



# Métis-Settler relations on the Prairies in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century

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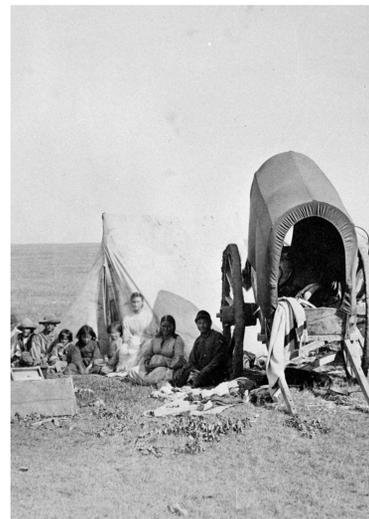
## Introduction

In 1869, Louis Riel formed the first Métis provisional government in the Red River Settlement (now Manitoba), to assert Métis identity and rights. Tensions arose between Indigenous communities and the Government as land surveyors started to encroach on Métis and First Nations territory to make way for immigration of settlers to the west. These tensions eventually led to the Red River Resistance and the battles over land. Through negotiations with the Dominion of Canada and the Métis, the Manitoba Act of 1870 was passed and a Scrip process was implemented, to distribute certificates redeemable for land or money to Métis families. Due to complex application processes and other capacity issues, many Métis were not able to apply for Scrip, and those who did were not able to keep their allotted lands. Therefore, they were forced to move further west to find new homes and lands. The same land-related tensions lead to the North West Resistance of 1885 and the subsequent hanging of Métis leader Louis Riel on the basis of treason. Following this defeat, some white-passing Métis hid their identities, but life became even more difficult for the rest.

Despite these events, Métis people continued to work and take part in the economy. Traditional Métis economy, which was dependent on buffalo hunting and the fur trade, was in decline. The Métis developed other sources of expertise and specialized in transporting goods across the Prairies. The Red River Carts and trails were used as a main source of transportation for Métis before railroads. These carts were instrumental in the transportation of furs from different Hudson's Bay Company Trading Posts. The carts were also used by land surveyors, who employed Métis men for their knowledge of the land and language skills, to transport them into remote areas. Otto Klotz, a German Canadian land surveyor and astronomer recorded his travels throughout Canada, as well as his relations with Métis people.



Louis Riel's First Provisional Government  
<https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/aboriginal-heritage/metis/Pages/metis-nation-related-themes.aspx>



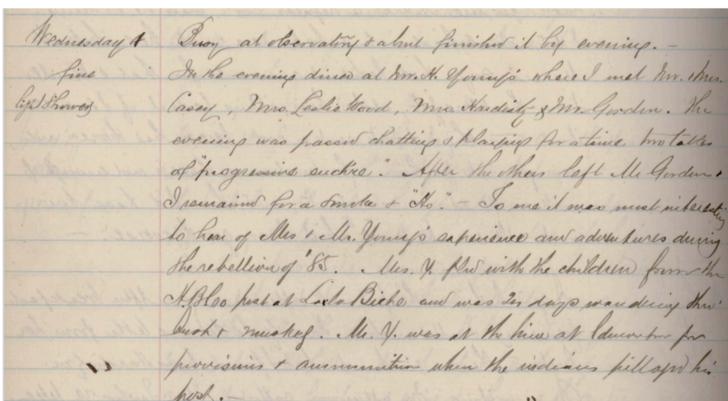
Red River Carts on the Prairies  
<https://indigenouspeoplesatlasofcanada.ca/article/red-river-carts/>

## Methodology

This research consisted of a literature review of Métis history as well as the transcription of scanned copies of Otto Klotz's journals. The period of May 1888 to August 1888 was transcribed into Microsoft Word as faithfully as possible, with original punctuation and spelling. Historical transcription can be difficult due to illegible handwriting and other irregularities:

- Any completely illegible words were replaced by a question mark in brackets;
- A partially legible word was also put into brackets.

Example of a single entry:

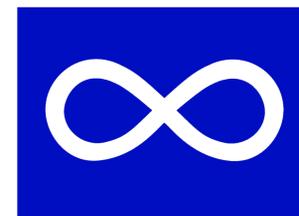


Busy at observatory + about finished it by evening. - In the evening diner at Mr. H. Young's where I met Mr. + Mrs. Casey, Mrs. Leslie Wood, Mrs. Hardisty & Mr. Gordon. The evening was passed chatting + playing for a time two takes of "progressive euchre." After the others left Mr. Gordon + I remained for a smoke + "Ho". - To me it was most interesting to hear of Mrs. + Mr. Young's experience and adventures during the rebellion of '85. Mrs. Y. flew with the children from HBCo past at Lac La Biche and was 24 days wandering thru' bush + muskeg. Mr. Y. was at the hill at Edmonton for provisions + ammunition when the indians pillaged his post.

## Results

The transcription of this period of Otto Klotz's life revealed some important information about the relationships between Indigenous peoples and settler populations. In the summer of 1888, Klotz wrote about his experiences travelling to Alberta. Klotz employed a Métis man named Poitras to transport him from Calgary to Edmonton, where he conducted surveying and astronomy work. The journal entries revealed mostly unfavourable views of Métis and First Nations people that Klotz encountered. In an earlier entry from March of 1885, he referred to Métis people as "the enemy", and how the conflict, referring to the Northwest Resistance of 1885, may have had negative impacts on his surveying work. He referred to Louis Riel as an "arch-rebel" and his defeat and capture as "gratifying news". For the Dominion of Canada, the execution of Riel was seen as necessary in continuing the work of dispossession of Indigenous lands. For Klotz, this news was good, as he could continue with his surveying work. Three years later in July of 1888, Klotz employs Poitras to help him travel to Edmonton to do surveying work. In his interactions with Poitras, Klotz refers to him as "my Halfbreed", which demonstrates his sense of superiority and authority over him. The difficult circumstances that Métis people faced at the time of post-resistance led them to work for people like Klotz, who were actively taking and transforming their lands. Klotz' words and sentiments reflect the paternalistic view of white settlers over Indigenous people throughout the processes of colonization.

Despite the attempts and use of tactics to extinguish Métis rights over the land through processes like Scrip, Métis people still managed to assert their uniqueness and rights following the Resistance. It is evident that the Métis identity was distinct, strong and well established in the late 1880's on the Prairies. Klotz acknowledged their distinctness from First Nations and other settler communities by identifying them as "half-breeds" as opposed to "Indians". Even in the delicate climate of post-Resistance, when Métis people were more reluctant to publicly reveal their identity due to fear of prosecution, historical documents like Klotz' diaries allow us to validate that Métis identity and pride were still deeply rooted in kinship connections and shared histories of resistance to the settler colonial state.



<http://guides.library.ubc.ca/c.php?g=307423&p=2050145>

The Métis flag represents the joining of two cultures and the existence of a people forever.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, understanding the life and work of land surveyors through transcription of historical documents is fundamental to understanding the dynamics of settler-Indigenous relations throughout different periods of Canadian history. Through the Scrip process and Resistance battles, the dispossession of the land is a root cause of the loss of culture and identity for Métis people. More research is needed on the history of the unique Métis identity, economies and politics as we move towards decolonization and reconciliation.

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