



Métis jig

HISTORIC MÉTIS CHRISTMAS SEASON

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The historical Western Métis people loved to party, feast and celebrate whenever an opportune occasion presented itself, and many did. Like the people themselves, these activities were an amalgam of French, Scottish, Irish and Indian (First Nations) roots. Festivities consisting of good food and drink, rousing music, energetic dancing, lively singing and jovial socializing would usually start in the early evening and continue until the early morning hours. During this merrymaking, and continuing to this day, the Red River Jig and the fiddle were at the core of Métis identity. The primary source of this music originated with the Scottish winterers of the North West Company.

In the 19th century the Christmas and New Year period was the main festive season in the Red River with activities extending over ten days to two weeks. Those away from Red River on the winter buffalo hunt didn't miss out on the celebrations. An example is given by Norbert Welsh in *The Last Buffalo Hunter*. In his narrative, Welsh said that at New Year's (1865) they had a good time:

“We would dance the old-time dances and the Red River Jig, reel of four, reel of eight, double jig, strip the willow, rabbit chase, Tucker circle, drops of brandy, and all the half-breed dances. There were always lots of fiddlers. Nearly every man could play the fiddle. Then we would go to another family. I tell you, we had a regular good time. We had lots to eat and drink.... This feasting lasted about ten days.”

The prominent Métis entrepreneur James McKay (who was born at Edmonton House in 1828 and died in 1879 at St. James, Manitoba) invariably gave a fun-filled New Year's Party at his home in the Red River Settlement. His home was called Deer Lodge and was a frequent gathering place for the Métis, Indians and other residents in the area. His New Year's Day festivities consisted of dancing, music, songs, eating and socializing, and began in the late afternoon. The young men were gussied up in their best homespun, while the young ladies wore their finest dresses with close-fitting bodices. All wore moccasins, making fast-foot shuffling easy while dancing.

In a 1953 article titled “Red River New Year”, historian Margaret A. MacLeod wrote that when the dance at McKay's home began “Four fiddlers played in relays of two to give the exhausted ones a chance to recover. Four sets for the square dance formed in that big room and to the music of ‘The Buffalo Girl’ or ‘Soldiers’ Joy’, they

were off at the dancing in earnest.” A late supper was served while the spirited dancing carried on long into the night.

Food served at McKay’s New Year’s party included such items as buffalo tongues and hump, smoked deer, beaver tail, roasted ducks and geese, hot joints of beef and pork, pemmican, bannock, and strong black tea.

There were other convivial happenings during the Christmas - New Year Holidays. Joseph James Hargrave wrote in his 1871 book *Red River*:

“Much driving about and visiting take place, and balls, family parties and celebrations of a kindred nature are set on foot.... One of the principal events in the holidays is the celebration of a midnight mass in the cathedral of St. Boniface, on Christmas eve.”

Weddings were very common at this time of year and lasted several days with much feasting, dancing and drinking. The son of Cuthbert Grant (the first dynamic Métis leader) was married to a Métis girl at St. François Xavier in 1843. As quoted in the Spring, 1961 issue of *Beaver Magazine*, Robert Clouston a guest at the wedding, wrote in an 1843 letter that:

“We reached Mr. Grant’s about 12 o’clock and found them all dancing; and Mr. G. himself, in that happy state, which is sometimes called glorious; we had something to eat, and then joined the dance We had dancing all day and till 4 o’clock next morning - and by 9 the following day left them - heartily tired of the scene, but thinking the bridegroom a very happy fellow.”

In the morning a breakfast was served. It was a custom that one had to sing a song to the bride in order to receive a piece of the wedding cake.

Another event held on New Year’s Day witnessed horse-racing on the Red River. Woolen-capped men in carriages galloped their ribbon-adorned steeds along the frozen river, with many spectators cheering on their favorite team.

In his book *Homeland to Hinterland*, Gerhard Ens gives a brief description of “The Social and Seasonal Round” of the Red River Métis. This account includes the winter festive season, a Christmas dinner, a dance, and New Year’s Day.

In his Memoirs titled *Vanishing Spaces*, the marvelous Métis raconteur Louis Goulet gave a verbal picture of a Métis feast in the 19th century. He stated that everyone tried to surpass all others in preparing the tastiest dinner. During the festivities, a singing competition was held. This was followed by exhilarated dancing to the music of fiddles, guitars, drums, mouth organs, and other rhythmic instruments at hand. Each dancer, each musician and each singer animatedly tried to outshine the others while the onlookers watched the joyous rivalry with enthusiasm. An event such as this carried on for many hours and the most energetic jiggers might find at the end of the festivities that the soles of their moccasins had seen their last days.

The Métis in other communities carried on the same festive tradition. Goulet mentioned a house dance in the Judith Basin. This was an enclave on the Missouri River in present day Montana where many Métis people reside today. He mentioned that men pounded on a drum “to the rhythm of the Red River JigThe dancers kept time by clapping and snapping their fingers over their heads.”

In his 19th century biography *Behind the Palisades*, HBC Chief Trader George Simpson McTavish (nephew of HBC Governor George Simpson) wrote about the annual Christmas celebrations at York Factory in Northeastern Manitoba, where many Métis lived and worked.

Christmas there was marked by hearty good cheer, jovial festivities and animated dancing. McTavish wrote: “Dancing! Why it was a whirlwind of vitality and speed! the pounding of feet brooked no delay.” He added that the dancers “have to give their best in Red River jigs, Scotch reels, the Rabbit, Duck dances, and old Dan Tucker.”

He wrote that the women (who at that time would be Métis, Indians and Inuit) stayed to the end; and “some of the belles displaying heroic continuity and fortitude in dancing with all comers.” The celebration went on all night and ended “only a couple of hours before breakfast an experience of unalloyed happiness no one could forget.”

Fort Langley, British Columbia was established in 1827 by the Hudson's Bay Company with the help of, among others, the Métis. Members of the Métis community participated in dances at this Fort. Although Christmas was a holiday there, the major festivities for this season of the year occurred on New Year's Day as was the custom in the Métis settlement of Red River.

In a letter written to Edward Ermatinger, Archy McDonald (the husband of Métis Matriarch Jane Klyne) referred to Frank (Edward's brother) staying with him and Jenny at Fort Colvile in December 1836. Before Christmas, Frank left the Fort, but at the Spokane Forks he became ice bound. He and his men returned to Fort Colvile. Obviously they arrived in time for Christmas dinner with the McDonald family since Archy stated in his letter that they came back again:

"... just in time for the Roast Beef & plum pudding.... After doing ourselves & about five & thirty men all the justice of good things at Colvile he & party again left...."

In a fascinating December 1962 article in *The Western Producer* newspaper, Métis Sarah Potter was interviewed and shared her 1880s memories of New Year festivities along the South Saskatchewan River when she was a small girl. Here are a few excerpts:

"Christmas was essentially a religious festival, observed with great solemnity Midnight mass from 12 to 2 a.m. on Christmas morning was attended by every member of the family The remainder of the Christmas observance was spent in quiet visiting."

"New Year's Day was the great fete day of the year in our settlement, and the celebrations lasted for the whole week. At the stroke of midnight on December 31, the cold crisp air would respond with rifle shots, pans banging, shouting voices that could be heard for miles. This ushered in the New Year with an explosion of noise."

"When every house in turn has been visited and each member of the family kissed and wished 'une bonne heureuse annee', every sleigh gathered at one large house for an evening of festivities."

"The main order of the evening was the dancing. – quadrillion, cotillion, squares, reel o'four, reel o'eight, Red River jig, drops o'brandy and the old fur traders rabbit dance. The dancing kept up full pace until dawn. Then all would partake of the bountiful feast spread before them. Before breaking up, each family made arrangements to meet at some other home the following evening to resume the dance."

Today the annual Christmas Party held by a number of Métis communities for children and families continues the tradition of historical Métis Christmas Season celebrations and festivities.

MERRY CHRISTMAS and HAPPY NEW YEAR.

LONG LIVE THE MÉTIS

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