

## **Early Metis Communities: Birsay Village or Orkney Town**

When Peter Fidler (1769-1822) made a map of the Red River District, he recording the settlement of Birsay Village west of Fort Douglas on the Assiniboine River which was built by a group of Metis freemen, some of whom had previously lived in the Brandon House area.

Birsay Village is along the Assiniboine River midway between Lyon Island and Kettle Plain. The vast majority of the freeman were Orkney-Cree Michif who worked for the French trading companies. Many of the freemen had lived long enough in the North West to be free of their companies contracts, and to be regarded as permanent inhabitants of the region. Some had been in the North West trade since 1770. The Hudson Bay Company freemen were far fewer as the company policy was to return servants to Europe when their contract expired. A few former H.B.C. servants, however, had settled in the vicinity of Brandon House, living with the Cree nearly in the same manner as the free Canadians of Red River did with the Ojibwa. Not surprising, most of the Hudson Bay freemen are natives of the Orkney Isles which had supplied the HBC with 75 percent of the servants by 1800.

Peter Fidler suggested that these Orkney freemen were servants who had been dismissed for various misdemeanors and acts of insubordination, rather than servants whose contracts had expired. For example, John Lyons was set free in August 1816 for refusing to accompany James Inkster on a trip to Indian Elbow on the upper Assiniboine. Humphrey Favel was set free on account of his bad behaviour toward John McLeod at Red River in 1815; Thomas Favel, a Metis (1780-1848), was released because of his refusal to go with Peter Fidler to Jack River at the northern end of Lake Winnipeg in 1815; Magnus Spence, in service since 1783, became free in 1815 as well. Jack Spence, son of Magnus Spence, was sent to explore Red River for possible sites for an Orkney Colony. He was the one who selected the Birsay site, three miles above the White Horse Plain, or twenty-two miles above the forks.

Magnus Spence, in the service of the Company since 1783, became free in 1815 and appears to be the leader and eldest of this group. Birsay was the home parish of Magnus Spence in the Orkneys. This group moved from Brandon house to the Assiniboine, just three miles north of the White Horse Plains, during the winter of 1817-1818 to adopt a more sedentary way of life. Peter Fidler, in the spring, had counted eight males, two females and thirteen children: six boys and seven girls. Only Magnus Spence and James Monkman had a wife and family listed against their names. Later in the year, more Metis came in from the buffalo hunt, having laid up a good stock, and some of them are moving to the spots where they intend to build.

Whooping cough and measles hit Orkney Town, and James Sandison lost two children on August 4. Owman Norquay b-1775 lost one child, and -Oman Norquay (1773-1820) died. To add to their misery, swarms of grasshoppers destroyed their crops. Orkney Town was abandoned by mid-September, 1819. The 1827 census suggests they were

absorbed into the main Red River Colony. The French Canadian Freeman and Metis of Pembina quickly moved in to the settlement at Orkney Town.



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Reference:

R. Dick Garneau, "Metis Culture 1818-1820." <http://www.telusplanet.net/dgarneau/metis38a.htm>