

## Pamphlet # 6

### The Métis: Early Origins

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Métis ethno genesis occurred somewhere within the geographical limits of the French fur trade and sometime after French fur traders extended their reach beyond the St. Lawrence River Valley. Prior to this, the proximity of French colonial institutions in the Quebec City, Montreal corridor precluded the development of any new peoples. The process by which the Métis came into existence had to wait until French *voyageurs* and *coureurs de bois* reached the area of the Great Lakes. Even here, the process was slow and limited to single locations, usually the fur trade depots. It took the great distances associated with the trade in Rupert's Land, the competition provided by the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), and the existence of the horse and buffalo in the region to contribute the necessary framework around which the process of Métissage could be developed. At first denied in the Quebec area and then barely begun in the Great Lakes region, the Nation was finally created by those Métis who eventually settled in the area west of the Red River. The exact date by which the Métis were recognized as such by others is unknown. What is known, is that by the mid-eighteenth century certain people around the Forks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers were referring to themselves as either 'Bois-Brûlés' or 'Métis.'

#### Western Origins, 1700-1750

The founders of the Métis Nation were mostly unaware that a nation-building process was taking place. There was, in effect, no

<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.

predetermined plan with firmly fixed dates for the completion of the different stages of national development that they could follow. Essentially, this meant that the Métis who were involved with the beginnings of their Nation did not realize that they were engaged in the process of nation-building until long after it was underway. Instead, fur trapping, fur trading and working for the fur trade companies occupied their time, as did the provisioning of the fur brigades with pemmican. In fact, the production and sale of pemmican was the primary occupation of most Métis. On the one hand, the long trade routes provided steady employment while, on the other hand, there was economic independence to be found in supplying pemmican for cash to both the HBC and the North-West Company (NWC). Since the First Nations were unwilling to supply food in large enough quantities and at convenient and dependable times to fuel the fur brigades, the Métis, with their horses and Red River carts, became the sole suppliers of pemmican. This activity eventually produced a stable economic climate in which Métissage could take place. Inevitably, however, the competition wars fought over furs and pemmican impacted forcibly on the development of Métis nationalism.

#### Pemmican Wars

The 'Pemmican Wars' which broke out in the last years of the eighteenth century and which continued until the amalgamation of the French and English fur trade systems in 1821 dramatically increased the rate of Métis national development. By 1810 the Métis were being referred to as the 'New Nation' and the Wars were a direct cause of a growing Métis realization that they were, in effect, a Nation. During these pivotal years, the need to wage war to defend their homes and to organize politically to protect their investment in the fur trade radically increased the rate of Métis nation-building.

When the Amalgamation of the HBC and the

NWC in 1821 caused a rash of Métis unemployment, the affected individuals moved to the area around The Forks. Prior to this, the Métis lived wherever they found work in the fur trade or wherever they wanted to live. What the move to Red River provided was the opportunity to create a physical center for a rapidly evolving Métis homeland. In the riverlot communities of St. Boniface, St. Vital and St. Norbert, the various classes of Métis congregated and prospered by farming, organizing buffalo hunts, and by commercial freighting. In these riverine communities, trade with St. Paul and pemmican sales to the HBC figured largely in Métis plans and with the resultant prosperity came increased social cohesion and expanding experience as an active nation.

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