

Louis Riel and the Dispersion of the American Métis

Thomas Flanagan

THE MÉTIS leader Louis Riel is perhaps best known to readers of *Minnesota History* in connection with the Red River insurrection of 1869-70. When Canada agreed to purchase Rupert's Land, the immense fur-trading preserve of the Hudson's Bay Company, no one bothered to consult the mixed-blood inhabitants of the

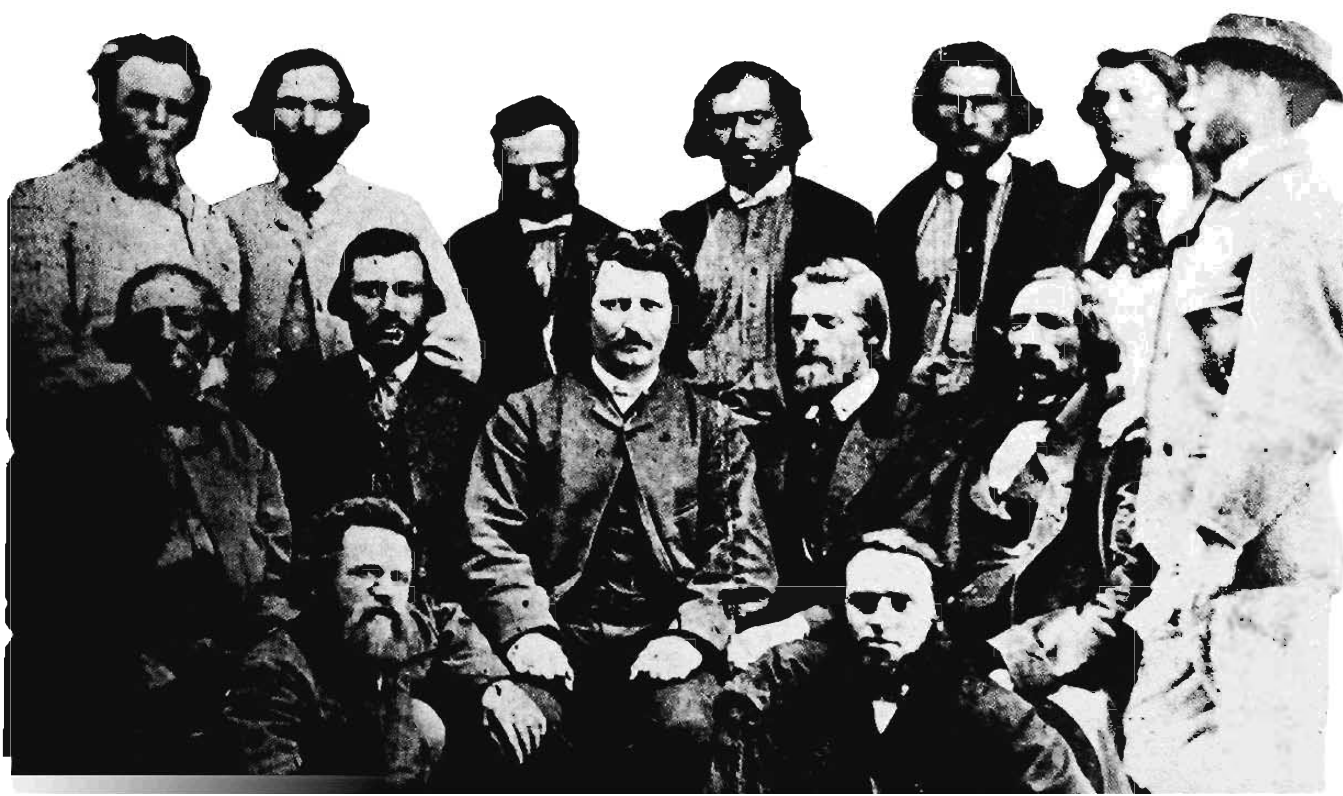
¹ Here and two paragraphs below, see two works by George F. G. Stanley: *Louis Riel* (Toronto, 1963) and *The Birth of Western Canada: A History of the Riel Rebellions* (London and New York, 1936). The former is the authoritative biography of Riel.

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country. Riel led the métis who lived at the forks of the Red and Assiniboine rivers in a movement of resistance, insisting that Canada meet certain métis demands before taking possession of Rupert's Land. The métis were clamoring for local self-government, recognition of their French language and Catholic religion, and protection of their traditional land holdings and other customary rights, such as free trade with the United States.¹

In one sense the métis resistance was a success. It forced the Canadian government into negotiations in which many of the métis demands were conceded and legally entrenched in the Manitoba Act which gave birth to the province of that name. However, the victory was tainted by the debacle of Thomas Scott's execution. Scott, an Ulster Orangeman who had also lived in Ontario, belonged to the small Canadian faction in Red

LOUIS RIEL (center) and some of his associates in 1869: top row, Charles Larocque, Pierre Delorme, Thomas Bunn, Xavier Pagée, Ambroise Lépine, Baptiste Tourond, Thomas Spence; center row, Pierre Poitras, John Bruce, Riel, W. B. O'Donoghue, François Dauphinais; front row, H. F. O'Lone, Paul Proulx.





LOUIS RIEL, about 1876

River Settlement that tried to overthrow Riel's government. The métis imprisoned Scott for "counter-revolutionary" activities and, when he proved difficult to control in captivity, executed him by firing squad on March 4, 1870. Riel wanted to make his provisional government respected, but this gratuitous act of brutality was a terrible mistake. It so inflamed opinion in Canada against Riel that he was forced to flee Manitoba when Canadian troops arrived in the new province in August, 1870.

Riel took refuge in St. Joseph, Dakota Territory. In fact, he spent about half his adult life in the United States. He was south of the Canadian border episodically in 1866-68 and 1870-75 and lived continuously in the United States from January, 1878, to June, 1884, becoming an American citizen on March 16, 1883.

Like Riel, the Red River métis are as much an American as a Canadian phenomenon. Their settlements at Pembina and St. Joseph (now Walhalla), Dakota Territory, were economically and socially a southern prolongation of the larger métis colony to the north. There was a great degree of movement and intermar-

riage between the two locations. Typically the British métis, especially from White Horse Plains, would join forces with the Pembina métis for the great buffalo hunts on the Dakota prairies. Particularly after Norman Kittson opened a trading post at Pembina in 1844, the commerce of the Red River settlement was like a barrel tapped at both ends: part flowing south to St. Paul through Pembina, part flowing north to England through Hudson Bay.²

The writing of history should transcend the political stereotypes of the nation-state. Riel and the métis are not merely Canadian topics; they are an integral part of the history of the north-central United States. Or, to put it more clearly, the 49th parallel as a political boundary was artificially imposed on the métis' social reality. Their history as a people cannot be grasped unless it is followed on both sides of the border. This article is a small step in that direction.³

After Riel's flight to safety in St. Joseph, his subsequent participation in Canadian politics was contingent on receiving an amnesty for the ill-conceived execution of Thomas Scott. Riel was three times elected Member of Parliament for the constituency of Provencher in southern Manitoba, but he could never take his seat because the Canadian capital of Ottawa lay in the province of Ontario, where there was a warrant for his arrest over the Scott affair. After much wrangling, Parliament voted Riel an amnesty of sorts on February 12, 1875, but only on condition that he be banished from Canada for five years.⁴

FOR SOME TIME Riel had found in religious mysticism a major consolation for his political reverses. The sentence of banishment opened the floodgates of prophetic inspiration. Riel began to see himself as the divinely inspired "Prophet of the New World," with a special mission to perform. He was called to reform religion in the New World and to announce that the métis were a new "Chosen People." He was staying in Washington, D.C., when the decisive breakthrough occurred in the form of an experience of mystical illumination.⁵

² Rhoda R. Gilman, Carolyn Gilman, Deborah M. Stultz, *The Red River Trails: Oxcart Routes Between St. Paul and the Selkirk Settlement 1820-1870*, 1-27 (St. Paul, 1979); Nancy L. Woolworth, "Gingras, St. Joseph, and the Métis in the Northern Red River Valley: 1843-1875," in *North Dakota History*, 42, 16-27 (Fall, 1975).

³ Alvin C. Gluek, Jr., *Minnesota and the Manifest Destiny of the Canadian Northwest: A Study in Canadian-American Relations*, especially 262-294 (Toronto, 1965).

⁴ Stanley, *Louis Riel*, especially 196-213.

⁵ Here and below, see Thomas Flanagan, *Louis "David" Riel: "Prophet of the New World,"* chapters 2 and 3 (Toronto, 1979); Thomas Flanagan, "Louis Riel: A Case Study in Involuntary Psychiatric Confinement," in *Canadian Psychiatric Association Journal*, 23:463-468 (November, 1978).

His friends thought he had lost his mind. They took him secretly back to Canada to stay with his aunt and uncle in Montreal. When they could not repress his mystical exaltation, they committed Riel to the insane asylum near Montreal on March 6, 1876. After two months he was transferred to the asylum at Beauport, a suburb of Quebec City, where he remained until his release on January 23, 1878. He seemed "cured" of his delusions only in the sense that he had become more circumspect about revealing them.

Upon his release, he went to stay with a friendly priest, Father Fabien Barnabé of Keeseville, New York. He lived there until almost the end of 1878 and fell in love with Father Barnabé's sister Evelina. Although they wished to marry, Riel could not seem to find suitable employment in the East and thus could not support her. In December, 1878, he went to St. Paul, Minnesota, hoping to interest Bishop John Ireland in a scheme to locate French-Canadian colonists in the American West. Riel succeeded in seeing Ireland, but nothing came of it. The astute bishop was probably mistrustful of Riel's reputation as a political firebrand.⁶

After spending a few days with his uncle Frank Riel in Minneapolis, Riel went north to Pembina. He could now travel by train as the railway line had been completed during 1878 to St. Vincent, just across from Pembina on the Minnesota side of the Red River. Riel remained in Pembina for a time and received some visi-

tors from Winnipeg. By March 9, 1879, at the latest, he was staying on the farm of Norman Gingras near St. Joseph.⁷

Norman, son of the pioneer trader Antoine Blanc Gingras, had long been a merchant in Pembina and St. Joseph. Now he and other members of the métis bourgeoisie were rapidly being supplanted by businessmen of a new type. Throughout the 1870s, the métis population of Pembina/St. Joseph, which had numbered perhaps as much as 2,000 at its peak, had been drifting away. The métis hunters had to follow the buffalo ever farther into Montana, the last American frontier. The able-bodied hunters left with their families, leaving behind the old and the relatively few métis who were strongly attached to commerce or farming.⁸

THIS EXODUS, which was paralleled north of the border, is a sad story that has never been fully told. For three-quarters of a century, métis of the Red River Valley, from St. Joseph to St. Boniface, had constituted a unique society. Dominating the buffalo hunt and the cart train business, they had carved out for themselves a special niche in the economy of the fur trade. Defeating the Sioux in pitched battles, they had controlled the Dakota prairies when neither the British nor American governments could have projected any power into the region. They had schools, churches, and celebrations. They even had their own language, which has recently come to light again at the Turtle Mountain Reserve in North Dakota. Assuming the métis of the last century spoke as their descendants do today, they had developed a singular Creole dialect in which the nouns were almost all French and the verbs almost all Cree. Now this distinctive and colorful society was melting away.⁹

The Icelanders and other newcomers flooding into the area probably paid little attention. As far as they were concerned, a boom was on. The population of

⁶ Flanagan, *Louis "David" Riel*, 100.

⁷ Louis Riel to Joseph Riel, March 9, 1879, in MG 3 D2, Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Winnipeg.

⁸ Woolworth, in *North Dakota History*, 42.16-18, 25-27.

⁹ John C. Crawford, "Speaking Michif in Four Métis Communities," in *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* III, 1.47-55 (1983); Patline Laverdure and Ida Rose Allard, *The Michif Dictionary, Turtle Mountain Chippewa Cree* (Winnipeg, 1983).

A CART TRAIN approaches a Pembina fort in this artist's drawing of about 1860.





FORT GARRY and Red River Settlement at the junction of the Red and Assiniboine rivers, 1846

Pembina increased from less than 200 in May, 1880, to 1,150 in May, 1882; the assessed value of property went from \$52,799 to \$291,356. St. Joseph was renamed Walhalla, and the new village of Neche was founded on the railway line, close to where William H. Moorhead had homesteaded in 1864. His farmhouse had been known as "Smuggler's Point" because it provided a convenient rendezvous for the métis free traders.¹⁰ Now all that was gone.

Riel stayed about six months in St. Joseph, writing poetry, receiving visitors from Manitoba, perhaps helping Norman Gingras with his stores and farm. In mid-August he left with a party of métis traveling to Montana Territory, the last refuge of the North American buffalo which had completely disappeared from Canada by 1878 but remained in the wilder parts of Montana in sufficient numbers that hunting could go on through 1883. They were mercilessly pursued not only by American hunters but by métis and Canadian Indians—Cree, Blackfoot, and Assiniboin—who had been advised by government authorities to cross the border if they wished to avoid starvation. Sitting Bull's people, who had taken refuge north of the line at Wood Mountain, also crossed occasionally into Montana to follow the buffalo. Riel joined a group of about 150 métis families who spent the winter in a camp on the Big Bend of the Milk River.¹¹

During the winter of 1879-80, an episode occurred

that has only recently come to light. Riel tried to take advantage of the presence of so many Indian tribes in Montana to form an alliance that could strike at Canada. He entered into delicate negotiations with all the most important chiefs: Crowfoot of the Blackfoot Confederacy, Sitting Bull of the Dakota, Big Bear of the Cree, and Red Stone of the Assiniboin. The plan was for all these hereditary enemies to unite under métis leadership. Canadian agents actively opposed Riel's efforts, but the main reason for the plan's failure seems to have been Indian suspicion of Riel's leadership. Astute chiefs like Crowfoot and Big Bear would not lightly place their people at the service of the métis. They knew that the métis, although kinsmen of the Indians, were a separate people with their own history and goals very different

¹⁰ *Pembina, Dakota Territory, the Pioneer City of the Red River Valley, and Her Industries*, 17 (Chicago and Winnipeg, 1882); Mary Ann Barnes Williams, *Origins of North Dakota Place Names*, 227, 229, 230 (Washburn, N.Dak., 1966).

¹¹ Riel's major writing accomplishment at this time (1879) was the vitriolic "A Sir John A. Macdonald," published posthumously in Louis "David" Riel, *Poésies Religieuses et Politiques*, 37-51 (Montreal, 1886); Frank Gilbert Roe, *The North American Buffalo: A Critical Study of the Species in Its Wild State*, chapter 16 (Toronto, 1951); Hugh A. Dempsey, *Crowfoot: Chief of the Blackfeet*, 115 (Edmonton, 1972). On Sitting Bull in Canada, see C. Frank Turner, *Across the Medicine Line* (Toronto, 1973) and Grant MacEwan, *Sitting Bull: The Years in Canada* (Edmonton, 1973).

from those of the Indians. They did not want to be pawns in the métis plans.¹²

ONCE THIS SCHEME collapsed, Riel turned to the project of seeking separate living space for the métis. On August 6, 1880, while the métis were camped on the Musselshell River in central Montana, he drafted a petition asking that land in Montana be set aside as a reservation for the métis. He obtained the signatures of 101 métis men who, with their families, must have represented a fair proportion of the métis population then in Montana. The petition was addressed to the renowned Indian fighter Colonel Nelson A. Miles, highest ranking officer in the region. (Riel tactfully addressed him by his higher Civil War rank of Brevet Major General.) He personally delivered the petition to Miles at Fort Keogh, Montana, on August 20, with an additional note: "If you think that the demand for a reservation cannot be acceded to, it is left to your judgement of course, to recommend what you think proper and for instance the setting aside of one or two small Halfbreed counties in

the [C]row reservation or on some other large [I]ndian reservation near the buffalo region between the Muscleshell [sic] and the Yellowstone."¹³

The petition is given below in its entirety except for the signatures, which are given later in the identification table. All signatures are in Riel's hand except for the first 14 names, which seem to be in the hand of someone else. Curiously, Riel did not sign the petition himself.

Muscleshell [sic] River M.T.

August 6th 1880.

Bvt Maj. Genl. N.A. Miles

U.S.A.

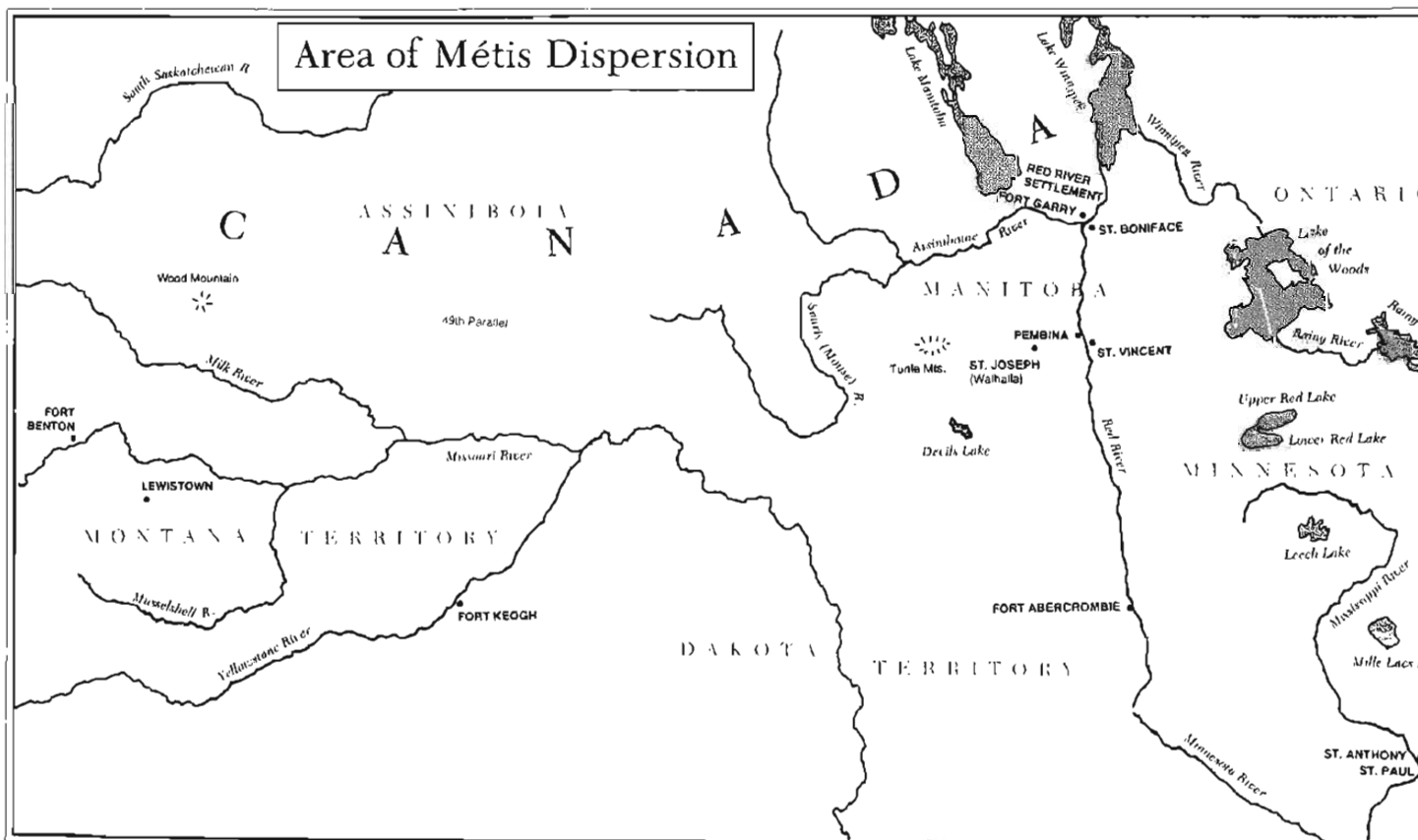
General:

We the undersigned Halfbreeds, have the honour to lay before you the following petition, trusting to your kindness to forward it through to the proper authorities of the U.S. Government at Washington, hoping also, from your knowledge of our people and habits that you will represent to the government our claims to a favorable hearing.

We ask the government to set apart a portion of land as a special reservation in this territory for the half-breeds, as, scattered amongst other settlers, it becomes a very difficult matter for us to make a living and owing to our present limited means and want of experience in

¹² Flanagan, Louis "David" Riel, 105-109.

¹³ Louis Riel to Nelson A. Miles, August 20, 1880, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, National Archives Record Group (NARG) 94, in Washington, D.C.



economy, we cannot compete with the majority of our fellow countrymen.

Our want of legal knowledge has also been a stumbling block in our way, as, often defrauded by tricky men, we have again been as individuals put to expense in the law courts uselessly, and this alone has rendered us often unable to remain more than four or five years at a time in one place without becoming completely impoverished. If the U.S. govern. would kindly consider this petition we promise that our first measure would be to completely exclude liquor of all kinds from the reservation.

We would also respectfully ask that a sum of money be appropriated for us, for a certain period, for the following purposes[.]

1. to erect and support schools, and for pay of competent teachers.
2. for providing us with necessary agricultural implements.
3. for providing farming seeds, potatoes etc for spring sowing, as a commencement[.]
4. for a certain amount of cows, pigs, sheep and chickens. In asking this we would respectfully state that we would have no need for the clothes and provisions annually issued to indians by Government

We promise on our part to endeavour to live as law abiding people and in case we succeed in getting a reservation set apart, we ask that all Halfbreeds entering said reservations and settling on land shall own that land according to the homestead, preemption or timber acts or such other way as the government may desire.

We ask the government to kindly consider that as halfbreeds we stand between the civilized and uncivilized man, and are closely related with the several tribes of the northwest, owing to which fact we indirectly exercise some influence and from the indian blood in our veins, we are inclined to believe that indians will listen to us more favorably than to the majority of those who are not connected by family ties with them

If the government would wish to use our influence, such as it is amongst the indians we freely offer it and will always be ready to do everything that lays in our power to fulfill [any] peaceful mission; and if it should be desired to have halfbreed scouts a willing answer to the call would be given.

Trusting that the above petition may meet with favorable consideration

We remain General Your most obedient servants.¹⁴

Although the petition is largely self-explanatory, a few comments may be helpful. First, the document refers to the signatories as "halfbreeds." The use of *métis* as an English word appears to be a 20th-century innovation now that "halfbreed" has become pejorative in connotation. The substitution of "*métis*" for "halfbreed" should be investigated as part of the development of ethnic consciousness: it is as significant in its own context as the replacement of "negro" by "black" or "Es-kimo" by "Inuit."¹⁵ Second, the hostility against liquor

was a lifelong cause with Riel. In this he was a faithful disciple of the Oblate missionaries who had repeatedly tried to reform the *métis*. Indeed, Riel's project of settling the *métis* on land as an agricultural people was a continuation of what the missionaries had always preached. For generations they had done their best to turn the buffalo-hunting *métis* into western *habitants*. Third, Riel made no attempt to assert any *métis* rights against the American government; he asked for the reservation solely as a favor from the authorities. This was in sharp contrast to his politics north of the border, where he consistently advocated a doctrine of aboriginal title to land, a theory widely held by the *métis*.¹⁶

It is not apparent from the rest of Riel's writings whether he had an intellectual reason for not introducing the concept of aboriginal title into American politics, or whether, overawed by American military might, he simply thought such claims were hopeless south of the 49th parallel. From a historical point of view, the *métis* probably had as much of a claim to the Dakota and Montana prairies as they did to the Canadian Northwest.

Colonel Miles was sympathetic to Riel's petition. Noting that the *métis* "running about over the country results in no benefit to themselves, and has a very injurious influence upon the different Indian tribes," he endorsed the petition for "favorable consideration" and forwarded it to General Alfred H. Terry, commander of the Department of Dakota in St. Paul. Terry was less sanguine. "I know of no action which can be taken in this

¹⁴ This version is taken from a copy in Riel's hand in MG 3 D1, 390, Provincial Archives of Manitoba. A copy in another hand is in the Records of the Adjutant General's Office, NARG 94. The only important difference between the two versions is that in the latter the word "non-sectarian" has been inserted after "schools" in the first item of the fourth paragraph. The list of signatures is found only with the National Archives copy.

¹⁵ Such a study remains to be done. The author has the impression that developments in Alberta in the 1930s may have been instrumental in introducing the term "*métis*" into English. In 1932 "L'Association des Métis d'Alberta et des Territoires du Nord-Ouest" was founded. Although most members were French speaking, the association also included some English-speaking activists, especially Jim Brady and Malcolm Norris. In 1934 the provincial government then ordained a royal commission to inquire "into the condition of the Half-breed population of Alberta." This commission heard extensively from Brady and Norris and also visited the (French) *métis* villages in Alberta. Its report led to the *Métis Population Betterment Act*, 1938, establishing colonies in northern Alberta known as "*Métis Settlements*." See Murray Dobbin, *The One-And-A-Half Men*, chapters 4-6 (Vancouver, 1981).

¹⁶ Thomas Flanagan, "Louis Riel and Aboriginal Rights," in Ian L. Getty and Antoine S. Lussier, *As Long as the Sun Shines and Water Flows: A Reader in Canadian Native Studies*, 247-262 (Vancouver, 1983).

matter," he wrote.¹⁷ Nonetheless the document went up until it reached the Secretary of War, sideways to the Secretary of the Interior, then down to the Office of Indian Affairs for comment. Advice was finally sought from someone in the field, A. R. Keller, agent on the Crow reservation in Montana. This very large body of land would have been an obvious place to settle the métis, as indeed Riel had proposed in his covering letter to Miles. Agent Keller's response furnished the *raison d'être* for the subsequent decision to deny the métis request for a reservation. It is also of considerable ethnographic interest as a description of métis life of the period.

United States Indian Service
Crow Agency, Montana
March 10, 1881

Hon. R[oland] E. Trowbridge
Commissioner Indian Affairs
Washington, D.C.
Sir.

Your "Montana L.W. 2086, 1880" is at hand, containing petition of Louis Reil [*sic*] and other half-breeds for Government aid, and in reply have to say, that after having given the matter considerable attention[,] the demand therein contained seems a little extraordinary. They are descended from the Cree tribe of Indians, located in the dominion of Canada. They are nomadic in their habits having oscillated for many years between the Canadian border and the United States. They move by means of carts composed *wholly* [*sic*] of wood to each of which, they attach a pony, and transport their camp equipage thereon. They are all of the Catholic faith of religion, and observe the forms of the church. They are very rarely long in any one place as they are natural barterers, trading in anything and everything, in demand in an Indian camp from a cartridge to a gallon of whiskey. They talk fluently nearly all the languages of this northern latitude including our own. They move in bodies of from one hundred to one thousand carts and are deemed very formidable warriors, always on good terms with all tribes no matter what relation they may sustain to our Government. During all the incursions of the hostile Sioux into our country, they were almost constantly coming into contact with these half-breeds

but never in a hostile manner. In fact I have never yet heard of a collision between them even in an individual capacity. They dress like Americans and are experts in hunting fishing and trapping. They have intelligence and some education but in this country have made little progress in agriculture. In what spirit other tribes might receive them I have no means of knowing but the Crows, would resist very determinedly any attempt to plant them on this reservation, nor do I think that they would exert a wholesome influence upon these Indians. They are British subjects, possessing however the habits customs and manners of the aborigines [*sic*] in the main, but with superior intelligence and cunning which render them dangerous. As is usual in such cases they imbibe the evils of civilization without its virtues. They would certainly be an undesirable class of population to encourage to settle in this Territory, and I cannot understand on what theory they can claim bounty from this Government or to be pensioners thereon especially as have so many of our own more worthy and more deserving unprovided for. Their custom of trading whiskey to Indians is known as far as their record is known, and our Indians enumerate this as one of their objections to the Half-breeds. I certainly deplore their masquerading over the country to and fro, between the United States and Canada. If the Government has more land than she knows how to dispose of, give them a portion entirely remote from the Indians and if not, let them either return to the Red River of the north, where they belong, or go to work, as our own citizens are compelled to do, to open up a home. If they do not do this our own enterprising population will want it, the land, in the near future. I cannot comprehend in what respect they have claims superior to our own patriotic citizens. It would be a travesty on justice, and a premium on indolence and vice.

They are not only making no progress for themselves, but are without the pale of authority and control, except the military which is usual[ly] remote from them, and are positively demoralizing to full-blood Indians.

I am Very Respectful[ly],
Your Ob't-Serv't.
A.R. Keller
U.S. Ind. Agt.¹⁸

¹⁷ Endorsement of Nelson A. Miles, September 16, 1880, and Second Endorsement of Alfred H. Terry, September 24, 1880, both in NARG 94.

¹⁸ A. R. Keller to R. E. Trowbridge, March 10, 1881, United States Indian Service, letters received, 6007 (1880), NARG 94.

¹⁹ Information in this table has been collated from the following sources: Patricia C. Harpole and Mary D. Nagle, *Minnesota Territorial Census, 1850*, 18-36 (St. Paul, 1972); United States, *Census, Dakota Territory, 1860, 1870*; genealogical collection of Mrs. Ruth Charest of Minneapolis, which is based in part on parish records of St. Joseph; the compilation of the Red River population in D. N. Sprague and R. P. Frye, comps., *The Genealogy of the First Métis Nation: The Development and Dispersal of the Red River Settlement 1820-1900* (Winnipeg, 1983).

Keller's superiors in Indian Affairs would immediately seize upon his assertion that the métis were "British subjects" and were "descended from the Cree tribe of Indians, located in the dominion of Canada" as a reason to deny the petition. To check this assertion, let us turn to an analysis of the identities of those who signed the petition. For a largely illiterate people, the métis are astonishingly well documented for genealogical purposes, so that it is possible to identify with reasonable certainty about 80 percent of the 101 signatories to the petition. Below, the 101 names are grouped by family and arranged alphabetically. Place of birth, community affiliation, approximate age in 1880, and family relationships are also given, where information is available.¹⁹

IDENTIFICATION OF SIGNATORIES TO LOUIS RIEL'S PETITION

Surname	Christian Name	Place of Birth	Affil. Commun.	App. Age in 1880	Family Relationship	Surname	Christian Name	Place of Birth	Affil. Commun.	App. Age in 1880	Family Relationship
Adam(s)	Baptiste Sr.	RR?	RR	60	Father of Jérémie & Moïse	Davis	Joseph	Pem	Pem	18	
"	Jérémie	RR	RR	29		"	Michel	Pem	Pem	28	
"	Moïse	RR	RR	39		"	William Sr.	?	Pem	57	Father of Joseph, Michel, William Jr.
Alary	André Sr.	?	Pem	60	Father of André Jr.	"	William Jr.	RR	Pem	36	
"	André Jr.	Pem	Pem	27		Ducharme	Cléophas	?	?	?	
"	Baptiste Sr.	RR	RR	40	Father of Baptiste	Fagnant	Moïse	RR	RR	40	Brother of William & Xavier
"	Charles	?	?	?		"	Théophile	?	?	?	
"	Baptiste	RR	RR	17		"	William	RR	RR	27	
Amyot	Arthur	Pem	Pem	22		"	Xavier	RR	RR	38	
"	François Sr.	RR	Pem	60	Father of François Jr.	Fleury	Antoine Sr.	?	Pem	40	Father of Antoine Jr.
"	François Jr.	RR	Pem	37		"	Antoine Jr.	Pem?	Pem	?	
"	Gabriel	?	?	?		"	Louis	?	?	?	
"	Joseph	?	?	?	Son of François Sr. or father of Arthur	Gariépy	Baptiste Sr.	?	RR	?	
						"	Baptiste	?	RR	?	
Azur(e)	Alexandre	Pem	Pem	32		"	Elie	?	RR	?	
Beauchamp	Pierre	?	?	?		"	Jean-Baptiste Jr.	?	RR	?	
Bellegarde	Baptiste	RR	Pem	38		"	Léonide	?	RR	?	
Bellehumeur	François	RR	RR	?		"	Louis	?	RR	?	
"	Jean	RR	RR	?		George	Hyacinthe	RR	RR	25	
"	Patrice	RR	RR	?		Hamlin	Elzéar	?	?	?	
Berger	Bernard	Pem	Pem	25		"	Jonas Sr.	?	Pem	51	Father of Jonas Jr. & Patrice
"	F. Xav.	RR	Pem	36		"	Jonas Jr.	Pem	Pem	23	
"	Isidore	Pem	Pem	34		"	Patrice	Pem	Pem	25	
"	Jacques	Pem	Pem	29		"	Salomon	?	?	?	
"	Jean Baptiste	Pem	Pem	31		"	Sévère Jr.	?	?	?	
"	Pierre Sr.	RR	Pem	64	Father of the others	"	Sévère Sr.	?	?	?	
"	Pierre Jr.	RR	Pem	38		Houle	Ambroise	?	?	?	
Bird	Thomas	?	RR	?		"	Antoine	RR	Pem	42	
Boyer	Abraham	RR	RR	35		Jérôme	L. M.	RR	Pem	46	
Cardinal	Bonaventure	?	?	?		Klyne	Benjamin	RR	Pem	35	
"	Jacques	?	?	?		Lafontaine	Antoine	RR	RR	31	Brother of Bernard & Octave
"	Narcisse	RR	RR	49		"	Baptiste	RR	RR	31	Cousin of others
"	Narcisse Jr.	RR	RR	?	Presumably son of Narcisse	"	Bernard	RR	RR	26	
	Pierre	RR	Pem	49		"	Octave	Pem	RR	27	
Charbonneau	Pierre	RR	Pem	35		Laframboise	William	?	RR	29	
Charette	Jean	RR	Pem	37	Brother of Joseph	Lambert	George	Pem	Pem	29	
"	Joseph	Pem	Pem	30		Larance	Thomas	RR	Pem	37	
Daigneau	François	?	Pem	40		Larocque	Baptiste	?	?	?	
						"	Joseph	?	?	?	
						Latreille	Moïse	Can	Pem	33	

Surname	Christian Name	Place of Birth	Comm. Affil.	App. Age in 1860	Family Relationship
Laverdure	Daniel	?	?	?	
"	François	Pem	Pem	27	
"	Pierre	Pem	Pem	61	Father of François & Xavier
"	Xavier	Pem	Pem	37	
Leclair	Johnny	?	?	?	
Ledoux	Baptiste	?	Pem	36	
Léveillé	Pierre	?	RR	?	
Lyonnais	Jean Marie	?	Pem	22	Brother of Joseph
"	Joseph (Joe)	?	Pem	35	
Marion	Norman	?	RR	29	
Norvest	Charles	?	?	?	
Ouellette	Antoine	?	RR	45	
"	François	RR	RR	33	Brother of Joseph & Moïse
"	Joseph	RR	RR	46	
"	Moïse	RR	RR	50	
Parisien	Joseph	?	RR	?	
Rainville	Jonas	Pem	Pem	24	
St. Denis	Michel	?	RR	?	
St. Matt	Alexandre	RR	RR	23	
"	Louis	?	RR	?	
Turcotte	Baptiste	RR	RR	43	
Vivier	Michel	RR	RR	35	
Wells	Edouard	RR	Pem	43	
Wilkey	Alexandre	RR	Pem	49	

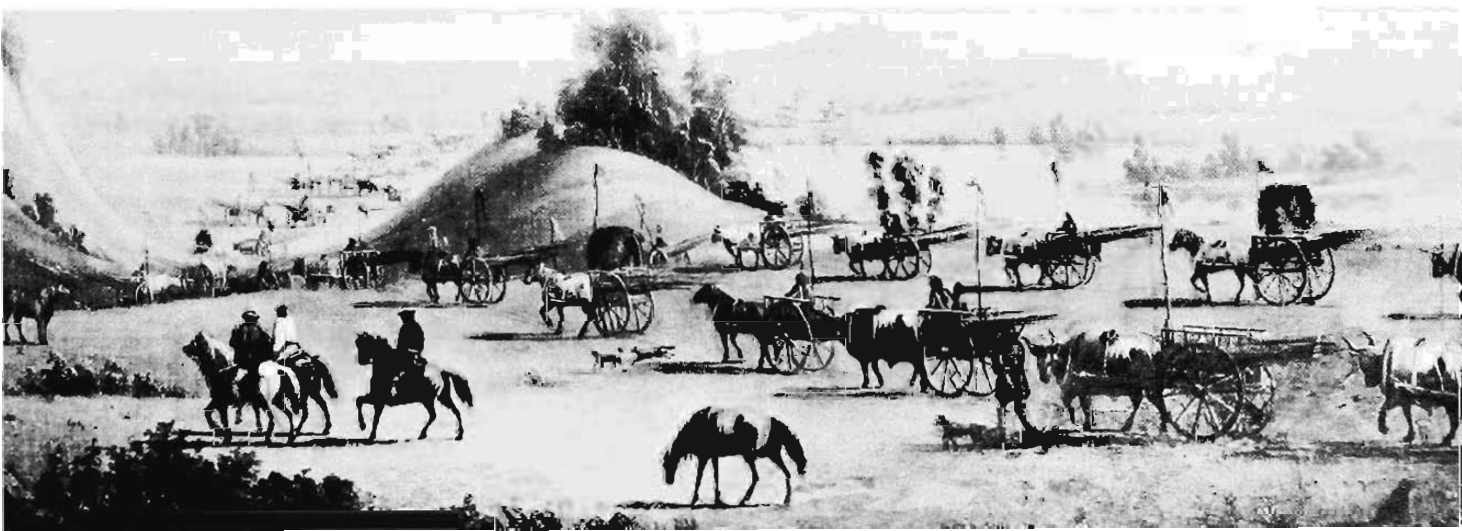
ANALYSIS of the data in the table yields several interesting conclusions about the social organization of this métis hunting party. First, this was an exclusively French group. A few English names like Wilkey, Wells, and Davis appear in the list, but always with French Christian names. These were families of English background that had become assimilated into the French-speaking buffalo hunters. The composition of this group supports William L. Morton's thesis that Red River was a dual society of French and English segments. The métis and the English half-breeds may not have lived in watertight subdivisions but were nonetheless socially distinct from each other.²⁰

Second, this was a relatively young group. The only men over 50 were fathers accompanied by one or more sons. This is not surprising in view of the physical demands of hunting buffalo.

Third, there was a strong predominance of patrilineal clans. Of the 101 names, 76 apparently belonged to patrilineal groups, either several sons and a father (e.g., Berger, Laverdure) or several brothers (e.g., Ouellette). Unfortunately a few clans like the Gariépy and Cardinal groups cannot be disentangled because of missing data. It is also regrettable that we do not have enough information on marriages to see if there were other underlying patterns of kinship. It is tantalizing to note, for example, that the first two men to sign the petition, Alexander Wilkey and Pierre Berger, Sr., may have been related by marriage. Berger's wife was named Judith Wilkey, but her connection with Alexandre Wilkey (or Wilkie) is unclear. The latter was the son of Jean Baptiste Wilkey, who had captained a great buffalo hunt in 1840, as described by Alexander Ross.

²⁰ See W. L. Morton's editorial introduction to *Alexander Begg's Red River Journal and Other Papers Relative to the Red River Resistance of 1869-1870*, 1-148 (Toronto, 1956).

RED RIVER MÉTIS, with carts, shown heading for a buffalo hunt in this Paul Kane painting, 1846





HARD-RIDING MÉTIS horsemen attack buffalo in this painting by Paul Kane, 1846.

Alexandre Wilkey had himself been a leading figure in St. Joseph before his departure. Pierre Berger was also a leader of his people and is considered one of the founders of Lewistown, Montana. It is likely that more complete knowledge would show that the patriarchs of these clans were connected to each other by marriage, so that what on paper looks like a congeries of names was actually a highly structured kinship network.²¹

Fourth, it seems that almost all these families derived in some way from the métis of Red River. Of the 46 names represented on the petition, only four (Bellegarde, Berger, Latreille, Norwest) are not found in the records of the Red River colony. In contrast, none of the 46 names appears among the names of the métis baptized by the Right Reverend Mathias Loras, Bishop of Dubuque, when in 1839 he visited St. Peter's mission, one of the forerunners of the city of St. Paul. It is clear that when the Old Northwest became Americanized, there was "a population of ten thousand to fifteen thousand residents of métis communities south and west of Lakes Superior and Huron," but it is not clear to what extent these métis may have moved west and contributed to the métis population of Red River and the Great Plains. Individual cases are known, such as the French-Canadian trader Jean Baptiste Nolin, who moved his métis wife and children from Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, to Fort Daer, the predecessor of Pembina, but no systematic study of such movements has been done. Among the signers of Riel's petition one notices a few names associated with the American fur trade in Minnesota (for example, Rainville, Norwest), but the overwhelming majority seems to derive from Red River.

Whether behind this Red River origin lie further links to the American Middle West is a question that awaits further research. Nothing would contribute more to métis studies at the present time than a thorough investigation of the transnational character of the métis population.²²

Even if Riel's petitioners all seem to be directly or indirectly of Red River origin, many had been living a long time in the United States at Pembina or St. Joseph. Community affiliation, defined as the location where the individual appears to have spent the longest part of his life before migrating to Montana, was tabulated where possible. Pembina/St. Joseph contributed 43 names and Red River 40, while 18 were unidentified. Those from Red River were mostly from the parish of St. François-Xavier (White Horse Plains), where many buffalo hunters lived. Thus this group resembled the buffalo-hunting parties of the past, in which groups from White Horse Plains would travel south to merge with their kinsmen from Pembina and hunt in the Dakota prairies.

Of the 43 métis heads of families from Pembina St.

²¹ Alexander Ross, *The Red River Settlement: Its Rise, Progress, and Present State*, 248 (Reprint ed., Minneapolis, 1957).

²² M. M. Hollmann, "New Light on Old St. Peter's and Early St. Paul," in *Minnesota History*, 8:27-51 (March, 1927); Jacqueline Peterson, "Ethnogenesis: Settlement and Growth of a 'New People' in the Great Lakes Region, 1702-1815," 42 (paper submitted to the Newberry Library Conference on the métis in North America, Chicago, September, 1981); Jerry Lemay, "Charles Nolin: Bourgeois Métis 1837-1907," 2 (unpublished paper, photocopy in Manitoba Historic Resources Branch, Winnipeg, 1979).

Joseph, at least 16 had actually been born in Red River but had been brought as small children to Dakota in the late 1840s when the Hudson's Bay Company tried to suppress the métis free traders. Many at that time followed their priest, Father Georges Antoine Belcourt, to Pembina, when the company expelled him from Assiniboia for supporting the free traders.²³

Petitioners' names such as Berger, Laverdure, Wilkie, Klyne, and several others were all found in the census of Pembina County taken in 1850, when it was still part of the Minnesota Territory. By 1880 these métis had lived over three decades in the United States. Most had probably never been formally naturalized, but to call them British subjects was clearly misleading. The group as a whole thus had a majority of de facto American citizens, although there was admittedly a large minority of British subjects who had only crossed the line within the last few years.

IN ANY EVENT, the accuracy of Agent Keller's assertion about citizenship did not probably matter very much to his superiors. It was a convenient rationalization to settle the matter and avoid facing up to the more difficult issue of whether the government should create a reservation for, or in some other way make a land grant to, the métis as a collectivity with a distinct identity. American policy had always been to deal with mixed-bloods either by allowing them to become Indians on a reservation or to give them individual grants of money or land. The latter strategy was repeatedly followed with the French métis of the Old Northwest, who acted as brokers between the Indians and the United States government when what is now the American Middle West was ceded by treaty.²⁴

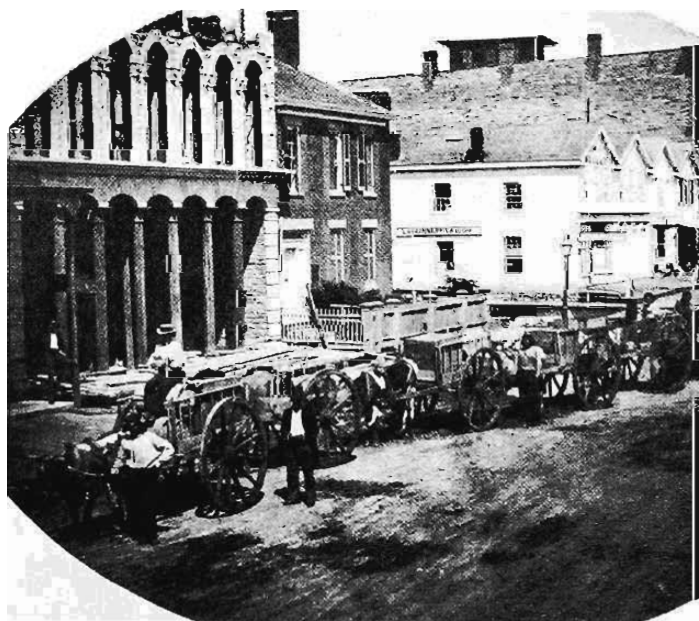
Both strategies had the consequence of preventing the emergence of an officially recognized métis "nation"

as an enduring collective presence different from either Indians or whites. Yet the establishment of such an entity was Riel's goal. His petition asked for land to be set aside solely for the métis, who "as half-breeds [stood] between the civilized and uncivilized man." The document attributed the plight of the métis to the fact that they were "scattered amongst other settlers." Although not spelled out, the claim was implied for all métis and not just for the signatories to the petition: officials reading the petition understood its purpose to be not just a benefit to a few individuals but "a reservation for the Half-breeds scattered throughout the Territory [of Montana]." Thus Riel's request was deeply at variance with the traditional orientation of American Indian policy.²⁵

Systematic research has not been done to track the subsequent movements of the métis petitioners, but they certainly dispersed. The Azures lived for some years near St. Peter's Mission on the Sun River, but Antoine Azure, at least, later returned to the Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota, as did Baptiste Bellegarde and probably others. Joseph and Moïse Ouellette returned to Canada, where they had reasonably well-established homes near Batoche on the South Saskatchewan River. The Berger and Laverdure clans settled in numbers in and around Lewistown, Montana, as did Benjamin Klyne. Lewistown was in its early years almost a métis community but gradually lost that character.

This geographical and social dispersion was matched by loss of legal identity. When the métis settled as homesteaders, as around Lewistown, they were treated

LINED UP on a St. Paul street in 1859 is a Red River cart train about to return to the north.



²³ Father Belcourt left Red River in October, 1847, and took up residence in Pembina in August, 1848. See J. M. Belteau, *Brief History of Old Pembina 1818-1832*, [9-10] (n.p., 1939). This pamphlet is in the Minnesota Historical Society library.

²⁴ In 1851 Governor Alexander Ramsey of Minnesota Territory negotiated a treaty for cession of the Red River Valley from the Red Lake and Pembina bands of Ojibway. He took the position that the Indians, not the métis, owned the land. See Willoughby M. Babcock, "With Ramsey to Pembina: A Treaty-Making Trip in 1851," in *Minnesota History*, 38:7 (March, 1962). However, the métis of Pembina were to receive free land at the rate of one-quarter section per family. Woolworth, in *North Dakota History*, 42:20, notes that this would have provided a benefit to the métis without creating a corporate entity to whom the government would have continuing obligations. In any event, the treaty was not ratified by the United States Senate.

²⁵ H[iram] Price, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, to Secretary of the Interior, May 14, 1881, Office of Indian Affairs, Record Book, M348, roll 39, NARC 94.

legally the same as white settlers. When they were accepted onto Indian reservations, it was under the legal fiction of being Indian. Thus the residents of Turtle Mountain are all legally considered Chippewa (Ojibway) Indians, even though the majority are ethnically métis. What had once been a cohesive and distinctive society centered at Pembina/St. Joseph had become a diaspora submerged within the larger American society.

The Canadian government would have liked to see a similar outcome in Canada. To pacify the métis insurgents of 1869-70, a land grant was ordained which, although generous in the amounts of land involved, was carefully structured to give the land in severalty rather than in common. Title was also made readily transferable. The result was that many métis of Red River sold their allotments in a veritable orgy of speculation and used the proceeds to move farther west.²⁶ The Canadian government would have preferred to let matters rest there, with a de facto diaspora, but the agitation of Louis Riel in 1883-85 forced it once again to take up métis claims. The result was a repetition of the land grants to métis every time that Indian title to land was extinguished through treaty in the three prairie provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, as well as in the Northwest Territories.²⁷

These land grants were always in severalty and highly negotiable so as to facilitate sale and forestall emergence of a consolidated métis land base. Yet the mere repetition of the grants created a tradition of treating the métis as an aboriginal people with their own identity distinct from the Indians. This partial and implicit recognition was greatly heightened in the package of constitutional amendments formally adopted in 1982: "(1) The existing aboriginal and treaty rights of the aboriginal peoples of Canada are hereby recognized and affirmed; (2) In this Act, 'aboriginal peoples of Canada' includes the Indian, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada."²⁸

At the moment, these are still only words. No legal substance has yet been given to the status of being métis. They themselves are still geographically scattered without any land of their own apart from what they may possess individually. Negotiations, however, are under way among the federal government, provincial governments, and native leaders, and it seems possible that some form of legal métis status will eventually emerge to parallel the status of being Indian or Inuit.²⁹

It is interesting to speculate what might have ensued south of the border if the American government had granted Riel's request. If a métis reservation had been formed in Montana, and if Riel had remained there to lend it the prestige of his name, it might have attracted many métis then in the Canadian Northwest. A cohesive society, openly acknowledged as métis, might have re-

sumed its existence there. The United States, together with or instead of Canada, might today be faced with dealing with both métis and Indians rather than just Indians.

Such counterfactual speculations do not affect history as it really was, but they do show that history results from human choices. The métis were a transnational community in the 19th century. That they have acquired at least a shadowy legal identity in Canada while being dispersed without recognition in the United States is a consequence of political decisions in the two countries. It remains to be seen whether recent developments in Canada may have some impact on ethnic politics in the United States, encouraging the métis to re-emerge as a distinct and acknowledged group. Two straws in the wind are the astonishing popularity of métis genealogy and the growing interest in métis history by American historians. It is not impossible that such trends could signal an awakening of métis ethnic consciousness in the contemporary United States.³⁰

²⁶ D. N. Sprague, "The Manitoba Land Question," in *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 15:74-84 (Fall, 1980); D. N. Sprague, "Government Lawlessness in the Administration of Manitoba Land Claims, 1870-1887," in *Manitoba Law Journal*, 10:415-441 (1980).

²⁷ The best account, published by the Métis Association of Alberta, is Joe Sawchuk, Patricia Sawchuk, Theresa Ferguson, *Métis Land Rights in Alberta: A Political History*, chapter 4 (Edmonton, 1981). When the métis of Saskatchewan appealed to Riel for leadership in 1884, he established a provisional government in 1885. The rebellion that followed was crushed by Canadian forces. Riel was found guilty of treason and hanged November 16, 1885. He is buried in St. Boniface, Manitoba.

²⁸ Canada, Constitution Act, 1982, part II, section 35. "Rights of the Aboriginal Peoples of Canada."

²⁹ The first ministers' conferences on native affairs were held in Canada in March, 1983, and 1984. Two more such conferences are scheduled to take place by 1987.

³⁰ Practitioners of métis genealogy appear to be almost everywhere in north-central and northwestern United States as well as in western Canada. See also Virginia Rogers, "The Indians and the Métis: Genealogical Sources on Minnesota's Earliest Settlers," in *Minnesota History*, 46:286-296 (Fall, 1979). An example of historians' interest in the métis was the conference on "The Métis in North America" held at the Newberry Library, Chicago, in 1981. The seminal publication in the rediscovery of the American métis is Jacqueline Peterson, "Prelude to Red River. A Social Portrait of the Great Lakes Métis," in *Ethnohistory*, 25:41-67 (Winter, 1978).

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