

MÉTIS RISING

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Introduction

YVONNE BOYER and LARRY CHARTRAND

Canadian society has been struggling with the “Half-breed” problem for a long time. During the nineteenth century, a strong Métis identity and collective community presence (with the capacity and numbers to defeat British/Canadian colonizing objectives) challenged the very idea of colonial policies of assimilation and civilization. Our ethnogenesis as a people was not to be a fleeting moment in the history of North America, as was expected by British and Canadian authorities. Instead, we persevered, and an enduring presence continued despite the direct opposition by both First Nations and Euro-Canadian society to our right to even exist as distinct people(s). In the first half of the twentieth century, the violence against Métis, who were labelled as traitors and as dirty, lazy natives, had damaging and lasting impacts on our collective strength and identity, including forcing some, when possible, to disguise their Métis or Half-breed identities and heritage to escape stigma and racism. But as the stories in this book confirm, we were not about to sit idly by and let the consequences of colonization (poverty, marginalization, discrimination, lack of housing, and child welfare abuses) continue unabated. We galvanized in the name of helping our own people improve their living conditions and secure cultural respect from mainstream society. The politicization efforts that were generated as a result contributed to a collective consciousness that has in turn contributed greatly to the current state of affairs, where, as Métis, we are no

longer the forgotten people(s). And we no longer fall into a jurisdictional black hole, thanks to the *Daniels* case. Moreover, we are now engaged in nation-to-nation negotiations, though often at the expense of dedicated Métis individuals who are willing to sacrifice a great deal to obtain legal rights recognition. The constitutional rights fought so hard for by Harry Daniels during the constitutional patriation process, and by leading Métis lawyers like Jason Madden and Jean Teillet, demonstrate our innate tenacity in standing up to colonization and paternalism. Together, this history of defiance in social, political, and legal forums has contributed to present-day circumstances. It is now possible to see a bright Métis future where one did not exist before.

This book is the culmination of a vision that we, the editors, have had for quite some time. We wanted to highlight the views and perspectives of Métis today on our political and ancestral pasts; the ways in which we build relationships and relate to others, institutions, and federal and provincial/territorial governments; and how we wish to move forward in exercising our rights as a self-determining people or peoples. We are using both the singular and plural version of the word *people* because whether we are one distinct Métis people or more than one group of distinct Métis peoples remains a contested issue, and there are strong and divergent views on who is entitled to identify as Métis today.

Métis in Canada have come to be Métis in many and varied ways. Some may agree that a particular person's history demonstrates Métis identity, and others may disagree. We are here not to judge but to show readers that Métis are colourful, messy people(s) – brilliant, complex, and divinely incoherent. The authors in this book offer a rich array of perspectives, including a traditional historical approach, the Métis experience of the Prairies, Métis spirituality and cultural knowledge, how housing and educational issues contributed to Métis politicization in the twentieth century, and the role of media in advancing Métis interests. These are somewhat novel perspectives on Métis experiences, and they add a rich, and sometimes contradictory, appreciation of who we are as Métis.

This book provides a powerful account of the twentieth-century Métis experience, which can be seen as the collective consequences of a battered Métis population after the 1885 Batoche resistance. The marginalization of Métis along road allowances and on the fringes of small towns and reserve communities, the mobilization to urban centres to find employment, the prevailing poverty, the lack of affordable housing, and the policy of adopting

out Métis children to White families are all Métis experiences documented in this collection both as deeply personal narratives and as broader social phenomena. Moreover, a number of the authors reflect on personal family histories of trying to hide from being Métis to avoid racialization and discrimination, or trying to rebuild a Métis identity from the ashes of mainstream bigotry and paternalism.

Métis Rising: Living Our Present through the Power of the Past is a collection of scholarly and narrative perspectives from a diverse range of scholars in Métis studies and other disciplines (history, Aboriginal/Indigenous studies, education, fine arts, and law). It is unique in its attempt to provide multiple viewpoints from which to examine the Métis experience today and in the past. The various essays in the book succeed wonderfully in weaving an intricate picture of the Métis social and economic experience that is greater than the sum of its parts. We can see the Métis experience through myriad lenses, including schooling in the Prairies, farm experiment relocations, urban migration, poor housing, and child welfare issues, which together form a picture of the Métis experience that has rarely, if ever, been shown before. The collection as a whole demonstrates that Métis political capacity was generated not just from one social issue or concern but from several sources related to multiple issues, ranging from housing, child welfare, and schooling to media production. For example, concerns over the Sixties Scoop in Saskatchewan drove Métis to stand up, which in turn contributed to the development and sustainability of Métis leadership capacity in that province. Building on the existing Métis studies literature, particularly regarding Métis identity, many of the essays in this collection also include narrative accounts that provide deep insights into the colourful lived experiences of being Métis in Canada, and in doing so provide us with an understanding of our very nature as a people(s).

We have grouped the essays into three parts, each with its own introduction. The first, [Part 1: History, Identity, and Belonging](#), begins with Leah Dorion and Curtis Breaton's unique account of their Métis family histories, with early ties to the historical river system network of communities and reciprocal relationships across central and western Canada. The distinctly mobile nature of Métis society has been discussed by other scholars, such as Michel Hogue and Brenda Macdougall, but in this case mobility is seen through the eyes of the river and lake Métis, as opposed to the open plains or boreal forest Métis. The collection doesn't spend much time on the standard story of the Métis as understood in popular Canadian culture and

Canadian studies, which focuses on the men (to the virtual exclusion of women) who stood up to Canada in the nineteenth century, representing a new nation in the west. This story has been told many times by many authors, focusing almost exclusively on the Métis of the Prairies, and we are only just beginning to understand and appreciate Métis histories from other regions of the country, some of which are generously shared in this book.¹ However, esteemed historian Catherine Littlejohn provides an introductory overall history of the nineteenth-century Métis experience, including some of the well-known moments in time for context – as both a refresher for informed readers of Métis history and a basic introduction for uninitiated readers to this dynamic nation-building history of the prairie Métis. Educational historian and teacher educator Jonathan Anuik explores Métis self-identification, and by extension contemporary Métis identity issues, through a unique educational lens. Métis cultural values are also addressed by Yvonne Vizina, who masterfully shows readers the importance of Métis traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) in addressing some of society's greatest challenges, such as climate change.

Part 2: Leadership and Relationship Building begins with Laura-Lee Bellehumeur-Kearns leading us through the very personal narratives of four Métis women and how they came to be leaders within the Métis Nation of Ontario. Tricia Logan's examination of the series of "solutions" presented to the Métis and the continued dismissal of Métis autonomy hones in on Métis identity and governance, which remain at the crux of the difficult situation that Métis face still today. Nathalie Kermoal describes how the marginalization that Métis experienced through decrepit housing helped to mobilize Métis political action across Canada. From the 1950s through the 1970s, Métis were often labelled as "natives" – a term commonly applied to all Indigenous Peoples – by government and Canadians. As we see in Allyson Stevenson's powerful commentary on Saskatchewan child welfare policy, Métis community members often took the lead in advocating for change.

In **Part 3: Exercising Our Rights and Self-Determination**, Paul Chartrand leads off with an account of his life. Although he tells the story in a matter-of-fact style, without fanfare, this important Métis lawyer and leader's impact on Métis constitutional, legal and political issues will continue to advance Métis rights for generations to come. Margaret Kress explores and honours the lifeworks of two Métis women, Elder Rose Richardson and knowledge keeper Yvonne Vizina, as *wiichihiwayshinawn* (exceptional helpers) who have helped her learn about her own place as a Métis woman. Yvonne Poitras Pratt reveals the entanglement and connectivity

of digital storytelling that makes it an effective tool for decolonizing action, creating an “ethical space” in which Métis voices and stories can be heard. And finally, Judith G. Bartlett tells the powerful story of her personal journey as a Métis and her work in developing the Holistic Life Promotion Framework.

One thing *Métis Rising* shows, perhaps more than anything else, is that the general narrative of Métis history and nationalist sentiment has been sparked not by a single idea or solution, such as a focus on Métis rights recognition, but by a number of Métis social, economic, and political concerns through the course of contemporary history, often motivated by a sincere desire to make things better for themselves as a people (better housing, culturally relevant child welfare, land and governance rights). We also recognize the interconnectedness of the authors’ insights. For instance, water kinship connections, as discussed by Dorion and Breaton, along with Littlejohn’s historical accounts of Métis dispersions with the post-1885 land relocations and scrip debacle, also discussed by Logan, and the rural histories discussed by Anuik with regard to Métis children’s schooling, help explain why, as noted by Kermoal with regard to urban housing, there was a disproportionately higher migration to the cities during the 1950s to 1970s among Métis than among First Nations people.

We believe readers, especially Métis readers, will see themselves in the book’s interwoven narratives. We can all relate in some way to the experiences and stories discussed by the authors. Métis-specific voices are often lost or ignored in the Indigenous studies literature, which frequently lumps the Métis experience in with the overall pan-Indigenous experience, or ignores the Métis and focuses only on First Nations or Inuit. One of the reasons for the creation of this book was to help address this gap through a recounting of distinctly Métis narratives, philosophies, and ways of life. Importantly, this book explores the Métis-Canadian encounter in ways that generalized Indigenous history and studies texts simply fail to do.

What is clear is that Métis are seen by Métis people(s) themselves as a people equal to all other peoples of the world. We have experienced war, dislocation, cultural assault, poverty, racism, and discrimination by governments and by Canadians. We have survived, and we are no longer invisible or irrelevant to Canada’s future. Our ancestors, who in many cases died in battle for our rights, would be proud of us today. We will reconcile with Canadians, but we will do it on our own terms, whether we live in the cities, boreal forests, or open plains, or along our rivers and lakes.

We are Métis Rising!

NOTE

- 1 Among our favourite books covering this period are Nobert Welsh and Mary Weeks, *The Last Buffalo Hunter* (New York: T. Nelson and Sons, 1939); George Woodcock, *Gabriel Dumont* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1975); Don Purich, *The Métis* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1988); and A.H. de Tremaudan, *Hold High Your Heads: History of the Métis Nation in Western Canada* (Winnipeg: Pemmican, 1982).

PART 1

HISTORY, IDENTITY, AND BELONGING

Compared with the history of the western Métis as a bison-hunting prairie people, the Métis as a people born among the rivers and lakes of the Canadian landscape are not well understood. In “River Water Flows through Our Veins,” Leah Dorion and Curtis Breaton address this gap in Métis history by describing their own family histories, helping us appreciate the fundamental importance of water to the birth of the Métis and its contribution to the creation of culturally widespread kinship and clan networks and communities. Their unique account of the distinctly mobile nature of Métis society shows how the Métis presence literally flowed from the rivers and lakes, transitioning and adapting over time to the prairie and plains. The authors’ families started from the eastern river systems and slowly made their way to western Canada. Dorion and Breaton see the river networks not only as being at the core of their families’ Métis identity and societal presence, but also as central to the development of Métis life across wide geographies, and not just the Red River. Indeed, the authors’ unique perspective on Métis identity and history shows how the rivers and lakes of Canada bound our communities in deep kinship ways that continue to be felt strongly today. They also note the spiritual dimension of Métis ways, which may be as eclectic as the rich and varied Métis communities themselves.

Dorion and Breaton write passionately about the marginalization of Métis from their inherent rights to the waterway systems of Canada, asking that we focus our legal and social attention on rebuilding these vital connections to Métis Indigenous waterway rights. Pointing to the intimate connection that Métis had with water in the past, and the fact that many Métis continue to maintain this connection, they ask important questions of policy makers and Métis leadership about their commitment to protecting water, which to us is more than just a resource – it is literally the source of our birth, our history, and our identity.

In “What’s a Métis, Anyway?” Catherine Littlejohn takes us from our water roots to the open prairie on a historical journey that deliberately tackles neither the already well-publicized events of the 1870 Métis conflict with Canada nor the Métis-Canada war of 1885. Instead, she focuses on the Métis people of the Prairies as a whole, looking at the everyday Métis folks of the times rather than on any one historical figure, often quoting directly from statements made by Métis hunters, freighters, guides, and soldiers. In addition to snappy historical accounts of major events and issues, she offers us little-known gems, like the fact that it was the Métis who helped the North West Mounted Police (today’s RCMP) establish itself in the west;

without that help it would not have been able to fulfill its mandate of addressing the atrocities of the American wolf hunters, for example. (But, of course, the Métis and the NWMP would soon be at war with each other.) Littlejohn also recounts the aftermath of the war on Métis communities and the extensive prejudice and discrimination that followed their being labelled “traitors” and “dirty Métis squatters,” among other racist characterizations. It is this historical experience, and knowing that our ancestors and relatives stood up, against all odds, in the final battle of 1885 and stood tall on the guillotines of Regina, that strengthens Métis identity today and gives us a unique and powerful sense of pride.

Littlejohn explores this history through the lens of Métis identity. Woven throughout the chapter is a discussion on the development, supports, and networks that make the Métis a unique society in western Canada and not just a hybrid culture. For example, she reports on archeological research on *hivernant* (wintering communities) that led researchers to rethink existing theories suggesting Métis was a “hybrid” culture. Littlejohn reflects on societal confusion about exactly “who is Métis,” noting Father Lavallée’s description of Métis as an interwoven “sash” reflecting complexity and intricacy in Métis identity. She also provides a refreshing look at critical roles and functions of day-to-day governance and voice, ranging from how the leaders of the bison hunt were selected to the peacekeeping roles of Métis citizens that were essential to maintaining law and order in a vast land using Métis-specific governance values and institutions.

“The Right to Self-Identify as Métis at School,” by Johnathan Anuik, picks up on the aftermath of the Canadian-Métis conflicts of the nineteenth-century communities in the west, but through the lens of twentieth-century prairie education. Anuik demonstrates the effectiveness of subsequent colonization policy in achieving its goal of assimilation of Métis into mainstream society. But he also provides evidence of Métis steadfastly resisting entrenched social views of Métis as no longer relevant in formal systems of interaction with the state, like the educational system, in which Métis were forced to be something else (most likely either French or Cree or some generic understanding of an Indigenous person). As Anuik notes, despite being labelled as either French or Indian in formal educational records, Métis saw their names and identities as Métis and as evidencing a Métis-specific history in the prairie communities in which they found themselves.

Anuik focuses on an initiative undertaken by Métis in collaboration with school boards to “develop terms for self-identification that convey accurate

and nuanced interpretations of Métis history and society in the twenty-first century,” revealing the importance of historical experiences that may colour and become integrated with that identity. He reports on a study of an Ontario school board’s mandate for developing procedures for voluntary self-identification by First Nations, Métis, and Inuit learners in schools: fact sheets that accompanied registration forms for self-identification purposes “resulted in emotional experiences for Métis,” based on whether the family felt that the school “really wanted to learn about Métis or not.” Anuik’s own study, in which he looked for stories of being Métis in Saskatchewan, had results that seemed surprising at first, but a deeper look showed a coherent history, time, and location-based understanding of Métis identity.

Yvonne Vizina, in “Ancestral Knowledge in a Contemporary World,” shows the important potential of Métis traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) in addressing some of society’s greatest challenges, including climate change. Respecting nature and the interconnectivity of life, and sharing what you have with the less fortunate, Métis values identified by Vizina as inherent ancestral knowledge, are also essential to the revitalization of Métis identity. Vizina, who also appears as a knowledge keeper and one of two *wiichihwayshinawn* (exceptional helpers) in a later chapter in the book, tells us that the traditional knowledge systems upheld by many Métis and imparted by their Indigenous ancestors, include the concept of “maintaining balance with respect to mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional elements of life.” She notes that while educators are encouraged to build lessons around the cognitive (mental), affective (emotional), and psychomotor (physical) domains of knowledge, in secular school systems the spiritual domain of knowledge is largely excluded, “making it difficult to integrate the spiritual foundation of Indigenous knowledges.”

Vizina believes Métis should be seen as a resource in managing the environment and achieving a more sustainable way of living, and that science education could include “helping learners think about why we do not have sustainable lifestyles, what might be learned from traditional Métis philosophies and processes to overcome this loss of foresight, and what actions we need to take.”

1

River Water Flows through Our Veins

LEAH DORION and CURTIS BREATON

Greetings from the North Saskatchewan River, near Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. My name is Leah Marie Dorion, and I am a descendant of over thirteen generations of river Métis, who developed their distinct identity in connection with rivers and water systems. In addition, my son, R. Louis Lafferty, is a direct descendant of the well-established Lafferty Métis fur-trade family, which worked the entire Mackenzie River system in the Northwest Territories. When I introduce myself I often say, “River water runs through my veins,” as an expression of the deep mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical connection my family and people have to the river. For a “new people” birthed around water, this river water metaphor is appropriate; our first Métis families emerged near the waterways, the river forks, where First Nations traditionally gathered, and where Europeans situated themselves for trade and relationship building. From these lakes, rivers, and streams the Métis moved inland and learned to establish themselves in plains and prairie environments. As Métis people, we have a long-standing custom of mobility and have developed interconnected chains of kinship networks that are as vast and flowing as the rivers. Our mobility is both our strength and, unfortunately, often our point of vulnerability as a people because of the imposition of the Canadian legal system, which defines community in Eurocentric and limited ways. In addition, the formation of the Canadian state and the creation of provincial governing systems imposed

many limitations on our people's inherent rights, especially in relation to mobility, water, and rivers.

This chapter is mostly a narrative-style conversation with R. Curtis Breaton, who is a seventh-generation descendant of the Métis Labadie trading family from the Great Lakes trade system. We share the story of three river Métis clans – the Dorion, Labadie, and Lafferty fur trade families – in order to create discussion and inquiry as we contemplate the roots of contemporary Métis identity and society.

Leah: Métis River-Based Kinship Systems

My late father, Louis Dorion, was a man who treasured the river way of living and taught me that our Métis/Indigenous inherited rights are attached to our person and flow within our being, travelling with us. These inherent rights are rooted in important responsibilities based on reciprocity. Dad grew up in the small northern Cree-Métis community of Cumberland House, Saskatchewan, which is situated on an island. Living in the midst of the great Saskatchewan River delta system, his Métis identity was formed in connection with the presence of water. Dad often paddled with relatives to The Pas, Manitoba, travelling with his grandpa John Gregory Dorion up the Grassberry River system to traditional medicine harvesting sites at Suggi Lake and Windy Lake. I heard many stories about our vast kinship system all along the river ways, and how Métis and Cree families had bush camps located up to two hundred kilometres away from Cumberland House, accessible only by river travel. My father had a genuine respect for all life and understood the power of water to sustain all life. During our many visits to the North Saskatchewan River, he passed river-based values and beliefs on to me through his stories about our kin. As I started my oral and academic training to become a keeper of the Dorion Clan family kinship system, I was instructed on how the family had enormous mobility and river kinship connections flowing through thirteen generations. Through our intergenerational history we formed a magnificent river kinship network that flows strong as a river.

The Dorion Clan is not unique in its participation in a strategic and vast mobile Métis and river kinship system. Viewed from a narrow, Western perspective, these Métis river families and river communities could be considered independent of each other – until kinship systems are truly and completely examined, revealing their intergenerational “relatedness.” Today, more Métis people are obtaining academic credentials and contributing important scholarship based on our principles of kinship, or, as my

family calls it, *Wahkotowin*. I use a river metaphor, but I also appreciate the “strawberry plant runner” metaphor used by Métis scholar Brenda Macdougall, who studied the Métis kinship network of Ile a la Crosse, Saskatchewan, in her seminal work, *One of the Family: Métis Culture in Nineteenth-Century Northwestern Saskatchewan*. She writes, “As the Métis emerged and took root on the shores of Sakitawak, and as the demands of the economy were exerted, these families began to radiate outward from the lake, establishing themselves throughout the region in new communities, including outposts, fishing stations, and wintering camps, near Cree and Dene bands and key transportation routes.”¹ I appreciate Macdougall’s groundbreaking study, which acknowledges that the Ile a la Crosse Métis kinship network extends well beyond the extent of her study and into many provinces and American states.

Today’s emerging scholarship examines the larger story of mobility and kinship between First Nations and the Métis community and shares a Métis point of view, involves Métis writers, and is based on Métis family- and community-based knowledge. In the past, much Métis-themed scholarship was based on outsider concepts of Métis identity and community development. But anthologies such as *The Long Journey of a Forgotten People: Métis Identities and Family Histories*, edited by Ute Lischke and David T. McNab, and *Contours of a People: Métis Family, Mobility, and History*, edited by Nicole St-Onge, Caroline Podruchny, and Brenda Macdougall, serve to explore Métis identity and land use from a Métis perspective. Curtis and I are proud to contribute to this scholarship about Métis identity, world view, and water relationship. We also want to encourage conscious conversations about diverse Métis social customs, cultural protocols, and values that Métis use to relate to each other, the land, and others. I remember my father teaching me various protocols to use when entering other peoples’ communities and territories in order to create a climate of respectful diplomatic relations based on the Métis way of relating. To this day, we still give food and gifts in order to form bonds, and whenever I put a canoe in the water I say a prayer for safe and peaceful travel.

While exploring the Dorion family history, specifically the Bottineau branch of the family tree, which connected us to the Great Lakes and the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers, I discovered the book by scholar Michel Hogue, *Métis and the Medicine Line: Creating a Border and Dividing a People*, which also acknowledges the importance of following Métis kinship relationships to understand the emergence of Métis identity and group belonging. Hogue acknowledges the benefits of mobility patterns practised

by plains Métis families, stating, “For mobile peoples, the connections to individuals living in other parts of the Plains allowed them to access different territories and to benefit from the knowledge that their family members had of different surroundings or environments.”² The establishment of a connected kinship chain of Métis communities created safety and security and is a central feature in our development as a distinct group of people.

Likewise, my uncle Armand Dorion told me about the river kinship network used by the Cumberland House people, in which connected river communities and family out-camps served as important places for visiting, trading, and resting en route to traplines, hunting grounds, and medicine-picking spots. In his youth, Uncle Armand was shown important sacred sites by his mother, Cecilia, as she wanted him to know about the spiritual customs and traditions along our river highway. Uncle Armand emphasized that river kinship created belonging, a sense of security, and a social safety net. His teachings echo the spider-web metaphor used by Nicole St-Onge and Carolyn Podruchny to explain Métis mobility, kinship, and ethnogenesis: “Our metaphor for conceptualizing Métis ethnogenesis is a spider web, with finely spun connections of family, kin, and friendship obligations. Like spider webs, these connections were woven in surprising and complex patterns and multiple dimensions, could be hard to see, could be easily broken and re-spun, and yet were strong and durable.”³

Since Métis people historically had a high degree of mobility through river highways and later overland routes, the colonial sedentary system has imposed serious restrictions on the original relationship forged by Métis with water, and their spiritual relationship with water, disconnecting many contemporary Métis people who, in their not-so-distant history, shared common kinship connections. With modernization and new patterns of land use, perhaps it is time for modern Métis families to reconnect and reconsider how our ancestors originally related to each other and to the waterways and rivers of this nation. Are we in good relationship with each other and are we in good relationship with our sources of water? Is it time for Métis people, families, and leaders to speak up about water matters? These were questions I pondered in the summer of 2016, when the North Saskatchewan River was contaminated by a pipeline leak near Maidstone, Saskatchewan. For many months, the water in Prince Albert was undrinkable, and a temporary pipeline pumped uncontaminated water from other surrounding water systems. Is there a role that we Métis could play in monitoring water quality and helping clean up the river? Why were our local Métis leaders not brought to the table to be informed about the impacts of

the contamination? As Métis people enter the new era of “reconciliation,” will our relationship with water become a significant discussion item?

When I lived in the Northwest Territories, I discovered the wonderful story of river Métis identity in the far north. My son, Louis, is a direct descent of the Lafferty family, a river Métis family with roots in that strong and beautiful northland. The Fort Providence Métis Council states that “during the 1800s and early 1900s, much of the Métis way of life was shaped by the river.”⁴ In the Northwest Territories I observed many similarities between the cultural beliefs, identity, and chain of river kinship system patterns of northern Métis families and many other river Métis families in Canada. The Fort Providence Métis Council continues:

Métis guides and paddlers were often hired to take explorers and traders on long journeys throughout the Mackenzie Valley, and around both Great Slave Lake and Great Bear Lake. Later, Métis gained respect as deckhands and river pilots of steamboats for both the trading companies, and the Christian missionaries. All along the river homesteads and settlements bear the names of Métis families: Hardy, Lafferty, Hardisty, Lemouel, Sanderson, Mercredit, Gaudet, Bouvier, and other.⁵

Métis families have adapted over time and worked diligently to continue to make a living from the lakes and rivers and to assert their inherent rights through the Indigenous kinship system. Métis Elders Ruth and Richard Lafferty, originally from Fort Providence and now living in Hay River, Northwest Territories, shared with me how important the Mackenzie River system is for the expression of Métis community identity and spirituality. Elder Ruth Lafferty emphasizes how important it is to stay emotionally and spiritually connected to our lands and our river systems. She points out that spring fish camp was a place where Métis people expressed a sense of family, spiritual awakening, freedom, and belonging. I had the honour of visiting the Lafferty family bush cabin and personally experienced northern Métis hospitality through the sharing of food, family, and sense of place.

With the establishment of modern politics, Métis like the Lafferty family are members of the Deh Cho First Nation through their Métis Locals (which are independent but affiliated community-based political authorities). The Northwest Territories Métis have established a strong political and kinship network with the Deh Cho people and highly value membership in this alliance. At one time the Métis Nation of the Northwest Territories had membership in the Métis National Council. Perhaps with the *Daniels* decision, in

which it was ruled that Métis and non-status Indians are “Indians” for the purpose of section 91(24) of the *Constitution Act, 1867*, Métis leaders from all geographic regions can use this new federal legal recognition to create a revived level of connection between all Métis people, bringing us together rather than dividing us, and we can once again make political alliances and connections with First Nations.⁶ As the federal government works with the Métis people themselves to establish a Métis enumeration system under federal jurisdiction, maybe more interprovincial and territorial communication and wisdom will transfer among Métis now situated throughout the provinces and territories, much like the way our rivers flow across their borders.

Curtis: The Great Lakes Métis Trading Network

My name is R. Curtis Breaton and, like my co-author, I am a descendant of Métis families who worked the Great Lakes system and along the chain of rivers branching from this magnificent water source. We are truly river Métis descendants. My grandmother Loretta Labadie was a strong Métis woman and our intergenerational connection with the Labadie trading family linked to Paincourt, Windsor, and the Detroit River system. Originally, our family had a large kinship network that stretched throughout the Great Lakes system during the fur trade. But as the fur trade economy declined, my branch of the family made our living in a new society that did not value our Métis culture or society. Therefore, many of us Labadie Métis who stayed on the Canadian side of the Detroit River were forced into a secretive relationship with the river when using our roll nets for fishing or when hunting muskrats to survive. Likewise, we were identified as French by outsiders, instead of by our historic Métis roots, which we can outwardly express today because of more tolerance in society.

As colonialism progressed, it was safer for family members to emphasize the “French heritage” label in order to prevent negative consequences stemming from our Indigenous ancestry. Overwhelming resettlement of the region, extensive urban development, and industrialism all around our homeland caused us to be largely a “forgotten people.” As we Métis in the east bring our identities and family histories into the light, our story will contribute greatly to the climate of reconciliation in this nation. In their compilation *The Long Journey of a Forgotten People: Métis Identities and Family Histories*, editors Ute Lischke and David T. McNab write, “It is clear from these family histories that, although these long Métis family journeys are far from over, the Métis are no longer Canada’s forgotten peoples.”⁷ We

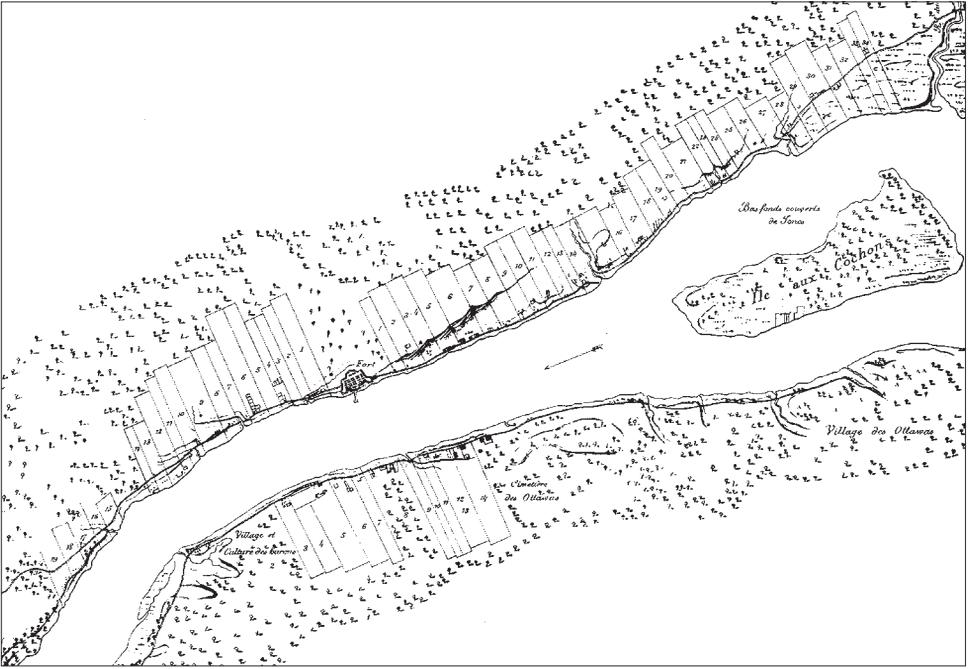


Figure 1.1 Detroit River Lot Survey Map, 1796

refuse to be forgotten. Our connection to the land and to water resources has been subjugated; nevertheless, we have persisted, and our regional identity as the Muskrat Métis, also once known as the Muskrat French, is something I am proud of, since we are survivors and as determined as the little creature who fed our Métis families when other resources failed or we were denied an equal place in Canadian society. I want to acknowledge my uncle Harold Labadie for being an inspiring family leader, encouraging all of us in the Breaton family to honour our grandmother and register with our contemporary Métis political organization so our collective identity and our Métis story will be passed forward to the next generation.

The Labadie family forged strong kinship ties to our Ojibway-Ottawa allies. My great-grandfather Antoine Louis Descompt dit Labadie married the daughter of Chief Pontiac, to whom the Catholic Church had given the French name Marie. Antoine and Marie had eight children together and many of the sons and daughters married into existing French Métis families. The Detroit River Labadies shared the values and beliefs epitomized by Chief Pontiac in relation to kinship, independence, entrepreneurship, and freedom of cultural expression. Chief Pontiac granted river lot #5 to my

great-grandfather Labadie, which at the time of survey in 1796 was situated right within the Ottawa “Indian” Village lands along the Detroit River, directly across from Fort Detroit.

The Labadie family adopted the French river lot land-use system and were highly adaptable trader-farmers, according to historian Wallace Genser: “Detroit’s Métis *habitants* were predominantly farmers, which made them unusual among Great Lakes Métis.”⁸

The Labadie family was one of the groups of voyageur families that supported the British side of colonial North America because they believed they would form a better social, political, and economic relationship with the British than with the Americans, who exhibited great prejudice toward Métis families. Nevertheless, Métis families left the Detroit River region over time and, as Genser claims, “many left Michigan and contributed to the construction of a Métis community at the Red River settlement (later Winnipeg) in Canada.”⁹ However, the British Métis allies, along with many First Nations allies, were vital in keeping American interests out of what is now Canada during the War of 1812. Louis George Labadie (Labatte) was one of our people who served as a soldier in the British Army and participated in the capture of Mackinaw in 1812.¹⁰ Researcher Lawrence Barkwell gives long overdue credit to the role of Great Lakes Métis voyageurs in 1812, pointing out that “this success influenced many more First Nations groups who had previously been neutral or undecided to rally to the British cause, contributing to several more British victories over the next year.”¹¹ The Great Lakes Métis had to grapple with deciding whether to become “American” or “Canadian,” and we were forced to make many choices in order to survive, but what remained important was our land, water, and kinship connection. The contributions of Métis peoples from the Great Lakes to Canadian history are finally being recognized and documented by Canadian society. Our story is important to tell, and our participation is important as we enter into the modern reconciliation process.

Curtis: Equal and Fair Access to the River

Providing equal and fair access to the water highway and river resources was a significant cultural practice for Métis families in North America. River lots were designed to give families both water access and wood lots, which were a source of food and provided back pasture for livestock and grazing of horses. Métis people’s desire to integrate changing economies and adapt to new realities is evident in the acceptance of the river lot land-use system.

River lots allowed Métis families to have group connection and accommodated some level of independent family space. The healthy tension between Métis individual and collective rights has always been a difficult concept for academics and outsiders to understand; Métis river lot land-use patterns reflect this balancing act. The Métis people who were transitioning from fur trade economic systems to agricultural economies used the French river lot land-use system because of its fairness and equality. Fur trade scholar Jacqueline Peterson explains what these lots looked like: “Detroit at large was laid out along the water line. Each man staked out his plot based on the available river shoreline, his cabin hugging the bank and his picketed garden trailing like a streamer into the timber behind.”¹² This strategy was replicated many times over by Métis people from Upper Canada, the Midwestern United States, and throughout the interior of Canada, who established themselves along major river systems, such as that of the North and South Saskatchewan Rivers. River lots predated many large urban centres in the northern United States and Canada, and they were not always occupied year-round by the Métis until the economy shifted to agriculture, or other resource developments threatened to dispossess Métis from their river lot claims. Métis have struggled to keep our river lot way of living and fought hard at Red River in 1869–70 and at Batoche in 1885 to keep the river lots from being replaced, or dismantled by the township grid system, because this type of land and water relationship had a significant influence on our identity and our way of being, and greatly promoted kinship relations.

Even though there were buildings and out-structures on the river lots, Métis habitation was not recognized or honoured by the newly imposed federal government grid system, which was an issue during the 1869–70 resistance at Red River and at Batoche in 1885. Canadian land occupation laws also worked against many semi-sedentary Métis, who were still connected with the transport and trade industry in the west. Many Métis people were illegally and strategically dispossessed from their river lots through the failure of the “Half-breed scrip” system, which was administered by the federal government to deal with Métis land claims originally under the *Manitoba Act, 1870* and later under the *Dominion Lands Act of 1872*. Scrip land was easily purchased and sold and did not have the same legal protections as Indian reserve lands, and there was a long delay in surveying Métis river lots. According to our oral history, numerous Métis were forced to sell their scrip to purchase grain, cattle, livestock, or other essential goods, since the fur trade was no longer viable. Our relative Lawrence Garneau, originally

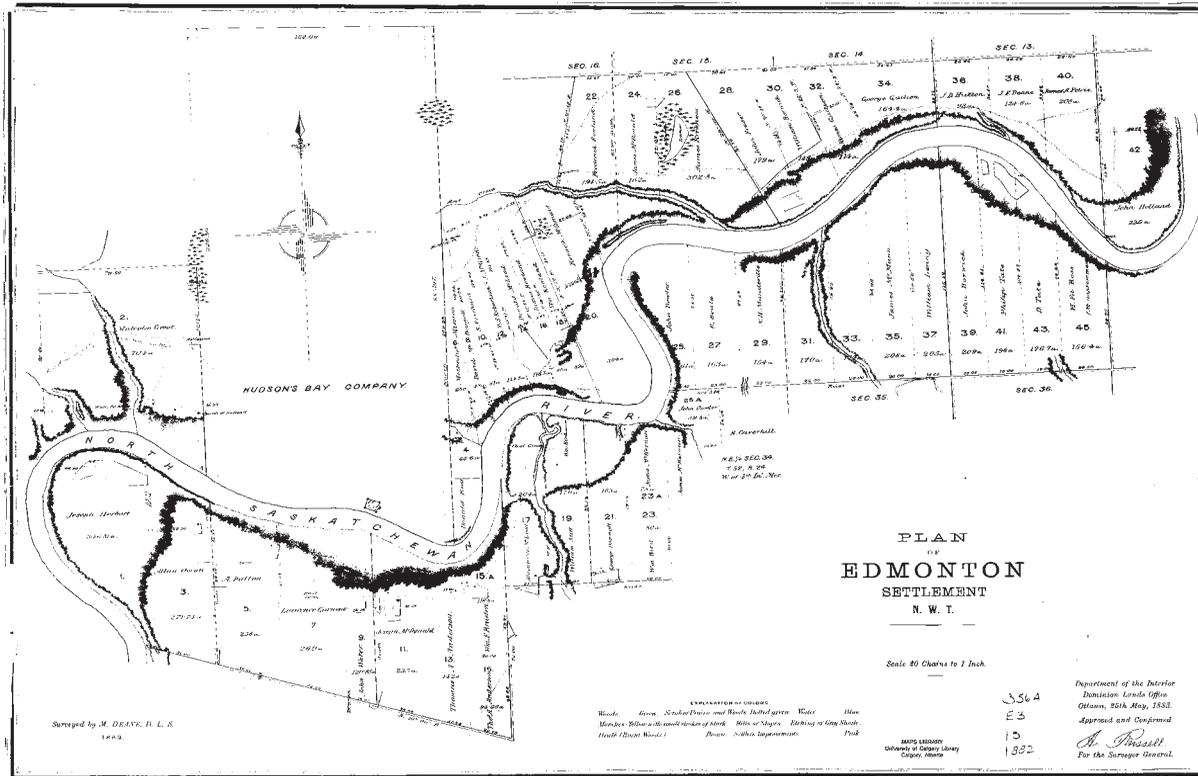


Figure 1.2 Fort Edmonton River Lot Survey Map, 1882

from the Great Lakes, and later Red River, eventually set up a river lot at Fort Edmonton in 1874 with his mixed operation of horses and cattle. Judy Larmour notes that Lawrence Garneau's river lot #7 was surveyed on 27 July 1882, with 269 acres located near the current site of the University of Alberta.¹³ Larmour's study of Alberta surveys acknowledges that Métis people had river lots in Alberta in places like St. Albert, Lac La Biche, and Lac Ste. Anne, to name a few.

There are currently very few Métis families in Canada who acquired their original river lots through the Half-breed scrip system. Scrip failed to provide a permanently protected land base, and this has been a key factor in our collective dispossession from the river, forcing some Métis families to become marginalized squatters or Road Allowance People in southern settlement areas. Under the scrip system, the Métis people never extinguished any of their resource rights. However, with the failure to acquire scrip or river lot properties, the Métis people were blocked from accessing river and water resources that were once such a significant and vital part of their intergenerational subsistence lifestyles. As Frank Tough states in discussing Métis scrip in Treaty Five,

there is nothing in the process, either in the written documents reporting on the treaty talks or in the application/declaration, which indicates that individual Métis consented to extinguish Aboriginal title. They merely applied to participate in a land grant and signed to the truthfulness of the personal information. No consent to stop using the land, to cease hunting, fishing, and trapping was ever given.¹⁴

My uncle Solomon Sanderson, former Chief of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, concurs with Frank Tough and reminded me how the Métis have never had proper dealings with Canada in relation to their legal rights to land and resources, and there is great potential for the Métis to come to the contemporary treaty table and establish their inherent rights. Unfortunately, the imposition of the *Natural Resources Transfer Agreement* in 1930 further alienated Métis from their inherent rights to the water and resources, and our contemporary leadership has not yet recovered from provincial and federal legal policies of neglect and interference.

Leah: Lobstick Making and a Métis Sense of Belonging

First Nations land-use patterns and European notions of settlement naturally found expression in the way Métis people established wintering sites

and semi-permanent settlements, and later formed river lot settlements. Every cultural group has a way of marking traditional land use. During the fur trade era and prior to the development of the river lot land-use strategy, the lobstick-making practice served as an important aspect of Métis traditional land use that has not been well documented because of our mobility. The Dorion, Labadie, and Lafferty families all carried extensive knowledge of water navigation and possessed the skills required to travel by boat over huge geographic distances, and all three river Métis families understood lobstick poles as navigational or directional markers to create belonging and identity during their travels.

The lobstick poles, comparable to a navigational lighthouse, were erected by the first Métis traders along the mouths of river systems, marking important inlet channels and providing direction. The Métis use of lobstick poles was adapted from European maypole traditions and First Nations cultural expressions. The lobstick poles were therefore birthed and born around waterways, like a first expression of Métis culture. A lobstick tree is stripped of its bark, either partly or completely, to indicate direction, location, and clans, people, or family names using the area. Sometimes lobsticks could be an indication of the presence of a natural resource, such as a berry- or medicine-picking place, or a trade centre. The First Nations cultural influence would be in the ceremony and feast that went with the construction of the lobsticks. Some Métis were hired by fur traders or explorers to erect a lobstick to commemorate their trip. In his published memoirs, Charles Mair (1899), secretary to one of the Half-breed scrip commissions, states:

That afternoon we rounded Point Brule, a high, bold cliff of sandstone with three “lop-sticks” upon its top. The Indian’s lop-stick, called by the Cree *piskootenusk*, is a sort of living talisman which he connects in some mysterious way with his own fate, and which he will often go many miles out of his direct course to visit. Even white men fall in with the fetish, and one of the three we saw was called “Lambert’s lop-stick.” I myself had one made for me by Gros Oreilles, the Saulteau Chief, nearly forty years ago, in the forest east of Pointe du Chene, in what is now Manitoba. They are made by stripping a tall spruce tree of a deep ring of branches, leaving the top and bottom ones intact. The tree seems to thrive all the same, and is a very noticeable, and not infrequent, object throughout the whole Thickwood Indian country.¹⁵

Erected at places like river forks and rendezvous points, Métis lobster markers represented how, even as a highly mobile people, we still had purpose, order, and pattern in our movement cycles. The lobstersticks in Prince Albert National Park and at neighbouring Paddockwood, Saskatchewan, are no longer standing, symbolic of the contemporary removal of Métis people from the land. I created the children's book *My First Métis Lobstick* so that the Métis lobster fur trade tradition will be understood by the Canadian public, which often struggles to understand the historical mobility patterns of our land- and river-use culture.¹⁶

Leah: Métis Women, Spirituality, and Water

Métis culture is built on a strong matriarchal system, originating with the First Nations women who were the mothers of the first Métis. These women rooted Métis children to the land. With the progression of colonization and the imposition of patriarchal kinship systems, some Métis families struggled to maintain their original matriarchal systems. A long-term effect is that little Métis history is expressed from a Métis woman's point of view, especially regarding our connection to rivers and water. As a Métis woman, there have been times in my life when I have turned to the river for guidance, clarity, and connection with my ancestors. In times of turmoil, I have placed tobacco in the river and expressed a silent prayer, asking the river to provide me with the strength and wisdom to navigate my life journey with both grace and ease, like the flowing river. A deep level of spiritual expression is practised among some Métis women in relation to water. My auntie Elsie Sanderson has shared many important values and beliefs with us younger women about the sacredness of water and the feminine gifts related to water. Water is mobile, it is adaptable, and it is life-giving. It has infused Métis culture for generations. But with modernization and the impacts of forced dispossession from our traditional lands, our spiritual relationship to rivers and waterways has eroded. It is more difficult to access certain waterways and to visit some of the places our Elders once accessed freely. Nevertheless, some Métis youth today are reconnecting with the land and water in order to express their spirituality and identity in a modern context, based on inherent rights principles.

I acknowledge Métis scholars like Chantal Fiola, who contributes greatly to the unfolding conversation about Métis spirituality and its diverse expressions with her book *Rekindling the Sacred Fire: Métis Ancestry and Anishinaabe Spirituality*. Fiola points out that the conversations documented in her

book show that “the historical context of colonialism continues to thread its way through the lives of Métis people today.”¹⁷ As more Métis people across Canada decolonize their identity and spirituality, a new, holistic conversation can occur, encouraging our children to be mindful about our past, present, and future vision. Being Métis is more than just a piece of paper; it is a living, evolving identity, not to be shelved and left unexpressed.

Despite the loss of territory, dispossession, and the colonial dismantling of Métis identity, many Métis women continue to sing and pray to water. Several Métis women in our family find a deep sense of happiness in spending time in a canoe paddling and connecting with the rhythm of life. One of my fondest memories from my time in the Northwest Territories is of watching the old-timers greet the river every day. As these Elders sat on humble river benches in the soft morning light, watching the beautiful Mackenzie River dance and swirl, it was easy to know that we all belong, and to understand that we are all a part of something greater. I believe waterways are defining features of Canada, and I know the water is a guiding metaphor for understanding the greater meaning of Métis identity and our emergence as a distinctive people in North America. We Métis are as mobile, fluid, adaptable, and strong as the rivers that flow through this land, and Métis women are important voices that need to be brought to the table in discussions about our river and resource rights.

Leah: Conclusion

When I left home to move to Saskatoon to attend the University of Saskatchewan, I was nervous and afraid. My father’s advice was to find the Métis Elders living there. He said everything would be fine, as our people are everywhere and our true Elders will always help someone in need. My father’s advice truly reflects our original understanding of the mobility and connectivity of the Métis people. When travelling, I always make a point of finding the local Métis community and making connections with them, as in the old ways of Métis protocol and hospitality. I want to personally acknowledge the Breaton/Labadie and Lafferty clans for continuing to keep our traditional teachings about Métis kinship alive. I want to honour my father, who taught me to love the river, to learn about our inherent rights, and to be strong and adaptable. Lastly, many thanks to my co-author, R. Curtis Breaton, for contributing his oral history and knowledge to this narrative.

Métis people have played a key role in the formation of Canada from the fur trade era, during the introduction of western settlement, and as a significant labour force. Our relationship with the land and rivers through

river lots and lobster making should be recognized by Canada today, and our kinship mobility network honoured. As the *Daniels* case brings Métis people under federal jurisdiction, laws imposed on Métis people in relation to property, game, and resources need to be re-examined as part of the reconciliation conversation in this country. If we are going to plan for the future, we need to know where we come from as Métis people – legally, politically, culturally, and even spiritually.

NOTES

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