

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF A TYPICAL
METIS COMMUNITY IN MANITOBA

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the community of St. Louis in the light of present day conditions. A brief history of the Metis people including their rise to nationhood is given as a historical backdrop for the community under study. The development of St. Louis as a community setting is discussed and then further studied in four areas. The present day economics of St. Louis are discussed and analyzed. Following this, power structures are examined along with their ultimate results. Some of the more notable social problems of the community are exposed in the following chapter. The second last chapter is devoted to socialization practices and education in St. Louis, and problems which arise in areas of conflict. In the conclusions, a brief summary of the research is given and possible methods of dealing with some of the problems are discussed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Preface

Every year in Manitoba well over one hundred new teachers are recruited to teach in native communities. Some of these communities are Indian and others are Metis. The majority of teachers hired have no experience of either cultural group, and many are teachers with no field experience. Of the teachers hired, many have preconceived and often romanticized notions about native groups. They cannot obtain beforehand, clear, accurate and factual information pertaining to the two groups other than of a general nature. The only information that is readily available to them is that found in the recruitment brochures of the Department of Indian Affairs, the Frontier School Division, and various local school districts of northern Manitoba. These are often too short, incomplete, inaccurate, and outdated. It is also difficult in this type of format to delineate the multitudinous aspects of the present day cultures of these peoples.

The past five years have seen the development of many new learning materials geared towards native students. These materials have been termed by some as "culturally relevant", and as such have often been approached by teachers as a panacea for their cross-cultural teaching problems.

From observation, it is this author's opinion that little improvement has taken place in this area since the introduction of some of these materials. This writer attributes at least part of the failure of these new materials to a lack of understanding on the part of the teachers using them.

This is not to say that the teachers are "ill-intentioned". Rather, they are "undirected" in the sense that they have never been made aware of some of the cultural intricacies within which they must work. The development of culturally "relevant" materials is of little benefit without first the development of teachers who are culturally aware and culturally sensitive.

Awareness is a necessary prerequisite to sensitivity, for it is impossible to be sensitive to needs of which one is unaware. However, awareness comes only when a conscious effort is made to gather information.

It is the purpose of this thesis to provide information to teachers about a specific Metis community that is typical of many such communities in Manitoba. It is hoped that this will contribute to their awareness, and ultimately their sensitivity and understanding. The author believes that if this is accomplished, it will enhance teaching in cross-cultural situations, and be a useful contribution to at least the cross-culturally inexperienced teacher.

The information presented concerns an actual Metis community in Manitoba. The pseudonym St. Louis is used throughout the work when referring to the community. As well, pseudonyms are used for all other names of towns, landmarks, and people who could be connected with the community under observation, in order to ensure the anonymity of the residents of the community.

The author has lived in St. Louis for three years and has functioned in the capacity of school principal during this period. The information gathered in this work is derived chiefly from government agencies connected with the community, businesses in St. Louis, interviews with residents, and from personal observations of the author.

The first chapter of this study traces the development of the Metis people in Canada, and it serves as a historical backdrop for the community of St. Louis. This chapter relies heavily on historical sources.

The second chapter deals with St. Louis' development from the time of the earliest settlements until the present, but limits itself to the historical developments of the community. Topics such as land grants, influencing events, and economic changes are discussed in this section. This chapter relies largely on personal interviews with elder members of the community.

Chapter three discusses the economy of St. Louis

with reference to the population, employment, and spending habits. The sources of information for this chapter are largely government agencies and business records.

The fourth chapter deals with power structures and their influence in St. Louis. The sources for this chapter are personal interviews with community members and the author's observations and their analyses.

The fifth chapter concerning social problems deals with the author's perceptions of the major problem areas in St. Louis. In this chapter, statistics and information from social and government agencies is used and subjected to interpretation by the writer.

Chapter six examines the process of socialization and education within St. Louis. The major source for this chapter is the author's observations coupled with parent and teacher interviews. Once again the information has been subjectively interpreted by the writer.

The purpose of the research was not to produce highly specific information about St. Louis, but rather to expose a general framework within which the community operates. It is for this reason that the author does not always include highly specific information pertaining to St. Louis. It is unimportant for the purpose of this work whether or not there are thirty seven houses or forty-four houses in the new development in St. Louis. It is sufficient to know that there are about forty houses there, as other

similar communities might well have thirty-nine or forty-six, or similar numbers. Such highly specific information has been purposely left out and the author has concentrated on supplying information which would be useful in applying to different but basically similar communities.

As in most studies, there are a number of limitations to this work. The major ones are that:

a) this study is limited to one community and cannot take into account specific factors which may or may not affect other similar communities,

b) the interview sources for various aspects of this study are not without their biases and consequently not all the material is totally objective,

c) at those points where the author makes interpretations, he is not without his own biases,

d) where statistics are used in such things as employment figures, birth rate and the like, the author recognizes the possibility of inaccurate figures due to faulty investigative techniques used by some government agencies.

Chapter 1

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE METIS NATION IN CANADA

A history of the Metis people in Canada is almost synonymous with the history of the development of Canada, and especially of Western Canada. Much has been written about Canada's past, but most of that written has not placed emphasis on the role of the Metis people in Canadian history. In textbooks such as Canada in North America to 1800 and Canada - Colony to Centennial, the people referred to most often as the "natives" of Canada are the various Indian tribes. Kavanagh¹ in his book on the Assiniboine Basin states that:

The first human arrival was the Indian. Possibly six thousand years ago the noble redman had crossed over Bering Sea from Asia.

It is this "redman" that the early explorers encountered from Jacques Cartier on. As the first contact the Europeans had in North America, the Indian has historically come to be treated as the native of this continent. In actual fact, the true native of this continent must be considered the Metis. It is the Metis whose origins find root

¹Martin Kavanagh, The Assiniboine Basin (Surrey, England: Unwin Brothers Limited, 1966), p. 2.

in the Canadian soil, and whose fatherland can be disputed by none. A product of the union of two immigrant peoples in a new land, the Metis rose from a few scattered individuals into a nation, always keeping close links with its cultural past. This chapter will outline in general terms the development of the Metis people to nationhood and the subsequent demise of the Metis people as a nation.

The earliest beginnings of the Metis can be traced to the days of the first explorers and traders. The explorers who discovered Canada returned to Europe with tales of a land of great wealth, and especially rich in furs. These tales raised the interest of traders who later decided to explore this new land with the hopes of finding these stories to be true. By so doing, they hoped to return home far wealthier than before.

It was undoubtedly one of these early traders or explorers who fathered the first half-breed child in this country. Alliances with Indian women probably began taking place soon after the white man's first arrival. It must be remembered that a passage from Europe was a long and arduous affair lasting several months. No women accompanied the men on these voyages as exploring was not deemed a fitting work in which to involve females.

Once having arrived in the new land, the preparation for winter and survival in the unknown country was made. To collect a quantity of furs worth the expense of the expedi-

tion, it was necessary for the traders to spend lengthy periods in this foreign land.

Although Jacques Cartier discovered the Gulf of St. Lawrence in 1534 and returned in 1535, little attention was paid to the new land. Even after his unsuccessful attempt to establish a colony in 1541, France did all but ignore Canada. Except for the occasional fishing expedition or trading mission, Canada was undisturbed.

The trade that was carried on was with the Indians for furs. It is likely that during this trading period some half-breed children were born. However, the number of these children would have been insignificant as no permanent colony of Europeans had yet established itself in Canada. In 1604 under the leadership of Champlain, the colony of St. Croix River was established. In 1608 it was removed to the site of present day Quebec City where it became the first permanent settlement in Canada.

From this meagre start, fur trading in Canada began to expand. The French began exploring the St. Lawrence River and the Great Lakes. Eventually fur trading companies such as the XY Company and the North West Company were formed.

With the formation of these companies came the establishment of small settlements.

In the meantime the English had not been idle. Hearing of the fortunes of the French, Charles II was persuaded to engage two French explorers, Radisson and Gros-

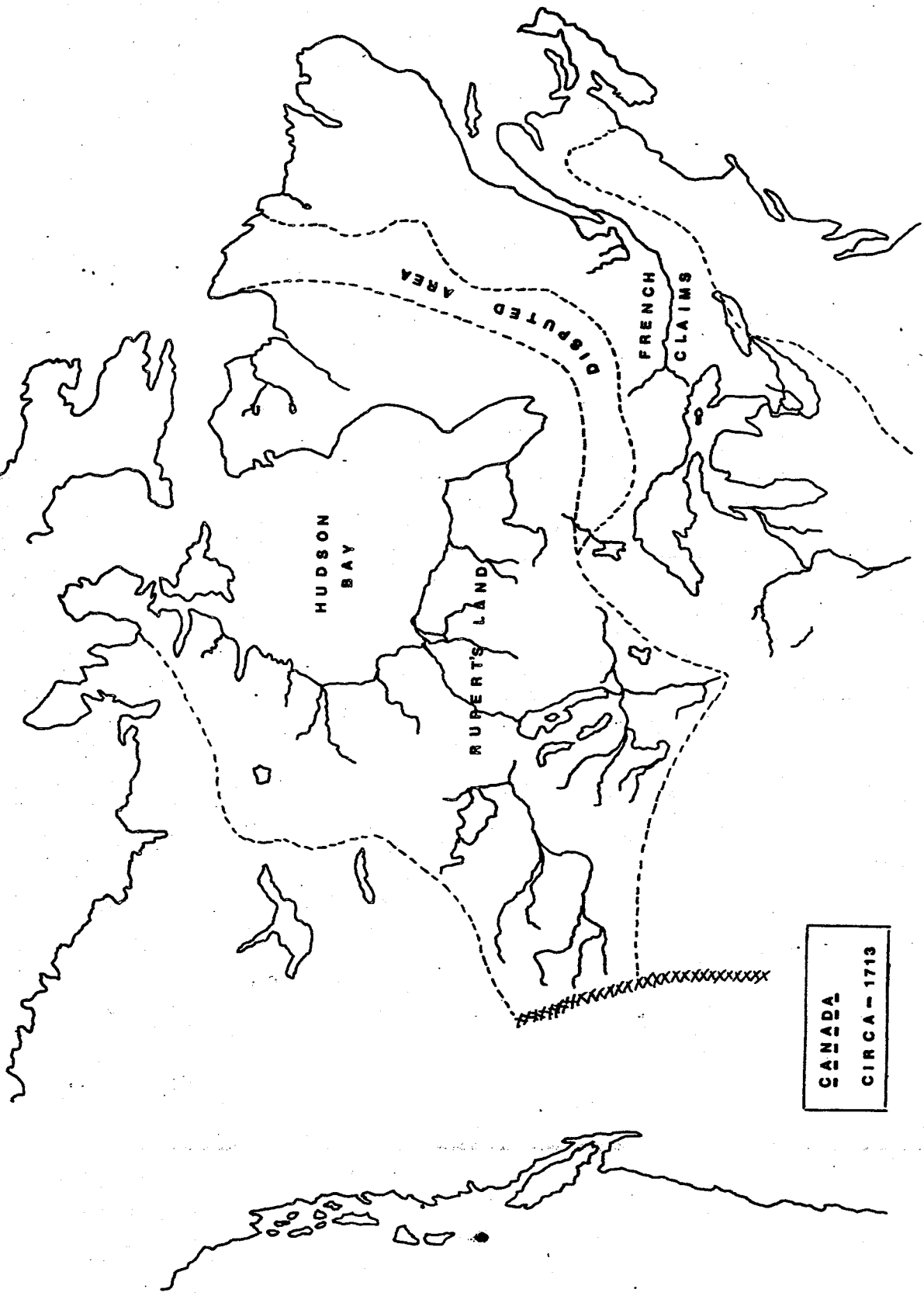
seilliers, to look into the fur trading possibilities for England. As a result of their explorations, the Hudson's Bay Company was founded in 1668. By 1670, it had been granted a royal charter in the name of "The Merchant Adventurers of England Trading into Hudson's Bay".² Its charter gave it the trapping and trading rights over all the lands drained by the Hudson Bay. (See map Fig. 1.)

What this meant in terms of the development of the Metis people was that another permanent colony was established which resulted in racially mixed mating and half-breed children. From this then it is possible to see that the Metis people originated from two basic areas in Canada. The first was the St. Lawrence River area in which the resultant mixed breed children were the French half-breed. The second was the Hudson Bay area where the English half-breeds evolved.

The fur trade in Canada was not only intricately involved with the beginnings of the Metis people, but for a considerable number of years, it was the single most influential factor in determining the culture of this new race. It continued to be such up until the Selkirk Land Grant and the establishment of the Red River Settlement.

During the years from the beginning of the fur trading companies up until 1812, the Metis people grew in

² Arthur S. Morton, A History of the Canadian West to 1870 - 71 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), p. 55.



CANADA
CIRCA - 1713

Fig. 1.

Copy of map taken from World Book Encyclopedia, 1972 edition, Vol. 3., p. 116 g. published by Field Educational Enterprises Corporation, Toronto.

numbers and developed a lifestyle around the fur industry. Despite the Hudson's Bay Company's reluctance, alliances between white and Indian partners became more and more commonplace. The need for mates, as well as the benefits of having a wife who spoke the native language, understood the culture, and who often had extremely valuable survival skills, served as incentive for these marriages. The Hudson's Bay Company felt a responsibility towards the women and children of such unions. As a result, wherever possible the first generation and succeeding generations of Metis children were hired by the Company. Some worked as interpreters, canoemen, fur packers, and manual workmen around the fort.³ A few were taught either at home or at distant boarding schools, how to read, write, and compute. These often took up employment later as clerks with the trading companies. One such man, Moses Norton, went on to become governor of Fort Churchill in 1759.

The development of the French half-breeds in Eastern Canada followed along similar lines. Although the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company were different, the lifeblood was still the same. Furs were sought on an ever increasing basis. The children of French and Indian unions were employed by the North West Company, but for reasons of economics rather than concern. The fur companies of Eastern

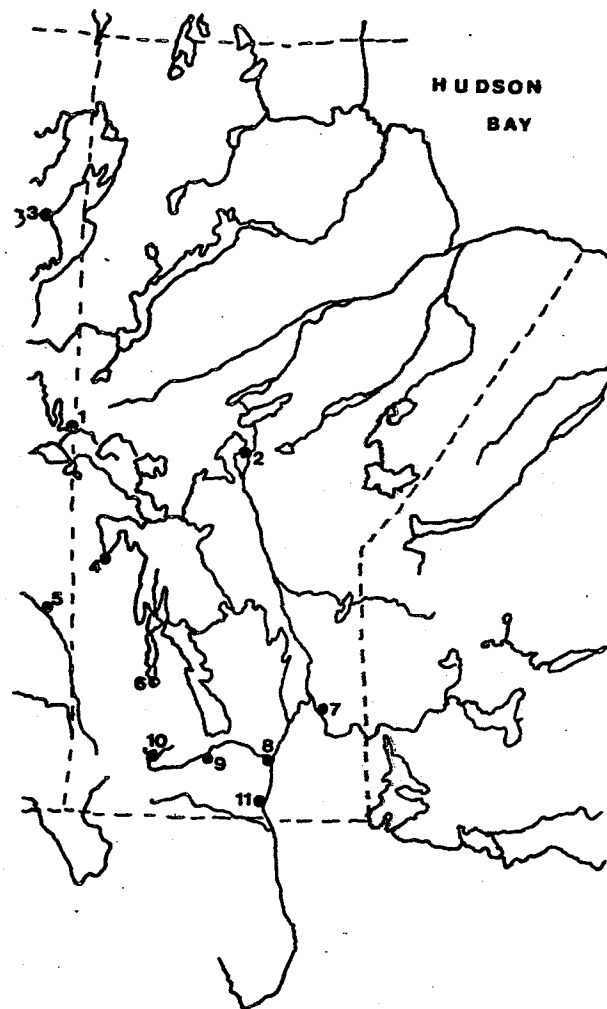
³D. Bruce Sealey and Antoine S. Lussier, The Metis Canada's Forgotten People (Winnipeg: Manitoba Metis Federation Press, 1975), p. 5.

Canada needed the Metis to survive, and it was here that the "coureurs de bois" originated.

As the furs became scarce in the immediate vicinity of the St. Lawrence, it became necessary to move further and further inland. To do so meant to go through Indian territory, and some of the tribes involved were somewhat hostile. What better people to involve in this task could one find than the Metis. Again, they knew the language, the customs, and possessed many of the life skills necessary to survive such journeys. As well, many were directly descended from, or related to, the inhabitants of the lands through which they travelled.

As time passed, the fur bearing animals diminished in numbers and it became necessary to move further and further away from the companies in order to trap profitably. At the same time, the numbers of the Metis increased significantly. In their expansion, the Hudson's Bay Company went further and further south, aided by the explorations of Henry Kelsey from 1690 to 1692. The French meanwhile, were sending their "coureurs de bois" further and further west. It was inevitable that both groups should meet, and in 1738 La Verendrye reached what is presently Winnipeg. The French established forts from Lake Superior to the Saskatchewan River. (See map fig. 2.) The English forts were meanwhile established around the Hudson and James Bay areas. (See map fig. 3.)

Map of the North West Company Forts circa 1812

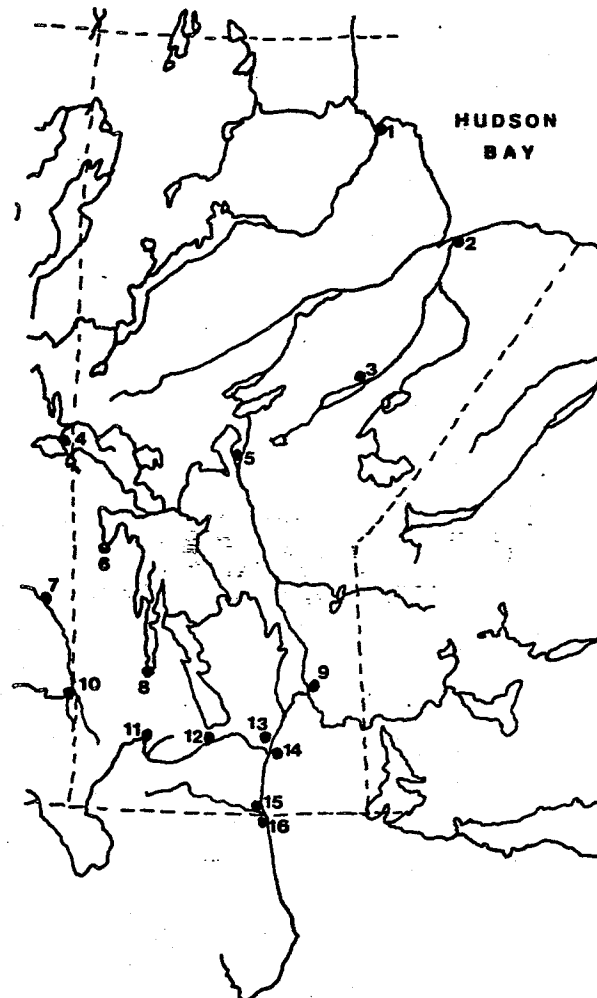


- | | |
|---------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Cumberland House | 6. Fort Dauphin |
| 2. Norway House | 7. Bas de la Riviere |
| 3. Bedford House | 8. Fort Gibraltar |
| 4. Swan River Post | 9. Fort La Reine |
| 5. Fort Alexandria | 10. Fort Assiniboine |
| 11. Fort Pembina | |

Fig. 2.

Copy of map taken from Canada - Colony to Centennial,
by Derald G. Willows and Stewart Richmond. Published by
McGraw - Hill Company of Canada Ltd., Toronto, 1970. p. 188.

Map of the Hudson's Bay Company Forts circa 1812



- | | |
|---------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Fort Churchill | 9. Fort Alexander |
| 2. York Factory | 10. Qu'Appelle Post |
| 3. Oxford House | 11. Brandon House |
| 4. Cumberland House | 12. Portage La Prairie |
| 5. Norway House | 13. Fort Douglas |
| 6. Swan River Post | 14. Fort Garry |
| 7. Carlton House | 15. Fort Pembina |
| 8. Fort Dauphin | 16. Fort Daer |

Fig. 3.

Copy of map taken from Canada - Colony to Centennial, by Derald G. Willows and Stewart Richmond. Published by McGraw - Hill Company of Canada Ltd., Toronto, 1970. p. 188.

In the area where the two companies met there was some rivalry as the lands were part of the Hudson's Bay Company charter. Yet:

The French produced original titles and acts in due form proving that as early as the year 1540 Sieur de Roberval took possession of them.⁴

However, it would seem that little more than fierce competition between the two companies took place during this time. It was to be later when the Selkirk Settlers arrived that the trouble would erupt.

The settlement of the Red River area was the result of efforts by Thomas Douglas, the Earl of Selkirk. Selkirk became concerned over conditions of farmers as they existed in the British Isles during the early 1800's. On a visit to Montreal he became friends with directors of the North West Company. On this voyage the idea came to him that the Red River area might provide an ideal setting for farmers away from the economic strife of Great Britain. The only question was whether or not it would be possible to procure land from the Hudson's Bay Company who held title to the area.⁵ In 1807 he married the daughter of one of the Hudson's Bay Company's prominent shareholders, Andrew Colville, and it seems likely that he received some encouragement from this quarter.

⁴James H. Marsh, The Fur Trade (Toronto: Collier McMillan Company, 1971), p. 21.

⁵Martin Kavanagh, op. cit., p. 36.

Douglas proceeded to buy shares in the company until he held sufficient to have a large number of votes on the board of directors. In 1811 he received the Selkirk Land Grant which covered an area of 116,000 square miles in an area surrounding the junction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. (See map fig. 4.)

By 1812 the first of the Selkirk Settlers numbering seventy arrived at Hudson Bay and proceeded to Assiniboia, the name given to the Selkirk Land Grant. The Metis who had developed into a sizeable group over the preceding generations had come to be settled in this area as well. They had in fact been living for a number of generations along the banks of the rivers. Their lifestyle had changed to a certain degree, but the mainstay of the economy was as always, the fur trade. The Metis who had settled the area had done so by the waterways which were still the main thoroughfares for the transporting of furs. (See map fig. 5.) The lifestyle was less transient than before as many families now had permanent homes and the men would go away in search of furs. These could be stockpiled at home and shipped later. Buffalo hunting during the summer months provided the necessary ingredients for making pemmican, the winter mainstay of those involved in the fur trade. Pemmican was non-perishable, and as trappers and traders went further and further from the trading posts in search of furs, it became a vital commodity. At the same time it became a trade item for the

Selkirk Land Grant

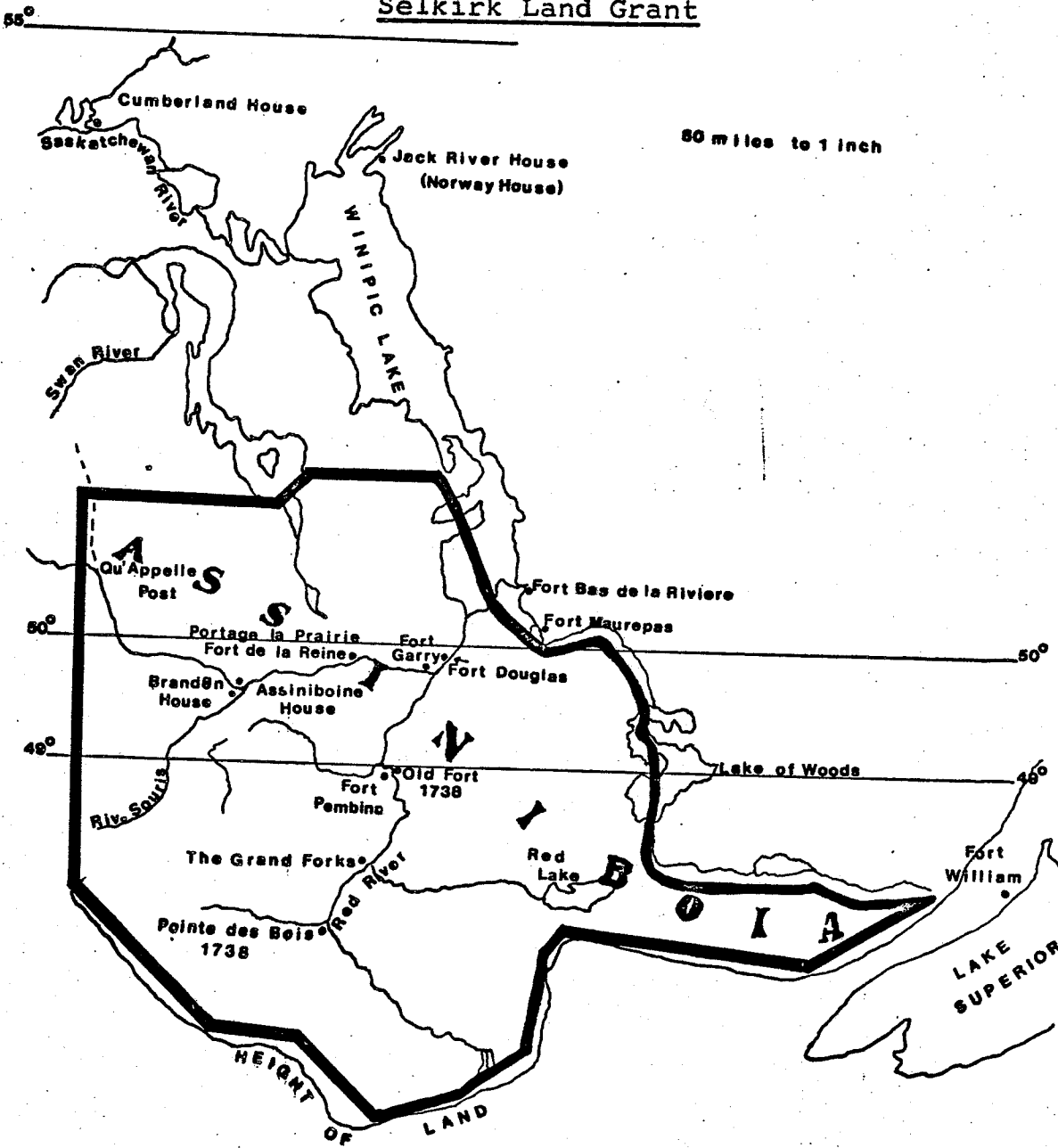
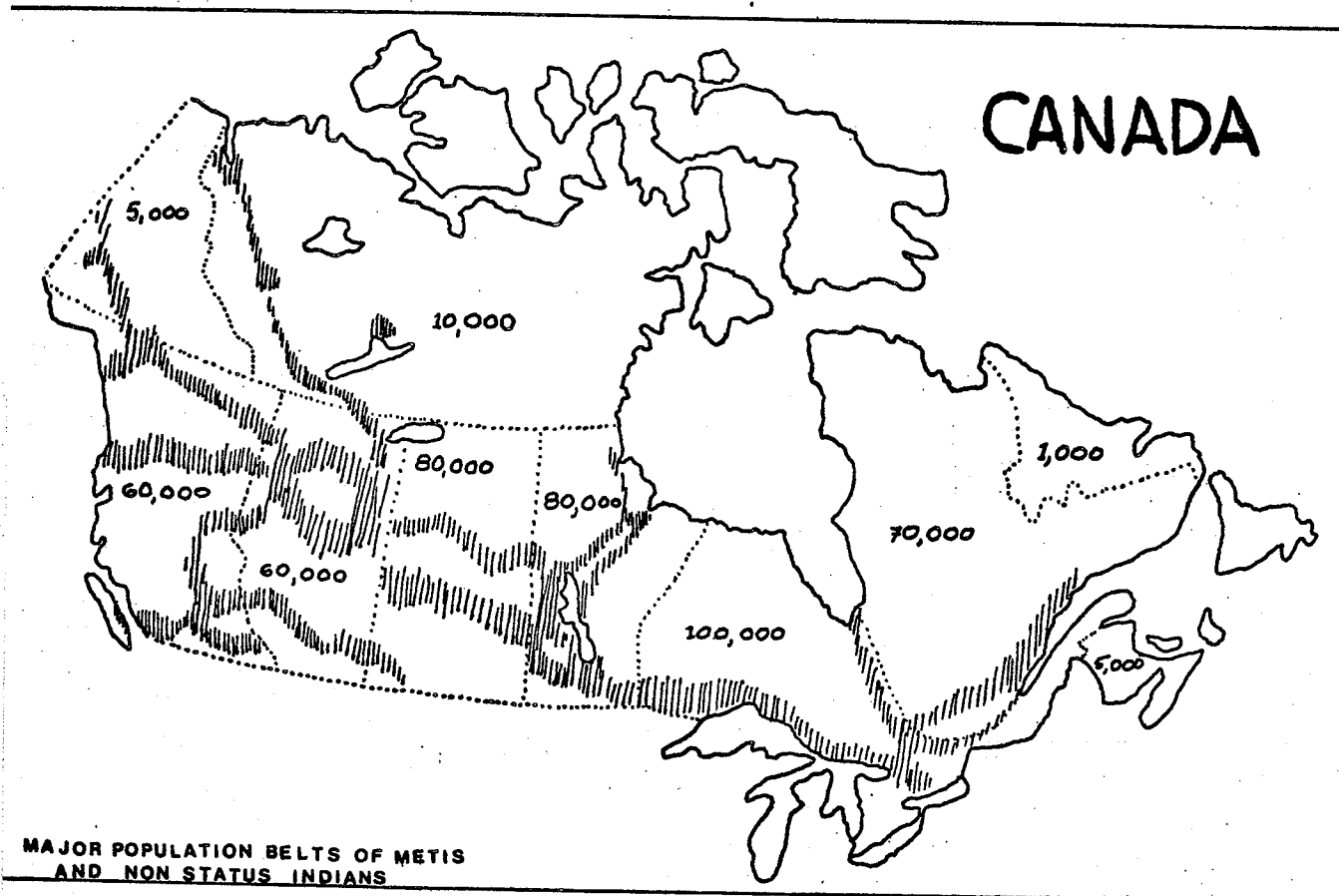


Fig. 4.

Copy taken from the original map of Assiniboia held by the Manitoba Archives.

Fig. 5.⁶

Metis with both the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company.

It was the tampering with this trade item that caused the Metis to band together and act as one people for probably the first time in their history. After two particularly harsh winters in 1812 and 1813, when the Selkirk Settlers had to winter in Pembina in order to procure enough food, Miles Macdonell the governor of Assiniboia issued a

⁶Map taken from p. 193 of The Metis Canada's Forgotten People, op. cit.

proclamation. The proclamation forbade the exporting of pemmican from Assiniboia without a license from the governor of Assiniboia. The implications were clear. All the pemmican was needed for the settlers of the Red River. If there were any excess, it would likely be exported to the Hudson's Bay Company rather than to the North West Company. Yet the North West Company had a great number of outlying posts very much dependent upon the pemmican supply, and the new settlement lay right in the middle of the line of forts extending to the Saskatchewan River. Those forts west of Assiniboia would be literally starved out.

These same forts employed a great number of Metis people. At the same time many Metis were involved in the exportation of pemmican. Those who depended on the supply for food resented the possibility of being starved out of work. Those involved in the trade of pemmican resented being told by newcomers and intruders with whom they could carry on trade. However, the Metis were not all of one mind, for while many worked for the North West Company and had their allegiance there, many also were loyal to the Hudson's Bay Company whose land they had settled on and for which company they had worked over succeeding generations.

In 1814, Macdonell issued another proclamation. This time "running the buffalo"⁷ was forbidden on the grounds

⁷D. Bruce Sealey and Antoine S. Lussier, op. cit., p. 37.

that it was driving the herds of buffalo out of Assiniboia. This edict united the Metis in their resentment of the Red River Settlers. It also increased the fear they had of the settlers who seemed to not recognize any of the rights the Metis felt were theirs by virtue of the length of time they had inhabited the area, and the contributions they had made to the economy of both the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company.

The harassment of the Red River Settlers by the Metis under the leadership of Cuthbert Grant illustrated the resentment felt. Buildings were burnt, settlers shot at, and generally life was made unpleasant. It was to the North West Company's advantage to have them united against the Red River Settlers. If the settlers were occupied with the Metis they would not have time to control the flow of pemmican to the forts of the North West Company. In order to insure this, the North West Company appointed Cuthbert Grant as the Captain of all the half-breeds in the district. Grant accepted this position and placed himself assiduously to the task of definitely establishing a Metis nation.

As the harassment of the Red River Settlers continued, the North West Company kept trying to keep the riverways open for the transportation of pemmican out of Assiniboia to their forts which had been cut off since the proclamation by Macdonell. Hoping to put an end to the trouble in Assiniboia, Macdonell surrendered himself to the