

## **The Métis: The Forgotten Years 1885-1960**

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Once relegated to a position of irrelevance in the Canadian mosaic, the Métis discovered that while they were denied full membership in the Canadian mainstream because of their 'rebel' background and Aboriginal status, they were also denied status as 'Indians' under the *Indian Act*. Literally caught between two worlds and not welcome in either, the Métis were forced further into the background economically and politically. They maintained their customs and social control mechanisms at the local and family level but the days of national activity were over. Politically powerless, denied education because they did not pay taxes on their 'road allowance' homes, and forcibly kept away from the reserves, the Métis became increasingly marginalized. They also discovered that outsiders were busily adding people to their communities without their knowledge.

As the Federal Government's Indian policy of forcible assimilation bore fruit, larger and larger numbers of Treaty and Registered Indians lost status and were forced off the reserves. Unable to find a welcome in an ethnocentric and often racist Canadian society, these people, who were no longer legally 'Indians', were now referred to as 'half-breeds' and, by default, 'Métis'. The result was that the Métis People now found themselves confronted by a confusing array of cultural experiences all subsumed under the heading of Métis.®

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Fred Shore, "The Emergence of the Métis Nation in Manitoba," in L.J. Barkwell, L. Dorion, and D.R. Préfontaine, Editors, *Métis Legacy: A Métis Historiographical and Annotated Bibliography*, Pemmican Publications, 2001.

The years after 1885 were literally the 'Forgotten Years' as the People disappeared into the backwaters of Western Canada. At the same time, they accepted their new members and the process of Métissage began anew but, this time, it included all the people who were then known as Métis. Although not all of the living members of the original Nation accepted this turn of events, the new form of the Métis Nation proceeded to evolve nonetheless. What they could use of their former laws and social control mechanisms they practiced, and what could not be practiced, they remembered. They soon discovered that laws regarding personal honour and honesty could be kept while laws regarding Métis governance could not. They also came to depend on their Elders, since the ethnocentric histories they were taught in the schools did not portray them in a very flattering manner. Eventually, the Métis also managed to organize themselves into small communities on the periphery of Canadian society or next to Reserves. In these small communities, they kept alive their culture, language and customs and waited for a better day.

### **Resurgence/Rebirth, 1960-1967**

The period after the Second World War was one of great change for all Aboriginal Peoples. The changing nature of Government and the appearance of independence movements throughout the Third and Fourth Worlds meant that First Nations, Inuit and Métis relationships with Canadian society could and would change. What began as an 'outside' movement to improve the lot of 'Indians' through the Federally-appointed 'Advisory Councils' in the 1960=s soon developed into a cultural rebirth movement with strong political overtones among the First Nations. In Métis communities the process was slower but just as dramatic.

Most Métis political and cultural re-awakening began as an offshoot to First

Nations= agitation for change. New interpretations of history and, more importantly, new research indicated that the Métis were something more than 'rebels' and that they had a just case against the Canadian government. Métis cultural awareness programs were implemented and the People slowly regained pride in themselves and reaffirmed who they were and where they had come from. Their biggest problem was in separating themselves from First Nations political objectives. Caught up in developing First Nations= cultural and political movements, the Métis eventually determined to break out on their own. Finally, after almost a hundred years, a Métis cultural and political voice found new expression with the founding of the Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF) in 1967.

### **National Reformulation, 1967- Present**

Since its founding, the MMF has had to struggle with low funding levels, the high expectations of the Métis People and the constantly fluctuating vicissitudes of federal and provincial politics. Additionally, there have been internal struggles; most notably the decision by the MMF to leave the Native Council of Canada to join with the Métis National Council. Mindful of their history, the Métis people have come to realize that an economic basis is an absolute must if self-government is to be at all possible. Given the past hundred years of economic and political marginalization, the Federation has had to put its hopes into the outcome of the research on the dispossession process of the 1870s. A positive settlement of the outstanding Métis land claim would go far towards re-establishing the Nation in its traditional homeland as an equal partner with Canada. At the same time, the slow relearning of traditional Métis customs and traditions is taking place in Métis communities across the prairies. This process bears a marked resemblance to the slow way in which the Nation first appeared. Small communities, gradually coalescing into a larger National format, loosely connected but unified when

threatened or attacked, is exactly the way the Metis first began their national progress. In the eighteenth century it was Amalgamation and the end of the Pemmican Wars which focused the Métis leadership in the area around The Forks. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, it will more than likely be the dramatic increase in Metis numbers in Winnipeg which will re-establish the centre of the Metis nation. In the meantime, the Elders are preparing the People for their renewed national role.

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