York Factory and Fort Churchill, but later spent much of his career in regions of present day Alberta and Saskatchewan. He was posted to Fort Pelly in 1852, Fort Edmonton in 1858, and as a Commissioner for Treaty

⁹⁴ Manitoba Library Association, *Pioneer and Early Citizens of Manitoba*, 49.

4, and Treaty 6 adhesions. He also worked at Fort Qu'Appelle, Fort Carlton and Fort Pitt.⁹⁵

It is rare to get a glimpse into the romantic aspect of a couple's relationship, especially during the time in which Mary and William lived. In William and Mary Christies' story, it is Letitia Hargrave that provides this rare insight. Letitia Hargrave was the wife of York Factory's Chief Factor James Hargrave. She wrote gossipy letters about the social goings-on wherever the Hargraves were posted, especially York Factory. Letitia was born in Scotland, and saw herself as superior to her peers in Rupert's Land who were of a mixed Indigenous/European heritage. Her letters reveal a highly critical and opinionated woman, who looked down her nose at those whose behavior or character did not meet her elevated standards. Her letters also read with a jaundiced-tone, which probably indicates that she was a difficult woman to be around at the time, but wonderfully fun reading today! In 1848, Letitia wrote to her mother:

“[Mrs. Sinclair] with the other members of the family came here a month ago in a schooner from Churchill on their way to Lac la Pluie where [Mary's father] Mr. Sinclair was appointed to. They arrived on a Thursday and on the following Sunday Mr. Wm Christie asked the eldest unmarried daughter to marry him and she and her mother consented.”⁹⁶

Letitia had a very strong opinion on the quickness of the engagement, which seemed to be a source of excitement, and great little piece of gossip to share with her mother! She writes, “Old Mr. Christie will be much vexed and will, I daresay refuse his consent. They had never met

⁹⁵ Irene Spry, “CHRISTIE, WILLIAM JOSEPH.”

⁹⁶ MacLeod, *Letters From Letitia Hargrave 1813–1854*, 232.

nor known any thing favourable of one another until the Sinclairs came from Churchill.”⁹⁷

Letitia’s disapproval of the Sinclairs is based on her opinion that Mary behaved improperly for a woman in early Victorian times and that the conduct of the Sinclair family did not meet her expectation for the social position they held in the Company at that time, and that this behavior would be the reason for Alexander Christie to not allow William to wed Mary. She continues in her letter:

“They stole a china basin & an oil cloth from me the last time they were here so I have not gone near them on this occasion, & Mr. [Alexander] Christie revenges the family by cutting [off] Mary & not speaking to [Letitia’s daughter] Tash nor looking at [Letitia’s] Baby. [Mary and her sister Margaret] scared Willie [Christie] by walking into his house & paying him a visit, she & her sister also astonished the gentlemen by going into the garde room & asking Dr. Smellie to play the fiddle.”⁹⁸

Whether the theft of the china bowl and oil cloth actually happened or not, or if anyone aside from Letitia was shocked and concerned that Mary and Margaret had visited William Christie and Dr. Smellie, we will never know. Despite Letitia Hargrave’s assessment of the situation, Mary and William did marry a year later, in 1849. The wedding ceremony was presided over by Rt. Rev. David Anderson, the newly appointed Bishop of Rupert’s Land.⁹⁹ Letitia’s husband, James Hargrave briefly mentions the marriage in a letter, as well as the fact

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 232.

⁹⁹ Berry, “Recovered Identity,” 50.

that three cases of champagne had been ordered from England to celebrate the arrival of the Bishop and the wedding, an indication of the status of the family!¹⁰⁰

Judging from other historical accounts that mention Mary and William Christie, they appeared to have a loving and devoted relationship. Fur trader Henry Moberly noted in his journal, that in 1858, when he was travelling with the Christies along the North Saskatchewan River, they encountered three bison bulls. Christie and Moberly were on horseback, and Mary was in the boat brigade below on the river. Moberly had shot and injured one of the bulls, and “Mr. Christie earnestly desired us to drive the animal to the brink of the bank so that his wife might see him shoot it.”¹⁰¹ William is clearly hoping to impress his wife with his abilities as a hunter to take down such a large animal - a romantic gesture indeed!

While the Christies resided at Fort Edmonton during William’s tenure as Chief Trader, there were many accounts by visitors of Mary’s skill as a gracious hostess, be it for grand balls she coordinated or intimate gatherings of a few guests.

In 1858, while posted in Fort Edmonton, the Christies co-hosted a Christmas ball with John Palliser, commander of the North American Exploring Expedition. In his writing, Palliser describes the room: “The room was splendidly decorated with swords and bayonets, flags...[and] and a splendid wooden Luster to hang from the ceiling [that] lighted the whole place with candles and reflectors it was a brilliant sight.”¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ MacLeod, *Letters From Letitia Hargrave 1813–1854*, cxxvi and cxxiv.

¹⁰¹ Moberly in Berry, “Recovered Identities,” 50.

¹⁰² Spry in Berry, “Recovered Identities,” 50.

The décor of the ballroom must have been quite grand, and perhaps its opulence in the frontier of the Canadian North West, was a little unexpected to Mary's visitors. It is easy to imagine from the description, officers' wives in their finest gowns waltzing in artistically crafted caribou hide dancing slippers. In the collection, there are four such dancing slippers with silk embroidery and bird quillwork, and one pair of unfinished slipper uppers made in black velvet with beadwork. All of the slippers are single shoes without a partner. It is suspected that these slippers were divided between sisters Margaret Konantz and Enid Rogers. These dancing slippers are very similar in make, design and decoration as a pair from the Collecough collection described by Hail and Duncan as Dogrib, collected in Fort McPherson in 1894, and another pair very similar collected in Grand Rapids, Manitoba were described as "an excellent example of Métis art".¹⁰³ (See plates 25a and 25b examples of caribou dancing slippers from the McTavish collection) Exactly when and where the slippers in the McTavish collection were made cannot be known for certain, but they had been worn and may have been associated with a particular event. In any case, we know they must have been important enough to divide between the Rogers sisters.¹⁰⁴

The expedition's botanist, Eugene Bourgeau described a more intimate winter evening at Fort Edmonton where "one gathers in a well-heated room, drawing near the stove, and chats of London, the hunt, or travel, while Madame Christie offers the travelers a glass of her excellent grog".¹⁰⁵ It appears from the rave reviews of her guests, Mary Christie could hold her own

¹⁰³ Hail and Duncan, *Out of the North*, 175.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁰⁵ Spry in Berry, "Recovered Identities," 47.

among the best hostesses in larger, more cosmopolitan centres.

The Earl of Southesk visited the Christies at Fort Edmonton as he toured Rupert's Land in 1859. He did not write much about his visit, but indicated that he was there at the same time as Captain Palliser, and his delight in the "comforts of civilization" at his return to Fort Edmonton to enjoy, "wine, well-made coffee, vegetables, cream tarts, and other good things too many to mention."¹⁰⁶ Southesk laments on leaving the hospitality of the Christies during his visit, "I felt depressed, almost sorrowful on leaving Edmonton, where I have been made more than comfortable, through the constant attentions and hospitalities of my kind entertainers, but little could be gathered from the aspect of nature to chase away gloom and raise one's spirit to cheerfulness."¹⁰⁷

As an indication of their hospitality, the Christies presented the Earl with gifts. In his journal, the Earl writes that he was given at least four pairs of silk embroidered caribou hide slippers and a beaded tabbed fire bag. Susan Berry argues that the beaded tabbed fire bag in the Southesk Collection in the Royal Alberta Museum, with the initials "WJC" on the front, is a gift from the Christies and that it was likely created by Mary's own hand.¹⁰⁸ These types of items were often made by a woman for her husband and this bag bears the initials of William Joseph Christie, so it does make sense that this piece was created by Mary for her husband, and given to honour Southesk. It is very possible that Mary created all of these pieces, however what role she

¹⁰⁶ Carnegie, *Saskatchewan and the Rocky Mountains*, 268–269.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 273.

¹⁰⁸ Berry, "Recovered Identities," 47.

played in the decision to present the Earl with these gifts is unknown. Christie's bag with his initials embroidered on the front is an intimate gift from Mary to her husband. How she felt about him giving it away can only be speculated!¹⁰⁹

The WJC bag, with its tiny beads, and fine stitches, was certainly a labour of love. The gift of such an important item to the Earl, indicates how honoured the Christies felt that Southesk visited them. The gift must have provided Southesk with a trigger for many wonderful memories, as he recalled his time with the Christies very fondly. In this way the WJC bag moves from a work of love to an object of memory and reflection.

William and Mary had seven children: Anne Margaret (Marguerite), Lydia Catherine, James Grant, William Joseph Jr., John George, Mary and Charles Thomas. There is no written record that states how Mary Sinclair Christie culturally identified, whether she considered herself Cree and Anishinaabek, British, or as George Simpson referred to her father, a "half breed". At least two of her children acknowledged their Indigenous heritage enough to apply for Scrip. John George's affidavit for his Scrip application simply states:

"Hon. William Joseph Christie, Scotchman is my father, Mary Sinclair English Halfbreed is my mother."¹¹⁰

John George's sister Marguerite Christie Groat also applied for Scrip, and her document describes Mary as Métis:

¹⁰⁹ James Carnegie, *Saskatchewan and the Rocky Mountains*, 268–269.

¹¹⁰ John George scrip affidavit, Vol. 1319, Series D-11-8a, RG 15, Library Archives Canada.

“Groat, Marguerite – Concerning his claim as a child – Address, Edmonton – Born, March 14, 1851 at St. Andrews – Father, William J. Christie, (Scot) - Mother, Mary Sinclair (Métis) – Married, June 26, 1871 at Edmonton to Malcom Groat – Children living, seven (names on declaration) – Scrip for \$240.”¹¹¹

Lydia Christie McTavish

The next member of the family connected to the provenance of the McTavish collection is William and Mary’s daughter Lydia Christie McTavish. It seems likely that we can connect Lydia with the pieces that are produced in the Norway House style as Lydia and her husband, Donald McTavish were posted there from 1864 - 1881. Stylistically, these can be distinguished from those made by her mother and given to Lydia in her wedding trousseau. These moccasins have caribou vamps, moose hide soles and wraps, bright silk flower embroidery that is executed in a buttonhole stitch. These postdate the invention of aniline dyes as they have colours in them unavailable before the 1850s, so a start date for this embroidery style of about 1864 is entirely plausible.

The historical record does not reveal much of Lydia’s early life, but it is known that she grew up beside the Red River,¹¹² and attended Miss Davis’ school at Oakfield as a young girl. Miss Davis’ school opened in 1840 and was a finishing school for daughters of the elite ranks of

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Gail Konantz, *Manitobans in Profile*, 3.

the HBC that had an excellent reputation for training girls to be officer's wives.¹¹³ Her classmate, Lillian Gibbons, describes Lydia as a lively girl, and says of Miss Davis' School, "Winter nights they would dance reels and listen to vivacious Lydia Christie sing 'Money Musk' and 'Soldier's Joy'".¹¹⁴

There are no letters from Lydia herself describing her time at Oakfield, but we can piece together what her time there was like from descriptions of other alumni of the school and from letters written between her mother Mary and Miss Davis regarding her daughters' education and care while they were away at school. It appears that Davis took very good care of the girls and was well liked and respected. Her alumni also give the impression that Miss Davis set very high, exacting standards for her students. In *Women of Red River*, Mrs. Janet Gunn Muckle recalls her time in Miss Davis' School. She went to her school at the age of twelve in 1886.

"[Inside] the schoolroom, there was a long table. The first class sat on one side of [a long] table and the second class sat on the other side, and Miss Davis sat at the head. She was an accomplished and excellent teacher."¹¹⁵

Miss Jane Mary Truthwaite recalls memories her time at Miss Davis' School:

"I went to Miss Davis' School at St. Andrews when I was ten years old. There was about thirty pupils, all borders. The girls all came from posts in the interior, as well as from the

¹¹³ Marjorie Morley, "DAVIS, MATHILDA."

¹¹⁴ Gibbons, "Early Red River Homes."

¹¹⁵ Healy, *Women of Red River*, 160.

different parts of Red River and ranged in age from ten to eighteen years old. We were taught reading, writing, spelling, music, and especially deportment. Behaviour and our manner of walking and talking. We had to read very well, and Miss Davis was extremely particular about our spelling, and even more particular about the propriety of our behavior and our manner of walking and talking. They used to say that after a girl came out of Miss Davis' school. She sat as though she had a basket of eggs on her head, and that you could pick out Miss Davis' pupils anywhere."¹¹⁶

From the descriptions of life at the school, it appears that Miss Davis ran a tight ship, but was kind to her students. With the reputation of the standard of excellence of the school, and the expectations and outcomes outlined in these first-hand accounts, it is easy to imagine that this also applied to their needlework. Both plain and decorative work would have been executed in the small, perfectly even stitches that are typical in the earliest items in the McTavish collection. The fine needlework taught at the school would have been of the earlier double-chain stitch and Lydia would have certainly been the combined result of the sewing taught by Mary's mother when Mary was a young girl, the lessons taught at private schools, such as Miss Davis', and standards set by women in the community.

After Lydia completed her studies at the private school, letters between her mother Mary and Miss Matilda Davis show concern for a course of study Lydia and her sister Margaret should pursue after completing Miss Davis' program. Mary Christie writes that her husband, "was quite undecided as to what he would do with the girls...it would be more advantageous for the girls to

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 135.

go together to England or Scotland for two or three years. It is true it is pretty expensive, but I think it would be well to give them every advantage we can.”¹¹⁷ Mary’s daughters were indeed given every advantage, as although Lydia and Margaret did not go to school overseas, they did attend “a very good school in Toronto”.¹¹⁸ The level of education for these girls was much higher than that of the average person in the Red River region. These girls were definitely members of the fur trade elite, and the fact that these girls in Red River were so highly educated is important to note because it complicates a stereotypical, mono-dimensional picture of the status of women in fur trade society in the mid-nineteenth century. (Lydia Christie McTavish. See plates 26a and 26b)

Donald Campbell McTavish was the son of Scots solicitor and farmer, Donald McTavish Sr., and Maria Letitia Simpson. Maria Simpson was one of the illegitimate children of Sir George Simpson, Governor of Fort Garry. She was born in Scotland before George Simpson began his employment with the Hudson’s Bay Company. Aside from arranging the marriage between his daughter and Donald McTavish Sr., George Simpson apparently had shown little interest in Maria’s life.¹¹⁹ Donald and Maria married in Inverness, Scotland in 1833 and emigrated to Grafton, Ontario, where they were to farm. Maria and Donald had three children: George Simpson (7 August 1834 - ca.1893), John Henry (1838 – 1888) and Donald Campbell (1844 – 1913).

¹¹⁷ Berry, “Recovered Identities,” 51.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Konantz, *Manitobans in Profile*, 3.

Life in Ontario was difficult for Donald and Maria. Gail Konantz writes, that Donald Sr. was “not a successful Solicitor, and he was, apparently, an even less successful farmer”.¹²⁰ To make life even more difficult for Donald Sr. and Maria, they were not a happy love-match. Donald Sr. died in 1845, by his own hand, and the widowed Maria Simpson McTavish married a farmer by the name of Donald Campbell.¹²¹ Maria and her family moved to Donald Campbell’s large home in Colborne when Donald Jr. was nineteen years old, and Maria and Donald had a son, Archibald (Archie) Campbell. Colborne is near Brockville Ontario, where Lydia Christie lived at that time, so it is possible that Lydia Christie and Donald met in Ontario, as they lived near to each other.

Lydia married Donald Campbell McTavish in 1875, at Holy Trinity Church in Winnipeg, in a service conducted by Archbishop Robert Machray of Rupert’s Land. As Donald began his work with the Hudson’s Bay Company, the couple moved to the north end of Lake Winnipeg, to Norway House where Donald took up his role as a clerk for the Company.¹²²

Norway House is about 600 miles north of Winnipeg, and it was here that the McTavish collection really started to come together. Lydia and Donald resided in rooms above the mess in “the big house”. Here in Norway House in 1876, Lydia had a baby girl, Florence Edith McTavish, who would be the next generation’s caretaker of the McTavish collection.¹²³

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid., 4.

¹²³ Ibid, 4-5.

When baby Edith was two years old, the McTavishes moved from Norway House to Rupert House, on James Bay, where Lydia had two more children, Grace and Graham.¹²⁴ In Gail Konantz's book she writes about some of Edith's earliest childhood memories at Rupert House. She remembered their husky dogs and the painted carriages they pulled, she recalled the snow and bitter cold, and the "weathered faces of the Indians who came to the fort for supplies".¹²⁵ Lydia would dress her children in mink fur coats and caps and take them for rides over the frozen tundra in the dog carriages.¹²⁶ Edith also remembered that as children they had few commercially purchased toys to play with. The toys had to be ordered from England, and shipped by boat through the Hudson Bay, which took months. By the time the parcels arrived, it had been long forgotten what was ordered, and guessing and unwrapping the toys was like Christmas!¹²⁷ The pets Lydia and her children played with were also well remembered by Edith: a little white fox and a baby beaver came to live with them in their log house and entertained the family.¹²⁸

We know some information about Donald McTavish's time with the HBC, from HBC records, however, there is not a large amount written about his personal life. According to letters out of Montreal that were written about him, he seemed to have a compassionate, albeit paternalistic relationship with First Nation people he did business with, blaming a poor hunting season on other non-Indigenous hunters, and describing his First Nation traders as "honest and

¹²⁴ Ibid, 5.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.,5.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

faithful to the company, and are like children looking upon Mr. Godschire like a father”.¹²⁹

When the family left Rupert House on July 23, 1901, the records show the following entry:

“He was kind to all and everyone is sorry is his departure. The Indians gave him a salute on leaving.”¹³⁰

When Edith had reached school age, there were limited educational options in Rupert House, so her family decided to send her to school at the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Montreal. Her Aunt Emily, the last of Maria Sinclair Christie’s daughters, now living in Montreal, promised to take care of her “whenever Edith needed her”, and Edith spent her holidays and summer vacations happily with her Aunt Emily. Her mother Lydia, would frequently come down from the north to visit Edith and her family in Brockville. During one of those visits, Lydia fell extremely ill, and they realized that she was dying of tuberculosis. Edith recalls, “Crying by her mother’s bed and being reprimanded by her grandmother Maria whom she claimed was very strict with her”.¹³¹

Lydia died in 1886, when Edith was just ten years old. In the back of Lydia’s Bible is written the dates of Lydia and Donald’s marriage, the birth of her children, and her death. The inscription on her death reads, “Lydia C. McTavish. Died at Edgar Place Brockville 26th Oct

¹²⁹ Christine Stabryn, “Unpublished document on Donald McTavish.”

¹³⁰ Ibid., “D.C. McTavish Report File A12/FT 340/4/11 1891, 1905-1908 (a series of H.B.C. letters)

¹³¹ Gail Konantz, *Manitobans in Profile*, 5.

1886. Being a great invalid for four years. Consumption carried her off in the end.”¹³² (Photo of inscription from the back page of Lydia’s Bible. See plate 27)

Donald McTavish tried keep the family together after the death of his wife. He hired a governess to come with him and his children up north, but the arrangement was “unsatisfactory”.¹³³ He brought his children to live with their Aunt Emily, who had cared for Edith while she went to school in Montreal.¹³⁴

Donald McTavish retired from service to the HBC on May 31, 1908, where he was stationed in Lac La Pluie District, Keewatin. He was promoted to Chief Factor in Lac La Pluie in 1905. Donald McTavish died on October 24, 1913.¹³⁵

Florence Edith McTavish Rogers

The McTavish collection was housed at the house in Colburne, Ontario, where Edith retired after living a full life in Manitoba. Edith McTavish was born in the Cree community of Norway House and must have developed strong Cree roots through her mother, grandmother and great grandmother. When she was two, the family moved from Norway House to Rupert’s House, another Cree community on the James Bay, but the written documents do not indicate just how much of a cultural impact the Cree communities had on Edith. Whether she spoke the

¹³² Paragraph of Lydia McTavish, Manitoba Museum collections.

¹³³ Gail Konantz, *Manitobans in Profile*, 5.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Christine Stabryn, Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Hudson’s Bay Company Archives. D.24/36 R. Ross, Norway House to J.A. Grahame, Ft. Garry, Sept. 8, 1887, (Unpublished document, Manitoba Museum 1983), 10.

language, had Cree playmates, or practiced any of the customs before relocating to southern Ontario is unknown. She eventually became an important political and public figure, but the historical records from the time offer no mention of this part of her heritage being declared publicly.

In the book, *Women of Red River*, published in 1923, Edith's connection to George Simpson is noted, but there is no indication that she identified with her Indigenous roots. Mrs. Bernard Ross recalled Edith's heritage, "At Norway House was born a daughter of Chief Factor Donald McTavish (and Great-granddaughter of Sir George Simpson) who, was Mrs. Arthur Rogers, is the first woman member of the Legislature of Manitoba [elected in 1920]. She is one of the representatives of the city of Winnipeg," so we know that at that time, people were not acknowledging that part of her heritage either.¹³⁶

When she finished school in Montreal, Edith travelled west to Manitoba to visit her Uncle Archie. Archie was Maria Campbell's last child by Donald Campbell and "his mother rejected him from the time he was a small boy." When he was old enough, he left Ontario and moved to Manitoba to work for the Canada Life Insurance Agency across Western Canada, inoculating his insurance prospects with the smallpox vaccine.¹³⁷

It was through her uncle Archie, that Edith met Arthur Rogers. Arthur was born in Franklin Centre, Huntingdon County, Quebec in 1862, and was living and working in Winnipeg as a successful businessman dealing in wholesale produce. He owned the Crescent Creamery

¹³⁶ Healy, *Women of Red River*, 184.

¹³⁷ Konantz, *Manitobans in Profile*, 6–7.

Company, which provided dairy products to the western provinces.¹³⁸ Edith and Roger had four children together, three daughters, Jean, Enid and Margaret, and one son, John. The family lived in a large treed estate at 64 Nassau Street, in Winnipeg. (Edith McTavish Rogers See plate 28)

Edith had an impressive career, considering the time in which she was born and the career options available to women at that time. She was the first female elected Member of the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba and introduced the legislation that incorporated the Winnipeg Foundation; she did volunteer service during World War I, and acted as an advocate for the Child Welfare Act; was active in social-welfare work and women's rights; and served on the Winnipeg General Hospital Board and the Central Council of the Battalion Auxiliaries.¹³⁹ (Edith McTavish Rogers. See plate 29)

In the fall of 1928, Arthur Rogers sold his interests in the Crescent Creamery Company, and invested a large portion of his money from the sale into the stock market. In March of 1929, while visiting Vancouver, Arthur suffered a heart attack. While convalescing, he decided to sell all of his stocks, and later that month, he died. In the fall of that year, mere months after he sold his stocks, the market crashed. He unknowingly saved his family from financial ruin! There must have been a huge sense of relief, when Arthur left Edith and their family financially secure.¹⁴⁰

Considering that Edith Rogers was a pioneer on many fronts as a woman in Canadian

¹³⁸ Goldsborough, "Edith MacTavish Rogers (1876–1947)."

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Konantz, *Manitobans in Profile*, 43.

politics, her work would have been incredibly demanding and would have taken her away from her family life on numerous occasions. When asked what he remembers about his grandmother Edith, Gord Konantz recalls a distant and detached grandmother, absorbed in her work in politics and social causes. Her work as an MLA, and the pressures and expectations of being the first female MLA in Manitoba, working in social causes, fighting for women's rights and bettering the lives of the less fortunate had its price. Gord recalls, "I don't have very pleasant memories of my grandmother. She was very stern.... She lived in the Fort Garry Hotel, and we would see her when I was growing up there, and when we were kids we made a lot of noise, and she didn't like that I don't think. I'd never been read a story by my grandmother."¹⁴¹

Edith's obituary in the *Globe and Mail*, states that she died in 1947 at seventy-one years of age. Edith died at Colborne but is buried in St John's cemetery in Winnipeg. Edith kept the family's collection of beaded and embroidered historical artefacts at Colborne until her death. At some point the collection was divided between Edith's daughters Enid and Margaret.

Enid Campbell Rogers

Enid Rogers was born in Winnipeg, and lived an exciting and privileged life, traveling abroad and working in Africa and Europe. Enid's life was one of travel and adventure. She grew up in a time and situation, when the children of wealthy families would tour Europe and other exotic locations as a part of their education. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Enid

¹⁴¹ Konantz, personal conversation.

travelled throughout Europe and Africa. She operated a beauty salon in South Africa, and spent some time in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), until World War II broke out in Europe in 1939.¹⁴² At that time, Enid was thirty-six years old. She immediately went to England and enlisted with the Red Cross Ambulance Service as a driver. She worked as a member of the Female Auxiliary Nursing Yeomanry, and acted heroically escaping injury and harm to herself while caught in the middle of the Nazi Blitz on Britain.¹⁴³ (Enid Rogers. See plate 30)

Safely back in Canada, Enid resided with her Aunt Emily at Bellevue, the family estate in Colbourne. The McTavish collection passed from either Edith Rogers, or Aunt Emily, to the next generation of the family. The keeping and care of the McTavish collection was divided between Enid and her sister Margaret, and at some point, half of the collection went with Margaret to Winnipeg, while Enid stayed at Bellevue. Enid's collection, as remembered by the surviving family members, was the better collection, with more spectacular pieces than the half that went to Margaret. Although we cannot be sure why the collection was divided, it was a great stroke of luck that it was, because in 1949, the main house at Bellevue, was totally destroyed by fire, including all of the artefacts of the family that it contained.¹⁴⁴

After the fire, Enid had a much smaller home rebuilt on the same location, and renamed the estate Inverawe. Here, she raised champion Yorkshire hogs, and became somewhat famous among pig breeders through North America.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Buchanan, "Enid Rogers," 4.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

Enid never married, however her life does seem to have been full of passion and romance. Gail Konantz, in her book on Edith Rogers, shared a family story about a time when the family's chauffer, Walter Potter, who was considered more of a member of the family than an employee, kept Enid from what the family considered a huge error in judgement. "Potter, hid her suitcase and locked her window, keeping her from a midnight elopement with someone of whom the family disapproved."¹⁴⁶

Margaret Rogers Konantz

At some point, Margaret brought half of the family collection of artefacts from Colburne to her home in Winnipeg. The 159 objects were housed in her home until her death. Gord Konantz recalls that the collection was kept in a cupboard, and was considered quite special, and not for children to pry into or play with.¹⁴⁷

Margaret Rogers Konantz was born in Winnipeg on April 30, 1899. She was educated at the Model School in Winnipeg, Strachan School in Toronto, and Miss Spence's School, a finishing school, in New York.¹⁴⁸ (Margaret Konantz. See plate 31) Margaret married Gordon Konantz on February 11, 1922, and they had two sons, William G. and Gordon Jr., and a daughter Barbara Forcey.¹⁴⁹ As the daughter of Edith Rogers, Margaret must have been inspired

¹⁴⁶ Konantz, *Manitobans in Profile*, 24.

¹⁴⁷ Konantz, personal conversation.

¹⁴⁸ Goldsborough, "Margaret McTavish Rogers Konantz, 1899-1967."

¹⁴⁹ Margaret Rogers Konantz, Obituary, *Toronto Daily Star*.

by her mother, and like her mother, she lived a life of service. In addition to being elected the first female Member of Parliament for Manitoba in 1963, Margaret also served as president of the Junior League of Winnipeg; president of the Central Volunteer Bureau during World War II; vice president of UNICEF; national vice president of the UN Association; and the Canadian delegate to the 18th and 19th UN General Assemblies. She was recognized for her work as the first woman to receive the Golden Boy Award for her service in Manitoba; inducted into the Order of the British Empire and awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Manitoba.¹⁵⁰

Although reading historical accounts written about Margaret, seems to indicate that she was like her mother in many ways, Margaret was much more connected to her family, and perhaps did not feel that she had to sacrifice one part of her life to fulfill another. Gord Konantz's recollections of his mother are quite warm, and she seemed to be quite a fun person! (Margaret Konantz fishing on the Lake of the Woods. See plate 37)

Gord said that when his father was courting Margaret, he would see Edith busy with her causes and commitments, and asked Margaret to promise him that she would never go into politics for as long as he was alive. Margaret made that promise and the two married. Shortly after her husband Gord had passed away, Margaret began her career in politics, but she never broke her promise to him. (Margaret Konantz Member of Parliament election win. See plate 36)

Margaret died at the age of sixty-eight in 1967, in Fredericton, New Brunswick. The

¹⁵⁰ Goldsborough, "Margaret McTavish Rogers Konantz."

bulk of the collection, which numbers 159 artefacts, was passed from Margaret to her son William, who donated the collection to the Manitoba Museum in 1989.¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ Pettipas, "Konantz Collection Provenance."

**Problems with Identity and HBC Families:
Looking at Identity from the Outside in and the Inside Out**

Throughout the time I spent with the objects in the collection, it became obvious that there were influences and components of Indigenous origin, and some European. We know for certain, that the family had roots in Cree, Ojibway, English and Scottish heritage, and in discussions about the objects and their makers' origins, more than once had the questions arose, "How do we refer to them?" "What cultural group can we attribute this to?" It would be convenient to be able to neatly categorize people and the objects they make or possess, but in the Red River region, relationships, trade and family networks have always been complex and interconnected.

There is a propensity to divide people along their language, church and/or company alliances as either "Métis" or "English/Scots Métis"; "Country-born"; "Rupert's Lander"; or "HBC families", and in this case we would tend to want to refer to this family as the later. John E. Foster comments on this conundrum, pointing out that the common understanding of "Métis" in reference to communities in the pre-1870 West, who were "French speaking, Roman Catholic non-Indian native buffalo hunters of the Red River Settlement [who] emerged distinct from the socio-cultural mosaic of the period and region", has limitations.¹⁵² How do we then describe the emergence of the "English-speaking, Protestant buffalo hunters of Portage la Prairie, Prince Albert and Fort Victoria?"¹⁵³ Are they not Métis as well? That said, in the period before 1870,

¹⁵² Foster, "The Métis: the People and the Term (1978)," 22.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

there was a discernable Anglophone group of people of mixed ancestry, who were quite distinct from those of the Francophone, or Métis group, and a trajectory of assimilation into the Anglophone British-Protestant group, especially among the higher ranks of HBC Officer's families.

Aside from the applications for Scrip by Mary Sinclair's daughter Marguerite Groat and son John George Christie, nowhere else in the literature do the Sinclair, Christie and McTavish families connected to the collection refer to themselves as Métis or Half Breed, nor does anyone else refer to them as Métis. However, George Simpson in his "Character Book", had referred to William Sinclair Jr. as, "a half breed of the Cree nation..."¹⁵⁴ throughout the nineteenth century, there is no other term within the Hudson's Bay Company tradition to distinguish or identify this third community that develops as a result of the fur trade and the families that came from British and Cree or Ojibway unions.¹⁵⁵

Fred Shore cautions that these titles or labels are external, and that "these are names applied by outsiders and their own name for themselves never appears unless they accept one of the terms listed above."¹⁵⁶ He states that in reference to families of blended British and Indigenous heritage, "they were English subjects and proud of it, despite the fact that they were never accepted as "Englishmen" because of their Aboriginal antecedents."¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Spry, "SINCLAIR, WILLIAM."

¹⁵⁵ Foster, "The Métis: the People and the Term (1978)," 28.

¹⁵⁶ Fred Shore, "The Identity Issue and the Métis Nation."

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

In early years of the HBC, some children of officers and their Indigenous wives would have been selected by European fathers, and sent away to be schooled in Scotland. These children would return to Rupert's Land "British" in all accounts in their cultural influence and mannerisms, while their siblings might have been raised by their mother within a totally Cree socio-cultural context.¹⁵⁸

Sylvia Van Kirk profiles the identity to a similarly successful Red River family from a mixed-ancestry, the Alexander Ross family. Alexander Ross came from Scotland to work with the HBC, and married an Okanagan woman *à la façon du pays* (in the custom of the country). Because of Ross' desire to assimilate his children into British culture and identity his sons became very educated and accomplished, and his daughters married high-ranking HBC men of European heritage and ancestry, but still his children were subject to racist remarks and attitudes within Red River. It is no wonder that families would hide, or omit aspects of their ancestry about which they felt some ambivalence, and why certain histories of families were not made known outside of the family. Considering the 'firsts' accomplished by Edith Rogers and Margaret Konantz, it is surprising that there is no written record of them being the first women of Indigenous ancestry elected to provincial and federal leadership. However, considering the Ross family story comparison, it is understandable why it was not mentioned outside of the family. What makes the McTavish/Konantz family situation intriguing from a family identity point of view is that they chose to keep and add to the collection over several generations.

¹⁵⁸ Brown, "Women as the Centre and Symbol in the Emergence of Metis Communities", 41.

Nahoway was of a mixed Cree and British heritage, but according to Donna Sutherland, she was referred to as Cree.¹⁵⁹ She would have spoken Cree and been raised within the Cree Home Guard community, but lived within the fort walls as the daughter of an officer. Husdon's Bay Company Officers tend to be inconsistent in their reference to their children depending on their own status and dominant cultural affiliation. Terms like "Country-Born" and "Half Breed" were common terms in use by the mid-nineteenth century, but were used more as a pejorative term than as self-identity to a distinctive group.¹⁶⁰ There is little in the literature of how people self-identified, however, it is important to note, that identity is complex and fluid, and people identify in ways that are convenient. Nahoway's granddaughter Harriet Sinclair Cowan knew her heritage well and did not label herself a Half Breed, but said she, "belonged to this country and was happy in the conditions of my life".¹⁶¹ However, Harriet did self-identify as a "halfbreed head of family" in her Scrip application in 1877.¹⁶²

Sherry Farrell Racette suggests that the categories of mixed French and British and First Nations may not be as clearly defined as we would like them to be. Kinship networks and connections tied people together in ways that made a sharp delineation between Métis and HBC families impossible.¹⁶³ The people living within the parishes of Red River made up a network of inter-related communities. Alexander Ross commented on the relationship between the communities in the mid nineteenth century: "The Scotch and the French. Between these, there

¹⁵⁹ Sutherland, *Nahoway*, 53.

¹⁶⁰ Foster, "The Métis: the People and the Term (1978)," 28–29.

¹⁶¹ Sutherland, *Nahoway*, 51.

¹⁶² Harriet Cowan Scrip Claim 2859, Vol. 1319, Series D-11-8-1, RG 15 LAC, Archives Canada.

¹⁶³ Sherry Farrell-Racette, personal conversation.

is, and always has been, a fair show of mutual good feeling”.¹⁶⁴

In this particular situation, with the Sinclair-Christie-McTavish family, social class is also a factor here in how the family identifies and interacts with the community at-large, and can contribute to being somewhat “different” from other members of the community. The girls in the family at this level of fur trade society would have likely been semi-isolated and kept at a distance from other residents in the fort. Their mother would have had more freedom to who she interacted with, but as the wife of the Chief Factor, would have been limited as to who she chose as a companion.¹⁶⁵

In the early years of the family’s story, Letitia Hargrave’s distaste for the behavior of Mary Sinclair and her sister Margaret, is very much evidence of their “not-whiteness”. Letitia occupies the same social class, but clearly does not feel the “same” as the Sinclairs.¹⁶⁶ Letitia’s scathing letters of the girls’ lack of awareness of the subtle, yet strict social expectations of young women in their rank, gives the impression that Letitia believed the Sinclair girls were somehow not worthy of their social position.

Another interesting phenomenon observed in researching the family, is the emphasis on tracing the family ancestry along male lines, which is more of a European practice than an Indigenous one.¹⁶⁷ That said, when the current Konantz family references the generation of

¹⁶⁴ Irene Spry, “The Metis and Mixed-Bloods of Rupert’s Land Before 1870,” 98.

¹⁶⁵ Farrell-Racette, personal conversation.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

Nahoway and William Sinclair Sr., it is Nahoway that the family identifies as the “head” or “identifier” of that particular generation, not William. Perhaps it is with her that the family last identifies as Indigenous? Given the Scrip applications where people self-identified as “Half Breed”, this may not actually be the case. Perhaps after generations of “out marriage” made it more of a historic identity, rather than an identity that surviving family members connect with today? It is unique to this family that the name and memory of their founding female ancestor has been treasured and passed down. Most Métis families would not be able to identify that first woman by name. I do not think it would be an understatement to say that this is a testament to her role in the family.

It should be noted, that as the family line was traced back to Nahoway, and even within Donna Sutherland’s discussion on Nahoway’s possible grandfather, all of the women in the family married non-Indigenous men, therefore following the father’s line would have been within cultural expectations from the European perspective.

If we move outside of this immediate family and follow other families (aunties, uncles, cousins, for example) that can trace their lineage back to Nahoway, some became fully British/Canadian, and some became First Nations. There seems to be actually three positions of identity extended members of this family line have taken: First Nations: Cree/Anishinaabe; Half Breed/Métis; and “white”/British/Canadian. Social class, occupation and marriage choice seem to be the key factors determining the direction a family will go.

For the Sinclair-Christie-McTavish-Rogers-Konantz family, suppressing their Indigenous or mixed-heritage status publicly becomes more important for each generation, and certainly at

the time of Edith Rogers, the family tended to identify as descendants of George Simpson, rather than Nahoway. Privately, however, identifying with an Indigenous, mixed, or fur trade heritage seems to have become woven into the collection of objects in the collections, and carefully stored in a cupboard.

Moving beyond an identity that looks from the outside in, we need to think about how this collection of objects, so carefully and purposefully passed down from one generation to the next creates and maintains a family identity. Curasi, Price and Arnould discuss how objects that are passed from one generation to the next can become irreplaceable, inalienable in value because they play a large role in forming a family's identity.¹⁶⁸ These items can range in meaning and value from family heirlooms to historic treasures. The McTavish collection is both. These objects have the power to “provide identity, and links the current generation to ancestors that make up their social distinction.”¹⁶⁹ When a family inherits a collection of objects from previous generations, they receive objects that have been “contaminated by the original owner's spirit”.¹⁷⁰ The stories that accompany these cherished objects reflect positively on the owning family, attest to their distinction, and strengthen the sense of identity.¹⁷¹

In the case of the McTavish collection, the current generation of the Konantz family proudly identifies with their fur trade heritage and the family history these objects represent.

¹⁶⁸ Carolyn Curasi, et al., “How Individuals' Cherished Possessions Become Families' Inalienable Wealth”, 609.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 615.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Their identity is neither Métis, nor HBC, but as a “fur trade family” with “a fur trade history”.¹⁷² The cultural blend of European and Indigenous ancestry within this generation is not distinct, it just simply “is”.

Although it is important to consider ancestral heritage when researching the social history of a family and a collection, in the case of the current generation of this particular study, it is equally important to turn to the family and ask how they identify themselves at this time, rather than to struggle to define or label them from the outside. When asked in an interview how they culturally identified, Gord Konantz simply replied, “It was never really talked about at all, that I could remember...we were a fur trade family”.¹⁷³

To respect the family’s current identity as having roots in the fur trade, but not necessarily categorically Métis or HBC, I have chosen to use the terms “mixed heritage” or “mixed ancestry” to refer to the family and collection, as an accumulation of cultural experience and roots. The individuals connected to the McTavish collection include generations of family members that come from a rich and diverse blend of Indigenous and European backgrounds, influences, languages, world view and traditions that contribute to the family’s heritage and Canada’s fur trade story.

In the course of this project I have had to reconcile the types and styles of objects that make up the McTavish collection with how the family views themselves, and carefully consider my own bias as a researcher. While I had been looking at these objects of Indigenous and Métis

¹⁷² Konantz, personal conversation.

¹⁷³ Gord and Gail Konantz, personal conversation.

design, I have been privileging this aspect of their creation and creators. Although there was a time when claiming an Indigenous heritage was not done for many reasons, including to protect the family from racist attacks and discrimination, perhaps both the collection and the family present a more complex puzzle. There was a time when the majority of people who made up the fur trade society, English or French, had Indigenous ancestry, and this aspect of who they were was simply a commonality most people shared and took for granted. What is unique and rare, is a connection to the most known or famous members of the fur trade story, such as, in this case, a connection to Sir George Simpson. This is what stands out from the other fur trade families' stories and this is what they identified as a key element of their family's history.

Object Biography and the McTavish Collection: Letting the Collection Talk

Every object has the potential to tell a story, and the McTavish collection is rich with rhetorical possibilities. One cannot work with objects such as these -- holding them, turning them over, looking at the stitching, thinking about how they are made, without wondering about the person who created them. Wondering about the time, place and life they lived, or who they were making these objects for and why. The idea that objects carry a history; have contexts and changing meanings, values and uses; and have relationships with various people over their lifetime resulting in the object's biography has been explored by scholars such as Igor Kopykoff (1986), Laura Peers (1999), Kayla Kramer (2013), Gloria Bell (2010), Maureen Matthews (2016), and Alfred Gell (1998).

Every collection of objects brought together by an individual or family only enriches that power of "story". Artefacts and identities are intertwined – objects connect people with experiences, memories and history. They are a concrete link to the past. Where a story, written or oral is abstract, an object was in the physical presence of our ancestors – they held it, possibly made it, and it meant something to them. We know this to be true because they cared for it and cherished it enough to pass it on.

Objects are sensory – we can hold them, feel the weight of them, and smell them. The sense of smell is a powerful connector to past memories and experiences. Such as the smell of smoke-tanned moose hide evoked by so many pieces of this collection. When Gord Konantz looked at the photos of the collection he had not seen in a long, long time, his first comment was that he remembered their smell. He would "open the drawer that contained these items, move

back the tissue paper that covered them and could just smell the smoky hide”.¹⁷⁴

Clearly, these objects have a powerful presence for Gord, but they also have a powerful, but different meaning and presence for myself as a researcher. What immediately struck me, was the skill of the tiny, perfect stitches; and the colour and style choice of the maker: “How did she do that?!” These objects have the power and agency to have multiple meanings and stories that all come together to form the biography of the object.

Object biography is essentially the ability of the object to “talk” to us.¹⁷⁵ Careful study of an object can provide information beyond its provenance. We can analyze the artistic choices of the maker, stylistic trends of the time and region it was made, or determine whether the object was created for the tourist trade, made for everyday use, or was a gift. The object has social agency when it seems to transmit an enduring sense of meaning the creator would have ascribed to that object.¹⁷⁶ As the object changes owners, more layers, or patinas of meaning are added to that object. These layers create and contribute to the object’s history, or biography.

Because of their “materiality” or resiliency, objects can “live beyond their origins and acquire new meanings, new uses and new owners along the way”.¹⁷⁷ Signs of wear “attest to the history the object has witnessed and provide evidence that the object has experienced time and

¹⁷⁴ Konantz, in personal conversation.

¹⁷⁵ Bell, “Threads of Visual Culture,” 64.

¹⁷⁶ Kopykoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” 67.

¹⁷⁷ Ames in Kayla Kramer, *Object Biographies: A Mandan-Hidatsa-Arikara Nation Buckskin and Quillwork Outfit, a Nez Perce Woman’s Buckskin Dress, A Ramos Polychrome Jar and a Navajo Man’s Military Style Jacket*, (University of Colorado, 2013), 8.

history before the present moments",¹⁷⁸ therefore, the concepts of "life, history, culture, biography, career and social patina become useful strategies to carefully trace and consider the shifting meaning of an object".¹⁷⁹

Igor Kopykoff asks us to consider these layers of social patina, and the uses and meanings added as each pair of hands receive the object, "At any single point in an object's career there can be multiple contexts based on the perspectives, interests and values brought forth by those who interact with it therefore, any event in the biography of an object can convey subtle meanings based on convictions and values."¹⁸⁰

That said, given the myriad of cultural and aesthetic clues encoded in an object, they can only be fully understood when their life is examined in perspective. Biographies of objects "highlight and allude to the interrelationships between cultural and social history with the potential to enlighten and provide knowledge that would otherwise be hidden or overlooked."¹⁸¹

Laura Peers provides a model for a biographical analysis which illustrates how events in an object's "life" can be used to construct such a biography. In her article on the "S. Black' bag she explores the complex 'personality' and history of a small embroidered and beaded cloth tab (octopus) bag, collected in 1841 or 1842 by Edward Hopkins, private secretary to Governor George Simpson. Her methodology includes looking at what can be known of the history of an

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Kramer, *Object Biographies*, 4.

¹⁸⁰ Kopykoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," 67.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

object; its layers of meaning, culturally and across time as the object's biography. She shows that it is the contexts and relationships an object has with people that truly make it meaningful.

Peers points out that the bag is embroidered with a European name on the front, it is created using both Indigenous and European decorative techniques, and in its lifetime of existence, it has been “a gift, a momento mori, a souvenir, a curio, a commodity, a specimen and a primary source”.¹⁸² The bag has moved from place to place, and travelled across the ocean, was created in one continent over a hundred years ago, and now resides in another one - its cultural understanding, meaning and context has changed over time and space.

In 1841-1842, when the “S Black” bag was collected by Edward Hopkins, there were very few European women west of Ontario. The wives of the HBC officers at this time were predominantly daughters of officers and Cree or Ojibway women, or their granddaughters like Mary Sinclair and Lydia McTavish. These mixed-heritage families can be generally divided into two groups: “English-speaking Protestant children of senior HBC officers who looked to Britain for their cultural identity and tended to downplay their Native heritage, to the French-speaking, Catholic children of Quebecois voyageurs and labourers who more easily combined their ancestries”.¹⁸³ Women of both of these groups did embroidery and beadwork, and certainly would have influenced each other in small fur trade centres such as the Red River settlement.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² Appaduri 1988; Kopytoff 1988; Hoskins 1998, in Peers, “Many Tender Ties: The S BLACK Bag,” 299.

¹⁸³ Peers, “Many Tender Ties: The S BLACK Bag,” 292.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

The very foundation of the fur trade is a “cross-cultural endeavor”.¹⁸⁵ Bruce White observed similarly that the fur trade “thrived on communication – not simply through a language of words, but also a language of objects.”¹⁸⁶ The objects that did that communicating were the decorated everyday items that exhibited the cross-cultural blending in their technology, style and the heritage of their maker. These objects Peers and White are referring to include the kinds of decorated clothing and accessories represented in the McTavish collection; moccasins, leggings, jackets, mittens, wall pockets and fire bags.

The object biographies get complicated when researchers start to discover apparently contradictory nuances and influences in its making and the meanings and uses the object accrues. Alfred Gell suggests that these contradictions often converge in the meaning and identity of that object. He gives the example: If a Métis girl had a Cree or Anishinaabe mother that she had learned beadwork style and color preference from, and thus the girl reproduced Cree, Anishinaabe, or Métis style objects, are the object she created Cree, Anishinaabe, Métis or all three?¹⁸⁷

In the case of the McTavish collection, this complex consideration of influences and origins needs to be taken into account. The Sinclair, Christie and McTavish families, were of mixed heritage themselves, their husbands employment with the HBC required them to move often, introducing to the collection stylistic influences from Red River, Norway House, James

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 288.

¹⁸⁶ White (1982), in Peers, “The S BLACK Bag,” 121.

¹⁸⁷ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 66.

Bay and Athabasca country. Some items within the collection could have been gifted to the family, others purchased, or made by others, but all objects carried a value to the family and hence to the collection, evident in the fact that they were cared for and passed down through the generations. Gord Konantz recalls that the collection, “was ‘out of bounds’ to the children, and that this was indicative of a feeling that the collection was somewhat revered as important” to the family’s fur trade history. It represented a time in the family’s history and showed how they lived, and how they dressed.”¹⁸⁸

These objects represent a connection to the family’s fur trade history and the family’s sense of identity, who they are and where they come from. This may or may not have been the intention of Mary Sinclair or Lydia McTavish when the items were passed and added to from one generation to the next, however, as Curasi observes, “These transferred objects can provide the scaffolding upon which to attach one’s life narrative.”¹⁸⁹ The life narrative of the women who the collection passed the collection down to their daughters are added to the biographies of the entire collection as a whole. They are a direct and tangible link to the past. The collection is made up of the objects determined “worth keeping”, and probably not used for “everyday” use, or possibly a part of a trousseau. These are the items these women wanted to be remembered by, and for their daughters to remember their grandmothers by. “Objects we choose to keep and pass down document important life events we wish to remember, shape and sustain memories in the generations to come”, writes Curasi, adding that they allow descendants to “bask in the

¹⁸⁸ Konantz, personal conversation.

¹⁸⁹ Curasi, “Intergenerational Possession Transfers and Identity Maintenance,” 113.

achievements and glories of their predecessors' accomplishments".¹⁹⁰ These accomplishments and glories are what contribute to their identity; somehow this is a part of them and contribute to who they become.

The concept of an heirloom, of determining that an object has a mnemonic value that makes it worthy of saving and passing down, is not a universal practice for members of all social classes, and therefore what we learn from objects as heirlooms can be limited to certain groups of people. Families that have a high social status, according to Curasi, tend to collect items that are considered valuable, and that are considered significant enough to pass down to subsequent generations.¹⁹¹ Museum collections which have an overrepresentation of such objects therefore probably do not accurately represent the "everyday" item, nor can they provide a window into what people belonging to a lower social status found valuable and representative of something important. With this thought in mind, a fur trade family's collections provides multiple layers of information about changing and enduring values throughout the generations. The sharing of family history which travels with treasured objects from one generation to the next contributes to the complex process of creating identity. "These cherished possessions provide a foundation for communicating values and teaching important life lessons through the transfer of stories bundled with cherished possession."¹⁹²

Although nowhere in the written records is the intentional transfer of the McTavish

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 112.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

collection from mother to daughter clearly defined, the movement of heirlooms between female family members according to Curasi, is the logical trend. Based on the literature, the phenomenon of collecting, caring for and passing down certain family heirlooms is more prominent among women than men.¹⁹³ Curasi postulates various possible reasons for this, including that “women are more involved in maintaining relationships and social ties”; the “gendered nature of gift-giving, more commonly ascribed to women than men”; and in addition to the consideration that items that are transferred between generations are often items used by or of interest to women, it is also possible that a bond is created by the physicality of the connection formed when women handle, organize, and mend these items.¹⁹⁴

A large number of items in the McTavish collection are created in either an Indigenous style, out of materials popular with Indigenous artists, or for a specific purpose, for example, the pipe bags. Whether the pieces are created by Indigenous women within the community and collected by the family, or created by the family members themselves, these objects are a tool for maintaining an identity to a particular story, time and place. These objects carry the mnemonic agency, whether intentional or not, or overt or not, to remind each generation of their Indigenous grandmothers. As the family grew in social and political status, and became more assimilated into British-Canadian mainstream society, these objects were a reminder of the family’s Cree-ness, even if that identity was not shared publicly.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 113.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

Thoughts on the Collection: Talking Back

Katherine Pettipas describes the McTavish collection as an “eclectic assembly of items” from a large range of Subarctic geo-cultural areas and times.¹⁹⁵ How do we look at this “eclectic assembly” and make sense of it? In the Manitoba Museum records that detail the provenance of the collection, the acquisition and assembly of the collection is attributed to Donald Campbell McTavish, however the nature of needlework as being the realm and interest of women in Victorian times, puts the idea into question. The material evidence we have already discussed certainly leads to the possibility that this was a collection at least partially created by Donald’s wife, Lydia Christie McTavish, and included the work of other women in the family, such as Lydia’s mother Mary.

The challenge with building a biography around these objects, is that establishing beyond a doubt who the original maker or owner was, is the fact the provenance rarely supports a definitive conclusion. The families who worked for the HBC moved around a considerable amount throughout their career so one woman might learn new styles in her lifetime or carry new styles to far flung communities. Also, the act of exchanging gifts was a part of “business” during the fur trade, as a way of building good relationships and trade connections. This would involve the transfer of personal items and re-gifting of items from one person to another in various locations that may be far from the location of the object’s origin and creation. This makes making any stylistic and identity generalizations about the collection difficult, and we need to be

¹⁹⁵ Pettipas, “Konantz Collection Provenance.”

open to changing possibilities over time.

Serendipity: Time, Place and Knowledge

A closer examination of the needlework led to the possible attribution of some of the embroidered pieces. The creation of the work in the McTavish collection includes examples of pieces that could have only been created because of the coming together of very specific elements at a specific time and place. Janinne Krauchi, a Métis needlework artist knows what exactly would be required to produce the double-chain stitch and Norway House styles of embroidery:

“The only way to produce this work is with super fine needles that are very hard to find these days; silk thread, that was not available for a long time until recently, and is very expensive; and smoke tanned caribou done by an expert hand. Smoked tanned hide of that quality is hard to find these days, and less and less people have the knowledge and experience in how to make it at this level. The caribou is either a caramel brown, or pure white. If the process of tanning the hide is done right, it should be very, very soft. The threads rarely go all the way through the caribou, picking up just one layer of the hide. The stitches are very small, regular and perfectly done, whatever the style of embroidery: buttonhole stitch, or double-chain stitch. The women needed to learn from someone how to do this embroidery, and there were very high expectations from whom ever taught them, because each piece is perfectly done. The combination of all of these elements is absolutely necessary in order to produce this kind of work – any deviation from this, and

it just doesn't work.”¹⁹⁶

Pieces embroidered with silk thread were compared to examples in the Manitoba Museum collections where cotton thread was used instead of silk. The pieces compared were all done on the same medium of fine smoke-tanned caribou hide. The embroidery done in cotton is bulky and lumpy, even on the same pattern and colour choices as the silk. The stitches on the pieces in the McTavish collection are so fine, small and close together, it would be impossible to reproduce this quality of stitch on any other than high quality smoke-tanned hide, where only the first layer of the hide is stitched with anything but silk floss. The thread rarely goes all the way through to the entire piece of hide and only the top layer of the dermis is picked up and stitched through. The back of the work is almost clear of stitches, and the only threads that go all the way through is the first stitch of a fresh thread so the knot is secure. Without actually looking at the back of embroidered objects, it is difficult to appreciate the level of skill and the light touch needed to embroider hide in this way.

The white caribou hide was used sparingly in strategic areas of the articles of clothing, Barbara Hail explains that this type of bleached-white caribou was not abundant, and only made during small windows of opportunity throughout the year: “Tanned, unsmoked hide can be bleached even whiter by hanging it in the bright March and April sun that reflects off the snow. It is sometimes used as a contrast with darker, smoked hide.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ Krauchi, personal conversation.

¹⁹⁷ Hail and Duncan, *Out of the North*, 176.

The Question: “What part of the collection possibly belonged to whom”?

Mary Sinclair Christie (Possible acquisition dates 1850s – 1870s)

To summarize the movement of the collection through the generations, and to build a hypothesis of when pieces were added and by whom, we start with Mary Sinclair-Christie, and the pieces that are made in the type and style of the Athabasca region in the mid-nineteenth century. The large number of items that can be grouped together in similar style and type that have been attributed to Mary Sinclair as maker or collector, have been determined to be so because they seem to be older than the other objects in the collection. These objects are predominantly Red River Métis style according to Brassier, Farrell-Racette, Duncan and Hail, and all of which are made with silk embroidery using silk floss dyed with non-aniline dyes and is faded in colour. These pieces include ten pairs of silk embroidered wrap-around moccasins that are either Red River style floral embroidery, or Red River Métis style influenced, but created in the Mackenzie River area. These pieces show no wear at all and are all similar enough to each other to believe that they were all made by the same person.

There are five pairs of mittens, four of which are similar enough to each other in both the embroidery and floss colours, and the choice of colours of silk ribbon used in the cutwork appliqué to conclude that these were done by the same hand. The style of these mittens is Red River Métis, made large enough to accommodate a wool duffle and mitten strings from worsted wool braided cords that allow the mittens to dangle about the hips of the wearer.

It is certain that Mary produced her own needlework for her family. Company records of William’s account at Fort Edmonton show that purchases of seed beads, silk thread and printed

cottons were made.¹⁹⁸

Berry argues persuasively that the combination of Mary's own cultural influence from her family and those she met in the communities where she lived in produced a distinctive style. The designs include the use of thistles, an allusion to the Scottish homeland of many of the men in her family, the colour pallet is entirely made up of soft natural pre-aniline dyes, and finally the quality of the double-chain stitches and the inclusion of design elements that can be identified in the Southesk WJC bag with its "hints of Anishinaabe design elements" of stylized flowers.¹⁹⁹ (See plates 13, 16 and 23) If Berry is identifying elements in the WJC bag as Anishinaabe, this influence could have come through Mary from her mother, or from the women she met when she lived in Lac la Pluie. This is certainly not a regional influence in the Fort Edmonton area, but the mobility of the traders and their families which so confound stylistic analysis would facilitate just this sort of hybrid aesthetic development.

During the eight years that William and Mary spent in Fort Edmonton, Mary would have seen the needlework women were producing there. She could have purchased the work of others, received gifts, or simply influenced in her own work by what she saw. It is reasonable to assume that the four slippers that demonstrate a Métis or Cree-Métis influence were made and/or collected while the Christies were in Fort Edmonton. These slippers are very similar to slippers in the Emma Shaw Colcleugh Collection at the Haffenreffer Museum. Created in the same cut, and similar double-chain stitch embroidery (see plates 25a and 25b), Colcleugh collected such

¹⁹⁸ Berry, "Recovered Identities," 49.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

slippers in, The Pas, Manitoba and Cumberland House, Saskatchewan.²⁰⁰ The slippers with a similar cut and style, but trimmed with dyed bird quill trim are attributed to a Dene (possibly Métis?) maker by Colcleugh, who had travelled widely and were collected in Fort McMurray.²⁰¹ In all likelihood, Mary collected the slippers from multiple locations, over various times, and had been artistically influenced in her own work by the women in the various places she lived.

An interesting and puzzling aspect of these slippers is that there is just one of each pair. In discussion with Gord and Gail Konantz, the fact that there is one of each brought about the hypothesis that they were divided between sisters Margaret and Enid when they had divided the collection. The fact that these slippers had a value attached to them sufficient that the sisters resolved to take one slipper each, makes me think that their value was mnemonic than aesthetic. Had these slippers been made by their great-grandmother? Did they provide a specific family connection to that past? Whatever the answer, these slippers definitely had meaning beyond function and practicality as single units. (See plates 25a and 25b)

As clues and tidbits of information are gathered together to build a biography of these objects, the mittens and the moccasins that are Red River in design are interesting to think about. Mary's formative years were spent at the school in Red River and although Mary and William spent the majority of his career in Saskatchewan and Alberta, not in Red River, the artistic practices of her youth might be referenced in some of the work. Can these Red River mittens, for instance be placed at a date from before the Christies were living in Saskatchewan and

²⁰⁰ Hail and Duncan, *Out of the North*, 164.

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, 126, 151, 174-176.

Alberta? Could they have been collected by William during his time in Red River before he and Mary married in 1849, or were they Mary's from her time as a girl in Red River? (See plates 6 and 7)

There is a laurel leaf motif that is found on various items in the collection. When these items are placed next to each other, commonalities, and possibly the work of the same hand can be identified. All of these items are done in what we think are non-aniline dyes, dating them older than 1856, and all are produced in double-chain stitch embroidery. The consistency of this motif, and the similarities of the use of this leaf in the "WJC" bag, lead me to believe that this could have been made by Mary. (See plates 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, and 23)

One of the most interesting aspects of the McTavish collection is its eclectic nature. The items reflect regional styles that represent a large geographic and cultural area. The Christies spent most of their career in Fort Edmonton and in various places in Saskatchewan. There are no items in the collection that are identified as representing the style and type of objects made by Plains people, even though William had been present for the signing of Treaties with Plains Cree and Assiniboine nations. However, William's involvement with the signing of treaties may explain the presence of some of the items that are in the collection that may have been gifted to him at those times, such as the three pipe bags. (See plate 34 for example of pipe bag from the McTavish Collection) The beaded panel bags, or octopus bags could have come into the collection as gifts as well. (See plates 1 and 3) When we take into consideration the nature of the gift of Mary's octopus bag to the Earl of Southesk, these bags could have been gifts to the Christies or McTavishes on important occasions like the signing of the treaties.

Lydia Christie McTavish (Possible Acquisition dates 1860s-1900)

Items that can possibly attributed to Lydia are the pieces that are typical of Norway House embroidery and were known to be produced during the time the McTavishes, as a young family, were living in Norway House from 1864 to 1881. These items feature the large flamboyant Norway House style embroidered in a buttonhole stitch or beaded on either moose hide, bleached caribou hide, or a combination of both. This includes a large collection of six wrap-around moccasins, three pairs of gauntlets, two pairs of mittens, two jackets or hunting coats, four hand bags, and three wall pockets.

It is difficult to determine if Lydia made any of these pieces. There are variations in the quality and execution of the embroidery, which indicate that they may not have been made by the same person. In developing a biography for this portion of the collection, I went further afield than what we know about Lydia and her family, to what was happening socially, politically and economically in Norway House at the time the McTavishes were living there.

Historically Norway House was a very important post for the HBC as a provisioning and supply centre. It is located on the northern end of Lake Winnipeg, in a strategic position for brigades moving goods north to south between Fort Garry and York Factory, and east to west into the interior to the Athabaskan and Mackenzie Rivers and beyond. Goods would be unloaded and stored in Norway House depots, and brigades would be provisioned and loaded with freight to take the goods to their final destinations.²⁰²

²⁰² Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada*, 290–291.

The McTavish's tenure in Norway House was from 1864 to 1881. During this time, great changes were taking place throughout Europe and North America in the Industrial Revolution, and the remote post of Norway House did not go unaffected by these changes. York boat and canoe brigades were replaced by steam ships such as the steamship "Colville" that could carry large, heavy and bulky cargo on the rivers and Lake Winnipeg between Lower Fort Garry and Grand Rapids.²⁰³ The completion of the St. Paul and Manitoba Railway that ran between St. Boniface and St Paul Minnesota via Emmerson Manitoba, and Pembina North Dakota opened in 1878, making north to south Red River cart brigades obsolete into the Red River region.²⁰⁴ An earlier railroad to Emerson undermined Norway House because it made the Hudson Bay route less competitive.

This innovation in transportation technology caused posts like Norway House and York Factory to decline in importance as economic centres. This would have affected those who were dependent on the Company for their livelihoods. In times of economic struggle, the McTavishes would have been one of the few families of means that others would have gone to for help.

There was a busy trade in clothing in Norway House. Women would have outfitted men of the brigades, HBC Officers, and anyone else in need of clothing for travel in the country for decades prior to the arrival of the McTavishes. HBC Officers and "tourists" would commission highly decorative pieces to bring home with them as souvenirs of their time in the country, and

²⁰³ Ibid., 343.

²⁰⁴ Parks Canada, "Commemorating the First Railway in Western Canada."

HBC families like the McTavishes would have had practical “play” clothes made for the family, and warm clothing for the winter weather. With the decline of the community as an economic centre, these women would have felt the pinch in providing for their families. It is not inconceivable that they would have approached Lydia and sold her pieces to provide for their families in these difficult economic times.

Lydia could possibly have made some pieces in the collection, but it is also possible that many of these pieces of the Norway House style were purchased. Within the collection are hand bags made in the Norway House style. There are two hand bags made of moose hide that have a “produced for sale” appearance about them, and one in particular, made of beautiful white caribou with a pale pink silk lining, stands apart for the care in selecting the finest hide and silk for lining, and perfect embroidery of the floral motif. It is these subtle differences that invite a guess about how a piece may have been acquired.

Comparisons Made Between the McTavish Collection and Collections of Similar Provenance

Laura Peers, in her article on the “S. BLACK” bag, uses the object’s biography to trace possible meanings of the bag throughout its lifetime. We can make some parallels here to help us understand the meaning behind similar objects in the McTavish collection, specifically the tabbed octopus bags. As it is likely that the “WJC” in the Southesk collection in the Royal Alberta Museum was made by Mary Sinclair as a gift to her husband William Joseph Christie,

just as Peers posits that the S. BLACK bag was a gift of affection.²⁰⁵

The McTavish collection contains four of these beaded octopus bags, which do not appear to be made by the same maker or dated from the same time period or regional style. Like the giving of the WJC bag to Southesk, these were likely gifts given to the Christie's or perhaps the McTavishes.

The collection acquired by Emma Shaw Colcleugh on her travels throughout Western Canada in the 1880s, shares similarities in style and overlaps the locations where they were collected. She describes slippers, like the ones attributed to Mary, collected from women in the Mackenzie River area, and Norway House style embroidery collected from around the Lake Winnipeg region. Colcleugh provides some insight into the visual cacophony of cultural influences in Winnipeg during the time the McTavishes were in Norway House:

“The streets presented a great variety. Up-to-the-minute exquisites were jostled by half-breeds shod with moccasins; dainty-dressed ladies were side by side with Indian mothers who carried their infants on their backs in braided pockets with wooden back”.²⁰⁶

As a woman traveler and collector in the Victorian era, Colcleugh can also give us some insight into a woman's world and her thoughts through her journals. The pieces Colcleugh chose to collect were examples of her personal taste and interest, and perhaps what was offered to her by the women in the communities she visited. Hail and Duncan write that Emma collection the

²⁰⁵ Matthews and Farrell-Racette, personal conversation.

²⁰⁶ Hail and Duncan, *Out of the North*, 46.

pieces she did because “[She} may have been offered especially fine bead and silk embroideries because, like other women, she was assumed to be a beader herself, or because she expressed interest in the beadwork.”²⁰⁷ Therefore, even if Lydia did not create these pieces herself, they are still a reflection of her taste and interest. If these objects were purchased from women in Norway House whose families were experiencing financial difficulty due to the decline in economic activity at that time, the collection of these objects are nonetheless an example of Lydia’s compassion and willingness to help those in need in her community.

Final Thoughts:

How we look at objects to read women’s stories, and how objects carry identity

Looking at Objects to Read Women’s Stories

Why is this collection so important? The McTavish Collection serves a variety of functions for both the family and the Manitoba Museum. Through the process of pulling a large number of pieces from the museum storage, and reuniting them as a whole, it is possible to build both object and collection biographies. It opens possibilities of piecing together a picture of the life of wives of HBC Officers during a time span of the fur trade era in what is now Western Canada. It also opens up for interrogation the complex question of identity for the families of mixed-heritage in the upper ranks of the HBC.

The McTavish collection at the Manitoba Museum is made up of objects that represent a

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 63.

large geographical and cultural area from the Sub-Arctic to the Plains/Prairies. Eighty objects of beaded and embroidered personal items, clothing and home décor were selected from the collection because they represent items that would have been made by women, and would have been of interest to women collectors at the time the collection was accumulating. The items of the collection that were excluded were several examples of men's tools, paintings and animal parts such as polar bear teeth. The selected objects were studied as a whole collection, and grouped by embroidery technique, materials and object types to determine possible time periods of creation or collection, and then connected via historical research with the lives and biographies of the women connected to the pieces. They were sorted and resorted to discover clues to learning more about the objects and collection. Photos of the collection were brought to the family members to see what memories or thoughts the objects would elicit from those connected to the collection today.

Objects have the mnemonic power to carry the stories of events that occurred in the lifetimes of those who possessed those objects. The information embedded, symbolized and represented in these objects make us re-think the saying, "if these walls could talk...", and actually make us stop and listen to what they would say.

Throughout their lifetimes, objects acquire layers of meaning, value and uses that are placed on them by each person who has that object in their possession. This social patina, embodies the object's biography. The fact that the object has this biography gives it agency to connect us to the past, connect us to our ancestors, spark memories, teach us about cultural practices, and "tell" stories of earlier times. The purpose of this project was to uncover the

biographies of objects in the McTavish collection and connect them with the family.

From the very beginning of this project, I discovered that researching women's history is a very different process than researching men. Men's stories are documented in written text, often in their own hand. Women's historiographers lament the absence of women in the written record. There is record of women, but it is found in the objects they create, collect and pass to the next generation along with their stories. The "reading" of these objects to unpack those stories can be done, however, it requires a different attitude from the researcher and digging with a somewhat different tool kit.

It is the stories and historic context of time and place of the object or collection of objects that add meaning and value to the collection. What do these objects help us to understand about the collectors and custodians of the collection? Over the generations of this collection, the women in this family demonstrated strength and resilience as they grew in power and social status, into members of the fur trade and Manitoban and Canadian political elite.

Values, identity, family history are all deeply embedded into these objects. Especially when they are pulled together as a whole collection, the stories begin to emerge. These objects have to be mindfully selected by their owners who choose to keep, cherish and pass them down for very specific reasons. They represent, or symbolized something their owner deems very important and valuable. Just how important that object is to the family story may not be immediately evident and obvious to either the next generation who accept it into their care, or to a museum visitor that looks at the object in a case. Those messages, or information must be purposefully unpacked in order to hear what the object has to say.

Creating object biographies requires looking at objects from every possible angle. Examining an object, how it was made, the techniques, skill, and artistic choices. Hands-on experimentation with techniques and skills can give a researcher a great appreciation of the skill and creativity required, for what would seem at first to require little effort! Grouping objects and looking at them together, considering the life of the collector and all those who have had the object in their possession: looking at an object from every perspective can help answer questions, and inspire questions that go deeper. What was happening politically, socially and economically at that time? When considering the reasons the Sinclair-Christie-McTavish-Rogers-Konantz family kept these items, cared for them and passed them down, some speculation can be made. It is mind-boggling that the collection at the Manitoba Museum represents only a portion of the original collection, and that the original collection would have numbered 300 objects or more! Why would all of these objects be saved? Why would not the best example of each type, or the pieces that have the most significance to the family history be kept, and the others given away? What is the significance of the collection as a single body?

From the range of styles, and variety of objects in the collection, we would have to also acknowledge the family as collectors as well as makers, and accumulated examples of regional works from women they encountered on their HBC postings throughout the northwest. These objects were chosen specifically from the collection because they represent the story of women. The production of this work by these women was considered important, and they learned how to do it as young girls. The hybridity of style, design, media and construction of the objects tell a story of how women could easily move between Indigenous and European worlds. When we consider the push for assimilation of these women of European and Indigenous heritage, were

these objects of intended, or unintended feminine resistance? Whether collected, or created by the hands of the women in this family, was maintaining and passing down of this collection a way of encoding meaning into the objects that signified who they were, intentionally, or not; overt, or implied, their “Creeness”, “Métisness” or “HBCness”?

Considering the hypothesis that Mary created many of the older pieces, in particular the slippers, to give to her daughter Lydia possibly as a part of her wedding trousseau, I was only looking at the direct family line of this particular collection. However, Lydia had two sisters, Margaret and Mary. Her mother would have been busy making and compiling items for the trousseaus of all three of her daughters. It is probable, therefore to find similar objects, with similar motifs and colour palette in the family collections of the descendants of Margaret and Mary Christie, if such collections exist.

Lydia amassed a significant collection of pieces that represent the Norway House style of embroidery. It is unclear why she would have kept all of these and added them to her collection passed down to her mother. At the time Mary and Lydia were collecting these objects, they would not have had the historical significance they do today, in fact, I think they would have been quite common for people who are living in fur trade settlements and posts. They could not have known that these items would be cherished by family and studied by researchers over a hundred years later?

Lydia died young from tuberculosis, and this seems from the family stories to have had an understandably traumatic effect on Edith, who was ten years old when her mother died. These items had belonged to her mother, and would have been a connection to her, and to

Edith's childhood in Norway House and Rupert's House on the James Bay. Edith's recollections of her mother in Gail Konantz's book, of the time when the family was at Rupert's House are warm, playful and full of fun. These objects would have represented those times in the "little log cabin", and the smell of the smoked-tanned moose hide would bring those memories forward.

Edith may have passed the collection down to her children as a connection to their grandmother Lydia, or as a symbol of the fur trade history the family is rooted, or for both reasons. Edith Rogers seemed like a very pragmatic woman, and these objects would teach and maintain that sense of identity and history for the generations that would follow. Whatever the significance of the collection, it was important to the family, that is for sure. The dividing of the collection between Edith's daughters Margaret Konantz and Enid Rogers is evidence of this. I asked Gord and Gail Konantz why the collection was divided between the two sisters, and why half the collection stayed in Colburn and the other half went to Winnipeg. Neither were exactly sure, however Gail speculated that each sister wanted to care for the collection, and the only way to settle things was to divide it.

Objects Carry Identity

The question of identity is complex as we can have many identities at one once, and many of these identities can change over time. There is the inner and the outer: a public face and a private one we tuck away in warm smoke-tanned scented drawer. A private identity may not be discussed as frequently, but still a part of who we are and just as important, we know this is important because the collection exists.

Gord recalled the time the family home in Colburn burned in 1947. He said that before the damage had been assessed, there was much worrying about what had happened to the collection. When they found out the collection was gone, “There were bad feelings”, as everyone was looking for someone to blame.²⁰⁸ The loss of the collection was as devastating to the family, as if they had lost a loved one. This is an indication of how important that collection was to the family, their identity, and their connection to their ancestors.

For the Sinclair-Christie-McTavish-Rogers-Konantz family, suppressing their Indigenous or mixed-heritage status publicly becomes more important for each generation, and certainly at the time of Edith Rogers, the family tends to identify as descendants of George Simpson, rather than Nahoway. Privately, however, identifying with an Indigenous, mixed, or fur trade heritage seems to have become nested within this collection. Tucked away, the delicious smells of smoke tanned hide, cared for, jealously guarded, and fought over.

Recommendations and Future Study: Where do we go from here?

As collections are divided into ‘type’ and stored separately in museum vaults, the story the collection tells as a whole can be lost over time. It is an important for curators and researchers to think about collections as ‘whole’. Reuniting a collection as we would a family and creating links and connections gives the collection agency to let a story unfold, and creates a concrete and tangible connections to the past.

²⁰⁸ Konantz, personal conversation.

There are two areas of study that have emerged while thinking about this collection that would be interesting to consider: Other collections exist that are connected to the Sinclair lineage, and could be compared. Also, a question about how this kind of comparative collection study could provide joint learning opportunities between communities and museums?

The McTavish collection provides an opportunity to examine a collection of objects with a very specific and direct provenance, from Nahoway directly to Margaret and Enid Konantz, to William Konantz who donated the collection and Gord, his brother who was interviewed on the collection's significance to the family. Nahoway had a large family, and daughters that married into all ranks of fur trade society. Mary Sinclair had sisters, aunts and cousins, and these families, whose roots are in Manitoba, were posted throughout Western Canada. What extant collections, or pieces of collections can be connected to this large family network that produced needlework art? What influence did generations of women from one family have on beadwork and embroidery across Western Canada? Would it be possible to create object biographies around these collections and connect them through matrilineal lines? A network of collections that are connected by female members of a single family that represent an untold history of women in Red River and Western Canada is waiting to be mapped out.

Throughout this project, as the story has unfolded, I have been privileged to have an opportunity to reach a deeper and very personal understanding of a collection and a family. The project created a lovely bridge between the family and the museum, where each learned a little more about each other and their shared interests in the McTavish Collection. It was a beautiful partnership!

Plate Gallery



Plate 1. Angela Fey, (March 2016). James Bay Cree style beaded tab (octopus) bag. McTavish Collection H4-0-736, Manitoba Museum. Bag is black wool stroud and lined with black silk. Red silk ribbon trim around outer edge. Fringe trim is red wool and beads on sinew.

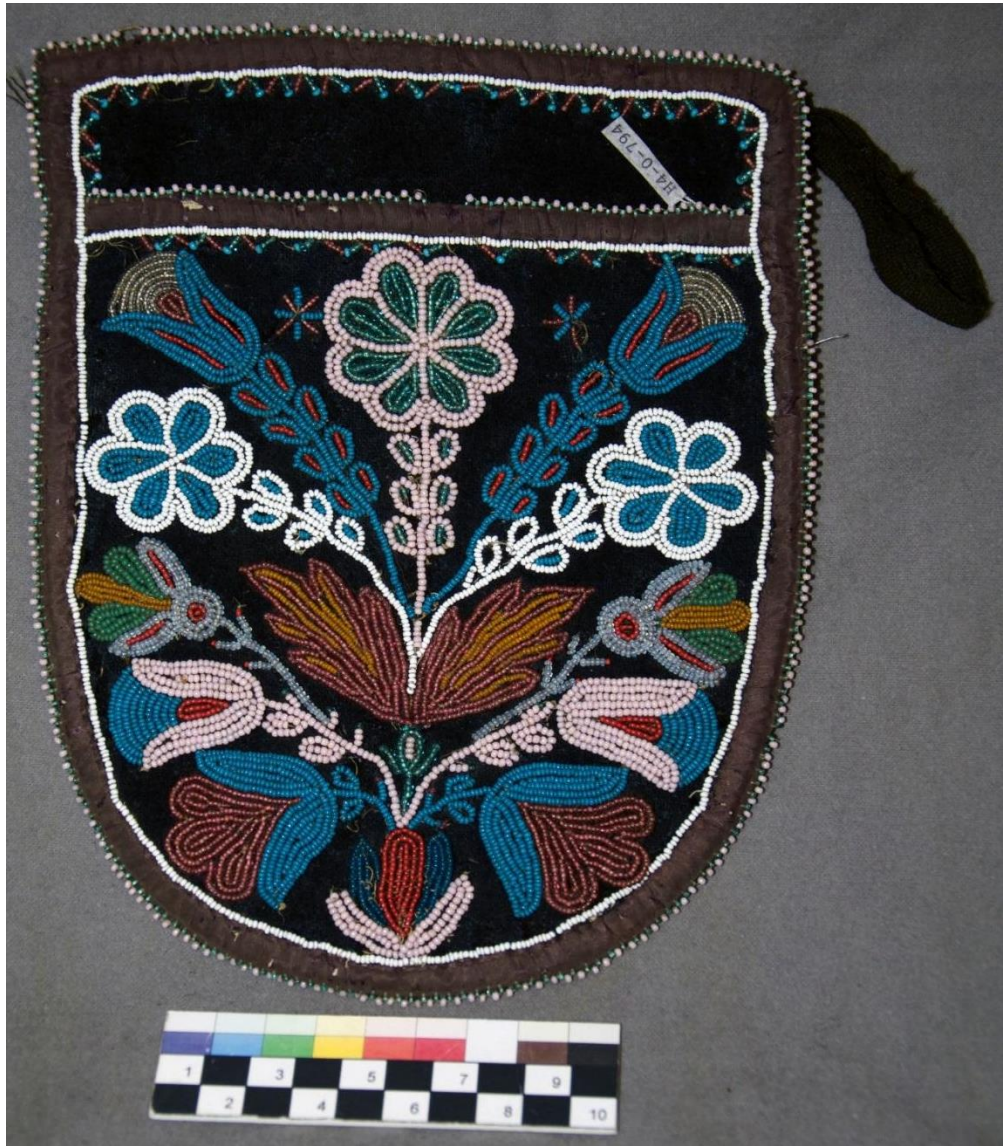


Plate 2. Angela Fey (March 2016) James Bay Cree style beaded wall pocket or watch pocket
McTavish Collection H4-0-794, Manitoba Museum. Beads sewn on black stroud wool. Black
silk ribbon trim on out edge. Lined and backed with linen cloth.



Plate 3. Angela Fey (March 2016), Lake Winnipeg Cascading Lobe style beadwork panel bag. McTavish Collection H4-0-737, Manitoba Museum. Beaded black stroud bag with green silk ribbon trim. Lower beaded panel produced on a loom. Fringes of red wool, beads and sinew.



Plate 4. Angela Fey (March 2016), Lake Winnipeg Cascading Lobe style garters. McTavish Collection H4-0-749, Manitoba Museum. Black stroud with cotton backing and dark green silk ribbon trim on outer edge. Wool pom poms, tassels and four-strand braided ties.



Plate 5. Angela Fey (March 2016), Lake Winnipeg Cascading Lobe style leggings. McTavish Collection H4-0-817, Manitoba Museum. Unlined black stroud. Beaded panel trimmed with dark purple silk ribbon on outer edge.



Plate 6. Angela Fey (March 2016), Métis style embroidery and silk ribbon cutwork mittens
McTavish Collection H4-0-726, Manitoba Museum. Caribou hide and black stroud with silk
ribbon cutwork trim. Wool four-strand braided strings and tassels. Buttonhole stitch embroidery.



Plate 7. Angela Fey (March 2016), Detail of embroidery and silk ribbon cutwork on Mètis style mittens. McTavish Collection H4-0-728, Manitoba Museum. Caribou hide and black stroud with silk ribbon cutwork trim. Mix of double-chain stitch and buttonhole embroidery.



Plate 8. Angela Fey (March 2016), Lake Winnipeg Small Flower style wall pocket. McTavish Collection H4-0-802, Manitoba Museum. Caribou hide with cotton backing. Centre opening for pocket. Orange silk ribbon trim on outer edge and on pocket opening. Outer edge has a knotted silk floss thread trim in green and blue. Buttonhole stitch embroidery.



Plate 9. Angela Fey (March 2016), Detail on gauntlet cuff of Norway House style embroidery. McTavish Collection H4-0-721, Manitoba Museum. Gauntlet made out of moose hide and machine sewn. Evidence of once having fur trim at the cuff. Buttonhole stitch embroidery.



Plate 10. Maureen Matthews (2014), Norway House style embroidery on a hide jacket. McTavish Collection H4-2-383, Manitoba Museum. Buttonhole stitch embroidery.



Plate 11. Angela Fey (March 2016), Hide neck tie in Norway House style embroidery. McTavish Collection H4-0-752, Manitoba Museum. Caribou hide backed with pink silk backing. Machine sewn. Buttonhole stitch embroidery.



Plate 12. Angela Fey (March 2016), Detail of embroidery on moccasins. McTavish Collection H4-0-770, Manitoba Museum. Wrap-around moccasins with tan-coloured caribou hide with light tan vamp. Double-chain stitch embroidery. Twisted silk floss thread trim around vamp.



Plate 13. Angela Fey (March 2016), Detail of embroidery and pleated caribou hide on moccasins. McTavish Collection H4-0-775, Manitoba Museum. Wrap-around moccasins with tan-coloured caribou hide white caribou hide vamp. Double-chain stitch embroidery. Twisted silk floss thread trim around vamp



Plate 14a. Angela Fey (March 2016), Detail of embroidery and pleated hide on moccasins. McTavish Collection H4-0-772, Manitoba Museum. Wrap-around moccasins with tan-coloured caribou hide white caribou hide vamp. Double-chain stitch embroidery. Twisted silk floss thread trim around vamp.



Plate 14b. Angela Fey (March 2016), Detail of red and navy wool stroud cuff on moccasins. McTavish Collection H4-0-772, Manitoba Museum.



Plate 15. Angela Fey (March 2016), Moccasins. McTavish Collection H4-0-779, Manitoba Museum. Wrap-around moccasins with tan-coloured caribou hide white caribou hide vamp. Double-chain stitch embroidery. Twisted silk floss thread trim around vamp. Navy and red stroud hand-pinked cuff.



Plate 16. Angela Fey (March 2016) Single moccasin. McTavish Collection H4-0-789, Manitoba Museum. Wrap-around moccasins with tan-coloured caribou hide white caribou hide vamp. Double-chain stitch embroidery. Twisted silk floss thread trim around vamp. Navy stroud cuff with no pinking.



Plate 17. Angela Fey (March 2016), Moccasins. McTavish Collection H4-0-773, Manitoba Museum. Wrap-around moccasins with tan-coloured caribou hide white caribou hide vamp. Double-chain stitch embroidery. Twisted silk floss thread trim around vamp. Navy and red stroud hand-pinked cuff.



Plate 18. Angela Fey (March 2016) Moccasins. McTavish Collection H4-0-777, Manitoba Museum. Caribou hide. Cuffs are pinked caribou.



Plate 19a. Angela Fey (March 2016), Moccasins. McTavish Collection H4-0-776, Manitoba Museum. Tan caribou hide wrap-around moccasins with white caribou vamp. Double-chain stitch embroidery and twisted silk floss trim around vamp.



Plate 19b. Angela Fey (March 2016), Detail of red and navy wool stroud cuff on moccasins. McTavish Collection H4-0-776, Manitoba Museum. Hand-pinked cuff.



Plate 20a. Angela Fey (March 2016), Hand bag front view. McTavish Collection H4-0-793, Manitoba Museum. Tan-coloured caribou hide with hide fringe trim. Silk floss double-chain stitch embroidery. Four-strand braided hand strap.



Plate 20b. Angela Fey (March 2016) Hand bag rear view. McTavish Collection H4-0-793, Manitoba Museum. Orange laurel leaf detail.



Plate 21a. Angela Fey (March 2016) Mittens. McTavish Collection H4-0-723, Manitoba Museum. Hide mittens. Embroidery is on front and back. Evidence of fur trim on edge of cuff (at wrist and at top near thumb).



Plate 21b. Angela Fey (March 2026) Mitten detail. McTavish Collection H4-0-723, Manitoba Museum. Laurel leaf detail. Remnants of fur trim on cuff.



Plate 22. Angela Fey (March 2016), Beaded wall pocket or watch pocket. McTavish Collection H4-0-795, Manitoba Museum. Laurel leaf detail in bead work.



Plate 23. Angela Fey (March 2016), Wall pocket or watch pocket. McTavish Collection H4-0-799, Manitoba Museum. White caribou hide. Evidence of fur trim around outside edge and across opening of the pocket. Double-chain stitch silk floss embroidery. Cotton lining and pale pink silk ribbon tab on top for hanging.



Plate 24 [unknown photographer]. Mary Sinclair, 1833-1900. Mary Sinclair as a young girl. Possibly when she was a student in Red River. Gail Konantz, *Manitobans in Profile: Edith Rogers*, Peguis Pub. Ltd., Winnipeg, 1981.



Plate 25a. Angela Fey (March 2016), Single caribou dancing slipper with silk floss embroidery, quillwork and remnants of fur trim. McTavish Collection. H4-0-786, Manitoba Museum. Tan-coloured caribou hide. Embroidery on vamp and around cuff. Edge of cuff trimmed with blue silk ribbon.



Plate 25b. Angela Fey (March 2016), Detail of dancing slipper. McTavish Collection H4-0-786, Manitoba Museum. Remnants of fur trim around opening of slipper. Detail of orange and white porcupine quillwork. Dark purple porcupine quill-wrapped horsehair trim at vamp seam.



Plate 26a. [unknown photographer]. Konantz Family collection. Image of Lydia Christie McTavish, University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections. Accessed February 2016.



Plate 26b. [unknown photographer], Detail of image of Lydia Christie McTavish. Konantz Family collection, University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections. Accessed February 2016.

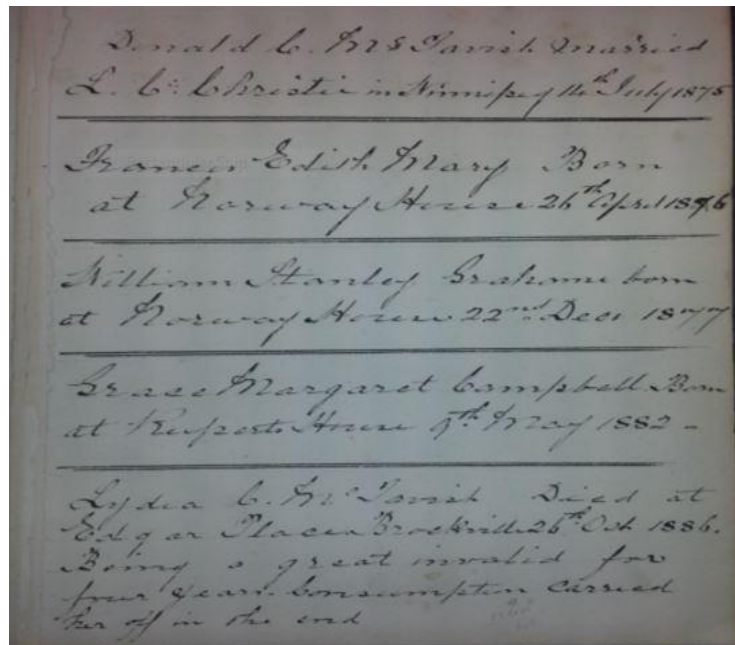


Plate 27. Angela Fey (May 2016), Page from Lydia Christie McTavish's Bible. Manitoba Museum Collections. New acquisition, not catalogued (2016).



Plate 28. [unknown photographer]. Edith Rogers on her wedding day. Konantz family collection, University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections. Accessed February 2016.



Plate 29. [unknown photographer]. Edith Rogers, Member of Manitoba Legislative Assembly. Gail Konantz, *Manitobans in Profile: Edith Rogers*, Peguis Pub. Ltd., Winnipeg, 1981.



Plate 30. [unknown photographer], Enid Rogers. Konantz family collection, University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections. Accessed February 2016.



Plate 31. [unknown photographer]. Margaret Rogers graduation from Miss Spence's School, New York, 1929. Konantz family collection, University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections. Accessed February 2016.



Plate 32. [unknown photographer]. Margaret Rogers Konantz' 1963 federal election win. Shown with children Bill, Gord and Barbara Konantz. Konantz family collection, University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections. Accessed February 2016.

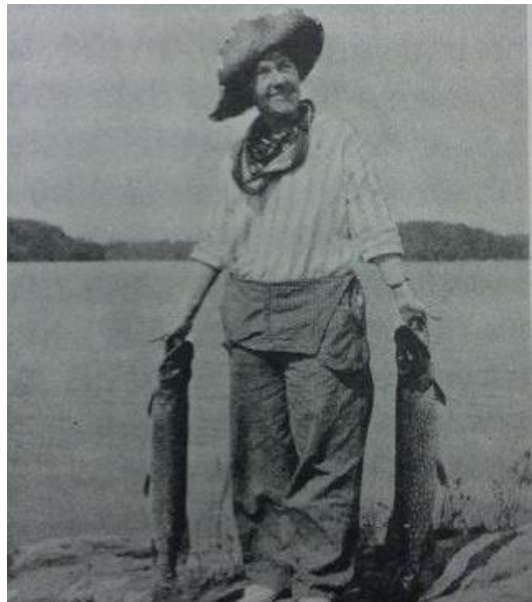


Plate 33. [unknown photographer]. Margaret Rogers Konantz fishing at Lake of the Woods. Konantz family collection, University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections. Accessed February 2016.



Plate 34. Angela Fey (March 2016), Beaded pipe bag. McTavish Collection H4-0-731, Manitoba Museum.

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