

"Where the Buffalo Roam: Migration of the French Red River Metis
to Lewistown, Montana"

by
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As the first rays of sunlight pierced the crisp fall morning, a herd of buffalo grazed on the prairie grasses in a ravine. They slowly meandered as one body with only a few soft grunts to break the silence of dawn. A shot rang out, and then another. The bison, startled, raised their heads to see a thousand mounted hunters charging down on them from the north. The buffalo runners were soon among their prey. When the pandemonium ceased, the prairie was littered with buffalo carcasses. Skinners and packers rapidly performed their work. The following day, loaded with strips of buffalo meat and hides, the large band of mixed-blood Metis departed for the Red River to sell their pelts to representatives of the fur companies.

The distinct society of the Metis was shaped primarily by economic forces. The role of mixed-bloods as hunters, trappers, and traders in the fur industry gave the Metis a sense of identity and cohesion. Dependent on the economy of the fur industry, the French Metis of the Red River were driven west by the forces of the fur trade, continually abandoning settlements in order to follow the receding buffalo herds, until they reached the Judith Basin of Montana where the fur trade collapsed and a settled Metis community flourished. Cohesive Metis society survived the migration period, but with the end of the fur trade came new external pressures that splintered their community. Born of white fur company fathers and Indian mothers, the mixed heritage of the Metis made them uniquely qualified to serve the fur industry. Their distinct society was a result of this industry and the Metis associated closely with it. In response to the

changing nature of the fur trade, the French Metis of the Red River chose to leave their indigenous territory and migrate hundreds of miles from western Minnesota to central Montana in the 1800s. By 1880 there were between 800 and 1,000 Metis settled in the Judith Basin of central Montana Territory. The story of their migrations from the Red River to the Mountainous West, and the establishment of their final fur trading settlement at Spring Creek in the Judith Basin of Montana represents the desperate response of the Metis to the declining fur trade.

Metis society was dependent on the fur industry for survival. The Red River, winding north between present day North Dakota and Minnesota, was the lifeline of Metis territory, and the base of Metis fur trade operations. As the buffalo herds receded ever west beginning in the 1840s, Metis hunters obliged by following their livelihood, though always returning to the Red River to conduct trade. Over the next three decades, however, the Metis realized that their ventures in commercial hunting often took them hundred of miles from home, and that it was more profitable to establish settlements among the diminishing buffalo herds. As a result, brigades of Metis returned to the Red River colony only rarely, and as a culture, they progressively marched west into Montana in the 1870s.

Along the Milk River the Metis encountered the last stronghold of the bison. After the ensuing slaughter of 1879, and a sharp decline in trade, the Metis splintered. Most went to Canada, but a few stayed in Montana. One group,

after hearing a glowing report of game, traveled to the Judith and Snowy Mountains on the edge of the Judith Basin to establish a Metis community on the banks of Spring Creek. This desperate band, encouraged by the prospects of continuing trade, migrated to the final site of Metis fur trading activity. To understand why the French Red River Metis migrated to the Mountainous West and established a thriving community at Spring Creek in 1879, three themes must be explored: that the formation of Metis culture bound them to serve the fur trade, that westward receding buffalo herds forced the Metis to follow their livelihood and abandon their Red River homeland, and that the declining fur trade forced many Metis to the Judith Basin desperately hoping to maintain their traditional lifestyle.

By the mid nineteenth century a great number of white settlers had advanced into the Red River region displacing a majority of the areas mixed-blood population. Metis river lots, established by Hudson's Bay Company, were ignored by the government when Rupert's Land came under the control of the Dominion of Canada. Though some Metis chose to remain at the Red River adapting to white society many more traveled west under the influence of the fur trade. The migration of the French Metis from the Red River was primarily one of economic necessity, in which a society strongly tied to the fur trade chose to follow the receding buffalo herds and preserve their traditional role as hunters. Only by following the herds could the Metis remain a cohesive and autonomous community. Without the fur trade and the hunt mixed-blood

society was fragmented. The Metis were not, as some historians suggest, following their food source. They were, in fact, searching for the land of their dreams where they could build a permanent fur trading settlement. Metis migration was calculated, not random wandering. The westward migration of the Metis allowed them to exploit mountainous areas along their route. Mountainous areas, aberrations or archipelagos on the Great Plains, were islands of concentrated resources for the Metis, which offered the mixed-bloods abundant water, timber, and protection. Most important, these archipelagos were havens for bison and other wild game.

The uniqueness of Metis society bound them to serve the fur industry, and the cohesive French Metis culture could not be successful without it. When the French voyageurs of the Hudson's Bay Company journeyed into Western Canada in the eighteenth century, they became dependent on the Native American tribes inhabiting the area. French trappers in the fur trade adopted the characteristics of Indians in order to survive and often lived among their indigenous neighbors. Many voyagers married into Assiniboine, Chippewa, and Cree families. Indian women provided trappers with moccasins, snow shoes, buckskin clothing, pemmican, and trading partners.¹ The children of these white and Indian unions were half-breeds. Shunned to some extent by both cultures, especially with the arrival of white women into Rupert's land, these mixed-bloods intermarried among themselves and created a distinct and separate culture known as the Metis. The Metis, descendants of white fathers

and Indian mothers, lived in scattered groups throughout the Canadian West, but congregated primarily along the Red River. Mixed-bloods were found throughout the Great Lakes region since the advent of the French onto the continent. Advancing settlement in upper Canada and Wisconsin and Minnesota pushed the mixed-bloods west where they congregated around Pembina and the Red River. It was there the Metis, as a new people, neither Indian nor white, created a homeland and served the fur industry.

A distinction must be made between the French Metis and the English mixed-bloods. Both groups are similar when compared demographically, but the English mixed-bloods were the progeny of the British fur company officers and officials of the Hudson's Bay Company. By 1850 they had become almost completely self-sufficient farmers and if they did work for the companies, it was in management or relatively high status positions. The French Metis, on the other hand, were related to the voyageurs of the Northwest Company and practiced agriculture on a limited basis, if at all.

As fur trade routes expanded, mixed-bloods found themselves uniquely qualified to serve the industry. No longer did white traders look to Indians for assistance. Instead the mixed-bloods themselves were called upon to act as agents for the Hudson's Bay and North West Companies. They became hunters, trappers, guides, traders, interpreters, and post managers. The Metis were ideal workers for the fur trade because they were loyal children of fur trading fathers with woodland knowledge inherited from their mothers. Mixed-bloods became

a recognized as important but separate members of fur trade society. Thus, the Metis on the Red River became a distinct community of hunters and traders.

The Metis were a cultural mix that adopted traits from both their Indian and white ancestors. They had their own language, a mixture of French, English, Chippewa, and Cree, and their own form of Catholicism, reverent yet personal. As a distinct society, the French Metis preferred to hunt rather than to farm like their English mixed-blood cousins. Large bands of commercial hunters bi-annually left Pembina and slaughtered thousands of bison in the Red River region. The Metis aided in the depletion of the bison by killing them recklessly for their skins and meat. Hunting, trapping, and trading were of central important for Metis society.

Individual mixed-bloods trapped beaver, lynx, and martin in the woodlands and hunted buffalo on the Red River's flood plain. However, as the beaver trade waned in the land 1830s due to the diminishing demand of international fashion, the significance of the buffalo robe as a commodity gained in stature. A competitive market, feeding the hunger of eastern merchants, increased the price of hides significantly and the Metis responded with vigorous hunting. Tallow and hides were traded and exported to the east. By 1830 Hudson's Bay Company employed around 1,000 people and operated at that level for the next few decades. To run their trading business efficiently, each year the company needed more than sixty tons of pemmican, a dried form of buffalo meat mixed with berries, to provision their overextended network of posts. The North West

Company had been employing the Metis as meat hunters for years, long before Hudson's Bay followed suit. The Metis were hired to provision the trade with pemmican from the hinterland itself. Consequently, the Red River Metis took advantage of the companies' need for buffalo meat and incorporated the business of making pemmican into their robe trading venture.² Prior to 1840, the Red River Metis relied on small scale hunting, trapping, trading, and work for the fur companies to provide for their needs. This activity was supplemented by subsistence agriculture. The booming buffalo robe market changed all of that. The three decades following 1840 saw the Metis become more unsettled commercial hunters with the buffalo robe trade providing a prosperous living.

Buffalo hunting often led the Metis into United States territory. While there the Metis came into contact with American fur traders and were persuaded to break the monopoly that Hudson's Bay had on the fur trade. Buffalo robes secured in the fall, and furs trapped during the winter, were sold to American traders who promised higher prices than the Metis' traditional Hudson's Bay Company allies. Massive amounts of robes and meat were moved by the Metis from their hunting grounds to the Red River and even St. Paul. The success of the Metis in the fur trade also led them to trade for furs with their Indian relatives. The outfitted Metis traded ammunition, cloth, and liquor to the Indians in exchange for furs and robes. These furs and robes were, in turn, sold to white traders for profit. Thus, the Metis were sometimes able to act as intermediaries between Indians and whites. However, their activities were

increasingly scrutinized by the U.S. Government. An Army detachment was sent from Fort Atkinson, Kansas to the Red River region in the summer of 1845 to expel from American soil the mixed-bloods, who were presumed to be British subjects and thought to be shrewd people, and a competitive threat to American traders and Indians in the area. The Metis responded that they would be desperate without the resources, meaning buffalo, of the American territory. Corresponding with Army headquarters, the commander of this military expedition recommended that the mixed-bloods be allowed to continue their hunting south of the international boundary, due to his impression of them being a peaceful people.³

By combining the lifestyles of their Indian and white relatives the Metis were able to forge their own identity as a new people. Hudson's Bay Company owned the very land on which the Metis lived, and in that respect the Metis colony was a fur company colony. The Metis community at Pembina flourished while hunters roamed the surrounding plains killing buffalo. At the conclusion of each hunting foray, bands of Metis returned to the Red River to trade their cargo of fresh hides and dried pemmican to the company posts. Within miles of their Red River homeland, the Metis were able to pursue their quarry in short hunting ventures secure in the knowledge that they would return to their permanent settlement at the conclusion of the hunt.

Utterly dependent on the fur trade, the French Metis were forced by the economics of their livelihood to follow the receding buffalo herds west and

abandon their Red River homeland. By 1840 Metis buffalo hunting was taking place on a massive scale. The result of the commodification of the buffalo was mixed-blood overhunting on the northern plains and an abrupt depletion of the bison. Non-Metis commercial killing in the region paled in comparison to mixed-blood hunting practices. What had once been a family venture of hunting for subsistence and acquiring a small amount of robes, became a societal activity, as organized bands of Metis hunters traversed the plains in search of their prey and valuable robes and meat. The Metis realized that in order to maintain their traditional ways and preserve their cohesive hunting communities they would be required to follow the buffalo herds. So crucial was the Metis reliance on securing robes that the mixed-bloods at Pembina begged Alexander Wortley, an aristocratic traveler of no real significance, and his small party in 1850 not to venture west for fear that the group might scare off any remaining bison.⁴ The Wortley party was no different from any other white expedition. However, this incident suggests that buffalo were already scarce in the region and that the Metis lamented having to travel great distances to secure robes. The result was a progressive march west and the establishment of winter hunting camps. As the camps moved farther away from the Red River they became more permanent settlements. Eventually, because of extreme hunting pressure, the only sizable population of bison remaining were to be found in Montana, and the Metis followed the buffalo all the way into the Milk River region.

Working in conjunction with the fur trade, families of Metis formed large, cohesive, and disciplined hunting bands in order to pursue the buffalo herds farther away from the Red River into hostile Indian territory. Red River hunters followed the international boundary as well as pushing south and west into the Dakotas.⁵ Massive hunts were conducted twice a year. Spring excursions were made to get meat, while fall forays were conducted as a means of providing the community with pemmican for the winter and thick robes to trade. Metis hunting parties originating from the Red River were huge and attest to the fact that the Metis were engaged in commercial killing. The June hunt of 1840 typified the proceedings. According to Joseph Howard, the spring hunt of 1840 was comprised of, "620 hunters, 650 women and 360 children for two months, required 1,210 carts, about the same number of draught animals, and 403 hunting horses." The expeditions also possessed, "740 guns, 150 gallons of gunpowder, 1,300 pounds of balls, 6,240 flints and hundreds of knives, axes, and harness sets."⁶ The majority of the ammunition would be used on the hunt, but much of it would be preserved as a safety precaution against hostile tribes. Metis hunting parties were organized in a military fashion and led by a captain and lieutenants. Elected leadership of the parties thoroughly planned and organized the expeditions. The goal was to kill as efficiently as possible. The night before a hunt was a time for final preparation and instruction. To be successful the band had to work together.⁷ At dawn, after a signal provided by the commander, the hunters mounted on their buffalo runners charged down

upon their unsuspecting quarry. Gabriel Dumont, a Metis leader, reported one of his bands killing no less than 1,375 buffalo in one day. Mounted hunters fired from the hip with the best of them killing twelve animals each. Women driving carts followed the hunters and immediately began the demanding work of skinning the buffalo, preparing pemmican, and cleaning the hides.⁸ Metis families functioned as economic units with all family members partaking in the hunt. Though men did the killing and first skinning of the buffalo, it was the women who prepared the hides and made the pemmican. The result was a product that was as much the woman's as it was the man's. Both the male and female spheres overlapped to create a successful family and social economy.⁹ After the hunt massive amounts of meat and hides were taken back to the Red River and ultimately to the east for trade.

Each season the Metis were drawn farther and farther away from their Red River homeland. By the Late 1850s the buffalo had been exterminated in the vicinity of the Red River, and Metis hunters were forced to construct winter settlements to the west in order to be close to the herds. Bands setting out from the Red River lived in small tipis until reaching the herd and their winter encampments. There they built more sturdy cabins of cottonwood and plastered the interior with a mixture of buffalo hair and clay. Scraped skins of buffalo calves provided a crude transparent window. In the fashion of their Indian ancestors, Metis winter camps were built around a commons in the shape of a circle.¹⁰ The migrating Metis, far from the Red River, found it more profitable

and efficient to return east to trade only once a year, instead of immediately after the hunt. However, each year found the Metis traveling farther west and their eastern pilgrimages became increasingly more infrequent. The Metis were not a nomadic people. They desperately wanted to settle down in a permanent community. Bands of mixed-bloods often traveled hundreds of miles from the Red River to western hunting grounds and back again, unwilling to permanently break from their established colony. Eventually the distance became too great and Metis hunting bands returned to the Red River only once every few years, if at all, and instead sold their robes to British and American traders at the many posts on the plains. Though their occupation required them to migrate, the Metis did not camp arbitrarily. Instead they looked for mutations on the Great Plains, inviting localities that served as foundations for colonies and centers for the business of trade.

The relentless drive to kill buffalo for commercial gains led the Metis west in incremental stages. Migrating Metis traveled by Red River cart or what was commonly called the half-breed cart. This large Metis invention was made entirely of wood with a box frame supported by two broad wheels. Each pony drawn cart could carry between 600 to 900 pounds of cargo. Wheels on the Red River cart were not lubricated and their concerted sound was said to be insufferable. Joseph Kinsey Howard described the racket "as if a thousand finger nails were drawn across a thousand panes of glass."¹¹ Red River carts were instrumental in the migration of the Metis. The carts were responsible for

the transportation of thousands of pounds of trade goods, hides, and meat across the prairie from one successive encampment to another.

Turtle Mountain, lying only one hundred miles to the west of the Red River was the first island of concentrated resources to be exploited by the Metis. A hilly tree-covered archipelago on the plains, the Turtle Mountain region provided the Metis with their first winter settlement. Impressive supplies of buffalo offered a rich killing field in a well watered and timbered area, and the Metis were able to return to Pembina seasonally. However, resources at Turtle Mountain were exhausted by the late 1860s due to over use and a mass exodus out of the region ensued. William Boushie led a group of Metis out of the Turtle Mountain area and up the Missouri River in the 1870s in search of buffalo, though he noted that they were rare in the river bottoms and almost nonexistent on the plains. Boushie's band, about ten camps, traveled further west by Red River cart in search of game.¹²

Looking for buffalo, the Metis were led further west with ties to the Red River all but severed after leaving Turtle Mountain. From that point on only infrequent journeys were made to the Red River to conduct trade. This represented a major break in Metis movement. Full blown westward migration replaced seasonal travel. At Wood Mountain, just north of the international boundary in Western Canada, the Metis found numerous herds of grazing bison. The hunting was good and settlements of two hundred families in the region were not uncommon. Concentrated resources were exploited in the area until

the buffalo were exterminated. From Wood Mountain the Metis traveled to the Porcupine and White Rivers. Both areas attracted great numbers of hunters and traders. After these zones were abandoned for lack of game, the Metis moved west to the Cypress Hills, which were rich in buffalo. American traders built posts in the Cypress Hills and the Metis hunters were able to conduct business.¹³

"Everywhere the wooded buttes which dominated the monotonous horizons of the prairies, such as Touchwood Hills and Boss Hill, attracted winterers because of the resources offered."¹⁴ Thus, the Metis advanced westward inhabiting settlements in and around islands of concentrated resources. These rich outcroppings were exploited for their timber, water, and small fur bearing animals such as beaver and wolves, until the buffalo of the area had been decimated. Then it was time to move on and follow the trade.

The journey west for the Metis was not without hazards. Large bands of mixed-bloods traveled together for protection. No one hunted alone because it was not safe. Those who chose to hunt alone seldom returned.¹⁵ Enemies, such as the Lakota and Blackfeet, occupied the prized hunting grounds and the Metis were viewed as hostile intruders by the natives. Native American tribes observed the commercial killing of the buffalo with horror and often resolved to expel the Metis trespassers. On June 13, 1851 a band of Metis hunters was attacked by a group of Lakota on the Missouri Coteau in an apparent attempt by the tribe to rid their traditional hunting grounds of foreign invaders.¹⁶ The Blackfeet also loathed the arrival of the Metis into their territory. On several

occasions the Blackfeet raided Metis camps and stole horses. Their firepower, however, was no match for the well supplied mixed-blood hunters.

Not all mixed-blood encounters with the native tribes were hostile. Metis were frequently in the company of the Ojibwa and Cree relatives. In 1865 the U.S. Army became concerned with the trade conducted among the northern plains tribes by the Metis. The military feared that the mixed-bloods were supplying the restless natives with powder and ammunitions and encouraging them to attack military forts and Americans in general. Colonel C.R.R. Dimon was dispatched from Davenport, Iowa to Fort Rice, Dakota Territory to investigate the activities of the Red River Metis. He found the "half-breeds to be treacherous," and in correspondence with Lieutenant Colonel Edward P. Ten Broeck, Acting Assistant Adjutant General, District of Iowa, stated "we have more to fear from the influence of these traders than any other natural disposition of the Indians...I am anxiously expecting an answer from the general commanding in regard to my request to break up these Red River trading agents."¹⁷

Individual Metis, serving the fur companies as guides, penetrated the Montana region long before the rest of the kin. These mavericks were only forerunners to the great body of Metis that would soon envelop the area. By the late 1860s the bison were nearly gone from the Cypress Hills region and the Metis, once again forced to move, traveled south into Montana. The Milk River region and its hinterland was the last stronghold of the buffalo. Frank

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Courchane recalled how "In their hunt for the buffalo they traveled westward, finally encamping almost entirely along the Milk River around Chinook and Havre."¹⁸ United States Military expeditions reported encounters with groups of Metis in northern Montana in the 1860s, but they were known to American trappers years before. Julia Azure, among the first Metis to enter the territory, remembered family hunting trips to the Yellowstone River, the Snowy Mountains, the Judiths, Little Belts, Little Rockies, Moccasins, and Bear Paws.¹⁹ The Metis entered Montana hoping to establish a fur trading society. A few went as far west as the Teton, Dearborn, Sun, and Marias Rivers, but the vast majority settled along the Milk River continuing the practice of commercial killing.

The Metis traveled around the Milk River's rich hunting grounds in their Red River carts from the late 1860s to 1879. They traded buffalo hides and small pelts to fur companies as well as pemmican to both Indians and whites. Skulking along the buffalo trails into the Milk River region, various bands of Metis resided along the banks of the waterway. These pioneers lived well off the game in the area, as well as other fur bearing animals. The largest early Montana settlement was located on Frenchman's Creek, a tributary of the Milk River. This area was considered to be one of the best remaining buffalo hunting areas on the northern plains.²⁰ Milk River settlements were within close striking distance of the Bearpaw and Little Rocky Mountains. As mountainous

sanctuaries of game, both areas were exploited fully by the Metis, and they allowed Metis society to continue its fur trading lifestyle.

Cottonwood cabins were constructed immediately by the Metis at Frenchman's Creek as well as meeting houses and small chapels. Due to the abundance of game, fuel, and water in the region the Metis were determined to stay. During the fall of 1867, H. Bidler, United States Marshal, was sent to the Frenchman's Creek community to expel the Canadian traders doing business with the area's resident mixed-bloods. The Metis protested, stating that they would be left in a desperate condition without supplies. Bidler responded by appointing Francis Janeaux, a member of his party and French Canadian, as the licensed trader for the Metis. Janeaux, with the help of the Metis, built a trading post at the mouth of Frenchman's Creek on the Milk River. Backed by the T.C. Powers Company, Janeaux traded for buffalo robes, pemmican, and furs of every sort which were all transported to Fort Peck and on to St. Paul via Bismarck.²¹ When the Metis settled along the Milk River they did not occupy a previously uninhabited land. Numerous bands of Indians resided in the region who saw the Metis as unwelcome intruders. While the native tribes were nomadic by nature, their mixed-blood counterparts sought an established community in the center of traditional Indian hunting grounds. Conflict was the result. Shortly after the Metis had established themselves along the Milk River smallpox broke out among the neighboring tribes. Apparently the mixed-bloods remained immune while the disease ravaged the encampments of the Indians.

According to Father Van Den Broek the Indians, "maliciously visited the half-breed hunters camp, and did everything in their power to communicate the disease to them, without success, however."²² Thus, it was the Metis who became the dominant hunters in northeastern Montana.

By the late 1870s it became apparent that the great bison herds were all but gone and with this realization many small groups of Metis broke away from the settlement at Milk River and scattered throughout the west. Small groups of mixed-bloods went to live near military posts and Indian agencies in Montana where work might be found. Others traveled to Canada, or even back to the Red River. Lois Magar stated, "Though some put down anchors, most of them knowing only the hunt and trapping, moved from place to place, desperate in their need after the buffalo were destroyed."²³ Those who remained, in addition to facing bleak hunting prospects, had to contend with the military. In the mid-1870s the Metis were accused of trading alcohol and ammunition to the "hostile" Sitting Bull Hunkpapa band of Lakota. In the spring of 1875 Colonel John Gibbon was ordered to break up the Metis settlement. The attempt was not successful and the mixed-bloods continued their practice of hunting and trading as best they could. In 1877 Indian agents of northern Montana reservations reported to the military that the Metis had been killing protected buffalo on the newly formed Indian reservations. In the summer of 1879 General Nelson Miles ordered the Metis to move out of the United States and into Canada. The Milk River Metis of Montana were in peril in 1879. As buffalo were exterminated and

the military forced removal, the lifestyle of the Metis was interrupted and irreparably altered. By 1881 the Milk River was void of Metis.²⁴

In the winter of 1878-1879, Frank Daignon and John Laverdure, both Metis hunters found a group of horses in the Little Rocky Mountains that belonged to Major Reed of Reeds Point in the Judith Basin. Major Reed and a Canadian companion, after being notified of the Metis find, traveled to Frenchman's Creek to identify the horses. While in the Metis settlement Major Reed informed the mixed-bloods of the abundance of buffalo found to the south in the Judith Basin.²⁵ That information ignited the Metis and stirred thought of one further migration. Metis leader Pierre Berger immediately convinced about twenty-five other mixed-blood families to accompany him to the Judith Basin. In May of 1879 this small band of hunters and trappers left the Milk River in their Red River carts for their new home. They traveled by way of Fort Benton, and made their way east until arriving at the base of the Judith Mountains. As Metis Ben Kline recalled, the party was furnished an escort at Fort Benton of two soldiers and two civilians to guide them as far east as Cottonwood Creek. Future bands of migrating Metis were also escorted by the U.S. military to the Judith Basin, not out of concern for the welfare of the mixed-bloods, but because the military wanted to ensure the removal of the Metis from the area in which they were interacting with the native tribes.

Berger's band of Metis desired to establish a permanent settlement, a last bastion of the great Metis-hunter society. The order of business for the Berger



the Metis, built a 100 by 150 foot loophole stockade trading post as a defense against marauding Indians. In August a third party of Metis, who had been removed from the Milk River and told to settle elsewhere, arrived a Spring Creek. The Spring Creek Metis hastily erected crude log cabins and braced themselves for the coming winter. Thus, in 1879, a Metis community was established at Spring Creek as a base from which a sizable band of Metis continued to engage in the business that the industry offered.

The Metis arrived a Spring Creek with intentions of building a permanent fur trade society. Joseph Howard states, "The largest and by far the best Metis community was that on Spring Creek. The hunters who found it had chosen one of Montana's most beautiful locations, mid-way in the green, well-watered Judith Basin, surrounded by three mountain ranges, and a favorite resort of the buffalo. Twenty-five families came in Red River carts in 1879 and thereafter the colony grew steadily; before any appreciable white migration occurred it had 150 Metis families."²⁹ Though the fur trade was waning the Spring Creek Metis continued the practice of killing bison for trade. Fur traders Schutts and Kipp conducted business with the Judith Basin Metis. The winter trade of 1879-1880 saw the pair purchase 1,800 buffalo robes and 3,000 small skins. In the winter of 1880-1881 they traded for 3,000 robes and as many furs, and 1881-1882 they secured 2,300 head and tail robes and as many small skins. However, by 1883 the buffalo were practically gone from the area and the mixed-bloods traded few robes.³⁰ Marcel Giraud cites the Judith Basin as being the region of the last

great Metis buffalo hunts. The French Metis residing at Spring Creek preyed upon bison of the region until their population was decimated and the buffalo robe trade collapsed.

For this large band of Metis, Spring Creek and the surrounding Judith, Snowy, and Little Belt Mountains was the "land of their dreams." These fur trade pioneers clung to their practice of hunting and trapping though they realized that the end of their traditional lifestyle was near. Already they had witnessed many of their relatives give up the hunting lifestyle while at the Milk River, due to the insignificant number of bison remaining. They too must have been preparing themselves for a future without the fur trade when they were offered one last opportunity to kill buffalo and keep their community together. They allowed their economic dependence on the fur trade to guide them on one final industry-related migration. In and around the base of the mountains the Metis found buffalo, wolves, and other fur bearing animals living in a timber lined sanctuary. Mixed-blood hunters from the Spring Creek settlement exploited the resources of the area until the market gave out and their trade-oriented society crumbled. With the end of the great buffalo hunts, due in large part to self-inflicted resource exploitation, Metis from the Red River to western Alberta found themselves in dire straits, facing starvation and living in abject poverty. Though the migrating Metis yearned for a permanent community, their hunting practices and economic ties to the fur trade doomed any ideas of settlement to failure. They had to follow the herds. When their

hunting livelihood was finally at a close, the Metis at Spring Creek struggled to develop their culture in the Judith Basin. Metis efforts at establishing a permanent community came to fruition in the Judith Basin. The mixed-blood hamlet on Spring Creek would be transformed from a small fur trading center into the large commercial hub of Lewistown, Montana.

Rather than wandering aimlessly looking for work like their destitute cousins, the Judith Basin Metis resolved to migrate no further. Instead, they sought to establish a permanent community at Spring Creek, Montana and settle the land. Howard described Spring Creek as being an, "orderly, busy, God-fearing community. Early arrivals declared their citizenship intention and took up homesteads, and though they had come penniless and almost without tools they soon built substantial log homes."³¹ The first Metis who arrived at Spring Creek had few, if any, household furnishings or farming implements. They brought only what their Red River carts could carry. Most families had an ax and possibly a grub hoe, but little else had been required in a lifestyle revolving around the hunt. Pierre Berger, leader of the original band, was a somewhat experienced blacksmith and had with him a few tools of the trade. Isaie Berger possessed a few carpentry tools and was said to be skilled in that field.³²

The first Metis to file homestead claims in 1879 were Peter Berger, Paul Morase, Francis Janeaux, Pierre Laverdure, and Antione Ouelette, all prominent Metis and leaders of their people. They were required to travel to White

Sulphur Springs, the county seat of Meagher County, to make application. Many more Spring Creek Metis intended to file a claim the following year, and rapidly assembled the timber required to construct their dwellings. Filing a claim and proving up on a homestead were two entirely different matters. Even when a family managed to fulfill the requirements for proving up, race could be a determining factor. A few Spring Creek Metis, like the Bergers and Ouelettes, had a relatively low Indian blood quantum. They appeared to be more French than Chippewa-Cree and faced no opposition when they claimed their patent. Thus, they were successful in proving up on their land. Many other Metis, however, were not as fortunate. Those with a high blood quantum, and who appeared to be Indian, were denied homesteads because they were considered to be Indians. Fred Nault, a Montana Metis, explained that his father was denied a homestead on two different occasions due to his native appearance.³³ The American Government failed to recognize the Metis as a new people. Instead they chose the easy route of classifying mixed-bloods as either Indian or white and, in the process, denied the Metis autonomy as a society.

Not all Spring Creek Metis were able to homestead. A majority squatted in the foothills of the surrounding mountains hunting for subsistence, after having been denied the right to file an agricultural claim like their anglo-looking relatives. Perhaps these Metis had a harder time adapting to the new mode of their society. They were an integral part of the community as a whole during its first years, yet in the long term many of them appear to have left the community,

mixing in with neighboring tribes and becoming part of Montana's landless Indians. Metis society had remained cohesive throughout the fur trading epoch, but once that industry collapsed the influences of the white culture fragmented the Metis as a people and culture.

Construction of log homes was an essential yet arduous task given the Metis limited number of tools. All roofing, framework, and flooring was made with smoothly hewn logs. Homes were heated by a fireplace that was made of small timber and a mortar of mud and grass. Roofs of the cabins were covered with sod for insulation and cracks in the walls plastered with dirt mortar. Doors and windows were covered with rawhide which, though not transparent, gave light to the room.³⁴ Metis settlements were usually constructed in such a way as to position the log cabins in a circle. In the center courtyard of the dwellings was a large structure which served as a community center and dance hall. Dancing and the accompanying socials were important social elements in the Metis lifestyle. Such events seemed to be a major form of community expression for the new people. Louis Shambow, when describing this mixed-blood activity, stated, "The priest could do anything with them but stop dancing."³⁵ The small villages in the foothills of the Judith Mountains were almost certainly arranged in this fashion, given the tradition of doing so while migrating. The village on Spring Creek was positioned differently due to the filing of homesteads. It seems likely that Janeaux allowed a certain number of mixed-bloods to live on his homestead in their own dwellings which surrounded the stockade. Also,

Metis homesteaders with land adjacent to Janeaux's most likely built their cabins in the corner closest to the trading post in order to be near their confederates, as did so many pioneers in the frontier west. Furthermore, the village on Spring Creek was infiltrated by whites in 1880, and soon after platted as a town, unlike the more traditional Metis settlement in the mountains.

Religion was the single most binding element in Metis society next to the fur trade. The Metis devoutly followed the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, the religion of their French ancestors. Rarely did a Metis hunting party pursue buffalo without the company of a priest to give blessings to their endeavor and satisfy their spiritual needs. While away from the settlements for an extended period they recognized Sunday with recitations of the rosary. Prayer also dominated Metis life, "When the hour of noon arrived, 'The Angelus,' they would, young and old, fall in a circle on their knees, and under the leadership of old Pere Lavadier, Janeaux's father-in-law, get their beads 'or rosarys' and pray most fervently."³⁶ It was not uncommon to see these fiercely religious people wearing the insignia of their faith, a large silver cross, close to their heart.

During the waning days of the fur trade the Metis increasingly found comfort in their religion. When ties to the economy of the fur trade were severed the Metis at Spring Creek relied on Catholicism to be the guiding institution in their community, and the source of their societal strength. The Metis who inhabited the Spring Creek area in 1879 were not accompanied by a priest, yet they remained reverent to their faith. Through the first winter daily prayers were

conducted in the home and the rosary said right after the chores were done on Sunday morning. Mixed-blood children were sent down to Alexander Wilkie's home for Catholic instruction and preparations for first communion, which was taught in French and Cree. A few of the older people had been taught to read and write in Cree by missionaries at Pembina.³⁷

In the late spring of 1880 Father Joseph Damioni arrived at the Spring Creek colony by Red River cart from St. Peters Mission to administer the sacraments to a dying mixed-blood. Father Damioni was surprised to find so many Metis camped in the area and for the next several years made annual and semiannual visits to the community to baptize children, deliver communion, and perform marriages. The first community service was held at Alexander Wilkie's home, but thereafter mass was said at Janeaux's stockade. The Metis were always eager to participate in the services, assisting with mass and leading hymns in French and Cree.

The Metis were not satisfied until they had a proper place to worship. During their migration from the Red River the Metis longed for a church that would adequately meet the needs of a large congregation. Services, en route, were held informally outside of the tipis, or in small chapels like the ones at the Milk River. However, the economy of the fur trade demanded that the settlements be abandoned before a proper church could be constructed. Spring Creek in 1886 was a different matter. With a rapidly growing fixed population of ardent Catholics the colony demanded their own personal place of worship.

An entire city block was donated by Francis Janeaux for the building, and members of the community organized to find ways to accomplish the task of construction. In 1887 a framed church was erected and was finally blessed by Bishop Brondel on September 29, 1888.³⁸ From 1895 until November 1906 there were a number of resident priests though none remained for any great amount of time.

One particularly interesting incident involving Metis religion of the time offers a good social commentary. In 1900 resident Priest Father Vermaat invited Father Terrian, a missionary from Canada, to conduct a two week mission at the Spring Creek Church. Father Terrian spoke French, but used the Cree language almost exclusively in his ministry to the mixed-bloods and his effort was greatly appreciated by his congregation. During the mission the church was filled to its capacity and mixed-bloods from distant localities camped on the east edge of town to be near the activities.³⁹ The popularity of this event suggests that the type of Catholicism practiced by Father Vermaat might have been vastly different from the brand of Catholicism practiced by the Metis during their fur trade days. Perhaps it was less personally appealing, while the services conducted in Cree made the Metis feel more of a part of the procession. The mission might also have been a social event for the mixed-bloods, a time when the society that was divided after the collapse of the fur trade could come together once again and revive the feelings associated with the days of their cohesive culture.

Catholicism was the anchor in the changing economy of the Judith Basin Metis. After their association with the fur trade ended, the Metis looked to religion to be the cornerstone of their new found community. When it was clear that their colony was going to be successful the mixed-bloods moved to transform the settlement into a permanent village. An example of this process was exemplified by the internment of the Metis dead to a properly consecrated cemetery. Being the first permanent settlers in the area, the Metis buried their dead in a suitable place near their village. In the ensuing years a white rancher homesteaded the land and complained of having the burial ground on his property. The mixed-bloods were also troubled by not having their loved ones properly buried in holy ground. The affair that followed saw the Metis remove all of the dead to a newly created and sanctified cemetery on top of a hill overlooking Spring Creek. The Spring Creek Metis were in the Judith Basin to stay.

The educational level at Spring Creek was unusually high when compared to other mixed-blood encampments in Montana as the Metis fully intended to make their children literate. The emphasis on education may have been derived from a desire to create a stable community. Reading and writing in French and Cree was taught to the elders at Pembina by Catholic missionaries. The fervor of the Metis fight for citizenship rights and land claims had been brought to the Spring Creek colony by the followers of Louis Riel. In order to negotiate effectively with local and national governments the Metis had to be literate. Most Metis

children, especially those camped around the base of the mountains, attended rural schools close to their homes. Metis teachers who had been educated at the Red River used instructional books written in Cree to teach their students how to read and write. Upon discovering that there were a substantial number of mixed-blood children in the area, the Meagher county commissioners decided to establish a public school there in 1881. Francis Janeaux invited Edward Brassey, a white man chosen by the commissioners, to live with him while teaching the school children. School opened in a crude log cabin with a dirt floor.

Thirty-nine children were a part of the first class; thirty-five mixed-bloods and four white children.⁴⁰ The following year Janeaux moved up on his homestead, and recognizing the need for a better school, donated eight lots of his own to the school district and construction of a bigger and better school began shortly. In 1889 Father Van Gorp, a missionary priest, visited Spring Creek and persuaded the Metis to send their children to the Catholic school conducted by the missionaries and Ursuline Sisters at St. Peters Mission, Montana. The next fall thirty or more Metis children made the 135 mile trek in Red River carts.⁴¹ The sacrifice required of the mixed-blood families in the name of education gives testimony to the desire of the Metis to move forward and advance their culture out of the fur trading realm and into the economic, social, and political system of the predominant culture.

Metis society was not governed by a loose confederation of individual families; each band democratically elected leaders and followed a strict yet

unwritten code of laws. While hunting the entire band was under the control of the soldier society, or as they referred to themselves, Les Soldats. This police force was primarily responsible for executing the orders of an elected chief and maintaining some semblance of discipline while pursuing buffalo. Failure to obey orders may have resulted in fines or banishment from the hunt.⁴²

Certainly, the Metis at Spring Creek must have adhered to a similar governing policy, especially if their intent was to establish a stable community. Samuel O'Connell remarked in 1876 that the Metis on the Milk River, "had a code of laws and were governed by a council of twelve under their chosen chief." In certain cases their laws were very severe. Disrespectful language directed towards any of the women or girls resulted in a trial by the council, punishment by flogging, and confiscation of the offenders' horses, carts, and buffalo robes.⁴³ When the Metis first arrived in the Judith Basin they undoubtedly were in need of, and administered, a similar practice; however by the early to mid-1880s a large influx of whites into the area most likely required the mixed-bloods to adopt the Anglo system of government, and in fact they became active members of the American political process.

However, the Metis at Spring Creek did maintain their own political agenda and were active in public affairs for the betterment of their society. Louis Riel, the champion of the mixed-blood fight for federal recognition and assistance, visited the Spring Creek colony and was successful in urging them to support a broad based Metis platform. In August of 1880 Riel requested through General

Miles that Washington establish a special reservation for the Metis in Montana and that financial aid be given to the mixed-bloods for purchase of implements, seed, and stock. In return the Metis would attempt to gain valid title to their land, exclude liquor from the area, and serve the U.S. Government in any way possible. Riel explained, "If the Government would wish to use our influence, such as it is, among the Indians we freely offer it."⁴⁴ Although Metis requests were denied, the Spring Creek Metis were encouraged by Louis Riel and other notable Metis leaders like Gabriel Dumont, who visited Spring Creek, to partake in the political process. Riel implored mixed-blood residents to vote for candidates who supported their cause, even though it was illegal for a Metis to do so. Riel convinced around two hundred Metis to vote illegally for Republican Alexander Botken in his bid for Delegate to Congress against Democrat Martin Maginnis. Riel at the same time organized the Spring Creek Metis to refuse to pay a poll tax.⁴⁵ Always concerned with the welfare of their kin, Metis at Spring Creek supported Gabriel Dumont's establishment of an underground railroad from Regina, Saskatchewan to Spring Creek in which Louis Riel and his Duck Lake resistors could escape. Such forms of resistance and political action prove that the Metis at Spring Creek not only desired a permanent community, they also promoted allegiance to Metis solidarity.

In 1880 Reed ended his partnership with Bowles and homesteaded on Little Casino Creek, one half mile southeast of Janeaux's stockade. On January 6, 1881 he was able to secure the first post office in the area. Serving as postmaster, he

named the office Reedsfort. An intense rivalry ensued between Reed and Janeaux. Janeaux wanted the post office and was adamant in his attempt to have the postal department give him its control, going so far as to circulate a petition among his neighbors. His efforts were not successful, perhaps because he represented the mixed-blood community. At the time the mixed-blood settlement in the Spring Creek area, including the foothills, was flourishing. The focal point of the Metis community, however, was Janeaux's trading post. His homestead would ultimately be transformed into Lewistown, Montana. Janeaux, after months of negotiations, was eventually persuaded by community members to plat a portion of his land for a village, and he turned to his friend Dr. La Palme to do the honor. The duo did not plan on a town, rather they expected a village of around 20 houses. Using a tape line, Dr. La Palme measured the blocks on each side of main street and made a mining style map without a survey. The original town plat was re-surveyed and expanded in 1884 because the site had been recorded in the northwest quarter section 15 rather than in the northeast quarter section. At the time a portion of Janeaux's land was fenced in and under cultivation. Janeaux was unwilling to allow his field to be damaged so his fence was taken as the starting line. That is the reason why the streets of present day Lewistown do not run in line with the cardinal directions. City street names like Morasse, Oullette, and Janeaux bear testament to the town's founders.

Janeaux had accrued a debt to T.C. Power and Brothers of over \$5000. As settlement Janeaux turned over all of his merchandise and buildings as well as the deed to some of his land to T.C. Power.⁴⁶ N.M Erickson was sent to Spring Creek to manage the operation for the Powers Company. Erickson succeeded almost immediately in establishing a hotel and some mercantile enterprises. He was also successful in his petition for a post office and the abandonment of Reedsfort. On March 10, 1884 the first post office was opened at Spring Creek and named Lewistown in honor of Major W.H. Lewis, former commander of a nearby military fort. As in Janeaux's failed attempt to gain the post office, his financial troubles also suggest that he, like the Metis, struggled in a world void of the fur trade.

Hopes of establishing a totally independent and autonomous society at Spring Creek by the Metis were dashed when the first non-Metis arrived in 1880. With the buffalo gone a few hardy ranchers drove their cattle onto the open range of the Judith Basin. In the next few years, with the discovery of gold, several small mining camps grew in the nearby Judith and Snowy Mountains. In 1883 sheep ranchers began streaming into the basin and played an important role in the shaping of a vibrant local economy. Banking and land enterprises, as well as commercial ventures, arose to serve the new economy in Lewistown. By 1885 the white settler was dominant in the Lewistown area as the community became the business center for a stock growing, farming, and mining region. The hunting and trading village that the Metis founded in 1879 had become a

bustling business center by 1885. Yet the Metis were able to adapt. As their social, religious, and political activities illustrate, Lewistown's founders, the area's resident mixed-bloods, maintained their society on one level while interacting with the racial majority on another.

Though Metis and white relations in Lewistown were for the most part amiable, some level of racial stratification did exist. Time and again the Metis were referred to unflatteringly as "breed" by their white counterparts. In an era of suspicion, distrust, and hatred of aboriginal peoples it is not surprising to find prejudice directed towards anyone who had any amount of Indian blood. Ben Kline reminisced about an accident in which a herd of stampeding bison wrecked havoc on a band of Metis who were traveling to Spring Creek in the company of U.S. Soldiers, "In making inquiry of Mr. Stack whether or not any breeds were injured, he stated that he did not know because they did not take enough interest in the proceeding to even inquire, as at that time they were considered simply breeds and subject to the white traders and marauding Indians."⁴⁷ To many whites the Metis at Spring Creek were "Squawmen" and "Coyote French." The 4th of July 1884 is legendary in Lewistown as the day that the famed outlaw Rattlesnake Jake was apprehended after he attempted to kill a "half-breed" in the doorway of Power's store.⁴⁸ Harry Stanford, a resident of Fort Benton in the 1880s, spoke with contempt when he recalled the mixed-bloods residing at Spring Creek.⁴⁹ It certainly was not fashionable to be part Indian. Metis children increasingly labeled themselves as "French Canadians" to avoid

the stigma of being identified as a "Breed." It is not uncommon for descendants of Lewistown's Metis pioneers to claim that their lines are not tainted by Indian blood.

Lewistown was transformed by 1884 from a small fur trading settlement into a robust and predominantly white town. The Metis who were able to prove up on their homesteads remained in the area and contributed to its bustling economy. Many mixed-bloods who squatted in the foothills of Lewistown's surrounding mountains found employment in the region and settled down, even though they were denied homesteads. The Metis established themselves as top horse breakers and ranch hands. Prior to 1900 the only available ranch hands in the area were mixed-bloods and several of their families resided on the cattle spreads where they worked. Other Metis found employment as miners, farmers, and woodhawks. The late 1880s saw the short-lived business of buffalo bone collecting grip Metis society. Mixed-bloods again moved about collecting bones for trade and making a livelihood off of the bison they helped exterminate.⁵⁰

However by the early 1900s, most Judith Basin Metis moved out of the area not as a society, but as individuals. They had attempted to settle down and adapt to the lifestyle of the predominant culture, but they were not successful. Outside forces fractured the tightly knit mixed-blood society at Lewistown. Many went to Canada or back to the Red River, while others scattered throughout Montana. Those who remained in Lewistown eventually assimilated into white society and became prominent citizens in the village they founded.

The high blood quantum Metis who had lived in Lewistown's surrounding mountains were left landless. A few who moved to Hill 57 outside of Great Falls relied on the scraps from a nearby slaughterhouse for survival. Ultimately in 1916, many landless Metis would be incorporated into the Rocky Boy Indian Reservation. Their future would be filled with peril while their settled kin in Lewistown thrived.

The French Red River Metis were children of the fur trade, and products of the economic interaction of two societies. Born of Indian mothers and white fathers, mixed-blood children were stuck in between both worlds. Their distinct heritage made them ideal workers in the fur industry and their role as hunters, trappers, and traders fostered a separate cultural identity. They were not Indian or white; they were a new people. Irrevocably tied to the fur trade, the Mountainous West offered the Metis a final frontier from which they could conduct their business as hunters and traders. As a society, the Metis originally served the industry of their ancestors but eventually became independent members of the trade. Their economic dependence on the fur industry encouraged the French Red River Metis to follow the receding buffalo herds west. What were once short hunting excursions turned into seasonal travel and finally permanent migration. Faithful to the end and hoping to establish the final fortress of their fur trading culture many Metis migrated to the Judith Basin in central Montana.

The mixed-bloods who migrated to Spring Creek in 1879 were not nomadic like their Indian relatives. They sought a homeland and a permanent settlement. Ironically, ties to hunting doomed any notion of a large settlement to failure. A hunting lifestyle and permanent settlement were contradictory ideas. The Spring Creek colony was only successful after its mixed-blood residents broke their ties to the fur trade. Instead of wandering desperately like most of their relatives after the collapse of the fur trade, many Spring Creek Metis resolved to establish a community and develop their culture in the Judith Basin. By adapting elements of their own traditional culture to the lifestyle of the predominant society, the Spring Creek Metis were successful in their undertaking. The result was a major contribution to the establishment of present day Lewistown.

From their beginnings on the Red River through their migration to Montana, the Metis who settled in the Judith Basin were able to remain a coherent social group until the end of the fur trade. Even then the Spring Creek Metis resolved to create a permanent settlement, as one unit, without ties to their former occupation. The advent of whites into the Judith Basin and surrounding mountains, and the influence that their culture had on mixed-blood society, changed all of that. White ranching and mining interests disrupted Metis society at Spring Creek. Settlement became an issue of race, and the Metis were forced to adjust to the new conditions, not as a society like they always had, but as individuals. Those with a low Indian blood quantum were able to pass as

whites, and integrate quite easily into the predominant culture. Mixed-bloods with a high Indian blood quantum were unable to do so and most moved out of the basin.

The mixed-bloods who migrated into Montana in the late nineteenth century have had their requests for the establishment of a separate Metis reservation continually denied. Embraced by the Indian community, most have become members of the Rocky Boy or Little Shell bands of Chippewa-Cree, intermarried, and have found an identity with their Indian cousins. Others, like those at Lewistown, have so assimilated into white society that they have all but forgotten, and sometimes even deny, their mixed heritage. Today, Montana's Metis are searching for their roots. Events such as the Metis Centennial Celebration held in Lewistown in 1979 have brought together Metis leaders, scholars, and tribal historians in order to gain a better collective understanding of the mixed-blood past, and suggest new political and social directions for the culture in the future. Montana Metis are now trying to understand the forces that shaped their culture and drove them over a thousand miles west from the Red River. A better understanding of their past will allow the Metis to regain societal pride and to confront the future, again, as a new people.

ENDNOTES

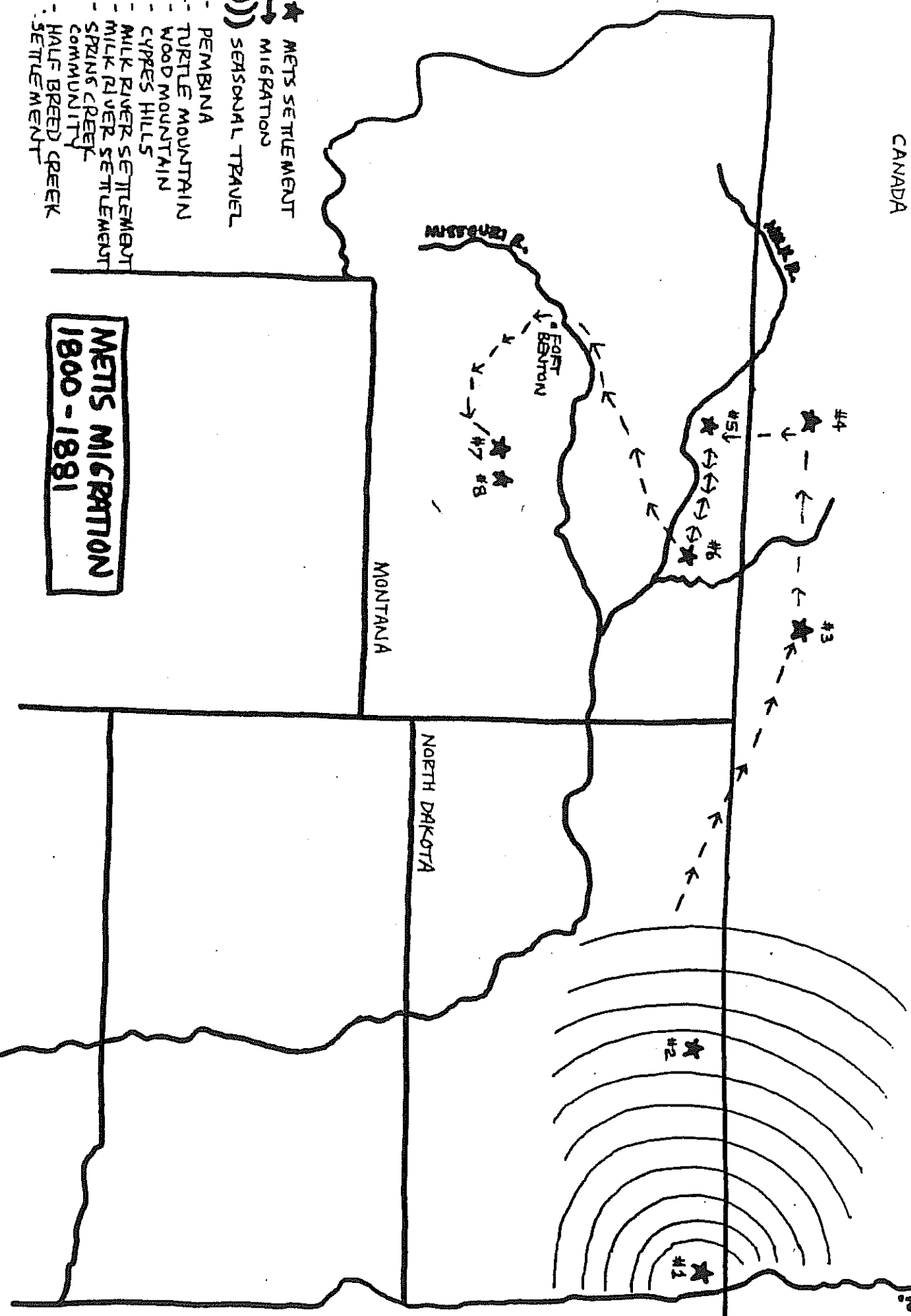
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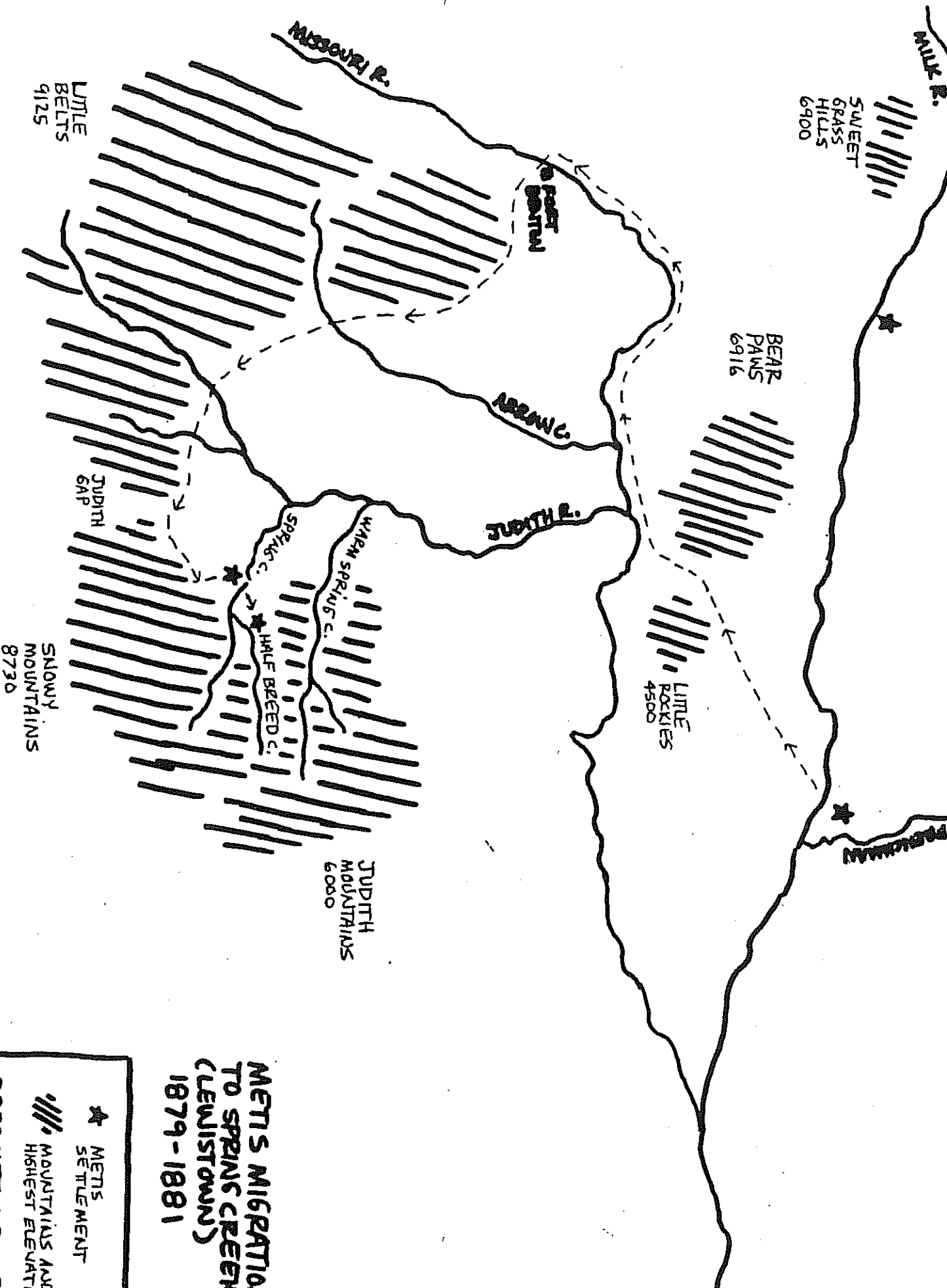
CANADA

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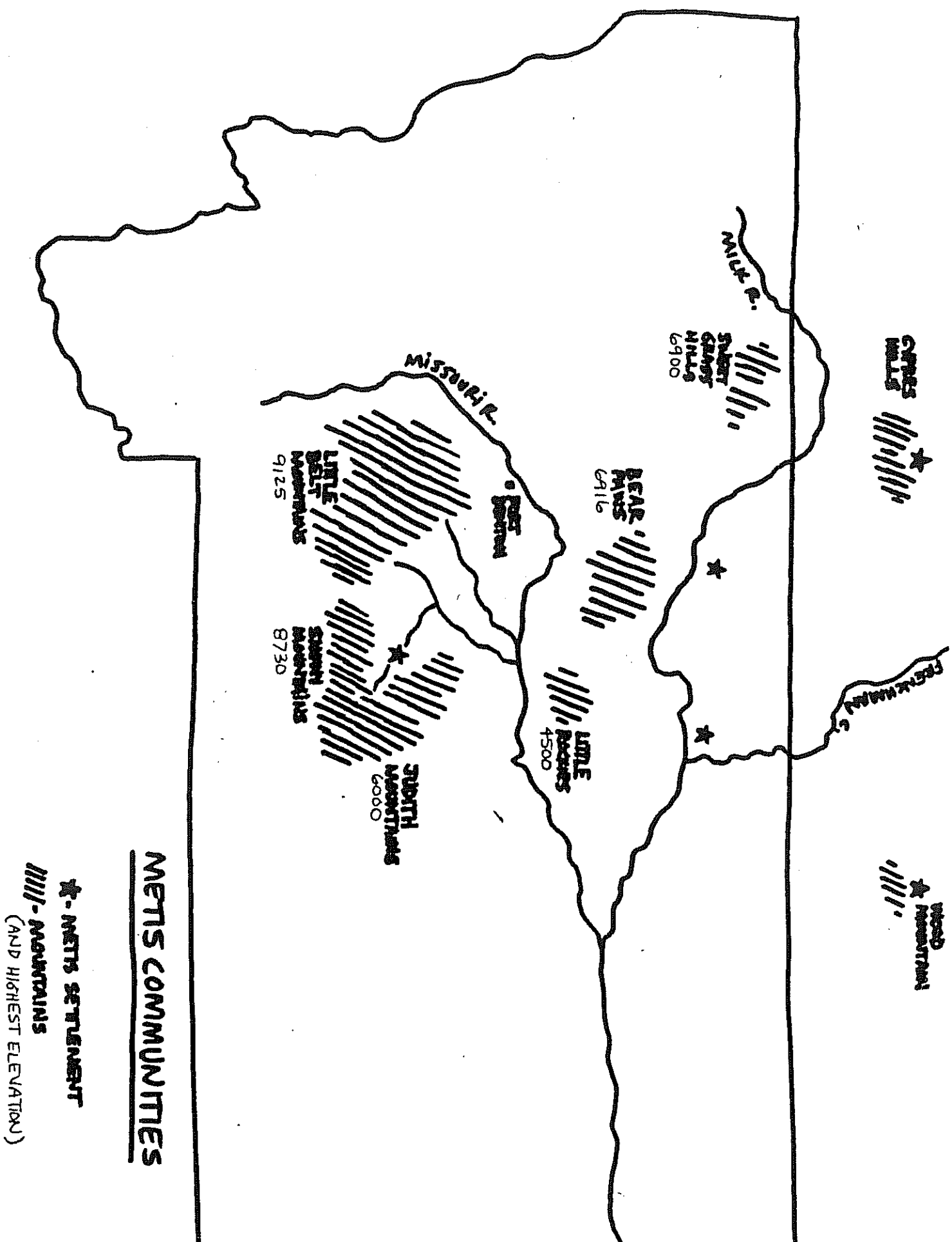


- ★ METIS SETTLEMENT
- MIGRATION
-))) SEASONAL TRAVEL
- 1- PEMBINA
- 2- TURTLE MOUNTAIN
- 3- WOOD MOUNTAIN
- 4- CYPRES HILLS
- 5- MILK RIVER SETTLEMENT
- 6- MILK RIVER SETTLEMENT
- 7- SPRING CREEK COMMUNITY
- 8- HALF BREED CREEK SETTLEMENT

METIS MIGRATION
1800-1881



**METIS MIGRATION
TO SPRING CREEK
(LEWISTOWN)
1879-1881**



METS COMMUNITIES

4. NETS RETURN

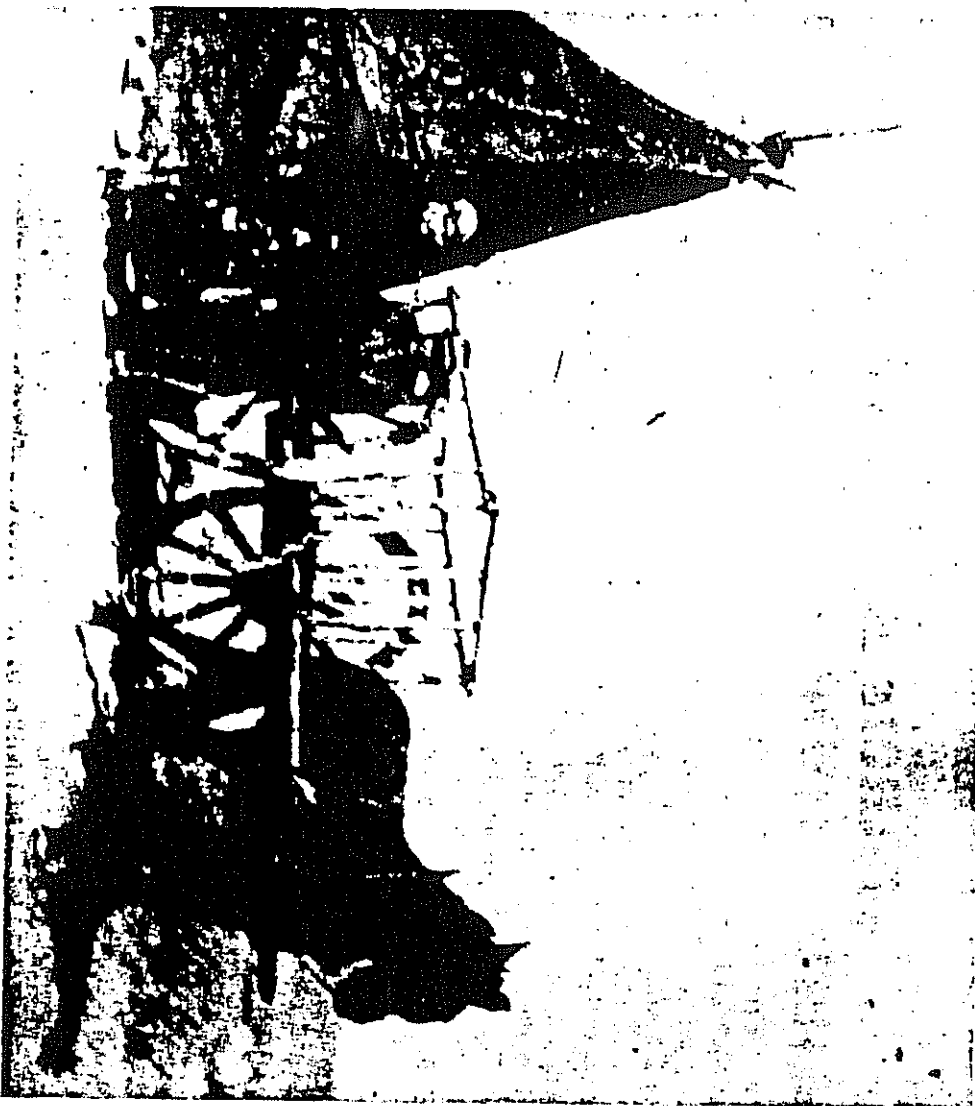
IIII-MOUNTAINS
(AND HIGHEST ELEVATION)



METIS IN MIXED-BLOOD DRESS



RED RIVER METIS
(LOUIS RIEL)



RED RIVER CART



JUDITH MOUNTAINS

LOW BLOOD QUANTUM METIS





HIGH BLOOD QUANTUM METIS