

Toward an Indigenous Parkland:  
Saskatchewan Métis beyond the official story, in photograph and narrative

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In the summer of 1955, the Rural Municipality of Canwood (a small village in western Canada), [SLIDE] requested assistance from the Department of Welfare for the Province of Saskatchewan “as a result of the excessive burden arising from the indigent members of the Métis population resident within its boundaries” (SAB R85-308 933 file 3:20). In his summary letter to the Supervisor of Rehabilitation following a summer spent undertaking a census of the region, welfare agent K. Forster lamented that “...the Métis problem in this municipality is much greater than either ourselves or the municipality had at first realized”. Explaining that of the 84 Métis families in the district, 54 were “squatting on crown land” and 18 were on permanent public assistance, Forster went on to suggest that “the pattern is quite familiar to other Métis concentrations with drunkenness and illegitimacy being quite prevalent, the heads of families working how and when it suits them although...all of these families in one way or another earn enough but as usual dissipate it as quickly as it is earned” (SAB R85-308 R 933 file 3: 1a).

Given that I am in Switzerland and speaking to an international audience, I I’d like to present my talk at a slightly different pitch than might be the case were I presenting to a Canadian audience. Before I get into the meat of the talk, I will provide some historical and legal context to provide a sense, first, of who I’m talking about (‘the Métis’) and second, the specific level of jurisdiction within which I am talking about. The first part of this story has to do with the fact that Canada is a federalist country. This means that political and legal jurisdiction is divided between the federal government and 10 provinces and three territories. What this means in practice is, however, historically variable. In 1867, Canada purchased lands that the Hudson’s Bay Company (a British trading consortium) had received from a 1670 Royal Charter by Prince

Rupert. This charter and the area it encompassed – which became known as Rupertsland – gave the Hudson’s Bay Company jurisdiction over 2.3 million square kilometers of Indigenous territories that Britain had unilaterally declared as its own. More specifically, it gave the HBC jurisdiction over “all the lands whose water drained into the Hudson’s Bay”.

In 1867, Canada purchased these territories under what was called the Rupertsland Transfer, leading to a so-called “Uprising” with segments of the Indigenous peoples living in the economic core of the region, Red River. Roughly half a century later in 1930, under the auspices of what is termed the ‘National Resources Transfer Act’ Canada transferred the parts of these lands located in western Canada. Under the NRTA, the Canadian federal government transferred control over crown lands and natural resources to the western provinces, control they had not been given when they entered confederation. Saskatchewan, the province I am analyzing, is one of those provinces, along with Manitoba, Alberta and British Columbia.

Though Saskatchewan was a “prairie” province like Alberta and Manitoba on either side of it, it holds the particular distinction of being the first and only elected *socialist* government in Canadian history. In 1944, Saskatchewan elected a new provincial government, the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (or CCF). As part of its socialist message, the CCF wanted to use the machinery of administrative *modernity* to create a better and more humane set of living conditions for its citizens. Toward this end, it introduced nearly 200 new pieces of legislation in the first two years of its existence pertaining to infrastructure, communications, transportation, education and resource extraction. Among the legislation was that geared toward the “social welfare” of its citizens. More specifically, this legislation and the eventual policies they gave legal cover to, introduced rules and regulations regarding welfare and the education of children –

all children, including those of Indigenous parents. These massively impacted the Indigenous peoples living in those regions and in particular, the Métis.

Though their governing rationalities were probably distinctive, the post-war exuberance of the CCF government in Saskatchewan was anything but. Fahrni and Rutherford (2008) suggest in fact that the post WWII era is more “generally hailed in Canada and elsewhere as an extended moment of unprecedented prosperity, developed welfare states, high modernity, and advanced capitalism” (2008: 2), fueled by a number of key developments, including: a widespread post-war economic boom; sustained population growth (known popularly as “the baby boom”); increased urbanization and a new suburbanization; the growth of the welfare state (unemployment insurance, family allowances, veterans benefits, more generous old-age pensions, etc.); an increasingly complex relationship with the United States; and later, the political events of the 1960s. But as Foucauldian governmentality literature has made clear, these kinds of liberal changes presupposed a population willing to accept their conditions of freedom. For those who were not obviously willing, government agents felt little compulsion against “encouraging” this willingness.

In the summary letter to his superior, Forster – who I introduced at the beginning of this talk - explained that he relayed to the Canwood Municipal Council that rehabilitating the Métis “is a long term proposition and it may be many years before definite results are shown. The people themselves have not been approached and we have no knowledge as to whether or not they are receptive toward any scheme of rehabilitation that might be presented to them”. As it turns out, whether the Métis they were planning on rehabilitating were interested would hardly have mattered, since the CCF government held comparatively little concern for their constituents’ voices, instead preferring to unilaterally impose governing rationalities, especially

among Aboriginal communities. Among their broader policies for dealing with Métis communities and their members who after the 1930 Natural Resources Transfer Agreement found themselves on Crown land that had been opened up for settlement was simply to “re-locate” them, in some cases hundreds of kilometers away from communities they had lived in for generations.

In any case, the official story of Métis life in the parkland region of Saskatchewan from this era is – or was – bleak. The communities and their members painted in these reports don’t appear to have much to smile about: their apparent laziness and indolence, coupled with the fact that work was in relative short supply in the region in which they lived, meant that a prosperous life was likely out of reach for most. However, a small, nearly throw-away remark by a government official in one report gives some insight into the fact that not all was as bleak as made out in official parlance. TJ Collins, a District Inspector for the Department of Municipal Affairs, wrote in 1957 that despite their apparent poverty, “...They all have a team of ponies so that they can move around the country to picnics, etc., but you will not find a cow, chickens or garden - that is work and keeps them at home. During the summer months they are always on the move and attend every picnic in the neighbourhood”.

The practice that Collins is speaking about is a common Métis practice of “visiting” or “camping” with friends and relatives, a practice that remains an integral part of Métis society today. Few people here today are likely familiar with Indigenous peoples in Canada in general, let alone the Métis in particular. If you *had* read the historiography, however, you’d see a field of scholarship predicated not on a discussion of these kinds of daily life practices. Rather, they write on the Métis in terms of our “mixed ancestry” origins *or* our role in opening up the Canadian west through a series of so-called Rebellions or Uprisings in the latter part of the

nineteenth century. Few scholars have explored the Métis in the context of everyday life, let alone the complexity of everyday life in the post-WWII period.

Toward this end, I want to read a passage from a series of short stories written by my mother shortly before she passed away, who grew up during this era and in this geographical period, to demonstrate that the poverty emphasized in official reports wasn't a death sentence and it wasn't something that Métis lived under the yoke of. Instead, it was but one of many indignities that were to be shrugged off and risen above in their attempts to live lives as they wished them to be, rather than as they were. The story is slightly lengthy and I apologize for that, but I want to provide a sense of complexity to both the material poverty of this era but also the manner in which Métis "made do" with what they had. Let me begin.

"Though probably character building, being male and growing up in a household like ours must have been frustrating for my brothers. It must have been a nightmare at times: not much food; hardly any money; certainly no privacy; and always spies with many eyes, and ears big as pitchers. Peer pressure existed among the families, too, in those days, but it was directed at manliness, rather than fashion, although there was some pressure to conform to fashion. There was pressure to earn money to buy the basics, but money was also needed to buy a girl a pop and to pay one's and her way into the movie. Then, there was money needed to buy beer for the inevitable party in the bush, but, one also had to have money to pay the older cousin to [buy] the beer for those underage. Times were tough, and decisions were difficult, but one had to set one's priorities.

Go-to-town clothing was expensive, so if one wanted new clothing, one had to work for the money to buy them, and once bought, they had to be carefully looked after. Money went much farther, then, but always, not far enough. A movie cost a dime; a pop,

a nickel; smokes were 39 cents a pack (with a book of matches thrown in); runners were 27 cents a pair; blue jeans, 95 cents; white jeans were much more expensive, they sold for \$1.05 a pair; beer was \$1.07 for a case of 24. These guys had to pick a mountain of [Seneca] roots and stones for many days before their job was declared finished and they got paid, usually earning \$5.00 for a month, so, these bucks had to be carefully hoarded to last from the end of one job to the end of the next. My brothers, however, managed to earn enough money for necessities like white jeans and hair cream. But I don't know, it just seemed to be a lot of trouble to be a boy growing up in the mid-fifties and early sixties...

It seemed like they were always slicking up to go into town. They'd get together with our cousins and go as a group, hitch-hiking to town on Saturday nights. Elvis hair and ducktails were in style, then [SLIDE #2]. If a person's hair was naturally wavy, so much better for attracting girls, but if it wasn't, well, then, you just did something about it (something no one was supposed to know about)! You soaked your hair down good with rain water and liberally applied table salt until your hair was coated white, then you casually sauntered to the corral where the cows were, glanced quickly over each shoulder, leaned over the fence and ducked your head so that the cows would style your hair into magnificent, shiny waves. Oops, problem! A great cowlick that wouldn't stay down no matter what you did. You tamped it down with the flat of your hand and quickly scurried to the house and hunted down a couple of your mother's bobby pins and pinned it. There! That ought to do it! You could take them out when it dries. There now, hair's styled, so let's get changed. Teeth brushed? Not yet? (There was no such thing as commercial toothpaste when I was a kid. We either used baking soda, or better yet, we

used charcoal from poplar wood or, if there wasn't any, cat-tails, skinned and opened up would work as well, as the inside of the green cat-tails are rough, but smell minty).

Anyway, the boys would clean their teeth, after getting their hair styled, then the skin-tight white jeans would be painted on, and someone or other would give a hand getting boots on as it was apparently putting at risk future [children] for them to bend to put their own shoes on. Then, one more quick glance in the mirror, practice the grin, once more, a stroke to each duck-tail and away they'd go, skirting the soft road-dust on their way, in order to present themselves in pristine perfection to their maids-in-waiting. Nary a spare dime in their pockets, but they pranced in their skin-tight white jeans like...wealthy peacocks”.

The point in presenting this narrative is not to demonstrate the “truth” of this era in a way that reveals the “lie” emphasized in government reports. Rather, it's to inject a note of Métis *agency* into dominant government narratives that otherwise positioned us as passive “things” that either followed government directives – in which case we were “good Natives”, or failed to follow them – in which case, we were “bad Natives”. In point of fact, for as much “good” as the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation oversaw during its two decades in power – electrification of rural areas, the first modern universal medicare, the construction of new roads and the extension of rail lines, the extension of social welfare (“relief”) for those who needed it and the wholesale rise in opportunities for education – they were remarkably unwilling to listen to communities who failed to share their teleological vision of the future. Many Métis communities in particular continued to prefer a “mixed economy” lifestyle that the CCF government labeled as “short term maximizing”. As such, little government support was provided, despite the fact that these lifestyles long-predated their rise to power.

In the end, the narratives emphasized in government reports about the Métis in rural mid-century Saskatchewan are partly correct. Life *was* tough – brutal at times – and many Métis *were* impoverished, conditions that various structural conditions imposed by government made even tougher. But, government reports hardly tell the whole story about the Indigenous parkland, and even the manner in which they tell the part of the story important to them misses the various ways that Métis reacted to, adapted to and overcame these conditions. In what's left of my time here, I would like to provide a brief pictorial narrative to counter the Métis present in government reports. These are pictures of our family and some friends. The fiddle tune that accompanies it is called “Tear Drop Waltz” and is being played by one of my uncles, Jean Baptiste (or “Big John”, as we call him).