



## SASKATCHEWAN RIVER BASIN

# *Human Heritage in the Basin*

Humankind has flourished in the Saskatchewan River Basin for almost as long as the river has been here, weathering several major changes in climate and ecology.

Archeologists have found more than 650 sites throughout the Basin showing the presence of humans 10,500 years ago, and 1,000 years before that in southern Saskatchewan - literally on the heels of the last glacial age. These early residents probably relied on hunting large Pleistocene animals such as mammoth, camel and caribou.

Around 11,000 years ago, mammoths and other species began to disappear and hunters pursued large game such as bison, which were becoming more abundant as the grasslands expanded and competing species disappeared. Bison continued to adapt and thrive, and remained the mainstay of the Plains First Nations people until the 19th century.

About 7,700 years ago, the plains environment became much warmer and drier. The population of large bison began to dwindle under the severe drought conditions.

### **People of the Bison**

About 5,000 years ago, the environment became cooler and wetter - more like our present climate. The smaller plains bison (buffalo) had become more abundant, and humans living near the river had begun to trade extensively with other cultures. That trade, improved hunting techniques, and the more productive climatic conditions all combined to help the humans flourish along the river. Approximately 2,000 years ago, as the Roman Empire flourished and Christianity was born, two technological innovations left their mark on the Plains First Nations cultures: pottery and the bow and arrow. The invention of the bow and arrow revolutionized hunting techniques and the use of pottery made the storage of food more secure.

For thousands of years the First Nations people of the plains hunted the North American bison. Their lifestyle became dependent on hunting buffalo, and numerous hunting techniques were developed and adapted to increase their hunting abilities. The most sophisticated technique developed was that of the buffalo jump. Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump, located in south-western Alberta, is one of the oldest and best preserved sites of this kind with its elaborate drive lane complex and deep archaeological deposits still intact.

Wanuskewin Heritage Park, located along the South Saskatchewan River just outside of Saskatoon, is an archaeological treasure trove, with archaeologists having discovered the presence of 2 historic and 19 pre-contact archaeological sites. The pre-contact sites include a medicine wheel, tipi rings, bison jumps and pounds, habitation sites and stone cairns, indicating intensive occupation over the past 6,000 years.

## Arrival of the Europeans

Contact with European traders, explorers and settlers changed the lifestyle of the First Nations rapidly - and irrevocably. The arrival of horses and guns let them move farther and faster, and hunt more efficiently. Sadly, contact also meant the successive introduction in the 1700s of epidemic diseases such as smallpox and measles, against which the First Nations people had no resistance.

The virtual demise of the bison by the late 1870s spelled the end of the traditional Plains First Nations lifestyle. In just 150 years, the 11,000 years of harmonious living and balance with nature was largely lost. The impact of human activity became stamped on the landscape.

While the influx of settlers, the virtual eradication of the buffalo and the presence of whisky traders took their toll on the First Nations, the arrival of the North West Mounted Police in the 1880s did prevent a great deal of bloodshed as cultures clashed. The Mounties - forerunners of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police - plugged the flow of whisky from Montana, and imposed the laws and justice of the British Empire with some sense of respect and courtesy for First Nations. Chief Crowfoot spoke of the Mounties protecting the tribes as the feathers of a bird protect it from winter.

When Sitting Bull, chief of the Sioux Nations, fled to Canada after the battle between the Sioux Nations and the U.S. Cavalry army at Little Big Horn, he was told to follow the law of the land - and, for the most part, he did. In fact, when first approached by the U.S. government to return to the States, he refused - praising the Mounties for speaking the truth with him.

But despite the lack of bloodshed, the impact of change was no less inevitable. As the buffalo disappeared, the 1870s also saw the signing of treaties between the First Nations and the Crown. Soon after, reserves were set aside for the First Nations.

## The Métis

The Métis culture traces its ancestry to the fur trade. The children of white fur traders and their First Nations wives were known variously as metifs or bois brules if their fathers were of French origin; or mixed-bloods and half-breeds if of English or Scottish descent.

The rivers were instrumental in opening the western plains of North America to European influence and eventual settlement. The Hudson's Bay Company established a fur trading post on the shore of Hudson Bay at the mouth of the Nelson River in 1682 and acquired furs from the First Nations people of the Saskatchewan River Basin via Lake Winnipeg and the Nelson River. Rival fur traders from Montreal brought trading goods to the Saskatchewan Rivers from a more southern route. The intense competition for furs drove the traders further inland, led to the construction of many fur trading and provisional posts along the Saskatchewan River and its major tributaries, exploration into other watersheds, and soon after, the discovery of routes to the Pacific Ocean.

In 1821, with the merger of the Hudson's Bay Company and Northwest Company, came a layoff of approximately two-thirds of the workers - predominantly Métis who settled in Manitoba's Red River Colony. They had developed a profitable role in the fur trade supplying provisions such as pemmican (a mix of dried meat, grain and berries), transporting furs and supplies, and working for the trading companies.



Photo courtesy: Meewasin Valley Authority

Hunting expeditions took them farther afield and the Métis spent their winters in hivernements - wintering villages, taken from hiver, the French word for winter. The sites were abandoned in the spring and summer when the Métis were hunting.

While hivernement settlements sprang up throughout the Saskatchewan River Basin, focus was brought to one settlement in particular when, in 1863, Gabriel Dumont was elected Chief of the South Saskatchewan River hivernement. Dumont would later emerge as a masterful military leader during the Riel Resistance.

In the 1870s, unable to sustain themselves through buffalo-hunting, the Métis adopted a more agrarian lifestyle by cultivating “river lots” and raising cattle, supplementing this with freighting and trading. Discontent grew as government surveys imposed a square township system over their land. Many Métis had difficulty obtaining legal title to the homes they had built, and efforts to get greater representation in territorial and federal politics were stymied. Discontent also grew within the First Nations people who, watching the buffalo disappear, demanded the food, equipment and farming assistance that had been promised by the treaties.

## The Riel Resistance

The federal government’s failure to respond to numerous petitions brought events to a head in the spring of 1885 with the Riel Resistance. Several skirmishes and battles occurred along the South Saskatchewan River, which played a major tactical role in the transportation of troops. The confrontation escalated, involving settlers, the North West Mounted Police and some of the First Nations, but the uprising could not be sustained. The final shots were fired at Batoche, Saskatchewan, in June 1885.

While Métis resistance failed on the battlefield, the Métis community was not destroyed and significant events and individuals associated with Métis heritage have been commemorated at a number of locations along the river. Work continues on other historical and cultural initiatives in this region of Saskatchewan known as “The Heart of Canada’s Old Northwest.”

The Batoche National Historic Site depicts the lifestyle of the Métis along the South Saskatchewan River in the Batoche settlement and commemorates the armed conflict of 1885. The National Historic Site, established in 1923, includes remnants of the Carlton Trail, the village of Batoche and the battlefield itself overlooking the South Saskatchewan River Valley. The site includes some restored buildings and a modern interpretive centre.



Photo courtesy: Meewasin Valley Authority

### For More Information

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