

HISTORIC MÉTIS COMMUNITIES IN ONTARIO

THE HISTORIC RAINY LAKE/LAKE OF THE WOODS MÉTIS COMMUNITY

Based on the existing research on Métis communities in Ontario and the criteria established by the Supreme Court of Canada in *R. v. Powley* (“*Powley*”), a historic Métis community developed from the inter-connected Métis populations along Rainy Lake and Rainy River at Lac La Pluie (Fort Frances) and Hungry Hall (Rainy River) as well as at Rat Portage (Kenora) and Eagle Lake (Dryden/Wabigoon) in the Lake of the Woods area. The Lake of the Woods area also includes White Fish Lake, Northwest Angle, Wabigoon and Long Sault (collectively known as the “Historic Rainy Lake/Lake of the Woods Métis Community”).

Identifying the Historic Métis Communities in Ontario

In *Powley*, the Supreme Court of Canada held that Métis rights—protected by section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*—exist in Ontario. This case established the framework for the recognition of Métis rights.

The Métis within section 35 refers to distinctive peoples or communities who, in addition to their mixed First Nation and European ancestry, developed their own customs, way of life, and recognizable group identity separate from their forebearers.

In order for a contemporary Métis community to possess section 35 rights it must have its roots in an identifiable historic Métis community that emerged prior to the time when Europeans established effective political and legal control in the area. It is therefore crucial to identify such historic Métis communities.

Identifying a historic Metis community requires demographic evidence that the population was identified as distinctive, evidence that the community had its own collective identity, and, evidence that the community had its own shared customs, practices and traditions.

Rainy River / Lake of the Woods Timeline

- 1787** The North West Company (NWC) establishes Fort Lac La Pluie (also known as Athabasca House or Rainy Lake House) as a means to shorten turnaround time for the NWC Athabasca brigades, rather than having them continue on to Fort William or Grand Portage.
- 1790s** The Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) pushes into the area and establishes a fur trade post at Lac La Pluie as well as posts at Eschabitchewan House, Manitou Rapids, Rainy Lake, and Portage l’Isle. The HBC abandoned the region in 1796-97, but returned in 1817, setting up Lac La Pluie House on the Canadian side of Rainy River (known today as International Falls).
- 1821** There is a merger of the HBC and NWC fur companies and Lac La Pluie becomes a part of the HBC’s York Factory department. HBC posts are also maintained at Rainy Lake, Vermilion Lake, and Lake of the Woods, with tough competition from the American Fur Company.
- 1830** Governor Simpson visits the region and Lac La Pluie is renamed Fort Frances in his wife’s honour.

- 1831** The HBC establishes a post at Shoal Lake (North West Lake of the Woods).
- 1836** The HBC establishes a post at Rat Portage, a strategic portage location between the Winnipeg River to the west and the Rainy Lake area via Lake of the Woods to the east.
- 1850s** HBC posts are established at Keewatin, Eagle Lake (Dryden), and Dinorwic.
- 1870** Shoal Lake post is closed and moved to North West Angle. By 1878 the North West Angle post is closed.
- 1870s** During this period in Lake of the Woods and Rat Portage, the lumber industry, mining, fishing, and railroad construction brings settlers and change to the area.
- 1873** Treaty 3 is concluded, opening up lands in the region for settlement.
- 1875** The “Halfbreeds of Rainy River and Lake” sign an Adhesion to Treaty 3 on September 12, 1875.
- 1880** By 1880, lumbering, mining and commercial fishing as well as some surveys are all affecting the area.
- 1890s** The HBC Rat Portage post is reorganized and maintained as a sales shop.
- 1901** HBC employees from Lac La Pluie are frequently sent to “the mouth of the river” where Rainy River drains into Lake of the Woods, where Hungry Hall is later established.

Demographics

Fur trade and census records document a persistent, inter-connected, and identifiable Métis population in the areas identified below from the early 1800s and into the early 1900s:

Lac La Pluie / Fort Frances:

Between 1838 and 1870, HBC “Lists of Servants” show a stable group of Métis surnames in Lac La Pluie/Fort Frances. As well, other “freemen” with Métis surnames appear in the vicinity of the post. A group of 85-100 Métis individuals (up to 20 families) are referred to in connection an Adhesion to Treaty 3, which was signed by Nicholas Chastelain on behalf of the ‘Halfbreeds of Rainy River and Lake’ on September 12, 1875.

In 1877, there were 7 Métis families that collected annuities on the Couchiching Reserve. As well, the 1881 census enumerates 39 individuals (10 Métis families) living just outside of the Couchiching Reserve at McIrvine Township. Many of the Métis surnames from the early 1800s continue to appear through to the 1901 census, which identifies 211 Métis individuals between Couchiching Reserve and McIrvine Township.

Lake of the Woods Area:

In 1835, the White Fish Lake (North West Lake of the Woods) outpost was inhabited by families with Métis surnames that were connected to the Lac La Pluie / Fort Frances fur trade.

Between 1875 and 1899, members of several Métis families appeared on the Treaty paylists of the Long Sault (two bands), Hungry Hall, and North West Angle Bands.

Rat Portage and Outposts:

Between 1836 and the 1890's, the Rat Portage post was managed by several Métis individuals. From the 1890s onward there are references to Métis individuals at Rat Portage, and three more were reported to occupy dwelling houses in Rat Portage. Between 1882 and 1897, at least 11 commercial fishermen in this area were identified as Métis.

Vocation and Cultural Practices

These interconnected Métis populations shared a number of customs, traditions, and common vocations, including:

- **Social Life**

HBC and NWC records provide evidence of fur traders and their First Nation or Métis wives and children interacting socially—even between competing posts—for Sunday night dances and special event get-togethers. The record also shows the Métis population of Fort Frances exhibiting a distinctive dress, embracing Christianity (Protestant and Catholic), and maintaining inter-group kinship practices (i.e., godparenting, marriage witnessing, etc.), often separate from First Nation and settler populations.

- **Post Provisioning and Niche Occupations**

At Lac La Pluie, Métis were hired as interpreters, winterers, runners, canoe-builders, interpreters, country-food providers, and fishermen, including as commercial fishermen at Lac La Pluie/Fort Frances. In particular, fishing was a staple country food at both Lac La Pluie and Rat Portage and a frequent activity of post employees at Lac La Pluie from the 1790s onwards.

The wives or partners of company employees or retired servants engaged in fort-provisioning activities such as harvesting maple sugar, gardening, snaring rabbits, fishing, and picking berries.

Records also show ongoing Métis participation in fishing as well as commercial fishing operations regulated by government; this was a distinctive feature of the Métis population not found in First Nations populations at this time.

Distinctive Collective Identity

There is evidence of a distinctive and persistent Métis population in the area of Rainy River / Rainy Lake that was intermarrying and relatively stable since the early 1800s. There is also some evidence that the Métis traders in Rainy Lake supported Cuthbert Grant's leadership of a "New Nation" in clashes between the Earl of Selkirk and the NWC in Red River.

The historic record documents Métis assisting in treaty negotiations with First Nation circa 1870 (for example, in acting as interpreters, witnesses, etc.). Further, during the treaty negotiations, the First Nations distinguished between their "children" living outside the area being able to benefit from the treaty if they come home within two years from the treaty (i.e., their direct First Nation relations) and their "halfbreed children" who have married First Nations women and live among them. There is also substantial documentation produced by Canada which consistently referred to "Indians" (i.e., First Nations) and "half-breeds" as separate groups. Certain "half-breed" families were consistently identified as such over successive generations.

Métis from Fort Frances petitioned Canada to form a separate “half-breed” band with their own chief. By 1875, it was clear that a strong sense of distinctive community had developed among the Fort Frances Métis under the leadership of Nicholas Chastelain. A “Halfbreed Adhesion” to Treaty 3 was entered into on September 12, 1875 and signed by Nicolas Chastelain as “Chief” of the “Halfbreeds of Rainy River and Lake.”

About this Document

This summary was prepared collaboratively by the Métis Nation of Ontario (“MNO”) and the Ontario Government (“Ontario”). It is based on currently available historical research on Métis in Ontario. Many of the reports reviewed and relied on to create this summary are available online at: <http://www.metisnation.org/registry/citizenship/historicresources/>. The parties will consider additional historic information as it may become available.

Identifying historic Métis communities is a necessary part of the legal requirements for establishing Métis rights, protected by section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*, however, the identification of historic Métis communities alone does not define contemporary rights-bearing Métis communities, determine who in Ontario is Métis, who holds Métis rights, or define Métis harvesting areas or territories.

This summary does not necessarily address the claims of other self-identifying Métis communities not represented by the MNO. The conclusions in this summary do not limit the potential for other historic Métis communities to be identified or the expansion of recognition historic Métis communities in the future based on additional historic research.