

Drop in Population

The population of First Nations and Inuit dropped from approximately 500 000 before Contact to approximately 102 000 by 1871. This great drop in population was mostly the result of disease. Because so many people were living with poverty and not getting enough to eat, they became weak and got sick easily. To make matters worse, First Nations and Inuit had no *resistance* to deadly European diseases such as smallpox, tuberculosis, and measles. When a disease has been in a community for many generations, people's bodies become better able to fight it. European diseases were new to First Nations and Inuit communities. Thousands of people died after coming in contact with Europeans or European goods. Sometimes whole communities were wiped out.

Tuberculosis is a lung disease. Measles and chicken pox give you a rash or sores and a high fever.

The Métis: Finding Their Place

By the mid-1800s, the largest Métis community in British North America was in the Red River Settlement, at the south end of Lake Winnipeg in Rupert's Land. The Métis honoured the French or English and First Nations cultures of their heritage. But as the younger generations of Métis grew up, they developed new traditions of their own.

The Red River Settlement was in the region under the control of the Hudson's Bay Company, and most Métis living there were employed in the fur trade in some way. They did the hard labour of transporting goods by canoe, by wagon, or on foot. They also supplied food to the fur traders, including vegetables from their gardens and buffalo meat. Because of racist attitudes, there wasn't much chance that Métis workers would be promoted to the easier and better-paying jobs in the fur trade. So they saw themselves as a separate people, and they took pride in the work they did.



This photograph from 1874 shows a Métis family at its camp in the Red River area. Notice the carts. These Red River carts were used by the Métis to transport goods. They were usually pulled by oxen. The wheels could be taken off so that the carts could float across rivers.