

## Traditional Métis Housing and Shelter - Todd Paquin and Patrick Young

**Module objective:** The students will learn about various Métis housing structures from tipis and wigwams, winter houses, sod houses, Road Allowance houses to modern homes.

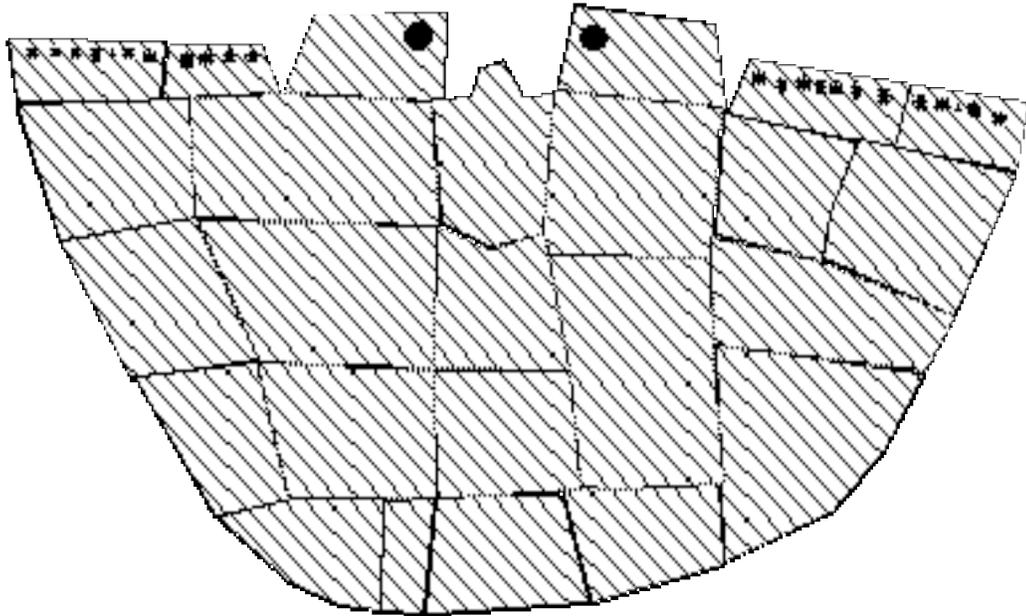
In their several centuries of existence, the Métis have lived in a variety of homes – both static and migratory. For almost two centuries, many Métis, if not most, lived in temporary homes. Often these homes were adapted to suit the Métis' subsistence activities or their role as fur trade workers or provisioners. It was essential that the nomadic Métis could carry their housing with them. The Métis followed the vast bison herds and maintained a largely communal lifestyle with very few possessions and only transportable shelter for more than 70 years. Tents, tipis and wigwams were their shelters of choice.

No single living space can be identified as Métis specific, although Road Allowance shacks and tents fashioned to Red River carts may be considered to be "temporary" Métis homes. The kind of home, which a particular Métis lived in the past was directly, related to the kinds of subsistence activities, which that person did to survive. For instance, a nomadic Métis buffalo hunter would have preferred to live in such a temporary and easily transportable structures as a tipi, a Métis farmer or fisher person would have preferred to live in a permanent home.

### **Tipis and Tents**

A Métis tipi was essentially the same as a First Nations tipi except that it did not have the same spiritual and other symbolic decorations upon it. Tipis were built by lashing three poles together to make a tripod, which was then framed by a dozen or more poles and topped with a circular cover of approximately twenty scraped bison skins. To keep out the elements and to close the tipi, a bone or a piece of wood was fastened through the cover's flap loop. The tipi's centre also had a cooking pit in which smoke sifted through a ventilation hole located at the conjunction of the three tripod poles.

These temporary, makeshift dwellings were built with minimal effort but could sustain as many as 10 people, including bison robe bedding, flooring, and household items.



**Pattern of Bison Hides for a Tipi Cover – Patrick Young**

The Plains Métis also used European-style tents, particularly in winter. In his reminiscences, Norbert Welsh, a well-known trader and bison hunter, described how he and his pregnant wife and another couple shared a 20-foot (6.1 metre) diameter tent in the dead of winter while out trading. The men built a 4-foot (1.22 metre) high brush fence around the tent and covered it with snow for external insulation. Internally, a small fire and bison hides were used to keep the heat in and the cold out.

### **Winter homes**

Another type of temporary house built by the Métis was the *maison d'hiver* or wintering house. These homes were built in areas with sufficient timber stalks, such as in parkland areas, and plenty of grass for horses, water and bison and other fauna. Places such as Wood Mountain or *Le bois montagne* and Val Marie in what's now

southern Saskatchewan were Métis wintering or *hivernant* communities. The people who lived in these villages were called *hivernants* or *winterers*. Common winter village locations were along the edge of the parklands, which provided shelter, a source of fuel and building materials, and a diverse range of fauna for food and clothing. Given these resources, a winter village could include up to 2,000 people, though the initial encampments were much smaller.

The villages were not highly structured. Rather, they were superimposed over the site's topography. The families did not try to alter the environment to meet their preconceived views of what the village layout should look like. This makes sense since the Métis were mobile and winter villages were not utilized year round or even annually. The inhabitants attempted to utilize individual site characteristics to their advantage resulting in highly varied inter-village organization patterns. For instance, the dwellings might be clustered on a flat terrace or they might be widely distributed if the landform was hilly.

Pre-contact archaeological sites commonly occur near or under Métis winter villages. It appears that the Métis used the same criteria as the Pre-contact First Nations, who also needed staging areas for organizing large spring hunts, for selecting wintering villages. Indeed, there is continuity between the late Pre-contact period and the Proto-historic and historic periods regarding regional settlement patterns.

Winter houses were made from saddle-notched logs, which were cemented together with waterproof mud or clay. The roof consisted of flatly laid poles covered with sod and hay. All doorways and windows were covered with stretched bison hides, which kept out the cold, but allowed light to filter in. In other instances, the door was made from wooden planks fastened with rawhide thongs. The houses were simple and practical with very few furnishings. Floors were either made from hewn

rocks or hard-packed dirt and floor coverings were made of hooked cloth rags or bison robes.

Often these one or two room buildings housed several families, which could mean that there were 15 to 20 people in each house. Such habitation, in close proximity, ensured a great deal of refuse. In fact, many winter homes contain refuse pits underneath, which left pungent odours from decaying organic materials. The homes were heated with clay hearths, made with a wooden frame, which required constant repairs lest the wood burn or clay crack. This meant that "mudding pits" were excavated nearby to keep a large supply of clay on hand for repairs. Once the winter concluded the houses were abandoned; however, they were often reused after further repairs.

### **Traditional Sedentary Homes**

Other traditional Métis, particularly farmers and merchants in the Red River Settlement and in St. Laurent, Saskatchewan District, lived in permanent dwellings. Some of these homes such as those of Xavier Letendre dit Batoche or James McKay (Deer Lodge) were grand. However, most were simple but practical log cabins made out of white poplar and pine and handcrafted by the family themselves.

These dwellings were one or one and a-half stories, with a thatched or gabled roof, consisting of either shingles or planks topped with sod, upon a fieldstone foundation. Mud or clay filled spaces between the logs, making the houses watertight and windproof. However, these types of homes were often poorly insulated. Snow and hay bales often had to be used as an insulating agent. Each home had a ground floor, an attic (a common sleeping room), and two rooms, which served as a kitchen and dining room while the other was for living and sleeping. Kitchens could also be an

extra room added to the structure. The rooms were usually very large, including living rooms which in many instances measured 24 feet x 24 feet (7.32 metres x 7.32 metres) in size. Home sizes varied and often depended on need and the skill of the builders. Larger homes required crews using pulleys and ropes, while two people could build smaller homes. Logs stripped of bark, and squared by an axe were fastened into a frame by saddle or by sturdier self-locking dovetail joints.

Dovetail notching was a strong method of building a wall and was used with houses taller than one story. It involves shaping the end of a log into a roughly triangular shape, which slopes in from the end of the log and is angled on the sides. The notch form was self-locking when the logs pull against the joint. This form of notching was used on buildings built prior to the 1930s and on structures which needed long-term stability.

Saddle notching, commonly used with smaller logs than dovetail notching (8-15 cm diameter vs. 15-20 cm diameter), involves making a rounded notch in the bottom of a log which fits over the log immediately below it. While this method is easier and quicker to use, it is weaker than the dovetail notch. Therefore, most buildings using saddle notching are less permanent structures and generally do not exceed one storey. Both the interior and exterior surfaces of the walls were plastered.

The interiors of early Métis homes were as functional and comfortable as possible. In the absence of paint, homes were frequently whitewashed with a plaster concoction of lime and clay or with plain lime. Windows and doors were often made in the same fashion as those in wintering homes. Small cellars, usually under the kitchen and about 6 to 8 feet (1.83 to 2.44 metres) deep, kept food from spoiling in the long summer months while storing produce in the winter.

A clay oven and a stone and clay-lined chimney, built into a kitchen wall, provided heat. These clay ovens at the bottom of the chimneys were quite large, which allowed for plenty of room for cooking pots and teakettles. By the early twentieth century, iron wood stoves superceded the clay oven.

No matter how they lived, the Métis had the artistic ability to decorate their homes with their handicrafts, thus making the most Spartan living quarters livable. Copper kettles, pots, and plates were hung from the walls to keep them from being broken and to minimize clutter. Walls were also adorned with a variety of religious iconography, clocks, pictures and flintlock guns, powder horns, shot bags and axes, all of which were kept out of reach of small children. Cupboards and shelves were built in the kitchen to hold house wares and dry goods. Furniture was often handcrafted and usually consisted of beds, cradles, cots, tables, chairs and benches made from rough-hewn wood and woven rawhide. If there was lots of company, beds could also serve as couches. Bison robes and trade blankets ensured that people were warm in their beds. Some well-off families possessed spinning wheels, sewing machines, clocks, weaving looms, and even silver teapots. The houses were tidy, uncluttered, and open, with few possessions.

### **Road Allowance Homes**

The aftermath of the 1885 Resistance proved devastating to the Métis' standard of living. Until the mid-twentieth century, seasonally employed and landless Métis had an extremely difficult time finding suitable housing in the face of extensive Euro-Canadian and European settlement in the Prairie West. Dispossession and grinding poverty resulted in the creation of Métis shanty communities near immigrant settlements. Since these homes were built beside crown lands and road allowances – land set aside for road development by rural municipalities – the Métis squatters

became derisively known as the “Road Allowance People”. Road Allowance houses were usually tarpaper shacks, which lacked insulation and were built largely from scrap lumber and other “recycled” building materials. For poor families, many of whom were on relief, broken windows were often covered with cardboard or rags. In the parkland areas of the central and northern fringes of the Prairies, those Road Allowance Métis that could do so built log cabins.

### **Northern Log Cabins**

Well into the 1960s, the log cabin was the home of choice and circumstance for most Métis living in northern regions. A 1960s study of northern Saskatchewan Métis communities revealed that one third of the houses had only one-room. More often than not, these homes, such as those in Cumberland House, were a two-room structure, approximately 18 by 20 feet (5.5 by 6.1 metres) and occupied by six people. These log cabins really had running water and heat came from a wood or coal burning heater and bear tin pipes.

### **Modern Homes**

Since the 1960s, housing opportunities for the Métis have improved; however, there is still room for improvement in inner city and northern communities. In the North, for instance, many communities lack basic sewage and adequate water services. Dwellings also tend to be overcrowded, with several families occupying one house. Nonetheless, the Métis also live in the same modern homes, apartments and condominiums as the larger society. Incomes, lifestyle, education levels, and social standing all impact how people choose housing. The Métis are no exception. Many Métis are still poorer than the Canadian average and as a result, housing cooperatives such as Saskatchewan Native Housing and the Manitoba Native Housing Association are assisting those Métis who cannot afford suitable housing, particularly in low-income urban neighbourhoods and in the North.

## Traditional Métis Housing and Shelter Fact Facts:

- I. The St. Norbert Provincial Heritage Site in Winnipeg Manitoba has the Turrene (circa 1871) and Delorme (circa 1850s) Houses. These historic Métis homes have been restored to what they originally looked like in the 1800s. Most 19th century Métis homes, such as this one, are no longer standing, however, some still exist in and around Winnipeg. In fact, the Riel family home, which Louis Riel never actually lived in, still stands in Winnipeg and is a National Historical Site.
- II. Mud and clay, often mixed with bison hair as a tempering agent, was often used as a means of insulation and crack-filling between the logs in a Métis Winter House. This process was known as "chinking" or *bousilage*. The roof of the house was made from flat poles covered in earth and hay, and windows and doors were usually made from stretched bison hide.
- III. Highlights from the *1997 Profile of the Métis* indicate that in 1991, 52% of the Métis rented their living accommodations and 48% owned their own homes and 47% of all Métis dwellings were in need of repairs. This only confirms that the Métis inhabit one of the lowest income strata in Canadian society.
- IV. Xavier Letendre dit Batoche, an affluent Métis business person from Batoche Northwest Territories, had one of the grandest homes in the old Northwest in the late 19th century. It was built in the French-Canadian Seigneurial style by Canadian craftsmen and was lavishly decorated and furnished. Although the owner had rivals in the Métis community of Batoche, Duck Lake and St. Louis, his home remained the focal point of the Métis living between the two arms of the Saskatchewan River.
- V. Looting by ill-disciplined Canadian soldiers at the battles of Fish Creek and Batoche during the 1885 Resistance led to many local Métis families being robbed of all their valuable possessions. Sometimes it took 20 or more years for these Métis to return to their pre-resistance standard of living, if at all.
- VI. Among Western Canada's Métis there is a tradition of remembrance for the "Road Allowance People" -- Métis who lived in appalling living conditions, usually in homes built of discarded wood and other materials along road allowances. These people and their stories, joyous and sorrowful but always poignant, are retold by Métis elders, scholars, artists, film producers and writers.
- VII. As recent as the 1960s, the Métis of northern Saskatchewan lived in log cabins with very little in modern and comforting amenities such as running water.
- VIII. Most Métis now live in cities. Winnipeg, Edmonton, Regina, Prince Albert and Saskatoon have large Métis populations, who, because of their low standard of living, largely live in low-income housing.

## Questions and activities:

- I. Outline some of the types of living structures which the Métis traditionally lived in. Were these homes functional and related to the sort of subsistence activity which the Métis partook in? Make a model of a tipi or a traditional Métis cabin. Use materials on hand or try to replicate as closely as possible the

- same natural materials, which the Métis would have used to construct their homes. Various Native Studies, History or Anthropology books will provide you with models to work from or you can visit a museum and create from models on display. Could people cook inside of a tipi?
- II. Describe a typical Métis wintering house. What materials were used for its construction? Where were these structures built and why? What unique features did these structures have which made them so valuable to the Métis people in *hivernant* camps? What kind of furnishings would these homes have had? What sorts of artifacts from these sites have the Métis left for archaeologists to interpret?
  - III. What happened to these structures after the end of the winter? Were the Métis winter villages structured in any particular way? How were these settlements organized?
  - IV. Describe the first kinds of Métis permanent structures. What lifestyle choices were necessary for the Métis to start living in such homes? Were these homes similar or did these structures vary? How were these homes constructed? What raw materials were used in their construction? How did early Métis homeowners brighten-up these structures? What sort of furnishings and household items would a typical Métis house from this time have?
  - V. Road Allowance Housing has a special significance for Prairie Métis, why is this so? What social and political factors led to the creation of the "Road Allowance People"? How were Road Allowance shacks built? Is there a similarity between these structures and the kind of housing which squatters build in the outskirts of many Third World cities?
  - VI. What kinds of housing do the Métis live in currently? Would their generally lower income levels affect the kind of accommodations that they chose to live in? How have Métis activists and political organizations attempted to improve the living conditions of those Métis living in urban and rural areas?

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