

Chapter I

A UNIQUE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

From the screeching wheels of the Red River carts to the thundering hoofs of stampeding buffalo, to the foot stomping jigging to a fiddler's refrain, to the cry of a new born babe, the saga of the Metis people unfolds into a panorama of colorful events and personalities.

In addition to their fur-trading activities, many Metis acted as guides and interpreters, thereby contributing to the exploration and settlement of many areas of North America. They also played a very significant role in a large part of Rupert's Land being brought into the Confederation of Canada as the Provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. To adequately appreciate them and their unique qualities, it is only fitting that this indigenous nation should be viewed from a factual account of their history, heritage, culture and way of life.

At the outset some of the misconceptions concerning the Metis that have developed over the years need to be addressed. A not uncommon misunderstanding by some is that the Metis only played a role in the history of Canada at the time of Louis Riel and the Red River Resistance of 1869-70, or at the time of Gabriel Dumont and the North-West Uprising of 1885.

Another erroneous belief is that to be Metis one's European ancestors had to be of French descent, or been employed by the Hudson's Bay Company, or resided in the Red River area, or in Rupert's Land. All of these limiting opinions fail to take into consideration many facets of the Metis people including their early history, their nomadic lifestyle, and the integral role that the fur trade played in their livelihood.

In the very early days of colonization, furs were the main export from North America to Europe. In time the financial benefits of the fur trade fueled the exploration and the initial development that occurred in many areas of North America. At its height the fur trade extended from

the Atlantic Ocean in the east to the Pacific Ocean in the west, and from Hudson Bay in the north to the Gulf of Mexico in the south.

Upon leaving the confines of the colonies, the early explorers and traders entered the hinterland where there were no European women. Consequently, they formed unions with the Indian women that produced a generation of mixed-blood children then called half-breeds.

There were peoples of mixed-blood in Canada since shortly after the Europeans first came into contact with the natives a number of centuries ago. However, mixed blood in itself does not constitute Metis identity. This identity required the development of a common culture, history and way of life.

It was these factors that were responsible for the evolution of the historic native-born Aboriginal peoples of the Metis Nation whose roots are found primarily in Western Canada and the North West United States.

The focus of this book is on these Metis of the Metis Nation and their fascinating role in the history of Canada. Accordingly special emphasis has been placed on the fur trade that occurred in the area of land from Hudson Bay and northern Canada in the north to the Great Lakes in the south and westward to the Pacific Coast where it extended from the border of Alaska in the north to the San Francisco area in the south.

The nurturing of this distinct indigenous people, of mixed European and Indian blood, in this geographical area occurred during the latter part of the 1700s and into the early part of the 1800s. Consequently the Metis were identifiable and were readily recognized by a non-Metis, Alexander Greenfield Macdonell, as being a "new nation" as early as 1816. The descendants of the offspring of this indigenous nation are members of the Metis Nation of today.

Over the years the Metis had to fight military, legal, political, social, cultural, and constitutional battles to survive as a distinctive people. Successful on some

occasions, crushed on others, they did not flag nor fail in their determination to persevere as a distinct culture and society in their traditional homeland of western North America.

The early Metis, a historical indigenous people, created a unique culture for themselves and for future generations. Their collective consciousness empowered them in their struggle for their collective causes.

The undaunted spirit of the Metis involved them in many notable episodes and produced many fascinating personalities. This book chronicles some of the remarkable events and profiles only a few of the outstanding individuals from this group. A common thread in the lives of the personalities of the Metis portrayed herein was pride in their Metis heritage.