

THE MÉTIS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Over two hundred years ago, the Métis first crossed west of the Continental Divide and descended the Rocky Mountains into the beautiful lands now known as British Columbia. Wearing their colorful sashes and singing rollicking songs, they were pathfinders, voyageurs, fur traders, guides, interpreters and builders.

The Métis were crew members for the North West Company's (NWC) great explorers Alexander Mackenzie, Simon Fraser and David Thompson all of whom have major rivers in Canada named in their honor. These explorations were intended to expand the fur trade west of the Rockies to meet the increasing demand for the valuable beaver, as well as other furs. Another goal of their expeditions was to search for an overland route to the Pacific Ocean and the potential for trade with the lucrative markets of the Orient.

As trailblazers and fur traders in the exploration and development of the West, the historical Métis of Canada have been called the "Children of the Fur Trade". The Métis were the descendants of the intermixture of two great cultures, First Nations and European. Their maternal ancestors were Aboriginal women; their paternal ancestors were mainly French or Scottish and, to a lesser extent, Irish and English.

However while these indigenous people inherited some cultural and other traits from their parental ancestors, the Métis developed their own unique identity, culture, customs, traditions, symbols and way of life. In time they coalesced into a "New Nation". The development of this distinctive peoples occurred post-European contact and pre-European control.

Their unique cultural evolution extended to their own flags, sashes, vehicles, language, food, clothing, folklore, folk heroes, poetry, songs, music and dance. The Métis shared a common ancestry and kinship, history, heritage, and way of life. These factors contributed to the development of a unique Aboriginal people that distinguished the Métis from their European and First Nations forebears and, for that matter, from all other peoples.

As the fur trade moved westward across the Rocky Mountains, it was the Métis who played a significant role in the exploration and development of what was to become the Province of British Columbia. They rowed the boats, they built the forts, they traded with the First Nations peoples, and they tilled the land.

In the 1790s the NWC inaugurated the first permanent fur trading establishments in what was to become British Columbia. Over the next number of years they opened a network of posts west of the Rocky Mountains. Prior to its 1821 merger with the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) in 1821, all of the forts in the New Caledonia and Columbia Districts were owned by the NWC. The pivotal center around which the fur trade operated was the fort, house, or post that the fur trading companies established for that area. Besides being used as trading houses and depots, the forts provided living quarters for the staff of the company and their families.

The working language of the forts west of the Rocky Mountains was French since this was the language of most of the Métis; however the bourgeois spoke mainly English. West of the Rocky Mountains Chinook Jargon was developed as the trade patois with the First Nations. Both Chinook Jargon and Michif had as one of their root languages French. Chinook Jargon combined the Native Chinook language with French and also added a few English words.

Together with their children, the country wives and the Métis who worked at the forts also brought with them their unique Métis culture and heritage that had been part of their lives east of the Rocky Mountains. This included their languages, sash, fiddling, jigging, moccasins, snowshoes, food, and festive celebrations.

Many of the forts and outposts which the Métis helped to build developed into cities towns and villages throughout British Columbia. Some examples are Fort Victoria, Fort Nanaimo, Fort Langley, Fort Kamloops, Fort George (now Prince George), Fort St. James, Fort Nelson, and Dease Lake Post.

Some of the employees brought with them their Métis country wives when they came to work in the fur trade west of the Rocky Mountains. Others intermarried with First Nations women in their new location. Many of their mixed-blood descendants played prominent roles in the history of British Columbia. Examples of these Métis are:

- Amelia Connolly Douglas was the Métis wife of Sir James Douglas, who was the first Governor of the Colony of British Columbia. As a young 16 year old bride, Amelia with the help of her Métis friend (Nancy McDougall Boucher) saved the life of James Douglas at the outset of his brilliant career.
- Joseph William McKay was the Métis founder of Nanaimo in 1853. His stellar contributions to the development of British Columbia included activities in the fields of exploration, fur-trading, mining, politics, civil service and business. In the 1880s, McKay personally vaccinated about 1,300 First Nations People in order to protect them against smallpox.
- Jean Baptiste Boucher (aka Waccan) was a multi-talented Métis pioneer and an interpreter and guide for Simon Fraser as well as an intermediary with the First Nations People. He spent most of his life at Fort St. James.
- Josette Legacé Work was a pioneer Métis matriarch and the grandmother of Simon Fraser Tolmie, who became the Premier of British Columbia in 1928. On Josette's death in 1896, the British Columbia Legislature passed a Resolution paying special tribute to her.

There are many modern day examples of prominent Métis who have made notable contributions to the Province of British Columbia. Examples of these outstanding Métis are Jack Poole (who spearheaded bringing the 2010 Winter Olympic Games to Vancouver); Senator Gerry St. Germain (who is currently Chairman of the Senate of Canada's Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples); Carol James (former leader of the British Columbia New Democratic Party); Dr. Howard Adams (educator, author and Métis activist); and Patti Mayo (Métis singer who has been inducted into the BC Country Music Hall of Fame).

On May 26, 1993, the British Columbia Government issued a Proclamation in recognition of the role the Métis people have played in the history of this Province. It read in part:
"..... the Métis culture ,,, is an integral part of British Columbia's multicultural character, and ... throughout history, Métis citizens have made significant contributions to the development and success of Our Province."

By: George and Terry Goulet