

Métis Farmers

Farming has always been an important economic activity among the Métis. For instance, Métis in the Great Lakes region had farmed around fur trade posts as early as the French Regime (1534-1763) in Canada. While farming does not have the romantic connotation of the bison hunts, it was still part of the traditional Métis economy, particularly in the English-speaking parishes in the Red River Settlement. Cereal agriculture was introduced to the Red River Métis by the Roman Catholic missionaries in the 1830s and soon after by the Anglican Church. Missionaries felt that it was imperative that the Métis become sedentary if they were to receive a formal education and religion. This policy of the “bible and the plough” would also make it easier to assimilate them into Euro-Canadian society. Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) officials also felt that if the Métis were tied more to a sedentary farming lifestyle and if they would be made less nomadic, they could be more useful to the Company as labourers and employees and would be less likely to trade with the Americans.

Early Métis agriculture in the Red River Colony was subsistence-based and was plagued by poor growing conditions. In the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century, there was no market for grain grown in the region. In the fifty years following 1820, there were thirty-one recorded crop failures in the Red River Settlement, due to droughts, floods, and grasshopper infestations. Strains of wheat such as Prairie du Chien and Marquis and Red Fife with long maturation periods of 100 and 115-125 days respectively were also grown. Today, Canada Spring Hard wheat usually takes 90 days to

mature. The longer growing times of these earlier strains of wheat increased the risk of frost and crop failure.

After 1860, farmers also began to rotate crops, put manure on fields and experimented with fertilizer to increase yields. All grains grown by the Métis were consumed locally or were traded to the HBC. Initially, Métis farmers harvested grains using hand held implements such as sickles and cradle scythes. The crop was then threshed, to remove chaff and stalks, with hand flails or by livestock trampling on it. Mechanization of this process occurred in the late nineteenth century. If there was no mill in the vicinity, flour was produced by using hand grinders called querns.

Early Métis farmers also possessed livestock. Cattle were introduced to the Red River Settlement in 1822 and sheep arrived in 1833. Horses and oxen were used to pull plows and harvesting equipment, but had originally been kept by the Métis for bison hunting and freighting. Much of the early livestock breeds that were imported to the colony, however, were not adapted to the harsh prairie life. A lack of proper animal husbandry also ensured that even superior breeds would fail to be bred properly.

Garden plots and cultivated land provided families with fresh vegetables such as potatoes, onions, cabbage, carrots, corn, pumpkins, herbs, and turnips. Gardens supplemented the traditional Métis diet of wild game and fish, and fit well into their seasonal cycle since planting and harvesting did not conflict with the bison hunt. The harvested vegetables were stored in cellars or root houses to supply the family through the winter, or they might have been dried and ground into powder or flour for use in

soups, stews, bannock and bread. Corn, for instance, was dried in the sun until hard; then the kernels were stripped off and stored in bags until they were needed. Of course, many of the products were consumed fresh. Herbs were also cultivated in home gardens and were dried in the house, often hung from rafters, and picked to use as flavouring in recipes. Many people depended heavily on their gardens during the 1930s depression to provide them with the food they could not afford to buy from stores.

Métis women also grew gardens in order to provide food for HBC posts, which in many cases prevented starvation among fur trade workers. At Moose Factory, women were responsible for planting and harvesting the potato crop, which resulted in 196 bushels being produced in 1830. The women's contribution at Fort Edmonton, in terms of gardening as well as providing other provisions and services, was so important that the chief factor, John Rowand, noted that without the women's hard work the Company might not have been able to carry on with its endeavours. At the community of St. Albert, Alberta, the harvest from the fields and gardens consisted of 700 barrels of potatoes, 200 of cabbage, 11 of carrots, 11 of onions, 150 sacks of wheat and 30 sacks of barley.

The HBC clearly relied on the foods it acquired from farmers and provisioners near its posts. These foods included meat, dairy products, vegetables and wheat. Wheat was especially important because the Company had to provide its men with a huge amount of bread and biscuits. It is estimated that the Sixth Regiment of Foot stationed at Lower Fort Garry between 1846 and 1848 consumed 68 kilograms of bread per day. This

constant need for flour, obviously, provided a market for the wheat grown by the surrounding farmers.

Despite using primitive implements, having no external export market, working with a harsh climate (the 1800s were a period of geothermal cooling) and the sensitivity of European grains and livestock, early Métis farmers persisted. However, without the reassurance that farming could completely replace bison hunting as the main economic activity, few other than the English Métis (the Country Born) would commit to it full time. Farming did not flourish in Prairie Canada until the Canadian Pacific Railway was built in the 1880s. The railway opened domestic and international markets for Prairie grain. Due to the unreliability of farming, bison hunting remained the primary means of making a living for the Métis throughout much of the nineteenth century since it provided better returns and more food. More often than not, the Métis merely included farming into their traditional seasonal cycle. This mixed-resource strategy allowed families to gain benefits from several economic activities.

Without stretching things too far, bison hunting and farming can be seen as a metaphor for the dual heritage of the Métis as a mix of Aboriginal and European peoples. For instance, while on the bison hunt many Métis felt that they were free to practice their Aboriginal culture without outsiders telling them how to run their affairs. Métis farmers lived in a more hierarchical society with different classes: rich, poor French-Canadian, and Métis farmers. The Church also had more control over their Métis parishioners in the farming settlements than in the more nomadic hunting

communities. As a result of this and French-Canadian settlement patterns, many Métis in these areas became assimilated in or gravitated towards French-Canadian culture. This was particularly true of the Métis farming communities in and around Winnipeg, Manitoba. The Country Born Métis were also more willing to become farmers than the French-Canadian-Métis.

Most farms remained small, however. The lack of metal implements with which to break and work the land meant that only a few acres could be planted in a season. Even as time passed, most Métis farmers could not afford the more efficient implements, such as tractors, and the amount of land they could cultivate remained small. For instance, the Métis on the South Saskatchewan River in 1884 cultivated, on average, 10 acres (1.23 hectares) per lot of 160 (19.7 hectares) to 195 acres (24 hectares). The prices for their grains were so low and unpredictable that it was not feasible to break more land. Wheat was worth \$1.75 a bushel, barley \$1.25 a bushel, and potatoes \$1.92 a bushel. The markets for farm produce remained quite limited, paying little for the harvested grains. Most grains from the Batoche region in the late nineteenth century were actually shipped to the north in exchange for furs!

Traditional Métis farms in the Prairies were located along riverbanks in long narrow lots or "*rangs*". Métis river-lot farms were adaptations of the French-Canadian river-lot farming system, which still predominates in Québec. Since the river lots and yards were narrow, Métis families were able to maintain a strong social support system. Travel between families was also minimized since well-established trails and paths connected Métis river lots.

The river valley also provided wood for fuel and building material for homes, barns, fences, and Red River carts. Farm lots were placed near rivers so Métis families had access to transportation, fishing, and water for domestic use. Plots were scattered on the banks of rivers for several kilometres, and were broken down into sections: some land was under cultivation and fallow, some for gardens and hayfields and for wood lots. River-lot farming was particularly well suited to the Red River and South Saskatchewan River communities, areas, which had a low population density.

After the Red River Resistance in 1869-70, the river lot survey system began to be replaced by the Ontario-based township survey system. In fact, one of the initial causes of the Red River Resistance was the federal government's ham-fisted attempt to survey Métis lands without Métis consultation. The Métis quickly realized that the new surveying system, based on 36 square land plots of 640-acre (79 hectares) sections each, was not compatible with their style of farming. Unlike the Métis river-lot system, a section of land could be kilometres from a water source and be totally devoid of trees and hay, which were important considerations for the Métis when selecting land. In addition, in order for a person to receive title to his or her land through *The Dominion Lands Act*, the person was required to farm and make improvements to his/her farms for several consecutive years before he/she could receive title to his/her lands. Many Métis did not conform to these regulations because they continued to follow a traditional seasonal cycle. Therefore, while many Métis applied for patents for lands that they occupied, they were not always successful. As a result, many Métis were

dispossessed of their lands because of strict adherence to homesteading policy (and racism).

After World War I, Métis farmers had an easier time marketing their grain and flour. The Wheat Pool movement on the Prairies (in the 1920s) and the development of the Canadian Wheat Board as a permanent marketing monopoly during the Great Depression and World War II made the marketing of grain an easier task for farmers. However, by the time of these developments occurred, most Métis grain farmers, like small subsistence farmers throughout North America, were forced out of business by larger and more efficient farming operations.

The additional restrictions placed on a subsistence-based lifestyle, such hunting and fishing restrictions, further worsened a poverty stricken existence, forcing more and more Métis to take up seasonal farm labour. Those Métis who lost title to the land, became menial farm labourers. Whole Métis families picked stones from fields, cleared fields of tree stumps and brush and did other farm chores. Seasonal farm labour became a way of life for many Métis. Those people who eked out an existence by doing seasonal farm chores often traveled on foot with their belongings stacked on ramshackle carts or wagons and lived in small tents heated by tin stoves. Some unmarried Métis women worked as domestic labourers and earned, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, \$4.00 to \$10.00 per month. Métis ranch hands were hired to work with cattle and horses.

As mechanization on farms increased and equipment became less expensive, farmers and ranchers were less apt to hire Métis workers if their families could do the work themselves. As well, because many Métis lacked the particular skill required, they could not get jobs using the mechanized equipment. However, some Métis threshing gangs and hay cutters worked deep into the United States and gradually worked their way into Canada as crops were ready to be harvested.

Only successful Métis commercial farming operations remained. Some were group owned and managed such as the Métis farm at Lebret, Saskatchewan and others were individually managed such as the many independent Métis farms which dot the landscape of rural Manitoba in northern Saskatchewan and in the Peace River Country in Alberta and in British Columbia. The current trend in Métis agriculture is towards corporate farming. For instance, the Alberta Métis Settlements have ventured into diverse farming operations, consisting of cereal farming, as well as elk and bison ranching. Other Métis farmers grow barley, oats, canola, lentils, mustard seed, corn, flax, and market vegetables and fodder crops. In 1986, a development corporation was developed at Lebret, Saskatchewan, which operated a commercial cattle ranch and produced cereal crops on a 3,000-acre (370 hectare) parcel. In 1986, Statistics Canada reported that 755 farmers in Western Canada identified themselves as Métis. With the crisis in agriculture in the last twenty years, this number has likely dropped. However, many Métis farmers persisted in obtaining a livelihood from the land. As Angus Spence, the first president of the Manitoba Métis Farmers

Association stated, “[i]t is amazing that the Métis farmers managed to survive at all in an all too often hostile social and economic environment, with the minimum of tools and equipment and never the access to capital to prosper” .

Fast Facts:

Norbert Welsh, when he was a boy of eight, went to work for a neighbour to help minimize the economic strain on his parents. He worked for his board plus one cent a day in 1853 doing gardening and farming chores. Labourers would go from farm to farm at harvest to help with the reaping and gathering of grain crops, as members of threshing gangs. Norbert Welsh was charged 75¢ an acre in 1871 for cutting and binding his wheat crop of 60 acres (7.4 hectares).

In 1878, Norbert Welsh, a Métis farmer, sold produce and crops to a North-West Mounted police outpost for: \$2.50/bushel for 100 bushels of potatoes, \$ 2.00/bushel for 150 bushels of oats, \$2.50/bushel for 120 bushels of barley and \$3.50/bushel for 50 bushels of wheat.

George William Sanderson, an English Métis from southern Manitoba, remembered eating a recipe for wheat, which was called *“kas-pis-akun”* wheat or *bustin*. Wheat was browned in a frying pan and then ground. The flour was then cooked in hot water or milk, added to which was cream and sugar. This made a form of porridge, which was good tasting and very nourishing. Barley was prepared for use by placing it in a hole about one foot deep (30 Centimetres) and eight inches (21 centimetres) wide bored in a

wooden block and pounding the chaff from it with a wooden pole. The barley, then, was used for soup.

Hay cutting was another seasonal farm job. The livestock needed hay for feed, particularly in the winter and many Métis hired out to cut and gather hay. This was done in the fall, between September and October. The hay had to be cut, raked, hauled and stacked so the farmer or rancher could get it to his animals easily. If people sold hay as a seasonal job, they could receive \$5.00 per load in 1890 in Saskatchewan.

Families who raised livestock sold the produce and animals for commercial gain. The Saskatchewan Métis were more livestock breeders than farmers as a whole. The Cochin, Saskatchewan region was such a place and many of the initial Métis settlers had relatively large numbers of cattle. Milk and eggs were gathered for home use as well as for sale.

The families who farmed along the South Saskatchewan River also kept livestock. A large portion of their small river lots were used as pasture for horses, cattle, milk cows, pigs and sheep. Many families kept herds of twenty to thirty cattle, while some industrious farmers and ranchers kept more than fifty head a piece. Pure bred horses were worth \$250 a piece in the 1880s.

Missions sometimes hired people to help plant and tend their gardens, livestock and crops. When it was time to plant wheat on farms around Fort Garry, the workers drew water from the Red River and brought it up to the farm. They put a chunk of lime in a barrel of water with wheat and let it soak

overnight. The next morning they drained the wheat, let it dry a little and then sowed it. This helped it germinate very quickly.

Ranch hands were hired to help with various duties dealing with cattle and horses. Hillyard Mitchell, who ranched and ran stores in the Batoche district, hired Métis boys and men such as Dodet Parenteau to tame horses at the rate of \$3.00 per head or Patrice Fayant to mow and gather hay at a rate of \$1.25 a day in the 1890s. Métis men who worked with their own teams of horses received \$2.50 a day for their labour, while a contracted labourer received board and a wage paid in merchandise. The labourer received a bag of flour, two pounds of tea and thirty pounds of bacon per month for his meals.

Adapted From:

Paquin, Todd, Young, Patrick, and Préfontaine, Darren R. "Métis Farmers".
<http://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/00718.pdf>