

Who Are the Métis?

Lesson 3

Guiding Questions for the Lesson

- What is Miskihkiya?
- What role did (and do) women play in Métis society?

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 3 The ideologies of Native traditional beliefs and spirituality persist into modern day life as tribal cultures, traditions, and languages are still practiced by many American Indian people and are incorporated into how tribes govern and manage their affairs. Additionally, each tribe has its own oral histories, which are as valid as written histories. These histories predate the “discovery” of North America.

Social Studies Standards

SS.G.6-8.2 Identify the location of places and regions in the world and understand their physical, political, and cultural characteristics.

SS.H.6-8.1 Explore complex civilizations and identify elements of change and continuity across historical eras in Montana, the Americas, and world history.

SS.H.6-8.2 Analyze how the historical events relate to one another and are shaped by historical context, including societies in the Americas.

SS.H.6-8.3 Analyze how, since European contact, historical events and policies have mutually impacted American Indian and European societies.

Materials

[“Métis Miskihkiya: Métis Life in Montana” by Rosalyn LaPier](#), *Montana Naturalist*, Winter 2013-14.
(Appendix A)

Political map of Montana

Length

One class period



Key Vocabulary

Clan Ecological Holistic
Multilingual Subsistence

Steps

Step One

Prior to providing the reading, “Métis Miskihkiya: Métis Life in Montana” by Rosalyn LaPier, build students’ understanding of key vocabulary words through an activity done in pairs or small groups.

For each of the key vocabulary words, ask students to individually write what pieces of words they see inside. You might lead the first round with “multilingual”: can students see “multi” and make a guess about what it might mean? And what does “lingual” remind them of? [language] Some students may grasp the concept more easily than others and you may need to offer more guidance in certain situations.

Then ask students to share with their partner/group some ideas of what those words might mean. Circulate among the groups, offering hints and help where needed. Encourage guesses.

Review each of the words with the whole group so students understand the words and how they might be used in sentences or contexts.

Provide the title of the article and ask students to make a guess, based on the title plus those words, what the article is going to be about. You might ask this of the group for a verbal discussion, or you might ask students to write their individual response on an index card or in a digital format.

Step Two

Hand out the article, “Métis Miskihkiya: Métis Life in Montana” by Rosalyn LaPier. Make sure you point out the two guiding questions for the lesson: *What is Miskihkiya?* And *What role did (and do) women play in Métis society?* Here are some suggested methods of leading the reading:

- Ask students to write in the margins (as they read) three-four words that describe the topic of each paragraph. (Provide additional note-taking space if your students’ handwriting will not be compact enough, although notes directly on the article is best for review purposes later.) Demonstrate this process with the first two-three paragraphs if your students have never done this before.
- Ask students to take turns reading aloud in small groups, if this will not be uncomfortable or distracting. Each student should read no more than two-three paragraphs. At the end of each student’s section, ask all students in the group to stop and make notes about what they heard in that section. This is a good way to teach general note-taking skills.
- Ask students to use symbols to mark up the text:
 - ! for words or ideas that seem important or surprising.
 - ? for words or ideas they do not understand.
 - circle words or ideas that remind them of something else they know about or have read.

Once students have completed the initial reading, ask them to chat with their partner or group about what they noticed in the reading. They should use their notes to guide this conversation. If you had them ask questions as they read, you can use those to direct a full class conversation afterward.

As a whole group, review questions/comments/things students found important or surprising from the article. At a minimum, review the paragraph notes to ensure comprehension by all students.

When you reach paragraph four, pull up the political map of Montana. Use the description of the Rocky Mountain Front and Augusta to help students find this area. You can expand, should this be a pertinent part of your curriculum, to discuss other points of geography as well as climate (note the article mentions “semi-arid”).

Make sure students understand, in particular, what the author says about Miskihkiya: that it is a holistic approach to living well, though it translates to “medicine”; it is not considered a single thing, but rather a concept of health and wellness that extends beyond plants to community and celebration as well.

Assessment

Ask students to use an index card or digital format to respond to the following prompt: Write the definition of Miskihkiya in your own words and use at least two of the key vocabulary words from this lesson in your definition.

Extension Options

Students’ knowledge of French, Chippewa, and Cree may vary. Provide additional readings or research assignments on these topics.

This article provides an excellent entry into plant research. Work with the science teacher or another pertinent school resource to learn more about plant cultivation, gathering, and preservation for food.

Appendix A: Métis Miskihkiya: MÉTIS LIFE IN MONTANA by Rosalyn LaPier

What happens when two worlds collide? Sometimes there is conflict and one gets conquered, sometimes they learn from each other but remain separate, and sometimes they blend into a new entity. On the Northern Great Plains two worlds collided and out of it emerged a new ethnic group—the Métis.

THE MÉTIS

The Métis are a distinct ethnic group that evolved out of the fur trade during the 18th century. As the European and Native peoples married and intermingled, their cultures, languages, music, art and environmental knowledge also began to blend.

By the time the Métis permanently moved into what is now Montana in the 19th century they had already solidified their status as a separate group within the northern Great Plains. They even asserted political rights as their own distinct nation-state within what is now Canada.

The Métis usually traveled and settled in large family groups, similar to their Native relatives. Families that began as a mixture of French, Chippewa and Cree evolved into Métis, who developed self-sufficient communities across the Plains. Their mixed heritage was evident in their language; even into the 20th century the Métis were multilingual, speaking Michif (their own creole language), French, Chippewa, Cree, sometimes other Native languages, and English.

My family, the LaPierres, first came to the Rocky Mountain Front before Montana became a territory. The Rocky Mountain Front of Montana is where the mountains meet the prairies, semi-arid and in some places almost desert-like. In the 1850s Antoine LaPierre moved his entire family there to work, initially as buffalo hunters, but eventually as hands for local cattle ranchers or on their own as wood-hawkers. They ended up settling down near Augusta—an area the Blackfeet called “*Spiksii*,” meaning “tall groves of trees”—and it was this place, which stood out amongst its stark surroundings, that the Métis came to call home.

Antoine’s daughter Clementine LaPierre married a Québécois rancher, Sam Forque, who Americanized his name to Ford. (The LaPierres eventually changed theirs to LaPier.) The home of Clementine, the eldest female of the clan, became the center of Métis life in the region. Family gatherings, community events, weddings and even weekly Mass were held at the Ford family home. Her siblings, Francois, John, Moses, Alec, and Euphrosine, and their spouses and children all lived close by.

MISKIHKIYA

The Métis, in part due to their semisubsistence lifestyle, viewed food and health holistically—much more so than is typical in modern Western culture. *Miskihkiya* is the Métis or Michif word that best translates into “medicine.” But it is a complex translation because it does not necessarily mean “medicine” in the Western sense; rather, it refers to healing generated from plants that come from the earth. These plants are neither strictly medicinal nor edible but their general characteristic is to heal the body, mind and spirit.

Therefore, Métis women used a combination of edible and medicinal plants in everyday life to promote health and wellness within their families.

Métis women like Clementine and her sisters were the keepers of plant knowledge. When they lived further out on the Plains—in the areas that are now Manitoba and North Dakota—these Métis women relied on native plants. Fortunately many of these same plants could be found along the Front Range. The women spent their summers gathering a variety of berries and roots to eat and plants for medicine, including herbs used to ease childbirth.

In addition to gathering wild medicinal and edible plants Métis women also grew large home gardens, a skill they learned from their European relatives. They raised and butchered cows, pigs and chickens. They churned their own butter. And instead of picking chokecherries (*Pîkomina* in Métis) to dry and grind into a mixture of meat and fat, known as pemmican, the Métis women canned their chokecherries into jam and syrup. The women also used their unique knowledge and skills to make tools from native woods, such as willow branch (*Lii sol*) pitchforks for moving hay. Since the Métis men continued to hunt and trap wild animals and fish the streams along the Front, the women smoked the meat and fish to preserve them for future use.

CELEBRATIONS

Celebrations were central to the social life of the Métis. The biggest day of the year was New Year's Day, when the Métis organized a large community dance and feast. The Métis women cooked a huge feast of foods all harvested from the local environment: a dish called rubbaboo (boiled rabbit with flour gravy); bullets (meatballs made from elk or deer); pemmican; fried bread; huckleberry, raspberry and serviceberry pies; and herbal tea. And they invited all their neighbors, no matter their ethnicity, to join in the celebrations. The New Year's celebration was not complete without a visit from the local Catholic priest. The Métis religion was a blend of Native beliefs and Catholicism. On occasions such as this, the men got together to smoke the inner bark of the red willow (*Kinikinik*). All of this—celebrating in community, eating wild meats and berries, smoking red willow, dancing all night—and more was what the Métis referred to as *Miskihkiya*.

TRADITION CONTINUES

When the Métis emerged as a new group they blended many aspects of their Native and European heritages. They maintained their Native ecological knowledge of wild plants and animals of the region, and they blended it with European ecological knowledge of domesticated plants and animals that go along with ranching, farming, and gardening. And through all this melding of cultures they maintained a holistic approach, understanding how to balance this varied ecological knowledge to live a healthy life. Now, five generations later, the Métis tradition of understanding and using native plants and hunting on the prairies continues. My cousin Autumn LaPier, a descendant of Antoine LaPierre, lives on the Rocky Mountain Front, near where her ancestors called home. Autumn now teaches her kindergarten-age daughter, Madeline—the next generation of Métis women—about native plants and health, and so the practice of *Miskihkiya* continues.

—*Rosalyn LaPier (Blackfeet/Métis) is a faculty member of the Environmental Studies program at the University of Montana. She also works with the Piegan Institute in Browning.*