

# The Métis Archipelago

## Lesson 2

### Guiding Question for the Lesson

- What was life like for Métis families settling in new places?

### Standards

#### Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians

EU 1 There is great diversity among the twelve sovereign tribes of Montana in their languages, cultures, histories, and governments. Each tribe has a distinct and unique cultural heritage that contributes to modern Montana.

EU 6 History is a story most often related through the subjective experience of the teller. With the inclusion of more and varied voices, histories are being rediscovered and revised. History told from American Indian perspectives frequently conflicts with the stories mainstream historians tell.

#### Social Studies Standards

SS.G.6-8.5 Explain the role and impact of spatial patterns of settlement and movement in shaping societies and cultures, including Indigenous cultures.

SS.G.6-8.6 Identify how the historical and contemporary movement of people, goods, and ideas from one area can impact change, conflict, and cooperation in other areas.

SS.H.608.5 Explain how Montana has changed over time and how this history impacts the present.

### Materials

[First Catholic pioneers - the Métis](#) by Mrs. Elizabeth Swan, Montana History Portal, Montana State Library.

[Memorial for Métis unmarked grave dedicated in Lewistown](#) (Appendix A) by Will Briggs, Lewistown News-Argus, September 5, 2023.

### Length

One class period

### Steps

#### Step One

Ask students to imagine what it might be like to travel in a group for several weeks or longer in screeching carts pulled by horses, to a place nobody had seen, to start a new life. What might they be feeling? What kinds of hardships and experiences might they encounter during the trip? How would they relate to others in their group? Ask students to write this out as an imaginative journal entry.



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## Step Two

Provide the “First Catholic pioneers - the Métis” resource to students. You will have students stop reading after the “First Death at the Settlement” section, so if you are printing, you will not need the whole document. Explain to students this was written in 1945 by two historians of Lewistown and reflects the words they used at the time, such as “half-breed,” which are not considered acceptable today. Be sure they are not reading past the “First Death” section, since that has more to do with religion and less to do with the everyday life questions we are after.

Direct students to the guiding question for this lesson and remind them of the questions you asked in Step One. Encourage them to think about those questions as the purpose for their reading. Then read this resource: individually, in small groups, the whole class reading out loud. If reading out loud, you can stop and ask for comprehension checks throughout. If students are reading independently or even in small groups, you might consider asking them to stop after each segment and write some notes about what they noticed. If you have printed the resource, they can circle details that stand out to them, related to the purpose for reading (the questions about what life was like for the people).

At the end of the reading, encourage a discussion in small groups or the entire class about what they noticed, what might have surprised them, and so on. Could they imagine that 150 years later, people still honor these first families, who essentially founded Lewistown? Now provide the news story from the Lewistown News-Argus about the memorial dedication. Read this out loud with students. What connections can they make to the original history they read? Certainly they will see some names. Be sure they read the “God’s Acre” inscription too, as there are overlaps with it as well. If you are feeling inspired, find the TV news coverage of this event and show that as well.

## Assessment

Ask students to return to the piece they wrote at the beginning of the lesson. How accurate was their imaginative version of what it might have been like? Ask them to write an assessment of their own guesses. Use details to explain how close or how far off their estimation was to what it was really like, according to the historians’ record.

## Extension Options

Because this lesson began with an imaginative piece, that could be an engaging extension for students. You could ask them to take on the persona of one of the individuals mentioned in the history and write some fictional journal entries from their chosen individual’s perspective, recounting what the journey was like using the events described in the historical account.

Similarly, you could provide photos of families mentioned in this article by going to the Montana State Library page (same place as where the Swan / La Tray account was housed) and conducting an image search. Ask students to pick a person and write an imaginative account of what their life might have consisted of.

There is another account of this trek, also housed at the Montana State Library, called [“1879 Metis Trek to the Judith Basin.”](#) Pages 5-9 are a first-person account from a woman who was born at Pembina and traveled with the group in 1879 to what became Lewistown. It is likely that much of the Swan/ La Tray account pulled from this account, but it is interesting to read it from the first-person perspective. You might have students read this and then compare primary and secondary sources (and tertiary, if you can find one) for a refined overview of how history looks and sounds different, depending on the teller.

## Appendix A: Memorial for Métis unmarked grave dedicated in Lewistown by Will Briggs



A monument installed at Calvary Cemetery tells the story of early Métis settlers originally buried on ranch land near Lewistown and reinterred at the cemetery in 1894. It also lists names of those who are known to be buried there, although not all of the 75 of them are known. Until last week, the grave was unmarked.

“It’s been decades since the Métis have had the recognition they deserve. That changes today.”

Those were the words of Alisa Herodes, councilwoman for the Little Shell Chippewa Tribe and descendant of Pierre Berger, one of the 25 Métis who settled in what would become Lewistown. Herodes spoke just before the unveiling of a memorial in honor of Lewistown’s original founders, buried in a previously unmarked grave at Calvary Cemetery.

The unveiling ceremony was held Friday afternoon at the cemetery in conjunction with the annual Métis Celebration and Powwow. The monument displays the names of 35 Métis buried on site, with more unidentified. It also tells the story of how Berger and his fellow Métis fled Canada due to diminishing buffalo herds and deadly conflicts with the Canadian government to a camp on the Milk River, before journeying to Central Montana in 1879.

When the Corbly family purchased the land where the original Métis cemetery was located in 1894, around 75 bodies were relocated to Calvary Cemetery after a High Mass of Requiem was held for them at St. Leo’s Catholic Church. Until last week, they lain there in an unmarked grave, a span of 130 years.

The efforts of the Little Shell Tribal Council, along with the work of local historians Candi Zion and Tom Wojtowick helped bring an end to that lack of recognition. The Little Shell Tribe donated the travertine stone for the monument from a tribal quarry in Idaho, along with performing the engraving and installation.

## **‘Why we’re here’**

Speakers at the unveiling honored both those who had gone before and the ties between them, while also expressing pride at being a Métis during an emotional ceremony that also included music, Scripture reading, the passing of a prayer bundle to all in attendance, and a prayer to the Great Spirit.

Herodes paid tribute to those buried in Calvary Cemetery and thanked her fellow Little Shell Tribe members for their assistance with the project.

“These people lived here, thrived here, and were buried here,” she said. “There have been many times my tribe has made me proud, and this one tops the list.”

Zion spoke next, also thanking those who helped with the monument and lamenting how long it took to honor those buried at the cemetery.

“This project has been in the making for a very long time,” she said.

Will Goodon, Minister of Housing for the Manitoba Métis Federation in Canada, then expressed his sense of connection with the Métis buried in the cemetery and with all Métis.

“We are all one people. We’re not separated by these artificial boundaries. Looking at the monument, I see a lot of names from my own family tree,” he said. “Even if people are registered in other indigenous collectives or tribes we are still each other... We know who we are because we have been left aside for decades.”

Métis storyteller and Montana’s Poet Laureate Chris LaTray rose to speak next, voicing a mixture of pride, outrage, and sorrow.

“We forget what brought these people here. We were driven here,” LaTray said. “We owe it to these folks to be proud. They couldn’t be proud. They buried every aspect of their culture because they had to. They may not have been enthusiastic about that, but I’m pretty . . . enthusiastic to be a Métis.”

Métis Elder and Michif language expert Norman Fleury served as the event’s final speaker, rising to speak just as a large gust of wind started to whip around the different national and tribal flags behind him.

“What we’re saying is that we’re all related,” Fleury said. “Even the flags are clapping.”

Through the rest of his remarks, Fleury echoed the previous speakers, touching on his people’s history, pain, and pride.

“It wasn’t safe to tell our story, but now it is,” he said. “A lot of us never assimilated, we just adapted... We were the biggest ranchers in the world. We had 60 to 70 million buffalo and we managed them.”

Fleury also spoke of the importance of passing down a legacy for younger generations.

“If we don’t leave them anything, they’ll have no legacy, nothing to work with,” he said. “I’m close to the people in this mass grave, but God gives us life... The people buried here, there was a reason they were here and that’s why we’re here.”

He wrapped up his remarks with a parting piece of hopeful advice to those assembled.

“Let us continue with love and respect,” Fleury said. “There are a lot of names that people called us, but what’s most important is what we call ourselves.”

## Text of the Métis memorial at Calvary Cemetery

Métis Memorial

“God’s Acre”

Many Métis descendants of Native Americans and Scots or French fled their Canadian homeland because of diminishing buffalo herds, deadly conflicts with the Canadian government over land, policy, and increasing opportunities in the United States and Territories.

In the spring of 1879, Pierre Berger led 25 Métis families from a camp on the Milk River past Fort Assiniboine to Fort Benton, across the Missouri River, and down to Arrow Creek to near the mountains, establishing what became Lewistown. Bernard LaFountain died soon after their arrival, and was buried in a coffin made from a Red River cart on a hillside, the first Métis Cemetery.

When Angelique and Antoine Ouellette (Métis trader and farmer) lost their daughter, they buried her on a hill above their home, not in the original cemetery. In 1891 they donated that tract of land to the Catholic Church to serve as a cemetery. It was named the Calvary Cemetery, the location of this monument.

After J.I. Corbly purchased the land where the original Métis Cemetery was located, he petitioned the first resident priest, Father John Van den Heuvel, to relocate the interred bodies. According to local Métis historian, Elizabeth Berger Swan, “... August (1894) the sad and unpleasant task was started... there must have been about 75 bodies interred there. Working day and night by the light of a big bonfire, they were done in about three days... through the day some were digging and others would be making coffins or just boxes to transfer some that showed signs of decay... they even had to use a shovel to put some of the bodies in the box.”

“Father Van den Heuvel ... bought cloth out of his own pocket and brought it to the ladies that were also helping to line and. Drape the coffins with white and black cloth .... When they were all ready, they brought the remains to the church, the coffins laid on the aisle one over the other. For two succeeding days a High Mass of Requiem was sung ’til all had been brought in. Two big graves were dug at the new cemetery where all were stacked one over the other. It was a sad but beautiful ceremony.”

John Gabriel Dumont and Madeline (Wilkie) Dumont, the sister of the Lewistown’s Judith (Wilkie), were reinterred with the others at Calvary. In the face of the dangerous Canadian conflicts, Gabriel Dumont, Madeline’s husband and the military commander of the charismatic Métis leader Louis Riel, ensured the safe escort of Madeline across the border to live with Judith. Madeline, however, was not in good health, dying in 1885/86 from consumption and complications from a buggy fall.

Ground penetrating radar in 2022 indicated that approximately 25 graves are located here. It is assumed that the coffins were stacked on top of each other in the mass graves as Elizabeth stated.