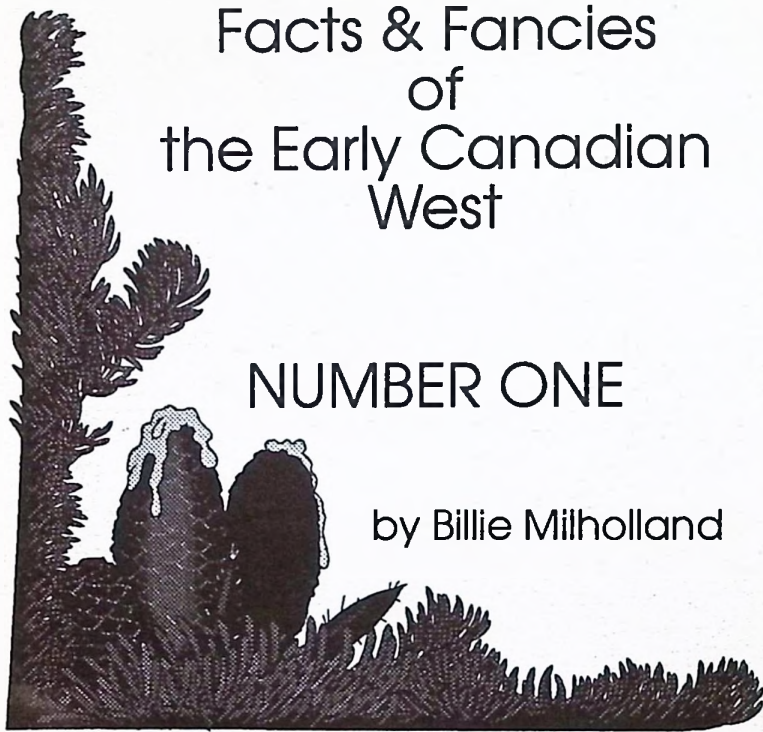


# Frontier Times

Facts & Fancies  
of  
the Early Canadian  
West

NUMBER ONE

by Billie Milholland





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# WHEN FUR WAS KING

The history of Western Canada would read differently if the first Basque fishermen who came to harvest the bays of the Lower St. Lawrence had not traded for warm bed robes. The First People of the St. Lawrence wore a garment made from eight beaver skins sewn together with sinew and worn with the fur inside. By the time the fisherman traded for these coats, the long guard hairs had been worn off and the short hairs wonderfully polished by many layers of body oil. The fishermen called them *castor gras* (greasy beaver). The fur robes were far superior as bedding than their blankets so they considered themselves lucky to get them. Somehow one of these robes got into the hands of a hat maker and the fame and fortune of the fur trade began. The felt makers in Europe were excited. They had been using Russian beaver to make felt but the North American beaver had tiny hooks on its fine hair which allowed for a higher quality felt. As the gentlemen of Europe clamoured for more of these hats, *castor gras* became scarce and the hunt for the funny, plate-tailed rodent began. A man of fashion would pay as much as a skilled labourer could make in six months for one of these hats.

## THE HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY

The people of Montreal had good opportunity to get in on the fur trade in a big way before anyone else. Two of their home town boys, Sieur des Groselliers and Pierre Esprit Radisson wintered in the Great Lakes area and brought more fur back to New France than had ever been seen in the colony. They also had a unique idea for using the Hudson's Bay for better access into the fur-rich interior. The bureaucratic administrators of New France were mean-minded and jealous of the backwoods boys' success so instead of praising and rewarding them, they taxed and penalized them. Radisson and Groseilliers then

went to Boston. The Yankees were interested but their captains were used to the warm ship routes to Barbados and when they were confronted with towering ice icebergs in the Straits they turned back. So, to England sailed the two persistent frontier's men, to the indulgent court of Charles II. Charles was receptive to the idea of wealth from fur and sponsored a trip to the New World. Groseillers returned with finer fur than the excessive Charles had ever seen and he lauched the Hudson's Bay Company in 1670 under the supervision of his cousin Prince Rupert.

## THE NORTH WEST COMPANY

The North West Company was an ongoing series of partnerships among French Canadian, dispossessed American and Highland Scot explorers, fur traders and promoters. In 1779, 109 years after the Hudson's Bay Company came to Rupert's Land, the first of many of uneasy NWC alliances were formed. The Hudson's Bay Company had not penetrated very far into the interior from the Bay, although they assumed they had jurisdiction over the vast acreage. Individual entrepreneurs from Montreal had been nibbling away at the fur-rich interior for years. By the time the North West Company began a concentrated aggressive movement into the interior, enterprising fur traders had created a string of forts as far west as the North Saskatchewan. In 1778 the controversial Peter Pond crossed Methye Portage, traded for a record load of top quality fur and discovered pemmican, thanks to the Chipweyan Indians. The increase in traffic over the fur trade trails became intense and the growing competition among the individual interests became intrusive. The timing was good for the success of an amalgamated effort under the North West Company.

## COUNTRY WIFE

The native women taken to wife by European fur traders were referred to as 'Country Wives', for although many of the men were committed to them for life, the companies they worked for did not approve. The men were encouraged to leave their Country Wives behind if they returned to Britain or eastern Canada when their stint with the company was over. Many men chose to stay in the land of their wife's people rather than leave without them. These women are the unsung heroines of early settlement. They fed their husbands, guided them, translated for them, made their shelters, made their clothing and gave them children to carry on their names.

## BREAD

It is often thought that because Europeans brought flour, oatmeal, barley and rice to the new world, the First People had no breadstuffs of their own before bannock. Nothing could be further from the truth. When Columbus arrived in North America in 1492, 700 species of corn grew and were used by the North Americans. Before the fur trade, corn was cultivated around the Great Lakes and as far west as southern Saskatchewan & traded to tribes of the Great Plains. Wild rice was harvested as far west as Saskatchewan, stored



and also traded widely. Wild grass seeds are all edible and they were used extensively. Wild nuts and berries were also incorporated into bread making. Cattail, pond lily & bulrush roots provided a fine flour for thickening soups and making travel cakes. Methods for making these breads were as varied as the women who made them. The First People found European foodstuffs distasteful at first and most Europeans ate Native fare only when desperate. Although the Native women's expertise with produce from Mother Earth's pantry saved the immigrants many times, they were not encouraged to prepare this food on a daily basis when they were with their European companions. Instead, they were encouraged to use European supplies and over time, evolved a new cuisine revolving around many forms of bannock. The excellent breads made prior to European contact have nearly faded from collective memory and are not often mentioned.

In the spring of 1794, J.M. of Garth was with a brigade taking furs to Grand Portage when they were delayed by ice. This caused them to run short of provisions.

***"We had to make use of some wild vegetables & Tripe de Roch (lichen) which when boiled with a little pemmican made a kind of soup."***



Many times fur traders would have starved if it had not been for the ingenuity of their women.

## CRACKLING BREAD

When rendering fat to be used in pemmican, ointments or other preserving, the granular, crunchy bits of skin that were, what we now call cracklings, were pounded and mixed with corn, seed or nut meal and baked in leaves in the ashes.

Duncan McGillvray, a young NWC clerk writes in his journal, July 22, 1794, at Grand Portage, as they made ready for the trip back to Fort George on the North Saskatchewan.

***"...our canoes being 16 in number...set off in the afternoon loaded with 25 pieces & 8 bags of corn each..."***

The bags of corn recorded by McGillvray were grown by Native Peoples in the Great Lakes area who were growing this grain long before Europeans arrived in North America.

## BOILED CORN BREAD

Dried corn kernels were pounded into meal and mixed with boiling water to make a stiff paste. Dried berries of any kind were often added. Saskatoons, blueberries or ground chokecherries and rose hips were favourites. Nutmeats, chopped or ground were included when available. (Hazel-nuts were plentiful in Western Canada). A woman would take a ball of dough, wetting her hands to prevent sticking and pat it into a patty. These cakes were then carefully slipped into boiling water & boiled for about one hour or until they started to float. They were eaten freshly cooked or smoke dried and used as trail bread. The water used for cooking them was seasoned with maple sap, birch sap, or salt and/ or meat drippings and drunk with the cakes or fed to children, elders or the sick and recuperating.

## HOMINY BREAD

Corn kernels soaked in ashes and water became white, puffy and delicious. These kernels were then dried, crushed, cooked and cooled. The resulting mush was mixed with nut or marrow oil, wrapped in leaves and buried in hot ashes to cook over night. All bread that was not eaten fresh was further dried and used as travelling bread.

## BAKED GREEN CORN BREAD

Fresh corn, cut off the cob was pounded to a paste, spread on flat wooden trays or stones to bake beside the fire.

## CATTAIL BREAD

Wet cattail roots (*Typhalatifolia*) were peeled, cut into small pieces and pounded into mush and dried. The long fibres were picked out and the resulting cattail flour mixed with cattail pollen gathered earlier in the season, water added to moisten, patties rolled in leaves & baked in the ashes. The flour was sometimes cooked like porridge and what was left over, fried the next day and eaten with birch syrup.

Alexander Mackenzie mentions women collecting birch sap while he was at Fort Chipewyan in 1794.

***"...for the purpose of making a sirup (sic) used as a substitute for sugar, of which they are very fond."***

## POND LILY BREAD

Pond lily roots also made good flour. Black pond lily seeds collected after the attractive yellow flowers fell off, were dried, crushed and roasted then pounded into flour. These seeds were also popped like popcorn and ground for flour.

## YARROW

**Yarrow** (*Achillea millefolium*) is still an abundant plant in open, grassy areas. The pungent leaves and flowers were used fresh or dried as a medicinal tea & flavouring. It is good, even today, rubbed into meat or fish before baking or broiling.

## SAGE

**Canadian Sagebrush** (*Artemisia cana*) still abounds in western Canada and it is not hard to imagine all the ways this strong smelling plant was used. As well as teas and seasoning, sagebrush was often burned as a ritual incense.

## CRANBERRY

**Highbush Cranberry** (*Viburnum opulus*) is not a true cranberry and its berries should not be eaten raw. It was dried and used to flavour soups, stews & beverages. A brew of the bark of the highbush cranberry brought relief from menstrual cramps and the pain of childbirth.

**Lowbush Cranberry** (*Vaccinium vitis-idaea*) tart & tangy was used fresh or dried in teas for bladder problems. It was also drunk with a sweetener when plentiful, for its own fine flavour.

## LABRADOR TEA

**Labrador Tea** (*Ledum groenlandicum*) in spite of its name, grows throughout western Canada and was used for flavouring and teas long before the men of the Klondike supposedly discovered it.

The shiny green leaves with fuzzy rust-coloured undersides are easily spotted in river valleys and boreal forests.

### **SENECA**

**Seneca Root**(*Polygala senega*) was widely distributed through out the early west, easily gathered, dried and stored. The dried roots were prized for teas, flavourings and medicine.

### **ONION**

**Wild Onion** or **Prairie Onion**(*Allium textile*) commonly found in dry meadows and on hillsides was used then, as cultivated onion is used now, medicinally and for seasoning.

### **HAZELNUT**

When plentiful, **Hazelnut** oil was used to flavour fish dishes and put on breads and cakes much like we used butter today.

These seasonings are some that exist in enough abundance for us to use them today. They are by no means the only seasonings used by the First People. Unfortunately, because of the severe interruption of their culture, the full extent of the Native North American's ingenuity with the plant world may never be known to us.

## NATIVE PRAYER

Creator I give thanks.  
Smoke rises and lifts my words to Creator.  
Creator listens to my words  
I give thanks for all things that grow.  
I give thanks for herbs and roots,  
bushes and trees and flowers and grasses.  
I give thanks for corn  
and all that sustains my life.  
Smoke rises and lifts my words to Creator.

## COOKING POTS & OTHER KITCHEN CONTAINERS

Assiniboine Indians got their name from the way they cooked some of their food. Assiniboine is a Slouan word for 'stone boilers', but of course, they weren't the only ones to use this ingenious cooking method. Stews and soups were made daily whenever the First People were not on the move. They weren't waiting for Europeans to bring them metal kettles. On the open prairie during a buffalo hunt, holes were dug, a buffalo hide or stomach pegged over the hole and the resulting container filled with water. Red hot stones dropped into the water brought it to a boil. Cooled stones were replaced as needed. When meat, wild vegetables, herbs & greens went into the vessel, replacing rocks became challenging. A branch basket to raise and lower the stones was one solution. In forested areas,



birch bark baskets served a similar purpose. Women of the First People made many different containers from animal innards, from birch bark, sewed together with spruce roots, from corn husks delicately woven in tight decorative patterns, from animal skins and from sinew beautifully knotted with techniques much like a mixture of macrame knots and snowshoe netting. Dippers and cups were made from horn, stirring paddles from bone. Flat sandstone provided griddles; it absorbed fat well and could withstand the heat of a direct fire.

## BEVERAGES

The list of nuts, grains, herbs, barks & berries picked by early North American woman for teas used for for nutrition, medicine and pleasure is endless. Before the fur trade introduced East Indian tea, Arabian coffee and alcohol, these women had baskets & bags of dried material for tea. Jacques Cartier, an early French explorer was icebound in the St. Lawrence River in the winter of 1535-36. Twenty-five of his men had died of scurvy and the rest were seriously weakened when Iroquois women made a spruce needle and bark concoction to cure them.



Until after the turn of the 20th century European Immigrants depended heavily on Indian remedies for their health.



**BIRCH** sap(*Betula alba*) collected in the spring was a refreshing beverage used as a spring tonic. When boiled down it yielded a good sweetener to eat with breads and to flavour bitter beverages. Birch buds, also collected in the spring, dried and made into a tea was used for prevention of mouth sores.

**PRAIRIE ROSE**(*Rosa acicularis*) buds were collected to add fragrance to winter broths. The Vitamin C rich rose hips were also gathered and the liquid from their cooking sipped by young and old. Rosehip seeds, rich with Vitamin E, were crushed, made into patties and dried to be eaten with the  
pa.

**EARBERRY**-Kinnikinnick(*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*) was not preferable as an eating berry, but its leaves made a pleasantly bitter drink often taken after heavy feasting to settle the stomach.

**BERGAMOT**(*Monarda didyma*) that wonderful addition to Earl Grey Tea, was used to soothe sore throats. An antiseptic, thymol, is an active ingredient in Bergamot tea.

**RASPBERRY leaves** have been used by the women of the First People up to modern times to relieve diarrhoea.

**GOLDEN ROD**(*Solidago*) added to more bitter teas smoothed out the taste.

**JUNIPER** berries (*Juniperus communis*) were roasted, ground and prepared much like we do boiled coffee today. A few fresh juniper sprigs were often thrown in for extra flavour. This tea, like many wild drinks, is very high in vitamin C.

**PINAPPLE WEED** (*Matricaria matricarioids*) a fragrant lacy little plant was dried to be used on its own against indigestion or mixed with Bearberry and others for an anticollic drink for babies.

**WILLOW** (*Salix*) contains salicin, an unrefined form of acetylsalicylic acid (aspirin), in its inner bark. The First Women collected this bark, dried it and knew to use it as a tea to reduce fever and pain.

**YARROW** (*Achillea millefolium*) was known as a very important curative plant wherever it grew. The bitter tea was fed to people recovering from injuries, the chewed leaves were used to reduce swelling and a tea made from the crushed root was used to clean out wounds. Oil of Yarrow (cineol) is a soothing treatment for burns. Caution needs to be used by modern users of yarrow tea. Extended use of this tea can be irritating to some people.

**SPRUCE & PINE** buds were picked and dried for a vitamin C rich tea that saved many of the first Europeans from the dreaded gum rotting disease, scurvy. The buds were often boiled in birch or maple sap for a pleasant drink for guests.

## **Killing Song**

(Sung after a successful hunt).

I am sorry I had to kill you,  
I needed meat to feed my family.  
In return I offer this gift,  
In prayer and thanksgiving.

Then a thanksgiving song would be offered to the Creator in gratefulness for the meat. All Native people gave thanks for everything they received from Mother Earth. Each group of people would have their own version of a song like this.

## **YORK BOAT**

**A**s the fur trade evolved, different types of transportation were introduced. The Hudson's Bay Company introduced the York boat. These boats were first made by Orkney Islanders of Scotland and later by their Metis off-spring. York boats were much larger than canoes. Canoes were easier to handle but accessible supplies of birch bark became depleted and manpower was scarce so the York Boat alternative was developed. These boats were up to 12 1/2 metres long. They could carry a load of up to 5500 kilograms. However, because they were so large, they were much more difficult to portage than canoes.

## DISPUTES

**M**etis people had a unique way of settling disagreements. The worst disagreements usually happened during the long winter months when people were cooped up together. These differences were settled in a specially designated area called the night grounds. This was done under the direction of the leaders of the camp. At the night grounds, the people would talk out their problems. If the argument was particularly fierce and a solution could not be agreed on, then a supervised fight between the quarreling parties was staged under the guidelines of the camp leader. After the fight, the matter was to be let go by both parties.

## CREE WORDS

**Paskwa-mostos** - Buffalo

**Sisip** - Duck

**Wapos** - Rabbit

**Mikwahp** - Tipi

**Maskasina** - Shoes

**Payak** - One

**Kewatinok** - North

**Thursday, December 6, 1792**

*"Burnt (Buffalo) Cow dung as usual. The fire is first made of small dry wood then afterwards the dry Dung. A small stick or 2 is kept constantly in the middle of the fire, perpendicular & bits of Inside fatt are placed upon it that it melts & falls down gradually into the fire & makes the Buffalo dung burn much better than without this."*

**Peter Fidler**

On Lake Athabasca, the Country Wives at the Hudson's Bay post were expected to provide an annual quota of fifty bundles of wattappe each (roots from the spruce tree, which they split fine for sewing the seams of the canoe). The women helped sew the canoes and caulk them with spruce gum which they also collected.

## RED RIVER CART

The sturdy Red River Cart could be built along the trail anywhere. The Metis people, who perfected its construction, used European cart ideas learned from their fathers and material that their mothers were familiar with.

The builder cut two long poles, about three and one-half metres long. These poles acted as the base for the cart box, and were used to harness the horse or ox to the cart.

A box was built on top of these two shafts. Then came the wheels. They were made from several pieces of hard wood, oak when made in Manitoba and birch when constructed further west. These one and one-half metre wheels were held together by wrapping them with strips of raw buffalo hide (shaganappi). When the hide dried, it shrank. The wheels were attached to a wooden axle which would not be greased because grease would collect dust on the trail and clog the wheels.

When the Red River Cart trains were on the move, the shrieking and squealing of wood rubbed continually against wood could be heard for miles.

These carts were very versatile, not only could they be pulled over the plains by beast, they could also be used as boats to cross rivers and swollen streams. When crossing a river, the wheels

were taken off, and tied to the bottom of the cart. The cart was then wrapped in buffalo hides to make a small boat, that could be floated across the river.

Some of the Metis covered their carts, like covered wagons in western movies. These carts could carry a load up to 450 kilograms.

**In 1849, one of Red River's two annual summer buffalo hunts consisted of 700 Metis, 200 Indians, 603 Red River Carts, 600 horses, 200 oxen, 400 dogs and one cat.**

Marie Ann Lajimodiere is often thought to have given birth to the first white baby in Manitoba but she was scooped by Isabel Gunn, an young Orkney woman who came to Rupert's Land as a Hudson's Bay employee, pretending to be John Fubbister. At Christmas, Hudson's Bay staff at Pembina went over to the North West Company Post for holiday festivities. When it came time to return, Fubbister was not feeling well and stayed behind. On December 29, 1806, much to the surprise of Alexander Henry, the factor of the North West Company House, John Fubbister gave birth to a robust baby on Henry's hearth. Eight days later, Marie Ann, wife of a French freeman, gave birth to her first baby at the Hudson's Bay House at Pembina.



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