

THE HISTORY OF  
THE MÉTIS ORGANIZATION OF SASKATCHEWAN

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## I. INTRODUCTION

People across Canada witnessed an unusual sight as the constitutional meetings, chaired by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, were broadcast across the nation on March 15 and 16, 1983. Indian, Métis and Inuit leaders were sitting around the conference table in head-to-head discussions with the provincial premiers and the Prime Minister. Thus, in the nation's capital, in mid-March of 1983, a strange anomaly was witnessed by the people of Canada, as three of the country's poorest, most powerless groups negotiated in public to have their basic "Aboriginal" rights entrenched within the new Canadian Constitution.

This meeting became an important historical event on two counts, since it marked that stage in our history when the constitution, having finally been brought home from Great Britain, could now become a blueprint for Canadian democratic institutions. Perhaps more importantly, Native statesmen and leaders representing the most oppressed groups in our midst were there, arguing their case with the nation's official policy-makers.

It remains to be seen whether or not the Natives of Canada will have their rights safeguarded by the Canadian Constitution. Certainly the appearance of Native leaders at this historical meeting was the culmination of a long and difficult struggle on behalf of Native people in Canada. This article is an attempt to summarize the political struggles of the Métis, the struggles that went on for nearly a century and culminated during the constitutional talks, as they represented one of the three recognized Aboriginal peoples entitled to special consideration in the Canadian Constitution.

It has often been assumed that the notion of Métis nation-hood died with the defeat of the Métis patriots at Batoche in 1885. It is perhaps more accurate to say that the Métis notion of nationhood did not die at Batoche. Rather, the battle marked the beginning of a "Dark Age" where, for over half a century, the Métis disappeared as an ethnic group from the visible political mosaic of our nation. Although the Métis were plunged into a nightmare of economic hardship and political repression as a result of their defeat, their sense of belonging to a distinct and worthwhile community did not die. During the great depression of the 1930s, the Métis, like other groups in Canada, began to organize themselves into political protest movements in Canada and saw themselves as a distinct national minority. This micro-nationalism has become a powerful force within Métis political organizations, and has been an important component within Métis political circles since their inception. Métis nationality was therefore given concrete expression through Métis political organization.

We will trace the history of Métis political organization and the growth of Métis nationalism throughout the period from 1930 to 1975. For the majority of the information about Métis activities throughout this period we are indebted to Murray Dobbin, whose book, The One-And-A-Half Men, is perhaps the most definitive study completed on the subject to date.

Using Dobbin's work as our guide, we will recount the tale of the rebirth of Métis political nationality and its development from the 1930s to the mid -1970s. We will discuss the founding and development of political organizations such as the Saskatchewan Métis Society (SMS) and The Association of Métis and Non-Status Indians of Saskatchewan (AMNSIS).

We will discuss the early difficulties faced by organizers, the land claims that were made between 1938 and 1941 by the SMS, the reorganization that took place within the SMS in 1943, its period of ineffective activity because of the demoralization of the people lasting to 1946, and the attempts of the political leaders in 1947 that led to a revival of the Métis struggle for recognition. Finally, we will describe the reorganization that took place from 1964 to 1975.

As Métis writer Maria Campbell has said, "You can not know where you are going unless you know where you are coming from." History, although it is not always recorded as such, is the story of peoples' struggles to create a better world. History is a living thing, not a lifeless artifact as it is often portrayed. This is, then, a summary of part of the neglected history of where our people are coming from – the story of the Métis of Saskatchewan in the struggle for a better world.

## II. ORIGINS

The fur trade that initially brought Europeans to the lands between Canada's Great Lakes and the Rocky Mountains not only brought wealth to the owners of the fur trading companies, but also gave birth to the Métis Nation. The Métis came into being as people of mixed Indian and European ancestry who served as middlemen in the fur trade. Acting as interpreters for the Indians and the traders, the Métis were employed by the fur trading companies as voyageurs, hunters, guides, clerks and general labourers. The Métis also engaged in early forms of agricultural pursuits on the prairies, perfecting the art of subsistence farming that flourished prior to the introduction of commercial farming by the federal government in 1870. Since Métis lands were required for this process, they were not encouraged to enter the new

wheat economy that replaced the old fur trading economy of the North-West in 1870. Instead of using the Indians and the Métis as a source of labour in the new wheat economy, it was cheaper and politically more expedient to bring in impoverished immigrants already acquainted with concepts of private property and commercialism. As a result, the Métis were bypassed, becoming an "obstacle" rather than a source of labour for the development of the new western economy.

Speculators and settlers moved into the Red River territory which had been occupied by the Métis prior to 1870. The Métis were dispossessed of their lands by speculators through the use of land and money scrip. The land was then sold to the settlers at a substantial profit. This did not occur without conflict, however. The Métis resisted vigorously in 1869 and 1870, and again in 1885.

When Colonel Garnet Wolseley's force arrived in 1870, many of the Métis fled Red River and moved further west. It was not long, however, before the settlement process caught up to them once more. In their new homes on the prairies, land ownership once again became a critical issue for the Métis. Following the armed Resistance of 1885, scrip was once again issued to the Métis, under the original provisions of the Dominion Lands Act of 1874. Of those few Métis who received scrip after 1885, even fewer retained their land acquired through scrip. Lacking capital to enter into commercial farming, most of the Métis parted with their land and money scrip for a fraction of its true value. Following these events the hapless Métis were forced to either move again, this time to the marginal lands of the parklands or to subsist as best they could as chronically unemployed people, often living on road allowances or in shanty towns on the fringes of society. These were the circumstances that provided the incentive for both the political organization that was

to follow, and the strong nationalist component that became a permanent part of all Métis political organization.

### III. ESTABLISHMENT OF THE SASKATCHEWAN MÉTIS SOCIETY – 1937:

The depression years on the prairies produced hardship and frustration for farmers and working people. The Métis, however, who had already been marginalized and impoverished by earlier events, were especially hard hit. In response to their conditions, Métis attempts at political organization began prior to the worst depression years. As early as 1931, a group of Métis from Regina led by a man named Joe McKenzie, began meeting to discuss the issue of the misuse of Métis scrip. These meetings continued on a more-or-less regular basis for over two years. No lobbying of the government was planned at these meetings which were designed simply to initiate discussion among the people.

By 1935, however, some of the Métis, frustrated with discussions that never seemed to result in action, began to agitate for a more concrete program. As a result, Joe Ross, a Regina labourer became the leader of the organizational drive for a Métis political body. Ross felt that an organization was required that would address the needs of the Métis as a group. It was hoped that such an organization would

achieve the following objectives:

- (1) Pressure the government to improve the economic and social conditions of the Métis.
- (2) To help the Métis get jobs or relief, and education for their children.
- (3) To press the government for a satisfactory settlement to their land claims.

These were the issues that mobilized the Métis into forming the Saskatchewan Métis Society. Seventeen Métis men and women were in attendance at the founding meeting. A writer observed:

There was no executive elected at this meeting but Joe Ross was elected Chairman of the group and Henry McKenzie Sr. was chosen secretary treasurer. It was not clear from the records whether or not the founding members formally chose a name for themselves. One of the early members, however, claimed they referred to themselves as the "Halfbreeds of Saskatchewan."<sup>1</sup>

It appears that for the first two years the group concentrated on organizing the Regina local, making no attempt to expand to a provincial level. Until 1938, the "Halfbreeds of Saskatchewan" did not have a constitution or a charter under provincial law. Like most working people of the time, the Métis lacked formal education and experience in dealing with government authorities. In fact, the Métis knew very little about the technicalities and procedures required to make their newly formed organization "official." However, they quickly recognized that they would require a constitution and a set of by-laws in order to achieve their own purposes through the organization.

The Métis involved with the organization asked Ed Klyne, a local member, to seek advice from Mr. T.H. Newlove, a Regina lawyer. The Métis committee, consisting

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<sup>1</sup> Murray Dobbin, "Métis Struggles of the Twentieth Century," Regina, New Breed Magazine, March 1978, p. 18.



of five members, met with Newlove, and at his behest drew up a constitution which was approved at a general meeting in the fall of 1937, held in Regina. The new organization, now acting in an official capacity, was named the Saskatchewan Métis Society. Its stated aims were:

- (1) To organize the Métis of Saskatchewan so that they may strive to better their social, cultural and economic life.
- (2) To assist as far as possible in recording and perpetuating a correct history of the Métis in Saskatchewan.
- (3) To set up branches of the society in Saskatchewan and to affiliate with, or accept affiliation with organizations having similar objectives.

In 1937, Joe LaRocque, a well educated Métis from Lebret, was chosen president. Other officers of the new organization were Edmond Klyne, truck driver; Robert LaRocque, salesman; Joe Powless, labourer; Jerome LaRocque, retired; and Joe Ross, also a labourer. All of the officers were from Regina.

Joe Ross was assigned the job of organizer. Ross and the president, Joe LaRocque, immediately set out to organize a series of local branches on a province-wide basis. This turned out to be an extremely difficult task due to the demoralization that had affected the people because of high unemployment and a reliance on debilitating welfare programs. Ross suffered a severe physical handicap, being practically blind. This became an advantage, however, since blind people were allowed free passage on the railway. The courageous Joe Ross was thus able to travel widely across the province despite the Society's lack of funds. Ross was not married; consequently, he could devote most of his energy to the immense organizational task that lay before him. The tenacious Joe Ross travelled to Estevan, Ituna, Lestock,

Lebret, Willowbunch, Battleford and Baljennie. His partner, president Joe LaRocque, travelled extensively throughout the north, at times travelling as far as Green Lake. The men found this rigorous work both interesting and exciting because for the first time since the defeat at Batoche, many isolated Métis communities were rediscovering each other. If the Métis Nation had been broken and scattered to the winds after 1885, Ross LaRocque and the SMS were now putting it back together again.

#### IV. EARLY DIFFICULTIES:

Although Ross and LaRocque discovered many enthusiastic Métis on their organizational trips across the province, they also faced many difficulties. Joe Ross felt that they were hampered in their efforts by the lack of good leaders. He commented:

There were all kinds of good leaders but they didn't seem to want to come forward, there were many who didn't want anything to do with the SMS for various reasons. Many felt the politicians would destroy it anyway. Another thing is that they felt the Métis people weren't reliable. There were all kinds of people who wouldn't admit they were Métis, couldn't talk to them at all, they wouldn't have anything to do with you. A lot of these people felt, well, I'm doing fine, why should I be bothered with anything like that.<sup>2</sup>

Another major block to Métis unity were the differences between the issues that affected the northern and the southern Métis. Because there were more English-speaking settlers in the south, the Métis of the south tended to speak English at the expense of the Native languages. The southern Métis communities relied more heavily on the "white" population for jobs than did the Métis of the north. In short,

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

the Métis of the south, because of their economic situation, pursued a way of life that more closely resembled that of the Europeans than that of their northern brethren.

By contrast, the northern Métis often spoke Cree or Chipewyan and tended to live the more traditional lifestyle of the Indians. They were more independent of the white community, often surviving by fishing and hunting. As a result of these important differences, communication between the northern and southern Métis was often difficult. Northern Métis faced different problems than the Métis of the south, and as a result, sought different solutions. The Métis of the north depended on the land for their survival and they sought to have land rights become a priority in the Métis struggle with the various levels of government. The southern Métis also wanted a land base, but unlike the northerners they were more interested in commercial agriculture. As a consequence, the southern Métis from the beginning perceived education and employment as top priorities.

Despite these serious differences, however, the SMS managed to survive as a provincial organization, acting on behalf of all Métis in the province. During the years following the founding of the SMS, meetings were held fairly regularly in most locals across the province. The discussions continued to revolve around the problems that still plagued the Métis: unemployment, and the need for a land base. The Aboriginal rights question emerged as the chief line of contention, since it involved not only a question of social and economic justice, but embodied the whole question of national pride. Thus, the need for a land base eventually became the foremost issue for the SMS.

Throughout the 1930s the Métis clearly recognized that they were being mistreated by the various levels of government, but there were few people who felt

that they had enough education to enter into the complicated negotiations that would have to take place with government officials. Those Métis who did have a good education often were swept away into the mainstream of society. Many of the well-educated Métis denied their Indian ancestry. This co-opting of potential Métis leadership had serious effects on the Métis' ability to organize. As a result, the Métis did not join the other protest groups on the prairies. Murray Dobbin wrote:

All across the west, protest movements, labour unions, farmers groups and political protest parties were calling for radical changes to, or even an end to capitalism – the economic system that denied them a right to a decent life. These organizations and political parties, like the CCF and the Communist Party, organized opposition to the old political parties in power and demanded the right to jobs and decent living conditions. The Métis did not take part in those activities. They were mostly Liberal Party supporters.<sup>3</sup>

The lack of political experience was a major problem for the early Métis leaders. As a result, the organization often supported policies that were not always in their own long-term interests. The Métis Society was organized to fight for political goals but, to be successful, its members needed to know more about the structure of power and how governments worked. They had to develop methods to pressure the government, and they had to learn how to use opposition parties. Without this knowledge, the Métis Society could not realize its own potential.

Zacharias Hamilton, of Regina, was a secretary of the Saskatchewan Historical Society. Because he was married to a Métis woman, Hamilton had taken a special interest in Métis history. When contacted by the Métis Society, Hamilton agreed to assist them with research into their land claims with the federal government.

Hamilton and two others, A.T. Hunter and J.A. Gregory, both fellow members of the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

historical society, assisted the Métis on their land claims issue. Others, including B.C. McDaniel, agreed to help as well. The three were all Liberal Party members; in fact, Gregory and McDaniel were Liberal members of the provincial Legislative Assembly.

Throughout 1938, the SMS continued to set up locals across Saskatchewan. By the end of 1938, it had fourteen fully organized branches in Regina, Lebret, Estevan, Crooked River, Meota, Willowbunch, Crooked Lake, Touchwood, Shell Lake, Ituna, Glen Mary, Battleford and Saskatoon. Other communities had been approached by the SMS but had not been organized at this point.

#### V. LAND CLAIMS 1938 – 1941:

The Métis were still handicapped in their struggle for land claims because of their colonial tradition. They had become a colonized people without a land base after their defeat in 1885. When the Canadian government had denied them the right to their land, it amounted to the denial of the reality of the existence of a Métis Nation within the Canadian confederation. The Métis correctly saw themselves as a nation of people who, collectively, had been treated unjustly by the Canadian government. The Métis still yearned for land that they felt was rightfully theirs. In the eyes of the SMS the enemy was the federal government, not the provincial government.

In 1938, J. A. Gregory, in his official capacity as an elected MLA, and president of the Historical Society, took the case for Métis land claims to the legislature. Zach Hamilton had concluded his research on Métis land claims and delivered his report to the SMS. Hamilton indicated that the Métis were correct in asserting that they had land claims against the federal government. In Hamilton's opinion, however, the

Métis did not have a claim against the federal government that could be legally justified. It was Hamilton's belief that :

[The Métis] only had a moral claim. In other words, the federal government could not be forced in court to make good on the Métis land claims. The Métis, in Hamilton's opinion, could not demand that their land claims be met, they could only request it. If the federal government wanted to, it could just refuse the Métis' request. This meant that their case was very weak.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout 1939 the Métis received some attention from both the Saskatchewan Legislature and the daily press regarding their claims. As well, attention was drawn to the terrible living conditions of the Métis people. A cry was raised for supportive public intervention on their behalf. The Métis annual convention was held in Regina, May 16 – 19, 1939. The Métis at this convention voted in a new executive. Mike Vandale of Saskatoon was elected president; Joe Ross became vice-president and organizer; while Jim LaRocque of Lebret was elected secretary; and, Mrs. R. Bouvin became the new treasurer.

During the years 1939 – 40, the Métis of Saskatchewan developed contacts with the Métis organizations of Alberta and Manitoba. This was beneficial for the Saskatchewan Métis, since they could borrow from the experience of three remarkable leaders of the Alberta Métis, Malcolm Norris, Jim Brady and Pete Tomkins. In 1940, the SMS had its largest membership. As well, it had achieved contact with Métis organizations across the prairie west. Serious international problems curtailed Métis organization, however, as World War II unfolded across Europe. Hundreds of young Métis joined Canada's military forces to fight for their country. As a result, the SMS

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

lost many of its best leaders and spokesmen from the provincial organization and the local branches. Likewise, the government concentrated its energies on the war effort and there was neither the money nor the political interest in addressing the problems of minority groups at home.

Throughout the war years what Métis leadership that still remained were closely tied to the Liberal Party. Nevertheless, the major concern of the Métis organization continued to be the land question. One of the important resolutions passed by the Métis Society during this period dealt with the *Manitoba Act* of 1870. The resolution stated that the Métis were entitled to the same rights as the Indians, and the *Manitoba Act* and existing treaties were used to back up the claim. In 1940, the SMS received funding from the Saskatchewan government to study the land claims issue. In the meantime, the Society continued to organize new locals across the province. In the same year, the provincial premier granted the Métis \$10,000 to hire lawyers to study the constitution as it pertained to Métis land claims. Consequent to this, the Métis curtailed all other activities geared to the land claims issue until the report was completed. Eventually, Zacharias Hamilton recommended to the membership that it would be advisable to postpone work on land claims until after the war was over. Although there was considerable disagreement, Hamilton's recommendation was accepted.

Nevertheless, considerable gains had been made by the Métis during the war years. By 1941, the SMS had doubled its membership. There were now twenty-eight branches established across the province. An unofficial SMS document, not dated, tallied the new branches as follows:

LOCAL

MEMBERSHIP

LEADERS

Battleford	60 Families	J. Falcon, J. Ballerdi
Batoche	400 Families	Boyer A. Dion
Crooked Lake	59 Families	Chas Pelletier
Crescent Lake	20 Families	L. Pelletier
Camp Lake	40 Families	J. Isbister
Duck Lake	60 Families	Joe Price
Estevan	45 Families	Alex Blondeau
Eldersley	75 Families	Mrs. Bodiou
Fort Qu'Appelle	35 Families	Pat Swan
Lebret	75 Families	Thos. Majors
Katepwa	50 Families	John Amyotte
Hubbard	100 Families	Norman Ross
Kinistino	200 Families	A.M. Fiddler
Willow Bunch	50 Families	Greg Mogillis
Meadow Lake	150 Families	P.X. Poitras
Willow Field	50 Families	Sol Pritchard
Prince Albert	250 Families	Roch St. Denis
Meota	35 Families	Joe Gervais
Beauval	75 Families	Riel Bonneau
Green Lake	45 Families	Alex Bishop
Regina	50 Families	Mr. L. Mamarre
Saskatoon	50 Families	C.H. Vandale, H. Crom
Chochin	40 Families	A. Boyer

UNORGANIZED BRANCHES OF THE SOCIETY:

Bresaylor	25 Families	Taylor and Sayer
Swift Current	20 Families	Leo LaRocque
Moosomin	25 Families	Cutler
Welby	35 Families	n/a
Maple Creek	60 Families	Peter and Normin St. Denis



## VI. SMS REORGANIZATION – 1943:

The war years resulted in Métis inaction. As a result, many locals had ceased to function by 1943. Members of most locals had become almost completely discouraged. In June of 1943, the Métis leadership decided to take action. A program of intensive reorganization was launched, once again centering on the land claims issue. It was quickly decided that the land claims study would be completed. However, the Noonan and Hodges report, upon its completion, did not serve the purposes of the Métis. In fact, it suggested that the Métis had neither a legal, nor a moral claim for their land rights. The brief:

Advised the Métis that they should stress present conditions and needs rather than compensation for past rights and alleged injustices.<sup>5</sup>

It was evident that the lawyers employed by the Métis had consciously pursued a very narrow legal view regarding Métis land rights. The brief concluded:

- (1) That the Métis did not and never had any legal claims enforceable through the courts, arising out of the Indian title.
- (2) That they did have a strong equitable (moral) claim to special consideration but
- (3) Such claims were already settled by the Dominion Government.<sup>6</sup>

This brief, ostensibly written on behalf of the Métis, nevertheless seemed to reflect the interests of the federal government, as its conclusions so clearly reveal. The conclusions, however, seemed dubious. In the first instance, it was obvious that the lawyers retained by the Métis had not carefully studied the *Manitoba Act*. Second,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

they failed to do a competent study on the concept of Aboriginal rights. Indeed, it seemed to many that the lawyers' conclusions had really been drawn up before the study had been completed. Many suspected that the influence of Mr. Hamilton played a key role in the negative approach it took towards the whole question of Métis land rights. This negative land claim brief was delivered to the Métis in July of 1943. The provincial Liberal government refused to give money to the Métis to deliver the worthless document to the federal government. Soon after this turn of events, however, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) defeated the Liberals in the Saskatchewan Provincial election. Shortly after their election to power, the CCF government gave the SMS a paltry \$500 to take their brief to Ottawa. The worthless brief, actually worded to back federal government policy on the land claims issue, simply reinforced the government policy that the Métis had no land claims that could be considered legitimate. The federal government made it clear to the Métis delegation that all land claims of the Métis had been settled when land and money scrip had been issued.

Following this fiasco, most of the local branches of the SMS became inactive. They had organized around one, single issue, the land claims issue. The failure of the SMS delegation to Ottawa seemed to be the terminal point. They had failed. What else could be expected? The SMS executive soon became inactive as well. Wilma Moore remained on as the secretary but the SMS was, for all practical purposes, defunct. It seemed that none of the leaders had the knowledge necessary to keep the Society alive following the devastating report that had been handed to them by their own lawyers.

1943 was a sad year for the SMS. Misled by Hamilton's advice during the first few years, and dominated by Wilma Moore, a Non-Native, the Society appeared to be falling apart. The southern Métis were once again bickering with their northern compatriots, and hopes of settling the land claims issue were dim, if not temporarily snuffed out altogether.

#### VII. DEMORALIZATION AND APATHY – 1944 – 1946:

By 1944, the war had not only taken its toll on Métis men overseas, it had reduced the efficiency of the SMS at home. The year 1944 saw the lowest membership ever. The provincial organization was the only one left, the locals were all inactive, and even the provincial organization was dominated by the truculent Wilma Moore, an outsider. Dobbin commented:

Her interference in SMS affairs had caused bitter and deep divisions within the Society between its northern and southern members. The main issue the organization had fought for – a land claim against the Federal Government was lost before the battle had ever begun.<sup>7</sup>

The only gain the Métis had made during those trying times was the Métis farm at Green Lake. The farm, however, turned out to be simply a make-work project. Few Métis obtained a living from their own small plots of land, and none were granted title to the lands they occupied at the Green Lake farm. The Métis saw the Green Lake project for what it was: a method for delivering a cheap welfare scheme to the northern Métis. They had little or no effective input into the scheme.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 12

If these problems were not enough, other changes were taking place. The original Métis leadership had obtained close ties with the ruling provincial Liberals. This party, now on its way out, had failed the Métis completely.

If it wasn't for Joe Ross, a CCF party member and the original SMS organizer, the CCF government would have neglected the Métis question. As it was, the Saskatchewan Métis Society barely stayed alive in 1945 and was slowly dying by 1946. Dobbin wrote:

In reality, the Métis were a very special group. They were a surplus population within Canada surrounded by a white majority which exploited, abused and constantly discriminated against them. Because they were Métis, they were denied the dignity and the standard of living that other citizens enjoyed.<sup>8</sup>

To keep the Association alive, Fred Delaronde, of Mont Nebo, north of Saskatoon, was elected President. He pressured the CCF government to recognize Métis issues. Mr. Delaronde wrote letters to the new Premier, T.C. Douglas requesting he meet with the SMS executive in Saskatoon. Finally on July 18, 1946, the Premier sent out letters to the executive and its local branches to meet with the government in Regina on July 30<sup>th</sup>.

The government had one purpose in calling the meeting. It wanted to promote the development of a truly representative Métis organization. The government suggested that a committee of Métis be elected to be responsible for reorganizing the SMS into a provincial association. Until such an association was in place, the government would recognize the committee as the representative body of all Métis in the province of Saskatchewan.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 15.

The committee consisted of the provincial executive, and only three members from the locals. The internal conflicts and the war years had reduced effective organization to the point where a meeting could not even bring together enough people to represent a cross-section of the Métis living in the province. Since the committee could not claim to represent all Métis of the province, they chose to form a Provisional Council, designed to function until the members could once again organize active locals across the province. All the members of the Provisional Council were asked to go back to their locals and gear up for a provincial election. Joe Ross, who had been absent from the meeting, and Malcolm Norris became the new organizers. The well educated and articulate Malcolm Norris was placed in charge of the task of drawing up a new constitution.

#### VIII. ATTEMPTS AT REVIVAL – 1947:

Although the new provincial CCF government seemed as aloof from the concerns and needs of the Métis as the previous Liberal government had been, there were some signs that the Métis could reorganize themselves. Malcolm Norris, past president of the Métis Association of Alberta, had moved to Saskatchewan and was working for the new provincial CCF government, having been assigned to the task of organizing co-operatives in the north. Norris had been a strong supporter of the CCF for a number of years. Norris believed that the CCF was committed to the creation of a better society and would eventually implement sweeping changes to the economic system, changes that would benefit the Métis, as well as the farmers and workers of the province. The CCF, however, had no plans or special programs for the Métis of the south. Norris intended to work toward the building of a strong, independent,

Métis organization that would, however, retain some of the socialist principles that were presumed to be the basis of the ideology upon which the CCF had been founded.

Throughout 1947, Norris worked hard to re-establish the SMS in the north. He started local branches in La Ronge and other northern communities. As well, he completed his work on the new constitution, and distributed copies of the document to all locals. Since Norris' work with the government entailed extensive travel throughout the north, he was able to use this government job for organizing new Métis locals in Buffalo Narrows, Île-à-la-Crosse, Patuanak and Beauval. While organizing new locals in the north, Norris corresponded to get the southern locals back on their feet, but it was a long, uphill battle.

#### IX. POLITICAL DISORGANIZATION – 1946 - 1964:

Norris and Joe Ross, realizing that neither the provincial nor the federal government would deal seriously with the Métis unless they were united and organized, worked tirelessly to rebuild the Métis political organization. Throughout 1947, a campaign of letters and correspondence was launched by these two men, aimed at ending the apathy of the Métis and to stimulate them to begin rebuilding the locals.

Joe Ross followed up these organizations drives by attempting to set up a province-wide conference to be held in Regina on July 15, 1949. The conference failed, however, and once again it appeared that the Métis Society was dead. Part of the reason for the apathy was the fact that there was a period of general prosperity following the war, and this general prosperity had, to some extent, improved conditions for the Métis of the province. As well, government services under the CCF

had improved conditions for the Métis. If there were not jobs for all, social welfare benefits had improved to the point where they removed the worst effects of poverty, and consequently reduced the militancy of the various protest movements that had been spawned by the depression of the 1930s. Few Métis locals remained active through the booming 1950s and early 1960s. During this period the Métis began to lose some of the more militant aspects of their group identity as they were assimilated into the booming job market across the province and the country.

X. REORGANIZATION – 1964 – 1975:

For the Métis people as a whole, things had not improved on the same scale as that of the non-Native people of Saskatchewan. Repression, racism and economic marginalization continued to be part of the Métis experience in this country. In the fall of 1964, the tireless Malcolm Norris, still using the north as the centre of his activities, founded the Métis Association of Saskatchewan. In this endeavour, Norris was assisted by a teacher named Donald Nielson. For these two men, Métis independence was a primary concern; consequently, Métis independence became an important issue for the northern organization. In 1965, the southern Métis formed the Métis Society of Saskatchewan, with Joe Amyotte as President. The Métis of the south did not place the same emphasis on independence as did their northern compatriots. Since the southern Métis had been assimilated to a much higher degree than the people of the north, independence meant much less to them. Despite some very real differences in both needs and attitudes, however, it was decided that the two regional groups should attempt to unite along the lines of their common Native heritage.

On February 25, 1967, a joint meeting was held between the Métis Association of Saskatchewan (representing the north) and the Métis Society of Saskatchewan (representing the south). Three weeks later a second executive meeting took place. At this important meeting it was decided that the two organizations would unite under one society. The amalgamation received formal approval. The new organization kept the name "the Métis Society of Saskatchewan" (MSS).

In the beginning the MSS received no funding from either the provincial or federal government. However, as the Métis of the province continued to organize across the province, a whole complex pattern of provincial and federal funding began to develop. In 1970, the MSS received money in the form of research grants for housing, and a grant from the Department of National Welfare for community development work. In 1971, hard funding came through from the Secretary of State for the provincial organization as well.

In 1975, the MSS once again underwent a name change. During the annual general meeting, a resolution was moved by Vernon Desjarlais, and seconded by Nora Thibodeau, "that the Society's name be changed from the Métis Society of Saskatchewan as it presently exists to the Association of Métis and Non-Status Indians of Saskatchewan" (AMNISIS). This resolution was very important because it allowed for the inclusion of Non-Status Indians of the province who had lost their treaty rights through enfranchisement or marriage. The resolution was put to a vote. The vote was unanimously in favour of the resolution. The following special resolution was moved by Wilbert Boyer and seconded by Wilbert Desjarlais.

Moved that the present objectives and by-laws of the Society be repealed and that the following objectives



and by-laws be substituted.<sup>9</sup>

OBJECTIVES AND PURPOSES:

- (1) "To work for the social, educational, economic betterment and general improvement of Métis and Non-Status Indians.
- (2) To preserve and further Métis and Non-Status Indian heritage and culture.
- (3) To unite and preserve the unity of Métis and Non-Status Indians.
- (4) To promote and advance the culture of the Métis and Non-Status Indians.
- (5) To co-operate with other organizations within or outside Saskatchewan to further these objectives and purposes."

In 1971, Jim Sinclair was elected president of AMNSIS. Under Sinclair's direction, AMNSIS has continued to work to keep the organization independent from direct affiliation with mainstream political parties. AMNSIS has worked for better education for Native people, for decent jobs and better living conditions, for fishing, trapping and hunting rights, and for fundamental human rights for the Métis people. In recent years the organization has fought a fresh battle with the federal government over Métis and Non-Status people's land rights.

The present AMNSIS organization stands as follows:

PRESIDENT:	Jim Sinclair
VICE PRESIDENT:	Clem Chartier
SECRETARY:	Frank Tomkins
TREASURER:	Jim Durocher

XI. CONCLUSION:

The booklet illustrates how the Métis organized themselves politically. It shows the reader that events of the past are linked to the present issues and to the future of

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<sup>9</sup> Minutes of the Annual General Meeting of the Métis Society of Saskatchewan 1975.

the Métis people. The struggles of organizing politically have been hindered by the lack of leadership, participation and government manipulation.

However, the important thing to remember is that the Métis people have never given up. Although the Métis Society has sometimes been inactive, it is through persistent efforts that the Métis people continue to survive based on the realization of their distinct culture.

Métis participation in constitutional talks has resulted in national recognition for the rights of the Métis of this country. A major gain has been made in convincing the provincial and federal government that the Métis exist as a Nation of People. As Malcolm Norris said, "You cannot separate the history of our people from the history of Western Canada's."