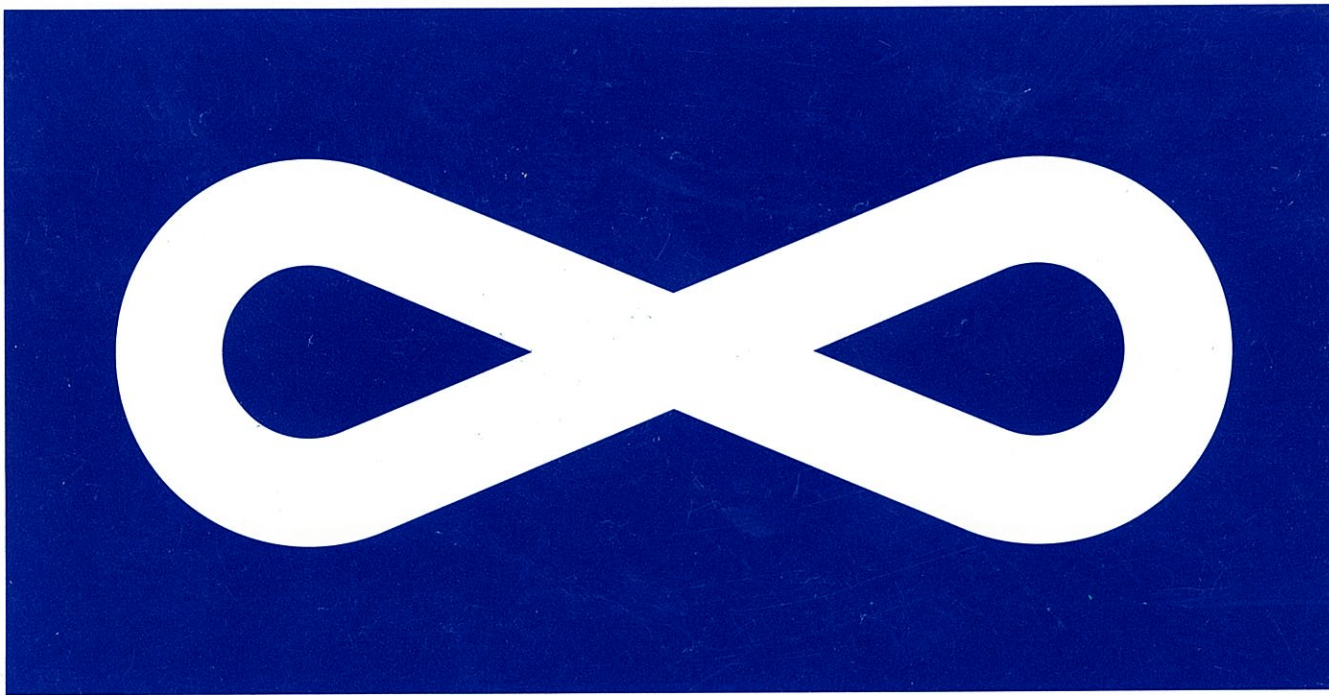


# LE' METIS

**Kiyanawn too Metr D'ikolenon  
Our Role Models**



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# A Brief History of the Metis

History books have described the Metis as a people of mixed ancestry. They have always been portrayed as people with European fathers and Indian mothers. This new race of people evolved during the 17th and 18th centuries in Canada and played a role in the fur trade of Canadian history. This generalization has become the basis on how the Metis people have been portrayed in the history books of Canada.

For political definitions and rationalizations the Metis have been given various definitions. They include the historical definition but also have been called a unique people who evolved in western Canada as a result of fur trade marriages between European fathers and Indian mothers. The only time that Metis people have been given a definition by a government agency prior to the Canadian Constitution was in Alberta. This piece of legislation which is known as the Metis Population Betterment Act of 1938 defines the Metis as people that possess a degree of Indian blood but who are not eligible for treaty status according to the definitions under the Indian Act.

Most recently, in moving toward a position of self determination, the Metis people have put forward the definition that a Metis is a person of Aboriginal ancestry who is distinct from Indian and Inuit and: is a descendant of those Metis who received or were entitled to receive land grants and/or Scrip under the provisions of the Manitoba Act, 1870, or the Dominion Lands Act, as enacted from time to time; or a person of Aboriginal descent who is accepted by the Metis Nation.

These definitions have served a purpose in the historical past or in the contemporary political process. The last definition which states that a Metis is a person who presents themselves as a Metis and accepted by their community as being Metis is probably the only one which can be considered as correct. The others are generalizations and therefore create misconceptions.

The Metis people did not spring from the

ground in the Manitoba region of Red River. It was here they were given recognition in the history of Canada. Metis people were first born in the countries where the European nations travelled and established colonies. The term is of French origin and is derived from the terms mixed and miscegenation which means the mixing of blood. This concept is not unique to North America but the term Metis is restricted to Canada.

Metis people are first documented in the early 1500s along the coast of Eastern Canada and have European fathers and Micmac mothers. As more Europeans arrived and the fur trade became very prominent, a Metis presence began to emerge. The fur trade forts were set up and maintained through a class structure. Metis people, for the most part, existed around the fringes of the forts. Small Metis communities slowly began to evolve around the Great Lakes region of Canada and Northern USA. The communities of Green Bay, Detroit, Chicago, Michilimackinac and Sault St. Marie are examples of early Metis communities. These fledgling communities eventually became major centres and the Metis were pushed out. Viewed as a hybrid, and troublesome, the Metis were shunned and deemed undesirable.

Metis people were forced to leave the communities that they had established in the northern states and eastern Canada. Early treaties and mass immigration of Europeans did not allow the Metis to remain as a small isolated people with a distinct identity. A smallpox epidemic amongst the Assiniboine people opened up a territory for outside relocation. Large populations of Metis people, previously restricted to the fringes around the fur trade forts, made their way to this new territory which is now southern Manitoba.

Metis history is well documented in this area beginning in the later 1700s and culminate with Louis Riel and the creation of Manitoba as a province in 1870. Many examples of Metis

culture, lifestyle and heroism are well documented. It is at this point that most people believe that Metis people emerge and base the historical definitions on. This brief 50-75 year period in history was very dynamic and did much to create a distinct Metis identity. It was during this time that Metis nationalism solidified and items such as the Metis flag first emerged.

Canadian Confederation, the National Policy, the signing of the treaties, the settlement of the Canadian west, the railroad, scrip, immigration, the American Civil War, the elimination of the buffalo; these are all factors which add dramatic negative impacts upon the development of a strong Metis nation in the early stages of the development of western Canada. A strong Metis presence in Manitoba in 1870 can certainly be recognized into the contemporary. Louis Riel is seen as the father of Manitoba and many historical recognitions are made of him and other prominent Metis individuals.

Political oppression caused many of these Metis people to leave Manitoba in the 1860s and 1870s. These people, mostly subsistence farmers and buffalo hunters, moved further west into what is now Saskatchewan and Alberta. They established small Metis communities where their former winter buffalo hunting camps had been. Lebret, Willow Bunch, St. Laurent are examples of these communities. These small communities were soon overwhelmed by European immigration and faded into history in comparison to Batoche and the much documented North West Resistance headed by famous Metis Leaders, Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont. The battle and the loss are well documented but the dispersal of the Metis people to other areas is not well documented. Forced into being a landless, uneducated people the Metis were once again on the fringes of society.

The early twentieth century is a sad period in Metis history. The majority of Metis people lived

either on road allowances or as indentured servants. They were forced to find employment in positions that nobody wanted and were often used as seasonal labourers. Metis people were refused rights to education and during the depression were refused "relief" due to their Metis heritage. Many Metis people denied their heritage in order to survive or to try to better their lot in life. It was not until 1944 that Metis were legally allowed to attend public schools in Saskatchewan.

The majority of Metis people of southern Saskatchewan find their roots or have relatives in the Qu'Appelle Valley. Large work crews of Metis men were recruited in this area during the 1950s and 1960s to build, paint and repair the elevators that are located in every town in western Canada. This struggle for survival has caused the Metis people to be somewhat transient and the elders say we are scattered like birds.

The 1970s and 1980s have seen a huge resurgence in Metis culture and identity. Metis locals, educational institutions and training programs have contributed greatly to a Metis identity. It is now that the young people are hearing the stories of the hardships that our elders have endured. From these stories, emerge a strength, and a strong resolve to improve the conditions for the Metis people. This strong resurgence has led to political gains and have given Metis people recognition as a distinct people within the Canadian Constitution. Our history is finally now beginning to be told by Metis historians, and many instances are being revised to give accurate depictions. The shame and oppression once commonplace to the Metis people is now being overcome and the inner strength of a dynamic healthy Metis identity is emerging. The old Metis communities, once forgotten are again becoming important to new generations and the future for the Metis nation looks promising.