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Métis Miskihkiya: MÉTIS LIFE IN MONTANA

By Rosalyn LaPier

What happens when two worlds collide? Sometimes there is conflict and one gets conquered, sometimes they learn from each other but remain separate, and sometimes they blend into a new entity. On the Northern Great Plains two worlds collided and out of it emerged a new ethnic group—the Métis.

THE MÉTIS

The Métis are a distinct ethnic group that evolved out of the fur trade during the 18th century. As the European and Native peoples married and intermingled, their cultures, languages, music, art and environmental knowledge also began to blend.

By the time the Métis permanently moved into what is now Montana in the 19th century they had already solidified their status as a separate group within the Northern Great Plains. They even asserted political rights as their own distinct nation-state within what is now Canada.

The Métis usually traveled and settled in large family groups, similar to their Native relatives. Families that began as a mixture

of French, Chippewa and Cree evolved into Métis, who developed self-sufficient communities all across the Plains. Their mixed heritage was evident in their language; even into the 20th century the Métis were multilingual, speaking Michif (their own creole language), French, Chippewa, Cree, sometimes other Native languages, and English.

My family, the LaPierres, first came to the Rocky Mountain Front before Montana became a territory. The Rocky Mountain Front of Montana is where the mountains meet the prairies, semi-arid and in some places almost desert-like. In the 1850s Antoine LaPierre moved his entire family there to work, initially as buffalo hunters, but eventually as hands for local cattle ranchers or

on their own as wood-hawkers. They ended up settling down near Augusta—an area the Blackfeet called “*Sspiksii*,” meaning “tall groves of trees”—and it was this place, which stood out amongst its stark surroundings, that the Métis came to call home.

Antoine’s daughter Clementine LaPierre married a Québécois rancher, Sam Forque, who Americanized his name to Ford. (The LaPierres eventually changed theirs to LaPier.) The home of Clementine, the eldest female of the clan, became the center of Métis life in the region. Family gatherings, community events, weddings and even weekly Mass were held at the Ford family home. Her siblings, Francois, John, Moses, Alec, and Euphrosine, and their spouses and children all lived close by.

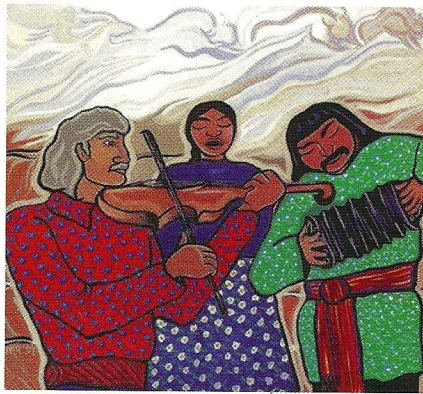
MISKIHKIYA

The Métis, in part due to their semi-subsistence lifestyle, viewed food and health holistically—much more so than is typical in modern Western culture. *Miskihkiya* is the Métis or Michif word that best translates into “medicine.” But it is a complex translation because it does not necessarily mean “medicine” in the Western sense; rather, it refers to healing generated from plants that come from the earth. These plants are neither strictly medicinal nor edible but their general characteristic is to heal the body, mind and spirit. Therefore, Métis women used a combination of edible and medicinal plants in everyday life to promote health and wellness within their families.

Métis women like Clementine and her sisters were the keepers of plant knowledge. When they lived further out on the Plains—in the areas that are now Manitoba and North Dakota—these Métis women relied on native plants. Fortunately many of these same plants could be found along the Front Range. The women spent their summers gathering a variety of berries and roots to eat and plants for medicine, including herbs used to ease childbirth.

In addition to gathering wild medicinal and edible plants Métis women also grew large home gardens, a skill they learned from their European relatives. They raised and butchered cows, pigs and chickens. They churned their own butter. And instead of picking chokecherries (*Pikomina* in Métis) to dry and grind into a mixture of meat and fat, known as pemmican, the Métis women canned their chokecherries into jam and syrup. The women also used their unique knowledge and skills to make tools from native woods, such as willow branch (*Lii sol*) pitchforks for moving hay.

Since the Métis men continued to hunt and trap wild animals and fish the streams along the Front, the women smoked the meat and fish to preserve them for future use.



CELEBRATIONS

Celebrations were central to the social life of the Métis. The biggest day of the year was New Year's Day, when the Métis organized a large community dance and feast. The Métis women cooked a huge feast of foods all harvested from the local environment: a dish called rubbaboo (boiled rabbit with flour gravy); bullets (meatballs made from elk or deer); pemmican; fried bread; huckleberry, raspberry and serviceberry pies; and herbal tea. And they invited all their neighbors, no matter their ethnicity, to join in the celebrations.

The New Year's celebration was not complete without a visit from the local Catholic priest. The Métis religion was a blend of Native beliefs and Catholicism. On occasions such as this, the men got together to smoke the inner bark of the red willow (*Kinikinik*). All of this—celebrating in community, eating wild meats and berries, smoking red willow, dancing all night—and more was what the Métis referred to as *Miskihkiya*.

TRADITION CONTINUES

When the Métis emerged as a new group they blended many aspects of their Native and European heritages. They maintained their Native ecological knowledge of wild plants and animals of the region, and they blended it with European ecological knowledge of domesticated plants and animals that go along with ranching, farming, and gardening. And through all this melding of cultures they maintained a holistic approach,

understanding how to balance this varied ecological knowledge to live a healthy life.

Now, five generations later, the Métis tradition of understanding and using native plants and hunting on the prairies continues. My cousin Autumn LaPier, a descendant of Antoine LaPier, lives on the Rocky Mountain Front, near where her ancestors called home. Autumn now teaches her kindergarten-age daughter, Madeline—the next generation of Métis women—about native plants and health, and so the practice of *Miskihkiya* continues. 🐾

—Rosalyn LaPier (*Blackfeet/Métis*) is a faculty member of the Environmental Studies program at the University of Montana. She also works with the Piegan Institute in Browning.

Special thanks to Dr. Sherry Farrell Racette, a well-known Métis artist and associate professor of Native Studies and Women's & Gender Studies at the University of Manitoba, for allowing us to use her artwork.

FURTHER READING:

Christi Belcourt. *Medicines to Help Us: Traditional Métis Plant Use*. Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2007.

Leah Dorion. *Relatives With Roots: A Story about Métis Women's Connection to the Land*. Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2011.

Rosalyn LaPier, “Métis Life Along Montana's Front Range,” in *Beyond...The Shadows of the Rockies: History of the Augusta Area*. Augusta Historical Society, 2007.

MÉTIS ART

One part of Métis culture that became unique was their incorporation of native floral imagery into their artwork. Initially this began with beadwork and embroidery on buckskin clothing. Métis women became known for these unusual designs and people could easily distinguish their work from other ethnic groups. Even today this distinct style of floral beadwork designs exists. However, in contemporary times, Métis floral art has also evolved to include different types of art such as paintings and even body tattoos.

Valentina LaPier, a Montana Métis artist, incorporates native floral designs into her highly sought-after paintings. She also incorporates Catholic religious icons, another Métis tradition, into her artwork.



Painting by Valentina LaPier

