Central Manitoba Saulteaux in the 19th Century

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This paper represents an effort to draw together some strands of documentary information about the historic Saulteaux of the central or Interlake district that lies between Lake Winnipeg and Lake Manitoba. More specifically, it focuses on the people who circulated in the lands from Anama Bay and Jack Head on Lake Winnipeg up the Dauphin River to Lake St. Martin and the northern end of Lake Manitoba from the early to the late 1800s.

From a 20th-century perspective, the area in question does not appear particularly distinctive or defineable. Manitoba’s provincial highway 6, paralleling the earlier railway, bisects it from south to north; secondary roads to the east or west are almost absent except for a small network in the Fairford-Gypsumville area. The modern road traveller gains no sense of the fact that in older times communications that linked broad regions (across Lake Winnipeg to Fort Alexander, the Winnipeg River, and beyond) to the east and the west (Fort Dauphin and beyond), were funnelled intensively through this part of the Interlake along a waterway axis at right angles to the present highway.

By the early 19th century, however, this area was quite familiar to the Saulteaux and to their European and Canadian associates — Montréal-based fur traders connected mainly with the North West Company. Some of the best overall views of these people, both Indian and white, come from the papers of North West Company clerk George Nelson and the records of rival fur traders, the Hudson’s Bay Company men who reached
the area some years after the expansion to that area of trade relations between the Saulteaux and the North West Company.

HBC officer Peter Fidler was an intermittent visitor to and a resident in the region from 1808 to 1820. In his "General Report of the Manetoba District" (HBCA B.51/e/1), he observed that the "Bungees or Soteaux" who formed the majority of the local population were not the original inhabitants, but rather were "introduced here" by the North West Company in about 1797. "A few strag[gle]lers" were followed by other migrants from Rainy Lake and the western borders of Lake Superior, and finding their new home richer in resources than that which they had left, they stayed.

As Hudson's Bay/North West Company competition intensified between 1810 and 1820, the local Saulteaux seemed in a good position to take more or less deliberate advantage of it. Peter Fidler wrote of two brothers, Iahcoo or Iacco, and Blue Coat, each of whom had associated himself with one of the rival concerns. As of 1819–1820, Iahcoo, "the most staunch Indian the NW have", resided with six or eight of his followers and their families in the Partridge Cross vicinity around the north end of Lake Manitoba. Described by Fidler as "a good fur hunter quiet but a confounded beggar", who was "clothled every year gratis by the NW Co.," (1820, HBCA B.51/e/1, fo. 17), he was probably identical with the local leader who for several years before had consistently traded with Nor'Wester George Nelson in the Lake St. Martin-Dauphin River-Jack Head area. (Cf. Nelson Journal and reminiscences for 1807–1812, cited in Brown 1984.)

Blue Coat, the brother of Iahcoo (or Ayagon in Nelson's spelling, presuming that the two names belonged to the same man), was a principal man who generally resided near Big Point, around the southern end of Lake Manitoba. Although said by Fidler to have "little authority among his countrymen", Blue Coat was "a Chief made by the [Red River] Colony in 1817" (Fidler 1820 in HBCA B.51/e/1, fo. 16) that is, presumably one of the chiefs involved in Lord Selkirk's treaty of that year. Since Fidler did not list his Saulteaux name it is not possible to judge whether he was the same as "Mechkadewikonair, La Robe Noir" listed by Joseph James Hargrave as the second chief to sign that document (Hargrave 1871:78) or whether he was identical to one of the other signers. But Blue Coat had
ties to the Colony; he went there every summer, and supplied it with provisions on occasion, as well as trading with the Hudson’s Bay Company. So far, the documents have not shed light on the nature of the personal relationship between the brothers Iahcoo and Blue Coat. But the two kinsmen may have reached some private understanding about dividing and maximizing the trade from the European rivals in their vicinity.

Aside from trade in furs, the Interlake Saulteaux of the early 1800s had other occasions for collaborative and collective local activity, particularly in spring and summer. Peter Fidler described maple sugaring as a local intensive and productive enterprise each April, particularly in the southwestern zone of the Manitoba district, but also elsewhere. Each familial group using a sugar bush was understood to have ongoing usufructuary right to it, and some families had stored at these sites “upwards of one thousand roggans [birchbark containers] to collect the water in” (HBCA B.51/e/1, fos. 9–10). Maple sugar had trade value, as did the wild rice that some Saulteaux harvested each fall in the southern part of the district.

As in other Saulteaux/Ojibwa areas, June was a month for ceremonial gatherings. Nor’Wester George Nelson attended a Midewiwin (or Grand Medicine Society) initiation at Jack Head on Lake Winnipeg in June of 1819; his all-too-brief description may be the earliest documented reference to its presence in that vicinity (although the tenor of his account suggests that the ritual was not new to him in that area). The Nelson record offers a corrective to A. I. Hallowell’s and Selwyn Dewdney’s inferences (Hallowell 1936; Dewdney 1975:156) that Mide ceremonials were not traceable this far to the north before the mid-19th century. Nelson’s observations at Jack Head also add historical depth to the strong traditions that were found to be associated with the Mide scrolls discovered in a cache at Jack Head in this century and linked with the Mide priest George Traverse (cf. Dewdney 1975:151–152; Steinbring 1981:251–252).

Hudson’s Bay Company officer William Brown, writing with reference to the 1818–1819 season, placed on record another probable Mide site, although he did not use the term. At the north end of Lake Manitoba on an island (unspecified), the Saulteaux had a “Big Tent” where they gathered each spring to “hold Councils and go through their Religious Ceremonies”
The structure was arched with a wooden frame covered with pine bark, measured 60 by 15 feet, and stood ten feet high. Inside it was lined with bulrush mats. The description of the framework suggests strong parallels with that illustrated in Steinbring (252), which was constructed by Berens River Saulteaux east of Lake Winnipeg, a resemblance that brings to mind the point made earlier here regarding communication networks. Today, to the traveller by car, Lake Winnipeg presents itself as a barrier: the roads end at Anama Bay or Jackhead Harbour. To the Saulteaux and their trading associates, however, waterways, even if large and sometimes rough, were opportunities, not impediments. Nelson, Fidler, and numerous other 19th-century writers make clear that people, goods and information readily crossed the lake by boat and canoe in summer, and over the ice in winter.

Fidler and Brown both recorded that the Saulteaux followed their June ceremonials with other cooperative summer occupations. A good many of them raised potatoes near Fort Dauphin and Lake Manitoba. William Brown wrote in 1820 that after the ceremonials in the island structure just mentioned the women and old men stayed to cultivate potatoes while the young men went off to hunt (HBCA B.122/e/1, fos. 9–10). Peter Fidler noted the Saulteaux’s summer use of communal dwellings: “according to their original custom many of them ... reside in oblong tents covered over with birch bark, some of them will be thirty feet long and about 14 wide, and sometimes four or five families reside in,” although some built beehive-shaped lodges (HBCA B.51/e/1, fos. 17–18).

Fishing was an important summer activity, as might be expected. Carp were plentiful, and sturgeon weighing up to 100 pounds or more could be taken near the mouth of the Dauphin River. Fidler noted as well a quite different local Saulteaux specialty, one consistent with the presence of Midewiwin practitioners. Some Saulteaux, being familiar with the “healing and sanative powers of roots and herbs”, had a “reputation amongst their neighbours to be the most skilled in the healing art”, and were well paid for their ministrations. Fidler commented in 1820 on the “great variety of different medicinal roots ... which they gather in the proper season and preserve thro the winter” (HBCA 51/e/1, fos. 5–6, 17). Some years before, in 1807, Nor’Wester George Nelson found him-
self greatly benefited on at least one occasion by the medical knowledge of his Saulteaux patron, Ayagon (Brown 1984:201). And in 1818–1819, when Nelson was posted at Jack Head, he evidently managed to utilize local medicines as a weapon in his trade rivalry with the HBC agent Donald Sutherland at Berens River across the lake. On May 2, 1819, Sutherland complained of his men arriving with few furs, due to their “heavy debts fore medicins or ruts from the other side of Lake Winnipeg this cursed medicins is more hurt to us than all the Canadians that is hear to oppress us” (HBCA B.16/a/2, quoted in Lytwyn 1981:202). Seneca or snake root (*Polygala senega* L., of the milkwort family) later became widely used as a curative plant harvested from the Manitoba Interlake for general sale. Whether this was also Nelson’s medicine is not known. The year 1819 was a bad year for whooping cough farther west (cf. Ray 1974:106); if this disease was also active in the Lake Winnipeg region, the expectorant quality of snake root might have been much valued.

Hudson’s Bay Company and the North West Company sources indicate, overall, that the decades 1800–1820 saw the firm entrenchment of the Saulteaux along the waterways of the Lake Winnipeg–Lake Manitoba region, including the areas draining through Lake St. Martin and the Dauphin River. The harvesting of maple sugar and medicines and potato growing were commented upon as local Saulteaux occupations in addition to the basic activities of hunting, trapping, and fishing. Ceremonial life flourished concurrently, at least on a moderate scale, bringing together early summer gatherings that probably amounted to at least several dozen people.

With the merger of the Hudson’s Bay and North West Companies in 1821, competitive trade in the area ceased. The central Interlake, like the East Winnipeg country on the opposite shore of Lake Winnipeg, tended to drop from view until the latter part of the 19th century, which saw the beginnings of efforts at homesteading in its more southerly zones and the raising of treaty concerns.

Yet the area was not uninhabited; the Saulteaux carried on as well as conditions allowed. A brief vignette suggesting the continued vitality of their community life, at least in Jack Head, comes from the manuscripts of the Rev. Egerton R. Young, a Methodist missionary who was stationed at Berens
River in the early 1870s. On December 21–22, 1874, Young left the "Ferrier Mission", as he called his post, to cross Lake Winnipeg on a preaching visit to the Saulteaux at Jack Head. His description of the occasion, too long to repeat here, is preserved both in manuscript form and in a rather reshaped printed version (Young 1874, 1891). Both versions relate the customary decorous conduct that one would expect during such a visit. But Young was also greatly struck by both the setting and the impressive self-confidence of his hosts:

We were ushered into a large comfortable Indian log house. Opposite the door was a large fire place, in which a bright fire was blazing and at either end of the house, for it was without partitions, a fish oil lamp was burning. On the left hand side ... were seated the two chiefs of the place. ... dignity sat enthroned upon their brows ... Opposite the chiefs, across the room, were ranged their soldiers ... the young men appointed to carry out their commands. Scores of men, women and children were seated on the floor filling the house with the exception of a little space in front of the fire which was reserved for me and my attendant Indians (Young 1874:102).

Young preached to the Saulteaux through his interpreter, Timothy Bear, for two hours. Then it was his hosts’ turn to express themselves in what they called “the ceremony of our greatest welcome.” Elaborate speeches by the leading men were followed by dancing, singing and drumming that lasted until long after midnight. Limited in his ability to understand what was going on, Young wrote down what details he could, conveying the impression that this was the most dramatic Indian ceremonialism that he had encountered. (His preceding years of mission service had been among the Cree of Rossville Mission at Norway House.) His account of the performance suggests that Saulteaux song and dance traditions, along with a strong sense of identity, were alive and vigorous at Jack Head.

Other sources, written, oral, and archaeological, may also be called upon to amplify our knowledge of 19th-century Saulteaux history and activities in the Manitoba Interlake. This discussion serves, however to bring together information from a variety of mainly unpublished and rather scattered accounts. It helps to document a dynamic, vigorous, and expressive Saulteaux presence between Lake Winnipeg and Lake Manitoba, along waterways that have since yielded their area-defining importance to the straight and narrow north-south slicings of road and railway line.
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