



**The Metis** The Metis, a people of mixed native and European ancestry, were born of the fur trade. Although intermarriage between European fur traders and native women occurred throughout Canadian history, the Metis emerged as a distinct culture along the Red River of Manitoba in the early 1800's. With a mixture of native and French Catholic traditions, their society was based on farming, trapping, a strong community, and the annual buffalo hunt.

With the failure of the Red River Rebellion in 1870, most Metis families left Manitoba and headed west onto the prairies to avoid persecution. Many settled near Fort Edmonton and along the South Saskatchewan River, where they continued to maintain their identity in scattered communities.

**Following the Bison** The bison played an important role in the traditional Metis way of life. Each summer, Metis families gathered together for a great communal bison hunt. Not only did this hunt supply the Metis with robes for trading and with much of their food, but it also served to cement the community ties which characterized their society.

By the early 1870's, the bison herds were greatly diminished, and few bison herds were to be found east of the Cypress Hills. The large communal hunts were no longer possible, and small groups of Metis families left the settlements and headed westward in search of the last bison. Leading a nomadic life during the summer, the families traveled across the prairies, hauling their possessions in screeching Red River carts pulled by oxen. While the men were hunting, the women stayed behind in the camp of hide tipis, curing bison robes and drying meat. The dried meat would be pounded and mixed with lard to make pemmican. Stored in air-tight skin bags, this nutritious food was the main-stay of the winter diet.

As winter approached, the wandering Metis found a suitable location to build a winter village, usually choosing a sheltered valley or wooded hills where water, wood, game and horse pasture were all accessible. Each family built a small one room cabin, made of pine logs chinked with mud, and roofed with sod. Even a small church was erected if a priest was present. Here the wintering Metis, known as *hivernants*, waited out the long, cold winter. Although trapping and hunting took up much of their time, winter was also when the Metis social scene came to life. The hivernants filled their nights with dances, games and gambling, and many marriages were arranged.



With the melting of the snow in spring, the Metis packed up their carts and left their wintering villages to pursue the bison for another summer. Sometimes the group returned in the fall to the previous year's wintering village, but often a new site would be found.

**Hivernants and the Cypress Hills** With an abundance of resources, the Cypress Hills were a popular wintering location. The deep coulees were filled with trees, and elk and deer were plentiful, supplementing the diet of

pemmican. Furs and hides obtained in the hills during the winter were valuable trading goods. And above all, the Cypress Hills were one of the last refuges of the dwindling bison herds, which often wintered nearby.

Metis hivernants may have arrived in the Cypress Hills as early as 1868, and throughout the 1870's wintering villages were common. The Metis congregated near the first trading posts, and a village sprang up around Fort Walsh soon after it was established in 1875 by the NWMP. By 1879 at least five Metis settlements existed in the Cypress Hills. The end of the decade, however, saw the final disappearance of the bison herds, and the end of a way of life.

Highly dependent on the bison, the Metis hivernants were hit hard by their loss. A few groups hung on during the early 1880's, hunting and trapping in the hills. Many others returned to the permanent Metis settlements in the north, taking up agriculture in order to survive. Soon after the railway reached Medicine Hat in 1883, settlers and ranchers began to displace the remaining Metis, who were considered to be squatters. The last of the hivernants soon left the Cypress Hills, never to return.



