

THE METIS

When the French came to North America, they were supported by trading companies. One of them was called "Les Cents Associes". Those companies were given the monopoly of trade with the Indians to cover their expenses. Their king required them to bring so many settlers in a certain period of time. In a short time they had their representatives among the Indians. And these went further and further inland in quest of fur. They took the ways of transport and travel of the natives: the birchbark canoe. Some of these were over thirty (30) feet long and could hold four to six men plus baggage. With those canoes the Voyageurs would go as far as the Winnipeg Lake and even down the Mississippi River. Many of them stayed with the Indians and married Indian girls. Their children were not Indians and were not white. They called themselves Metis. Half-breeds, in English, but they were insulted if you called them half-breed. On the water and in the woods, they could and would stand real hardships and thrive on that kind of life. But farming was not their cup of tea. When the white men came to the prairies and started to take over the land, the Metis fought for their rights of first settlers. They were given some land but did not do much to cultivate their little farms and most of them sold their land. When I was among them in the forties, they were really poor, working on neighboring farms, living in log cabins. Sometimes they would get up late to skip breakfast because they did not have enough to eat. They got some relief from the government and from charitable organizations. Efforts were made by the Oblates to organize them on cooperative farms but that did not last.

A few of them managed to break through the barrier of poverty and reach a good education and good social standing. Louis Riel was one of them. And I have known a few priests and nuns among them. Nobody starved that I know of, but malnutrition was taking its toll especially among the children. Smart they sure were and deadly with a rifle. During World War II, they had quite a reputation as snipers, especially at Dieppe. They were always the friend of the priest and he did all he could to help them. When the missionaries came to the prairies and started their civilizing work among the Indian warriors, very few of them were put to torture and death and no doubt it was due to the protection and influence of the Metis. In the early 1700s one Jesuit was killed by the Objibwes on Lake of the Woods. In the IBOOs one priest was killed in northern Manitoba by Indians instigated by anti-Catholic white men and later two Oblate Fathers were killed in northern Saskatchewan during the Metis uprising. I figure that is a good record compared with the rest of the world mission fields. Of course, a lot more was done for the Indians than for the Metis

and I do not know why. I have heard how a Metis galloping on the prairie could bring down a crow flying across his way. Half a dozen or more of them hunting buffalo galloping along the running herd they knew after the shooting which animal was theirs even if they had shot three or more each. They were not very rich but if they had food the table was for any of the neighbors who were hungry. The Indians are like this. The lucky hunters share with the unlucky. That way nobody starves, but nobody gets rich. Is it so bad? After all, it is not what we have that matters, but what we are.

In the early 1800s Lord Selkirk received a grant in the district of the Red River, south of Lake Winnipeg. He brought some white settlers there. When the Metis saw that the fur trading companies were no longer the absolute masters of the country, one of them, I think his name was Dauphinais, was delegated to Montreal to interview Lord Selkirk and request priests. He set out alone on snowshoes in the dead of winter and reached Montreal. The Lord was at a party. The delegate was not dressed in a way to make him welcome to the party, but he went and you can bet that he did not take time to take a shower before. When the guards at the door objected, he pushed them aside and contacted the Lord. He told him who he was, where he came from and why he had come that far. He got what he wanted. Shortly after, priests arrived at the Red River Settlement for the joy of the Metis and salvation of the Indians.

Of course, the Metis themselves had lost piety during the years they had lost contact with the priests. But they were still religious and caught up with their ideals. Their Indian wives became Christians. After a sermon one day, one of them turned to her husband and said: "You always said that you loved me and you never told me about the Great Spirit." In a short time, one of the missionaries, Fr. Provencher, was made Bishop of all of western and northwestern Canada. He did his best to get help and a new congregation. The Oblate Missionaries of Mary Immaculate answered. Those dedicated men went as far as the Pacific Ocean and even to the last Eskimo on the islands of the Arctic Ocean. They wrote one of the most glorious pages of the History of the Catholic Church.

The good Bishop settled near Winnipeg on the Red River. He imported farm implements and cattle and tried to interest his Metis friends in farming but the poor Metis had been too long on the hunting and fur trading trails. It took a long time before he could interest them even in making little vegetable gardens. One night, in the Fall after he had butchered a pig, he was awakened by a strange noise. He got up and went outside to find a thief running with his meat. He caught up with him and retrieved his property but when the thief told him that his family had been without food for some days, the good Bishop let him have half the pig.

After awhile, the good Bishop sent a Metis boy back east to be educated and hopefully to become a priest. The boy was good and smart but he never became a priest. He went into politics and fought for the rights of his people against the invading white settlers who had no consideration for the rights of the Metis and the Indians. Louis Riel was the name of the boy. He got something but it cost him his life.

