

# Articles

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## SAINT-LAURENT, MANITOBA: ORAL HISTORY OF A METIS COMMUNITY

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L'histoire des Métis à partir de 1985 ne dispose guère de documents; et comme il n'existe pratiquement aucun texte dû à la plume des Métis, les seules sources disponibles sont celles de l'histoire orale.

C'est pourquoi on a décidé, dans le cadre du Project de recherche en histoire orale sur les Métis, patronné par les Archives provinciales du Manitoba, d'enregistrer 22 interviews dans l'agglomération métis de Saint Laurent. Cette communauté fut choisie parce qu'elle offre un large échantillon d'un groupe qui a conservé les traits distinctifs de la culture française Métis. Le village lui-même comprend des représentants de l'industrie laitière bretonne, des pêcheurs Métis et d'autres groupes plus traditionnellement adonnés à la chasse ou la cueillette.

Les interviews montrent les rapports étroits qui existent entre la condition économique des différents groupes, bien que ce fait soit moins marqué depuis la deuxième Guerre mondiale. Les données d'histoire orale furent particulièrement utiles pour noter l'apparition des principaux changements sociaux et la réaction des groupes devant ces changements. En plus de données sur les conflits de classe et d'ethnie, l'enquête a précisé un grand nombre de points intéressants la vie de famille, le travail, les coutumes religieuses, la médecine populaire, les divertissements, la langue et le folklore des Métis.

Les principaux chercheurs estiment qu'il faudra encore recourir à des interviews pour rendre justice à la richesse et la vitalité de l'histoire des Métis.

Twentieth century Catholic Métis of French expression are truly one of Manitoba's forgotten people. Today they are chiefly remembered for Les Evenements of 1870 and 1885. That several thousands of them still live in Manitoba and consider themselves a group distinct from others is not generally known, and the history of the Métis from 1885 onward has gone unnoticed and undocumented. Since textual records created by the Métis are few and far between, the only available tool for documentation is oral history. Besides permitting the discovery and recording of facts in the narrowest sense, oral history has the advantage of communicating the ideas, attitudes, feelings and responses of human beings to the events of their lives.

During the summer of 1984 twenty-two taped interviews, varying in length from 30 minutes to 4 hours, were conducted under the auspices of the Métis Oral History Project sponsored by the Provincial Archives of Manitoba. Twenty of these were with informants who had ties of one sort or another with the Métis settlement of Saint-Laurent, situated on the south shore of Lake Manitoba. Of these, ten were conducted with people of English or French, Roman Catholic, Métis ancestry. The other ten were conducted with older

Francophones who had had extensive contact over the years with the Manitoba Métis population.

It had been decided early in the summer that the project would be oriented towards interviewing Métis people from one particular locality. When one discusses the Métis one is addressing a vast subject. Descendants of nineteenth century mixed-blood Red River families are found in all geographical areas and in all socio-economic classes of Manitoban society. Due to time and monetary limitations the project was forced to choose between interviewing Métis from one general socio-economic category, such as academics, or interviewing people of one specific settlement containing a large Métis population. The latter was favoured because it was deemed more likely to produce a series of interviews from Métis of all walks of life. The impact of differing economic situations on the Métis culture could then be evaluated.

Saint-Laurent, a predominantly French Métis town, was picked as the target community for this project. It was thought that, because of their relative isolation and numerical preponderance, the Métis living in that locality would have best preserved their French Métis heritage and culture. Saint-Laurent was also known as a town where fairly sharp economic distinctions existed. Until the 1960s, it had a poverty-stricken fringe settlement referred to as "Fort Rouge". This marginal area was situated to the east, on the other side of the tracks from the core area of the village.

A seven-day stay in the parish of Saint-Laurent produced nine formal, taped interviews plus one extensive informal one. These were later supplemented by ten additional interviews with narrators who had once been residents of the area but were now living in Winnipeg. Of these twenty interviews, three were with Oblate missionaries who had worked as parish priests in the settlement, two were with Franciscan nuns who had taught for years in Saint-Laurent, one was with a young Métis priest from one of the more affluent families of Saint-Laurent. Another interview was conducted with a "Breton" priest whose family had migrated from France and settled in the parish in the early part of this century. Four interviews were conducted with French Canadians who had been born in Saint-Laurent or had married into the community.

Besides the Métis priest, nine other interviews were conducted with Métis residents of Saint-Laurent. Five of these interviews were made with residents of the older northern section ("La Mission") of the parish and two were with southern area residents. These Métis were members of Saint-Laurent's "elite" - a term which is used here in a very relative way. These seven interviews are significant partly because they reveal severe internal friction within this group according to family, occupational and geographical criteria; that is, between the North and South sections of the settlements. The two other Métis interviewed were ex-"Fort Rouge" residents who talked and sang for hours and discussed in great detail their years in Saint-Laurent. The difference in world view between these Métis groups was striking.

These interviews with people of Saint-Laurent indicate how useful oral history can be as a tool for understanding the evolving social structure of a community. Local bonds and points of friction within the community were often inadvertently revealed by narrators recounting their

life histories. Oral history also proved to be useful in indicating where and when changes had occurred over the last fifty or sixty years and how residents reacted to them.

In the 1920s, Saint-Laurent was sharply divided between the hunters and gatherers (of Seneca root), the fishermen, and finally the dairy farmers. Ethnic divisions coincided with these economic ones. The dairy farmers were in large part "Bretons" who had come to Saint-Laurent from France in the 1920s. The first generation of Bretons were perceived by the Métis as snobs who mingled very little with the residents of the area. Even senior French Canadians who were interviewed commented that they sometimes found the Bretons "hard to take". The Bretons segregated themselves on geographical, economic and social planes. Most of them lived on farms in the north of the parish, were either large dairy farmers or merchants, and tended to speak Breton among themselves. Even their spoken French was quite different from that used by the Métis. Métis and Breton interviewees both commented that there was a big difference in the way each group "thought". Unfortunately they had difficulty in articulating what the difference was. Another indication of mutual aloofness occurred on New Year's Day, when everyone visited everyone else. There was little ethnic crossover. Also, in the first few decades after the Bretons' arrival there were few marriages between the two groups.

The fishermen and the hunter-gatherers were descendants of French and Scottish Métis who had moved during the mid-nineteenth century from the older settlements situated in southern Manitoba and North Dakota. Again, friction was quite strong between the different occupational groups. The Métis hunter-gatherers were seen by the Métis fishermen and Breton farmers as being somewhat more "traditional". Fishing and farming interviewees stated that these Métis were somehow "closer" to the Indians. Most of the hunter-gatherers lived in Fort Rouge. Many spoke Cree and Saulteaux to each other and the older women still wore the black shawl and smoked the corn pipes in the 1940s. Established Métis and Whites thought of Fort Rouge as being a tough place. In the clergy's eyes these Métis had serious problems with alcohol and, an even bigger sin, they lacked ambition. Fort Rouge families, all of which were Métis, were often quite poor: they did not own the land they occupied, and they did not possess a milk cow or plant a big garden. Winter could be a real hardship for these people. Several of the older Métis from Fort Rouge did not attend church much to the disapproval of other elements in the community. Up to the late 1950s it would seem no Fort Rouge children continued in school past grade eight.

The two old Fort Rouge residents who were interviewed expressed hostility towards the other Saint-Laurent residents. They both stated that Saint-Laurent had been a "hard" place to grow up in; that people were not friendly and tended to pick fights. They did not believe they had received their fair share of the money brought in by government sponsored projects administered by the affluent, more educated, Métis. They accused these community leaders of favoring their kin in the handouts. A cursory review of the data reveals few close kin ties between these two Métis groups prior to 1950. This may indicate that the fishing families and the hunting-gathering families originated in different areas of the province.

Since the War these ethnic divisions have tended to blur somewhat. Marriages have occurred between the fishing Métis and the farming Bretons. Also, some fishing Métis have become quite prosperous farmers. Residents

of Fort Rouge have for the most part drifted away and the little settlement no longer exists. The majority of large farms are still in "white" hands and the very poor people are still of Métis descent. Many of these poorer Métis eventually drift into the city of Winnipeg where they work as labourers. A common complaint in Saint-Laurent, especially now with the decline in fishing, is that there are no real opportunities for making a decent wage in the Interlake area.

The above is an example of what can be derived from the information acquired in the 1984 interviews. Aside from ethnic and class conflicts, data on a broad range of Métis experiences including family life, work, religious customs, healing practices, local entertainment, cooking, language and folklore were also gathered.

This project has laid the basis for understanding the dynamics behind the structures and functioning of a Manitoba Métis community. However, many more interviews will have to be made in Saint-Laurent before a truly clear picture emerges. Many of the informants who remember the community prior to what they term the "Big Change" (World War II) are elderly and in poor health and have produced little or no written records. Since the history of the Métis people and Métis communities in the twentieth century is not clearly known, and since written reports are scanty, oral history is perhaps the only remaining key to their world view. An effort should be made in the next few years to continue the interviewing of residents of Métis communities. Special emphasis should be placed on interviewing members of the poorer economic strata of Métis society. Though they are often reluctant to be taped, these are the individuals who have been most affected by the political, economic, and social changes which have occurred in this century.