

Life after 1885

After the 1885 Resistance, the vast influx of non-Aboriginal settlers and the failure of the Scrip system resulted in disruption of the Métis' traditional lifestyles. From 1885 to 1930, the Métis had difficulty adapting to the rapidly changing way of life in the Prairie West. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Métis used a mixed economy that included harvesting seasonal flora (plant) and fauna (animal) resources, supplemented with farming and wage labour. After 1885, however, the Métis began to rely heavily on low paying seasonal jobs to support themselves. Many ended up living in poverty.

Immediately following the conclusion of the Resistance, many Batoche Métis (and elsewhere) had great difficulty making a living. Since spring crops had not been planted at the time of the 1885 Resistance, many families ran out of food the following winter. Moreover, others had their homes destroyed and their property looted, which resulted in years of trying to obtain compensation from the federal government. Some men tried to obtain freighting work to make ends meet; however, contracts were low paying and were becoming scarce because of the increasing use of steamers and the railway to haul goods. In addition, merchants were reluctant to establish or even reestablish stores in the Batoche area after the 1885 Resistance. This reduced opportunities for freighting contracts and other employment, which further depressed the local Métis economy.

Lack of viable employment opportunities soon became a debilitating problem for Métis trying to support their families. As a result, some families lived in a deplorable state. In 1888, Alexander Cardinal's eight-member family lived in a house approximately three metres square, which was almost devoid of furniture, bedding, and food. The North West Mounted Police distributed flour and beef or bacon to starving families. Government officials gave unemployed people provisions in exchange for hauling and cutting wood, or doing handy work around police barracks. Many Métis soon needed help from the government to acquire food and clothing. Some were able to feed their families by selling their Scrip to speculators. However, doing this resulted in the loss of their lands.

Even when the Métis were able to obtain seasonal work or plant crops, times were still difficult. In the later nineteenth century, crop failures continued to plague farmers along the South Saskatchewan River. In some regions, the conditions were so bad that Métis families were forced to kill their cattle for food – a desperate move for people who owned so few animals. Eventually, some families abandoned their farms or sold all their possessions to cover their debts. Other Métis were landless and squatted on the approaches of Crown Land and thus became known as the "Road Allowance People". In addition, because many Métis did not own property, and therefore did not pay property taxes, they could not send their children to school. As a result, three generations of Métis were unable to receive a basic education.

The Métis who squatted on road allowances around Batoche had a much lower standard of living than nearby Euro-Canadians and Europeans. This poverty occurred well into the mid-twentieth century. As hunting and fishing regulations increased and government work projects failed, more and more people turned to government aid or "relief" to support themselves. The Métis' poverty bred hopelessness and, for some, a lack of ambition. Having to live on the outskirts of a settlement in run-down housing without meaningful employment was a great blow to Métis' self-respect. During this period, 1885-1930, many denied their Métis heritage and became assimilated into the Euro-Canadian mainstream in order to escape negative stereotypes and continuing economic hardship.

Reference:

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Further Readings:

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