

The Dispersal of the Métis

After the Red River Resistance (1869-70) and the 1885 Resistance, the Métis were dispersed throughout western North America. These dispersals occurred for many reasons including:

- ❖ The demise of the bison hunt and bison robe trade
- ❖ The failure of commercial agriculture to develop prior to the 1890s
- ❖ The large influx of Euro-Canadian and European settlers to the Prairies
- ❖ The racism of English and French Canadians towards the Métis
- ❖ The Métis' stigma of being labeled as a "rebel" people
- ❖ Changes to government legislation
- ❖ The failure of the Scrip system to adequately extinguish the Métis' Aboriginal title to the land

After 1870, the Métis' dispersal from Manitoba occurred for economic, political and social reasons. The bison-hunting economy of the Prairie West had by the 1870s, disappeared and commercial agriculture had not yet taken root. The bison robe trade also declined in what is now Western Canada after the reciprocity (free trade) deal between the United States and British North America (later the Dominion of Canada) expired with the conclusion of the American Civil War in 1865. This meant that duties (tariffs) were put on all goods entering and leaving Canada.

From the 1830s-90s, the Métis could not make a livelihood farming. Métis farmers in the Red River Settlement and later Manitoba struggled because of repeated grasshopper infestations (through the 1870s), droughts, early frosts and the frequent flooding of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. In addition, many Métis had to take out mortgages to keep their farms. When they could not pay them back, they were forced to sell them.

Farming in what are now the Prairie provinces was not practical in the nineteenth century. In fact, it was not until 1896 and Canada's first

immigration boom under the Laurier government, that the development of commercial agriculture was possible. First of all, there was not a sufficient number of railways present to transport grain outside of the region. Secondly, more virulent strains of wheat, which were more drought resistant with shorter growing seasons, had not yet been developed. Thirdly, there was an insufficient number of local producers to develop the necessary transportation and handling capacity to send grain outside of the region.

Social and political developments also made it difficult for the Manitoba (and later Batoche area) Métis to make a living farming. The imposition of the township land-holding system in Western Canada, based on land-holding systems in Ontario and the United States, was different from the Métis' river lot farming system. The Métis had river lot farms, much like those in Québec, along the Red and Assiniboine Rivers in Manitoba and later along the South Saskatchewan River in what is now Saskatchewan. This different land-holding system and racism from incoming English and French-Canadian settlers caused many Métis to leave Manitoba. The English Canadian newcomers were angry with the Métis because of the execution of Thomas Scott by a Métis tribunal during the Red River Resistance. In addition, newly arrived French Canadians took economic and political control of Manitoba's French-Métis communities, which further ensured the Métis' exodus from the very province, which they founded.

Changes to government legislation also influenced the Métis' dispersal from Manitoba. For instance, two amendments made to *The Manitoba Act* negatively affected the Métis. The first, in 1873, changed the

amount of eligible Métis who could obtain land from 10,000 down to 6,000. The second amendment affected Métis “winterers” (“*hivernants*”) who only spent their winters on their farmland, because the claimant had to prove “occupancy”, rather than “peaceable possession”. The provision also excluded those who did not make sufficient improvements to the land. With these amendments, 1,200 Métis families lost their title to the land. These changing regulations were also included in Section 125(e) of *The Dominion Lands Act* (1879), which was supposed to settle all claims by those Métis (who lived in the Northwest and outside of Manitoba prior to 1870) wishing to extinguish their “Indian” title. It took six years before the government acted upon its own legislation – after the Métis sent dozens of petitions inquiring about their land entitlement.

The Métis extinguished their Aboriginal title to the land through the Scrip system. “Scrip” was a certificate, in either land or monetary denominations, that the federal government granted to the Métis in order to surrender their Aboriginal title to the land. Métis Scrip certificates were granted to individuals rather than families and communities. This ensured that the Métis would be dispersed throughout the Northwest. In addition, many Métis were granted scrip land in far away places. Others were tricked into selling their land to speculators for small amounts. In fact, most Métis never received their scrip land. The scrip system’s failure to properly extinguish the Métis’ Aboriginal title was perhaps the main reason why the Métis dispersed from Manitoba starting in the 1870s.

As a result of the reasons listed above, the Métis out-migration from Manitoba was considerable. For instance, in the 1870s, nearly 1,000 families from Manitoba moved to twenty-two different settlements in the North-West Territories, with the largest groups settling along the South and North Saskatchewan Rivers at St. Laurent, and Prince Albert. There were only approximately 10,000 Métis inhabitants in Manitoba in 1871. About 80% of the families who settled in St. Laurent who were the "heads" of families in 1870 and should have received land, were landless before they arrived in the North-West Territories. In 1882-83, twenty families from St. François-Xavier (in what is now southern Manitoba) moved to Batoche. By 1883, there were 1,300 Métis between Gariépy's Crossing and Tourond's Coulee, a 50 kilometre-stretch along the South Saskatchewan River.

Following the 1885 Resistance, the Métis once again dispersed from their lands. Most of the Métis who left went to the North Dakota and Montana Territories to towns like Belcourt, Lewistown, and Selby Junction (Hill). Most of the migrants eventually moved back to Canada. Some Métis also moved to Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, and Pincher Creek (in what is now Alberta), while others moved to communities in present-day Saskatchewan, such as Willow Bunch, Onion Lake, Meadow Lake, Green Lake, Lac Muskeg, Leask, Marcelin, Kinistino, Bonne Madone, Birch Hills, and Crystal Springs. A group of Métis, made up mostly of the Modeste McGillis family, moved to Willow Bunch, in present-day southern Saskatchewan.

Many dispersed Métis moved to southern Alberta to become cowboys and horse trainers. These Métis migrants included Athanase Falcon, Joseph

Dumas, Xavier Pagé, Dodet Parenteau, Frédéric St. Germain, and Théophile Caron. However, the latter three moved back to Batoche. Cuthbert Gervais, Ludger Gareau, Norbert Delorme, and Jean-Baptiste Fidler all settled at Pincher Creek where they set up ranches.

Dispersed Métis families in Montana in the 1890s included those of Ambroise Dumont and Pierre Ouellette in Lewistown; Alexandre Venne in Sweet Grass; and Urbain "Pezzan" Delorme Jr. in Kalispell. In 1900, other families who moved to Montana included Ambroise Champagne's son François in Havre, and Eugène Boucher, who settled in the Musselshell River area from 1898 to 1908. (He then moved back to St. Louis, Saskatchewan). In 1898, Patrice Fleury Jr. moved near Helena, while Abraham Montour and Isidore "Wabash" Parenteau settled in Hill. Patrice Fleury moved back to St. Louis, Saskatchewan around 1905, and the other two moved to Medicine Hat, Alberta.

Many Métis families also settled in North Dakota. Métis who moved to Belcourt and St. Joseph ("St. Joe") included Jean Desmarais, Napoléon Nault, and Michel Dumont. Desmarais and Nault ended up moving to Medicine Hat, Alberta and Dumas moved to Ebb and Flow on Lake Manitoba. In 1900, Nault moved again, this time with his family to St. Malo, Manitoba. Roger Vandal also moved to St. Jean-Baptiste, North Dakota.

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