

MÉTIS CULTURE • WOMEN

Learning goal: To develop an understanding of the role of Métis women through comparison of traditional gender roles to present day.

Suggested timeline: 1 x 75-minute period

Subjects: Health & Physical Education, Family Studies, Civics

Lesson opener

See it:

“Apart from the pressures that fathers exerted to secure advantageous matches for their daughters, there were many other reasons why incoming traders found young mixed-blood women desirable wives. A fur trader’s daughter possessed the ideal qualifications to be a fur trader’s wife. This child of the fur trade was a symbol of the fusion of European and Indian cultures; she knew no other way of life than that of the Indian country. If she was not as hardy as her Indian mother, the mixed-blood woman was still much better able to cope with the not inconsiderable rigours of life at a fur-trade post than a white woman would have been. Even in the late fur-trade period, it required considerable fortitude to be a trader’s wife.”

— **Sylvia Van Kirk; *Many Tender Ties*, p. 109**

“With the emergence of the mixed-blood wife, the trend was the formation of lasting and devoted marital relationships. The growth of widespread inter-marriage between the men of both companies and the ‘daughters of the country’ had important implications for fur-trade society. The complex kinship network which developed gave a unique cohesiveness to this early Western Canadian society, a society characterized by its own indigenous customs. As the mixed-blood wife replaced the Indian wife, fur-trade custom became less subject to Indian influence and evolved more in accord with European practices. What is particularly striking about fur-trade life was the extent to which a concern for women and family influenced the development of social custom in a world where both initially were supposed to have been absent.”

— **Sylvia Van Kirk; *Many Tender Ties*, p. 122**

“Given the cultural gap between the traders, especially the officers, and their native wives, the strong family ties which developed in fur-trade society appear all the more remarkable. While the caring and concern of many fathers were undoubtedly genuine, much credit, as George Keith acknowledged, was due to the mothers on whom the double burden of personal sacrifice and cultural adjustment mostly fell. The fur-trade officers were particularly anxious for native women to become acculturated to European ideals of womanhood; what the men often failed to realize was the psychological stress and dislocation that such a process of acculturation could engender. If the founding of the Red River Settlement solved for many fur-trade fathers the dilemma of what to do with their families in retirement, it was also welcomed because it offered the ‘prospect of Civilization diffusing itself among us’. As a result, younger generations of mixed-blood girls were increasingly subjected to the pressures of English customs.”

— **Sylvia Van Kirk; *Many Tender Ties*, p. 143**

“In various parts of the British Empire, a direct relationship can be traced between the growth of racial prejudice and the arrival of white women on the scene. With the appearance of women of their own race, the fur traders began to exhibit prejudices toward native females which had previously been dormant.In fact, the question of colour became an issue for the first time.”

— **Sylvia Van Kirk; *Many Tender Ties*, p. 201**

Watch Honouring Métis Women [youtube.com/watch?v=gpVOnXMttc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gpVOnXMttc)

Introduce the concept of gender roles (not to be confused with stereotypes). Brainstorm traditional female roles, traditional male roles and current roles.

Strategy/Lesson activity

Feel it:

Watch The Fur Trade: Our People's Story [youtube.com/watch?v=2HHGmxQ2C4w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HHGmxQ2C4w) (start at 3:43 until 7:06). Discuss the perspectives presented.

Know it:

Discuss Topics:

What was the 'Custom of the Country' for marriages during the 17th and 18th centuries within the Fur Trade? How did the different policies of different fur trade companies impact the role of 'country wives' during the Fur Trade? How was the role of Métis women during the 1700s and 1800s similar to, and different from, their First Nation ancestors? How was the role of Métis men, during the 1700s and 1800s similar to, and different from, their European ancestors? How did marriage to a 'country wife' benefit the fur trader? Did marriage to a European or Métis fur trader benefit Métis women? If so, how? Why did the Northwest Company pass a resolution in 1806 to ensure NWC employees married Mixed-blood women instead of Native women? How did the arrival of European women into fur trade country impact Métis women?

How did Métis women help in the development of Canada?

What are current Métis male and female roles?

Assessment

Do It:

Option A:

Study the lyrics of the song, Daughters of the Country, by Don Freed plan9films.com/donfreed/mp3s/Valley%20of%20Green%20and%20Blue/Daughters%20of%20the%20Country.mp3. What does this song indicate and infer regarding the roles of Métis women during the fur trade? Refer to metismuseum.ca/resource.php/05242

Option B:

Create and participate in a Fur Trade re-enactment in a way that honours the contribution of the Métis country wife. Refer to Women of the Fur Trade 1774–1821 northwestjournal.ca/XIII2.htm and Female Voyageurs northwestjournal.ca/VII6.htm

Option C:

Create a comparison chart of the roles Métis women played across time. See chart below.

Suggested Resources:

Daughters of the Country, by Don Freed plan9films.com/donfreed/mp3s/Valley%20of%20Green%20and%20Blue/Daughters%20of%20the%20Country.mp3

Many Tender Ties, Women in Fur Trade Society: 1670–1870
by Sylvia Van Kirk

Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country
by Jennifer S.H. Brown

Women in the Shadows
by Christine Welsh

Women of the Fur Trade 1774–1821; A. Gottfred
northwestjournal.ca/XIII2.htm

Female Voyageurs; A. Gottfred
northwestjournal.ca/VII6.htm

Daughters of the Country DVD; Diane DeBassige, Norma Bailey, Aaron Kim Johnston, Dariuz Mazur, Anne Cameron; Publisher: National Film Board of Canada, 2006

Daughters of the Country Song
by Don Freed

Lyrics—metismuseum.ca/resource.php/05242

Métis Women of Mackinac—mackinacparks.com/metis-women-of-mackinac

Women of Courage 1812–2012—readingandremembrance.ca/forms/RR2012/Women%20of%20Courage.pdf

Elizabeth Mitchell—rootsweb.ancestry.com/~mimacki2/Elizabeth_Mitchell.html

David Mitchell—biographi.ca/en/bio/mitchell_david_6E.html

The Migration of Voyageurs from Drummond Island to Penetanguishene In 1828; A. C. Osborne.
my.tbaytel.net/bmartin/drummond.htm

The Fur Trade: Our People's Story [youtube.com/watch?v=2HHGmxQ2C4w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HHGmxQ2C4w)

Métis Women: Strong and Beautiful
ruor.uottawa.ca/bitstream/10393/30557/1/2011_Metis-Women-Strong-Beautiful-booklet.pdf

Métis Women
esask.uregina.ca/entry/metis_women.jsp

Women of the Fur Trade
louisrielinstitute.com/women-of-the-fur-trade.php

Women of the Métis Nation
en2.metiswomen.org

Halfbreed
by Maria Campbell

Women's Traditional Art Series, Narrators: Penny Condon, Anna Flaminio, and Cheryl Troupe
gdins.org/product/metis-womens-traditional-arts-series

From the Straits of Mackinac to Georgian Bay: 300 years of Métis history metisnation.org/media/141064/mno%20report%20-%20penetanguishene%20report.pdf

THE ROLE OF MÉTIS WOMEN

	18th Century (e.g. Fur Trade)	Early to mid 19th Century (e.g. War of 1812)	Late 19th Century (e.g. During and after Red River and Northwest Resistances)	20th Century to Present Day
Social				
Economic				
Cultural				
Familial				
Other				