

## MULTICULTURALISM IN THE PAST

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*Multicultural: Of or having a number [two or more] of distinct cultures existing side by side in the same country, province, etc. — Gage Canadian Dictionary.*

In Canada, multiculturalism is considered to be of sufficient value as to merit support and promotion by way of legislation, official policy, and public programming. In Manitoba, multicultural heritage is celebrated each year in the many ethnic festivals and celebrations held throughout the province. The most conspicuous acknowledgement of our past and present cultural diversity is Winnipeg's internationally renowned festival of the nations, Folklorama.

As an everyday aspect of human experience, multiculturalism ("cultural plurality" is perhaps a better term) is nothing new. Numerous examples of it are to be found well back into Manitoba's Indigenous past. Traditional Cree teachings, for example, speak of the "Ancients" -- people of distinct cultural heritage who lived in the North before and at the time of the arrival of the Crees themselves, and with whom the Crees became acquainted when they took up residence there many generations ago.

Archaeological discoveries dating to before European contact in southern Manitoba are also believed to reflect cultural diversity in this region in Pre-Contact times. During the 1980s, archaeologists working on the riverbank at Lockport found evidence of a community whose roots lay to the south in what is now the American Upper Midwest. Their pottery in particular reflects non-local origins, as does their economy: they were cultivators of domesticated plants, unlike their local neighbours whose diet was based on the consumption of wild faunal and floral food resources. This "distinct society" of farmers is thought to have comprised a group of immigrants who fled northward from conflict and turmoil in their homelands, a theme that is almost as old and as universal as humanity itself.

These newcomers formed what appears to have been a visible minority and a distinct society, to use other familiar modern phrases, within a region that was otherwise peopled mainly by southern Crees. And, it would seem that they maintained their identity during their relatively brief stay in southeastern Manitoba. Certainly, their distinctive material culture does not show evidence of blending or mixing with traditions native to the immediate area at that time. It calls to mind the socio-ethnic boundaries maintained in the same area by the Ottawas *vis à vis* their Saulteaux neighbours during the Fur Trade era, as will be recounted below.

Whatever became of this early farming colony is uncertain. The current theory holds that the people abandoned the Red River valley when their crops failed. Moving to the southwestward

onto the high plains west of the Escarpment, they found common cause with local groups who had also moved up from the south in the wake of widespread social and political unrest.

But in this new setting, a very different array of circumstances held sway compared to those that were found on the lower Red River. Here, in the prairies and parklands of southwestern Manitoba, peoples of diverse origins formed multicultural communities whose members readily shared their traditions with one another. This interpretation is based primarily on locally found pottery wares, featuring combinations of decorative motifs that clearly originated in different places to the south of Manitoba.

The essence of this scenario was captured by Dr E. Leigh Syms in the 1970s with his "co-influence sphere" hypothesis. A co-influence sphere is a region within which different ethnic groups interacted through such undertakings as trade, intermarriage, ceremonial gatherings, hunting expeditions, and conflict. The underlying premises are that the participants were of diverse cultural persuasions, and that dynamics are recognizable in the archaeological record. The co-influence sphere model has been used to good effect by numerous archaeologists since its original conception and introduction to the literature. Dr Bev Nicholson, one of Dr Syms' students, elaborated on the co-influence sphere model with his application of the concepts of "fused ethnicity" and "polyethnic coresidence" to the Late Pre-Contact Vickers focus of southwestern Manitoba. Both expressions, in and of themselves, bespeak of multicultural developments.

The arrival of Europeans in Manitoba gave rise to yet a third source of information that nicely complements Native oral tradition and the archaeological record. This is the written word, expressed in the form of documents penned by European explorers and traders. These earliest written records bear witness time and again to cultural plurality within the contemporary Native population of the region. For example, it is common nowadays to associate the Blackfoot nation with the high plains and foothills areas of Alberta and Montana. But the Blackfoot speak an Algonquian language, and the wellspring of all the Algonquian languages is generally considered by language historians to lie somewhere in the vicinity of lakes Huron and Ontario.

This means that centuries ago the ancestors of the Blackfoot migrated northwestward from southern Ontario to their present homeland, and there is reason to believe that southern Manitoba, which lies in between, figured in their migration route.

In fact, the final westward push of the Blackfoot may have come about in fairly recent times. The ethnologist Edward Curtis states that by 1670, Blackfoot people had been driven westward from the Lake Winnipeg country by the Assiniboins and their Cree allies. Peter George, a former chief of the Sakamoy Band of Ojibwas whose reserve lies just to the west of the Manitoba-Saskatchewan border, reported that this area had once belonged to the Blackfoot, who were displaced by Crees and Ojibwas from Manitoba. Obviously, Blackfoot people at one time lived much farther to the east than their descendants do today.

The same applies to a nation variously known as the Atsina, Gros Ventres, Fall Indians, and Arapahoes (in this article I will use "Atsina"). These were another Algonquian-speaking group. Long ago, before the arrival of Europeans, the ancestral Atsina lived in farming villages in Minnesota. They moved further onto the prairies early in the 17th Century (early 1600s), and shortly thereafter a splinter group broke away and headed north into the parklands of southern Manitoba. Fur trade records note their presence on the Assiniboine River as late as 1785.

In due course, the Atsina moved on, and by the early 1800s they were concentrated in central Saskatchewan. However, conflict between themselves on the one hand and the Crees and Ojibwas of western Manitoba on the other occasionally resulted in the taking of captives, who were brought back to Manitoba.

Use has been made of the term "Ojibwa" in earlier paragraphs, and I would like to pause for a moment here and define a number of other key proper nouns frequently associated with it.

Indigenous Elder and educator Edward Benton-Banai reminds us that the progenitor of all North American Aboriginal nations was Original Man who was lowered to Earth by the Creator Being a long time ago. In the 16<sup>th</sup> Century CE, three nations arose from the Indigenous population that was living in the area where the three Upper Great Lakes meet, i.e., northern Michigan. We know these peoples as the Ojibwa, Potawatomi, and Ottawa (Odawa). Though now existing as distinct and distinguishable nations by the mid-1500s, they nonetheless formed a league called the Three Fires Confederacy.

In the fullness of time, each of the Three Fires nations developed its own dialect of the original parent language. The Ojibwas were named "Saulteurs" by the French because of their place of residence at Sault Ste Marie, whence derives the more familiar name "Saulteaux." The Potawatomi pushed southward into central Michigan; and the Odawa ("Ottawa") for the most part held fast in the country about northern Michigan and the islands of northern Lake Huron. There, they gained a reputation as highly proficient traders. In fact, their name derives from the term "adawe," which means "to trade, to buy and sell."

Each of these three nations was made up of a number of clans, and the leadership of the respective clans formed each nation's government. Two of them – the Ojibwa and the Odawa – will figure prominently in the paragraphs below.

Returning now to the documented era of Manitoba history, there were Native-born children who were, to varying degrees, both multilingual and multicultural. One such individual, a five-year-old boy whose mother was an Atsina, was described by fur trader Daniel Harmon: "He speaks the Sautaux & Cree Dialects well for a Child of his age, and makes himself understood tolerably well in the Assiniboin & French Languages. In short he is like the most of the Children in this Country blessed with a retentive memory and apt to learn."

What brought large numbers of Saulteaux to southern Manitoba during the latter half of the 18th Century was the fur trade. When the Montreal-based North West Company (NWCo) became established in the region in the late-1700s, Lake Superior Ojibwas, being expert trappers, looked to the northwestward as a means of sustaining a standard of living now threatened by over-hunting and disease in their homelands to the east.

A nation whose history in the Red River country was closely bound up with that of the Ojibwas were the Ottawa. According to historical records, numbers of Ottawas came to the Red River valley in the early-1790s when the prospects of lucrative beaver-hunting lured them from their Upper Great Lakes homeland. While some made the journey in the company of Ojibwas, others came by themselves and retained a distinct identity. The latter was attested to by the trader Alexander Henry the Younger when he wrote of an Ottawa community at Netley Creek: "These people have no inclination to intermarry with the Saulteurs; they keep to themselves, and dispose of their daughters only among their own tribe. Their manner of living is entirely that of their own nation."

The Ojibwas and Ottawas are speakers of Algonquian languages, and both figured prominently in the fur trade history of southern Manitoba of the late 1700s and early 1800s. However, they were by no means the only Algonquian-speakers to make their appearance hereabouts. John Tanner was a white Ohioan who, as a young child, was captured by Shawnees and sold to a band of Ottawas that brought him to southern Manitoba. Later on in life, Tanner returned to the United States and had his experiences in the Red River country transcribed into written form. He recounts meeting "a lodge of Tus-kwaw-go-mees from (Upper) Canada." These people are more commonly known as Nippissings, named after the lake situated to the northeast of Lake Huron. Obviously, for many eastern people seeking opportunities as trappers and traders, Manitoba was **the** place to be around the turn of the 19th Century.

I should interject here a cautionary note: the fur trade accounts for southern Manitoba and adjacent northwestern Ontario repeatedly mention people whose names will be unfamiliar to the casual historian. La Vérendrye, for example, refers to a Saulteaux-speaking (i.e., Ojibwa) group known as the "Monsoni." Elsewhere, one sees reference to people known as the "Snakes," who also went by the French name "Sonnants." One must not assume that these groups were distinct tribes from the more familiar Saulteaux. Alexander Henry, in his Red River journal, describes the Snakes as "of the same nation as the Crees, but have a different dialect, somewhat resembling the Saulteur language." They were in fact simply members of the Rattlesnake (Chichigué) clan of the Ojibwa nation. On the other hand, it is not uncommon to find the same Alexander Henry referring to mixed parties variously composed of Crees and/or Assiniboins and/or Saulteurs, including Snakes/Sonnants/Chichigué. Note the historic multilingual (English, French, Saulteaux) identities of the same people!

Several centuries before the time of La Vérendrye, the resident Crees of southern Manitoba were joined by the Assiniboins, an offshoot of a Dakota (Sioux) nation, which in turn had for some generations occupied what is now central Minnesota. Because of an internal dispute, a sizable band of Dakotas broke away from their kinsmen and in due course made their way, like the Atsinas, to southern Manitoba. The Assiniboins, as they came to be called, entered into good relations with the resident Cree, and by and large these amicable relationships held fast for as long as both nations were prominent inhabitants of this region.

The Cree-Assiniboin relationships in Manitoba are especially interesting, since the members of these two nations spoke entirely different languages. The Crees are Algonquian-speakers, whereas the Assiniboins belong to the great Siouan language family. But their linguistic differences did not prevent them from forming a confederacy for mutual protection against their powerful enemies to the south. It is very common indeed to see reference in the fur traders' journals to combined Cree-Assiniboin bands. The implications are that these people were substantially bilingual as well as bicultural; and when the Ojibwas arrived from the southeast, many of them became partners with the Crees and Assiniboins as well, thereby elaborating further the cultural mix.

The Assiniboins were not the only Siouan-speakers known to have occupied southern Manitoba. The PreContact Lockport farming community described above are believed to have been Siouan-speakers. During the first half of the 18th Century, but before the arrival of the La Vérendryes, a people known as the Mandans occupied the country southwest of Lake Winnipeg until population pressures by the Crees and Assiniboins forced them to relocate to the Missouri River. When the French and later the NWCo established fur trade posts on the Assiniboine River in the latter half of the 18th Century, Mandan trading parties often made visits there. Indeed, some Mandans were residing in the Selkirk area when Peguis' *Saulteaux* first arrived in the late 1700s.

Another group of Siouan-speakers, known as the Hidatsas, also occupied the uplands west of the Manitoba Escarpment. Ojibwa tradition speaks of their distinctive earth lodge villages near Snowflake, Manitoba and on Antler Creek near Melita. By the time the first Europeans of record had penetrated the grasslands of southern Manitoba, the Hidatsas too had departed for the Missouri River country.

The relationships between neighbours were not always amicable. Sometime between the departure of the French and the arrival of the NWCo, Manitoba's Interlake region was taken over by a large number of Sisseton Dakotas from Minnesota. Having had the country wrested from them, it was only a matter of time before the Ojibwas sought to repossess it. Within five years and with the assistance of Plains Cree allies, the Ojibwas put an end to the Sissetons' occupation of the region.

In the decades that followed, Dakotas carried out raiding expeditions north of the 49th parallel. Some of these went as far afield as Deschambault Lake in northern Saskatchewan. From their home grounds in North Dakota, they carried out buffalo hunts in the Pembina Hills west of the Manitoba Escarpment and occasional trading forays to the posts along the middle Assiniboine River. They also made periodic "social" visits to the Red River Settlement, notwithstanding the abiding hostility of the local Saulteaux and Métis.

When a Westerner hears the name "Iroquois," southern Ontario and Quebec's St Lawrence River valley -- that is to say, Eastern Canada -- usually come to mind. And yet, members of the Mohawk nation formed a visible minority among the Native peoples involved in the western fur trade before and after the turn of the 19th Century.

Following its establishment in 1784, the Montreal-based NWCo engaged several hundred Iroquois as hunters and trappers. Upon signing contracts for up to three years, the Mohawks were outfitted, and the furs they trapped were traded to the Company. This not only afforded the Mohawks the opportunity to expand into new territory, but also gave them the freedom to come and go as they pleased in the course of fulfilling their contracts. Their involvement in the fur trade brought numbers of them to Manitoba, further diversifying the cultural and linguistic mosaic of the region during the early fur trade era.

Not that they were always easily understood. Trader Archibald McLeod noted in his diary entry of December 18, 1800 concerning an Iroquois at his post on the upper Assiniboine River: "we can understand very little of what he says — but he makes us signs he & his 7 friends have 400 Plues (pelts)."

Last, but by no means least, are the Metis who, by their very nature, are the embodiment not only of cultural but genetic diversity as well. Nor is it sufficient to define the Metis as being simply of dual heritage and descent: very often, their ancestry on both the Indigenous and European sides drew from several altogether different and distinct peoples.

Winnipeg and Manitoba are today known for their rich cultural heritage, the result of peoples immigrating from far and wide to escape hardship and to seek new opportunities. And yet, the situation as we now know it in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is but a variation on a theme that had been part of the human experience in these parts for centuries — not by government decree, but as a fact of life in times past, when the players were entirely or at least prominently Aboriginal.