

‘The Comforts of Married Life’: Metis Family Life, Labour, and the Hudson’s Bay Company

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Résumé de l'article

Depuis les années 1980, les universitaires ont cherché à comprendre la manière dont l'industrie canadienne de la fourrure a façonné les Métis. Moins d'attention a été accordée à l'impact des concepts des Métis de la famille et de la communauté sur la nature de leurs relations avec leur employeur, la compagnie de la Baie Hudson. Cet article se concentre sur la façon les structures des familles Métis dans le district du fleuve anglais a moulé les contours des relations de la communauté avec la compagnie de la Baie Hudson du 19e siècle. Plus précisément, seulement certaines familles ont établi des relations avec la compagnie, alors que les servants et leurs personnes à charge ont travaillé pour la compagnie pour le salaire et/ou l'accès aux ressources de la compagnie. La volonté de la compagnie de participer dans ce genre d'échanges avec ses employés a cultivé une loyauté intergénérationnelle parmi les Métis, à mesure que des générations successives ont été employées par la compagnie et qui, à leur tour, ont accédé à leur réseau de ressources économiques. Néanmoins, les responsables de la compagnie ont fait face à un dilemme. Ils ont reconnu que les familles des Métis étaient des contributeurs loyaux au succès de la compagnie, mais en même temps, ils les considéraient comme un fardeau économique et une purge de leurs ressources précieuses. Au cours du 19e siècle, l'ambivalence de la compagnie s'est accrue, influençant de manière négative ses relations avec les servants et leurs familles qui étaient autrefois loyaux. La loyauté des familles envers la compagnie était aussi solide que celle de la compagnie envers les familles. À la fin du siècle, étant donné que la compagnie s'est concentrée sur la réduction de ses obligations envers les familles, la loyauté des Métis a aussi changé pour des entreprises économiques concurrentielles, menaçant ainsi le monopole de la compagnie dans la région.

ARTICLE

'The Comforts of Married Life': Metis Family Life, Labour, and the Hudson's Bay Company

Brenda Macdougall

IN 1888, HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY (HBC) servant John Harper starved to death near Île à la Crosse, the main depot for the English River District. Five years later, the Company received a request from Harper's daughter for assistance in securing her and her family's future. Charlotte Harper requested that Henry J. Moberly, Île à la Crosse's chief trader, write the Half-Breed Claims Commission in Ottawa with details about her father's life, which were required to complete her application for scrip as his heir. Moberly described John Harper as coming from Kildonan, Manitoba before entering the HBC's service and being stationed in the Athabasca District. Moberly stated that Harper was legally married in 1872 to Margaret Tastawitch, a Dene woman from the Fort Chipewyan area, before being stationed in the English River District.¹ The parish registers of the Mission de Saint-Jean-Baptiste at Île à la Crosse record that John and Margaret had two daughters, Charlotte and Hélène, born in the District and while Moberly identifies their mother as being from Fort Chipewyan, the surname Tastawitch was associated with the English River District in the early 19th century.² According to Moberly, by 1893 Charlotte was married

1. The name Tastawitch was likely Testawitch. There was a Michel Testawitch in the English River District who was married to Sophie Lachance. This couple had a daughter, Marie Philomène Testawitch, who married Jean Baptiste Laliberte. It is probable that Margaret Testawitch was the sister of Marie Philomène. Additionally, the surname may, in fact, be Iroquois, not Dene, according to descendants of that family. The actual etymology of the name is unknown. Hudson's Bay Company Archives (hereafter HBCA), B.89/b/19, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Book, 1892–1894, Henry Moberly to R. Pamlet, Assistant Commissioner, 25 November 1893.

2. In the Île à la Crosse mission records, there is an entry concerning a Hélène Harper giving birth to a daughter, Celina-Marie, whose father was a Willie Biggs, to whom Hélène was not

Brenda Macdougall, "'The Comforts of Married Life': Metis Family Life, Labour, and the Hudson's Bay Company," *Labour/Le Travail*, 61 (Spring 2008), 9–39.

to an “Indian” man from the English River District and “living in very poor circumstances.”³ While the exact nature of Charlotte’s “poor circumstances” was not revealed, it was Moberly’s opinion that a successful scrip application would greatly alleviate her situation. Furthermore, although not explicitly stated in the letter, Moberly may have felt that if successful in obtaining scrip, Charlotte and her family would expect no further help from the HBC.

Much has been written regarding the HBC’s policies and sentiment towards its servant’s families.⁴ Throughout its long history, the Company often displayed an ambivalence towards the social activities of its servant class. Consequently, over time, this gave life to a subtle but complex web of contradictory policies and behaviours. In its early years, the Company was uncomfortable with its employees marrying into local Indian communities, and so enacted formal policies banning interpersonal sexual relationships, although it was never able to effectively enforce them. However, it is well-documented that the fur trade’s success depended upon a trader’s ability to establish meaningful social relationships with Aboriginal peoples, who refused to trade based on purely economic grounds.⁵ What still needs to be examined is the impact that famil-

married. Registres paroissiaux, 1867–1912. Eglise catholique, Mission de Saint-Jean-Baptiste, Île à la Crosse, Saskatchewan. The parish registers for the northwestern Saskatchewan communities were accessed through The Church of Jesus Christ and Latter Day Saints Family Search centre via microfilm copies.

3. HBCA, B.89/b/19, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Book, 1892–1894, Henry Moberly to R. Pamlet, Assistant Commissioner, 25 November 1893.

4. The two studies that stand as seminal works regarding fur trade companies and families are, of course, Jennifer S.H. Brown’s, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver 1980) and Sylvia Van Kirk’s, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society in Western Canada, 1670–1870* (Winnipeg 1980). However, see also Brown’s, “Fur Trade as Centrifuge: Family Dispersal and Offspring Identity in Two Contemporary Contexts,” in Raymond J. Demaille and Alfonso Ortiz, eds., *North American Indian Anthropology* (Norman 1994), 197–219; “Partial Truths: A Closer Look at Fur Trade Marriage,” in Theodore Binnema, Gerhard J. Ens and R.C. Macleod, eds., *From Rupert’s Land to Canada* (Edmonton 2001), 59–80; Argyro Rula Logotheti, “Six Moose Factory Cree Life Histories: The Negotiation of Self and the Maintenance of Culture” MA thesis, McMaster University, 1991; Jacqueline Peterson, “The People in Between: Indian-White Marriage and the Genesis of a Métis Society and Culture in the Great Lakes Region, 1680–1830” Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, 1980; Edward J. McCullough and Michael Maccagno, *Lac La Biche and the Early Fur Traders* (Edmonton 1991); Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes* (Amherst 2001); Elizabeth Arthur, “Angélique and her Children: Papers and Records,” *Thunder Bay Historical Society*, 6 (1978), 30–40, 30–34; Harriet Gorham, “Families of Mixed Descent in the Western Great Lakes Region,” in B.A. Cox, ed., *Native People, Native Lands* (Ottawa 1987), 37–55; and Susan Sleeper-Smith, “Furs and Female Kin Networks: The World of Marie Madeline Réaume L’Archevêque Chevalier,” in Jo-Anne Fiske, Susan Sleeper-Smith and William Wicken, eds., *New Faces of the Fur Trade: Selected Papers of the Seventh North American Fur Trade Conference, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1995* (East Lansing 1995), 23–53.

5. The work of Van Kirk and Brown has most succinctly and extensively established this reality in the North American fur trade, but also see Arthur J. Ray, “Reflections of Fur Trade Social

ial relationships had on the evolution of both HBC and Metis communities.⁶ Whether non-Aboriginal traders who married Aboriginal women understood or fully accepted their new roles as family members is, in some respects, inconsequential – they (and their children) were regarded as family and, more importantly, were socialized as family members within this new society.⁷ Despite the importance of establishing intimate social relationships, according to fur trade scholars, beginning in 1821 and continuing on throughout the century, the Company attempted to reduce as much as possible the numbers of people at its inland posts in order to diminish its obligations and responsibilities to support trade families. Yet, the records for the English River District reveal that even these policies were never effectively enforced. By 1853, Chief Trader George Deschambeault noted that “the number of Families at this place is surprising,” and several decades later, in 1889, a chief factor reported that “the Halfbreeds move or live depend on the HB Company for a living – as a rule they have large families.”⁸ However, the Company’s attempts to reduce its servant numbers, and therefore post populations, had negative implications

History and Metis History in Canada,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 6, 2 (1982), 91–107; Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes* (Amherst 2001); and Heather Rollason Driscoll, “A Most Important Chain of Connection: Marriage in the Hudson’s Bay Company,” in Binnema, Ens, & Macleod eds., *From Rupert’s Land To Canada*, 81–107.

6. The term Metis is chosen here to denote mixed-descent people who forged for themselves separate and distinct communities from either of their Indian and European ancestors. Note that Metis is written without an accent over the “e.” This is done to signify that the term is being used to encompass all mixed-descent people in the English River District. The reason for this choice is that “Métis” typically implies specific historical circumstance associated with French and Catholic influences that originated with the eastern trade routes prior to the fall of New France and the Scottish takeover of the St. Lawrence trade. The term “half-breed,” also known as the “country born,” has historically referred to English and Scottish mixed-bloods who came out of the Hudson’s Bay Company trade. The Metis of the English River District are predominantly, although not exclusively, from French and Cree forebears. I use the term to be inclusive of all mixed ancestry people in the area who were members of the regional extended family system.

7. Again, refer to those studies about family life during the fur trade such as Van Kirk, Devine, Peterson, and Brown. As well, Richard White’s study of diplomacy from the late 17th to early 19th century focuses a great deal on how First Nations and Europeans perceived each other’s obligations and responsibilities in the pays d’en haut. White concluded that each group had a culturally based set of expectations regarding protocols for establishing and maintaining their relationships and as long as the other group behaved properly, the other was satisfied. Questions about how genuine or authentic each group played out the roles expected of them were less relevant than the rituals sanctifying the relationships. The same can be argued about family life – acceptance was possible as long as each group appeared to be behaving appropriately. See White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge 1991).

8. HBCA, D.5/36, D.5/36, Governor George Simpson’s Correspondence Inward, George Deschambeault to G. Simpson, 20 February 1853; and HBCA, B.89/e/8, Île à la Crosse Post Report, 1889.

for the trade, for these men and their families began to assert an economic independence in the English River District by the end of the century.

The development of the fur trade in the District established a complex set of responsibilities and obligations that guided the relationship between local families and the Company. The consequence of large families associated with Company posts was twofold. The Company assumed some measure of influence and responsibility for families by providing housing and rations, transporting them throughout Rupert's Land, and a host of other actions that helped establish an infrastructure of familial support networks. In turn, families presumed that the HBC was there to assist them and expected that their loyal service would secure the Company's goodwill indefinitely. Certainly, Charlotte Harper's letter requesting assistance demonstrates the role that the Company was expected to play in non-financial matters. Furthermore, by examining the records for the District, it becomes clear that Charlotte Harper's request was not that unusual. Charlotte actually shared with others in the District an understanding of the form that the relationship between the Company and local families was to take. As the primary employer for the region's commercial economy, the HBC became more than a business – as an institution, it became a part of a shared community identity.

Reconstructing the genealogical connections of families from the English River District between 1790 and 1912 identified approximately 43 core Metis families, 26 of which had long histories of employment in the fur trade that for many began with the Northwest Company (NWC) in the late 18th century and continued with the HBC after the 1821 merger.⁹ Outsider Metis and Euro-Canadian male servants and locally born women established the pattern and make-up of HBC families in the late 19th century, which, over time, created a large and complex regional family network. Women born in the region supported male relatives employed in the trade, and therefore the Company, with their labour while also sharing their lives with one another. This created, by extension, a sense of family, community, and home within a trade environment that otherwise would have solely been an economic endeavour. The HBC directly engaged servants and indirectly those family networks in diverse capacities throughout the region, relying on them to fulfill a variety of tasks required for basic comfort, survival, and well-being in the English River District. It was the nature of the relationship between the families and their employer that merits greater attention if we are to understand the nature of Metis culture and society in the 19th century.

Anthropologist Philip Spaulding's research on Île à la Crosse Metis social patterns in the 1960s determined that the community highly valued large extended families because family members were bound to one another by ties of loyalty, obligations to speak and act upon a relative's behalf when required,

9. Brenda Macdougall, "Wahkootowin: Family and Cultural Identity," *Canadian Historical Review*, 87, 3 (September 2006), 431–462.

and requirements to support them materially and/or emotionally. Spaulding concluded that this Metis community traditionally placed such a value on family that individuals without relatives were regarded as non-persons in that society, reducing them to objects of pity.¹⁰ In Île à la Crosse, this value placed on family and familial loyalty influenced the shape of the Metis community's historical relationship with the HBC. What is suggested here is that Metis culture, rather than being shaped by the necessities of trade, had a role in determining the nature of trade relations because of a worldview that emphasized familial loyalty and the roles and responsibilities of family members towards one another.¹¹ The argument here, however, is not that families employed by the HBC controlled either the trade or the Company. By and large, these were loyal HBC families with male heads of households who had good relationships with their superiors. However, familial loyalty created a tension within the HBC hierarchy, as large, interrelated families asserted cultural solidarity within the workspace afforded them, which was oftentimes at odds with Company interests. Economically, men served as much as possible the interests of their relatives. For male HBC servants, there was a strong socio-cultural expectation not to abandon their primary responsibilities of being good relatives despite HBC duties.

It is within this context that Charlotte Harper's request for assistance from Moberly is framed. Her familial circumstances in 1893 reveals a family connected to the Company in the English River District but also rooted in the region's larger familial economic base. The daughter of an HBC servant, Charlotte married Martial Ikkeilzik in 1891 at the Île à la Crosse mission and remained in the English River District after her father's death. Martial was the son of Michel Ikkeilzik and Catherine Roy, and therefore brother to Marguerite Ikkeilzik, the wife of longtime HBC servant Pierre Malboeuf (see Figure 1).¹²

10. Philip T. Spaulding, "The Metis of Ile a la Crosse," Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1970, 96–98.

11. In his study of the Sioux during the colonial fur trade, Gary Clayton Anderson reached much the same conclusion. See the introduction of *Kinsmen of Another Kind: Dakota-White Relations in the Upper Mississippi Valley, 1650–1862* (Lincoln 1984). This is not, however, to argue that the economic mechanisms were either developed or controlled by the Metis. As Frank Tough pointed out, there was a world market that determined the overall scope of trade by setting prices, determining values of furs, and marketing them to consumers worldwide. The world market was something of which the Metis of the English River District likely had little knowledge or interest. See Frank Tough, "As Their Natural Resources Fail:" *Native Peoples and the Economic History of Northern Manitoba, 1870–1930* (Vancouver 1996).

12. Alternate spellings for Ikkeilzik are Elkeze, Elkelzek, and Elkezi. Today, all these names have become the surname of Keizie. In the Abstracts of Servants Accounts of 1851, Malboeuf was listed as being twenty-six years of age and with five years of service in the Company as a midman before becoming a fisherman in the English River District. Charlotte and Martial along with the latter's brother, Patrice Ikkeilzik, are known today in the region as being the founders of the northern village of Buffalo Narrows when they first settled there permanently in 1895. Library and Archives of Canada (LAC, previously NAC), RG 15, vol. 1357, Handwritten

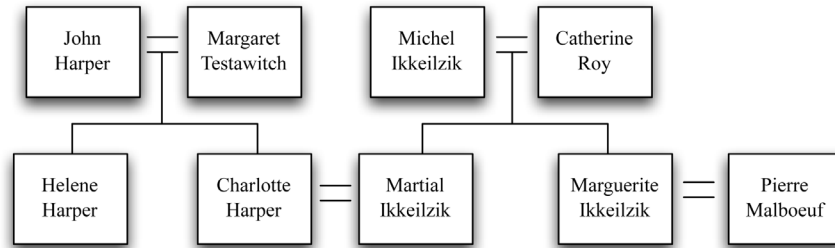


Figure 1. Charlotte Harper's Family

While the Ikkeilzik family was not one of the twenty-six families closely affiliated with the HBC, extended families such as theirs often reinforced themselves by drawing upon an affiliation with the Company. The Ikkeilzik family clearly connected themselves with a number of families with Company ties, such as the Harpers, Roys, and Malboeufs.

In turn, although an economic institution with clearly defined and differentiated categories of employment, the Company came to depend upon the local family networks of its male employees to stabilize their operations in the English River District. Over time, this became a venue through which social solidarity, familial loyalty, and cultural identity were reinforced through informal and unpaid labour practices. Importantly, the HBC itself, while not a part of the Metis family structure, functioned as a conduit that drew families together into a collectivity shaped by common employment, a sense of responsibility to a shared economic purpose at the posts, and a familial bond framed by reciprocal responsibilities – elements revealed by genealogical reconstruction and close examination of the labour environment represented in the HBC records during the post-1821 era.

After the merger – a time when the Company closed dozens of inland posts and made a large work force redundant – the English River District's post journals and employment registers reveal that servants continued to establish for themselves families that were depended upon by the Company and who, in turn, used the Company's resources to support their familial obligations. The importance and relevance of family life to male traders becomes apparent, for company officials regularly recorded their numbers at the District's posts. At the request of HBC Governor George Simpson, who visited Île à la Crosse in the 1822–23 trading season, Chief Factor George Keith recorded the number of women and children attached to the posts in the English River District. In this first post-merger accounting of families, there were 61 women and chil-

Application for Pierre Malboeuf; LAC, RG 15, vol. 1357, Pierre Malboeuf, 12 July 1900; and Registres paroissiaux, 1867–1912. Eglise catholique, Mission de Saint-Jean-Baptiste, Ile à la Crosse, Saskatchewan. Richard Wuorinen, *A History of Buffalo Narrows* (Buffalo Narrows 1981).

dren (the latter defined as those under fourteen years of age) at Cold Lake, 20 at Lac La Ronge, and 19 at Île à la Crosse – a total of 100 dependents at the Company posts.¹³ Two years later, Keith recorded that the Île à la Crosse post families consisted of five adult males, four married women, two widows, and a total of 24 children, which was, he stated, a decrease from the 1823 total of four adult males, four women, and thirteen children. He additionally noted that an Athabasca man, B. Bernard, was transferred to the Île à la Crosse post with his “fairly large” family.¹⁴

In January 1825, Keith recorded that he was permitted to have two Company officers, two experienced clerks or traders, one guide, three interpreters, one blacksmith, and sixteen canoemen and/or labourers. There were also, according to Keith, a number of women at the post. He reported that the total complement of servants and families in the English River District, which at the time was comprised of four posts – Île à la Crosse, Green Lake, Lac La Ronge, and Grey Deer Lake – was 27 men, 22 women, and 57 children. According to Keith, the reason that there were so many employees divided between those four posts was that, at the time of the merger, a number of men in the District were in debt, and so it had been advisable to keep them on to ensure repayment.¹⁵ The only reason for not getting rid of the women at the post, according to Keith, was that their presence sustained an excellent set of labourers essential to the Company. Keith was happy to report that several of the more experienced men were set to retire soon and that the contracts of several others would expire in 1826, thereby providing the Company an opportunity to rid itself of some of the women.¹⁶ A great deal of the expense associated with the women, and by extension their families, was because of their expectation that the Company would supplement family incomes by providing both food rations in the winter months and housing for permanently contracted servants.

The relief that the Company expected from ridding itself of some families

13. HBCA, B.89/a/8, Île à la Crosse Post Journals, 1824–25, Report by George Keith for the English River District, 1824/25; HBCA, B.89/a/8, Île à la Crosse Post Journal, 25 October 1824; HBCA, B.89/a/8, Île à la Crosse Post Journal, 1824–1825, n.d.

14. HBCA, B.89/a/8, Île à la Crosse Post Journal, 25 October 1824.

15. Keith also enumerated the First Nations population, noting that the number of Dene who traded at Île à la Crosse and Deers Lake totaled 87 adult males, 106 adult females, 136 young men and boys, and 140 girls. The Cree, who traded primarily at Green Lake and La Ronge, totaled 64 adult males, 76 adult women, 45 young men or boys, and 50 girls. There were also a number of freemen with families in the District, but Keith felt that they were so few in number that it was unnecessary to enumerate them (although he also wrote that they were expensive and burdensome to the Company). HBCA, B.89/a/8, Île à la Crosse Post Journals, 1824–25, Report by George Keith for the English River District, 1824/25; HBCA, B.89/a/5, Île à la Crosse Post Journal, 1822–1823, 1 November 1822; HBCA, B.89/a/8, Île à la Crosse Post Journal, 25 October 1824; HBCA, B.89/a/8, Île à la Crosse Post Journal, 1824–1825, n.d.

16. HBCA, B.89/a/9, Île à la Crosse Post Journals, 1825–1826, 13 January 1825.

was not alleviated greatly the next season. In 1826, Keith noted that Chief Trader John Spencer had been given the task of building a large canoe at his post to accommodate the transportation of families leaving the District. However, Spencer did not have the canoe built, and the families did not leave. Regardless of his inability to carry out orders, Keith informed Spencer and other men that the Company would not be responsible for providing the same amount of provisions to families as it had in past years.¹⁷

Over the decades, the number of posts in the District expanded and contracted, depending on need and profitability, and so the movement of families between posts within the region likewise fluctuated. In 1844, the enumeration of families at Île à la Crosse totaled 34 “souls in all within the fort,” which broke down to two men, three young men, ten women, twelve children. This figure also included the report’s author, Thomas Hodgson of Green Lake, an Indian man and his wife and two children, and a blind Indian who normally resided there.¹⁸ Twenty years later, in 1862, there were six posts in the District, employing a total of 36 men. The following complement of officers and men was provided for each post: Île à la Crosse employed one officer and fifteen men; Rapids River employed one clerk and four men; Deers Lake and Portage La Loche each employed a postmaster, although the former had an additional four men while the latter employed five men; and, finally, Jackfish Creek and Green Lake each employed one interpreter and three men.¹⁹

Nearly a decade later, in 1871, the number of women and children were again recorded at the Company posts. The totals for Île à la Crosse alone were 51 women (two of whom were widows) and 106 children. Clearly, the number of children was growing and becoming a significant part of the Company’s responsibilities. It is important to note that the families recorded in these reports were only those with male heads of households under contract with the HBC, not families of those men employed on either a seasonal or temporary basis, or those who lived a subsistence lifestyle and not employed by the Company. The District reports submitted a year later by Samuel Mackenzie listed four, rather than six, posts in operation in English River: Île à la Crosse (one commissioned officer, one senior clerk, one interpreter, one farmer, one cow herder, four fishermen, two guides, and eleven canoemen/labourers); Portage La Loche (one senior clerk); Bull’s House (one postmaster, one interpreter, two fishermen, and six canoemen/labourers); and Green Lake (one senior clerk, one postmaster, one interpreter, two fishermen, and five canoemen/labourers).²⁰

17. HBCA, B.89/b/3, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Book, 1825–1826, George Keith to John Spencer, 6 April 1826.

18. HBCA, B.89/a/23, Île à la Crosse Post Journals, 1843–1845, 31 May 1844.

19. HBCA, B.89/e/4, Île à la Crosse District Report, 1862.

20. HBCA, B.89/b/4, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Book, 1872–75, Samuel McKenzie, “Report to the Chief Commissioner at Fort Garry,” 1 June 1872.

Six months later, Chief Factor William McMurray submitted descriptions of three posts that reveal the residential infrastructure of the post families. Portage La Loche was located on the west side of the lake, about six miles from the store at the south end of Methy Portage. The soil was not useful except for growing potatoes, but there was an important small winter fishery, plus moose and caribou to provide meat. Both the Dene and the “descendants of French Canadian Halfbreeds” frequented the post, although McMurray noted that he preferred the character of the latter. Several families had built houses or huts at certain points around the lake, supporting themselves with small gardens and hunting. At the time, McMurray felt that Portage La Loche should be abandoned and rebuilt near the store at the south end of the portage. Bull’s House, also known as Riviere La Loche, was located on the north end of Buffalo Lake, 45 miles from the store at the south end of Lac La Loche and 70 miles from Île à la Crosse. The purpose of Bull’s House was to winter the oxen required for the summer transport system at Portage La Loche. Except in years of high waters, there were natural hay meadows at Bull’s House where the cattle grazed. When water levels were too high, hay was obtained from Buffalo Lake, three miles from the outpost. According to McMurray, Bull’s House had the best winter fishery in the District, supplying both Portage La Loche and Île à la Crosse when their own fisheries failed.²¹ As a result, there developed at Bull’s House a substantial residential population that performed all of these necessary tasks.

Alone, these HBC census and district reports give us but a glimpse into the development of a residential HBC population, but when combined with excerpts from post journals, correspondence records, and other, non-HBC records, the range and scope of the Metis community takes on greater depth. What is revealed is a significant population that by the mid-19th century was well-integrated into the HBC cycle of employment, but also able to sustain itself by drawing upon Company resources as a part of their community economic cycle. One of the most obvious examples of HBC families drawing upon the Company to support their familial economic interests was the development of formal and informal labour groups of related individuals. In the closing decades of the 19th century, there were several instances when the Company clerk noted that large groups of individuals were cooperatively working to accomplish critical HBC jobs. For instance, between 31 July and 3 August 1889, Julie Bouvier, her daughter Augustine Mary Desjarlais, and granddaughter Eliza, along with Angela Catfish, Véronique Daigneault, and Caroline and Margaret Lafleur, began weeding the HBC’s potato field at its post on Lac Île à la Crosse.²² Similarly, in early April 1890, the Company noted that ten women – Véronique Bouvier, Meline Malbeuf [*sic*], Widow Case [*sic*], Widow Mckay, Ann Jourdain,

21. HBCA, B.89/b/4, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Book, 1872–75, William McMurray, “Remarks Regarding the HB Posts in Upper English River District,” 10 January 1873.

22. HBCA, B.89/a/36&37, Île à la Crosse Post Journal, 1889–1896, 31 July 1889.

Corinne [*sic*] Roy, Mary Desjarlais, Angela [*sic*] Souris, and Mary Case [*sic*] – along with Old Souris were at work hanging fish, a task that took four days to complete and required the assistance of four boys and a couple of male servants.²³ In each instance, the women identified were married to, or were the mothers or daughters of, Company servants. Many of the women were related to one another by virtue of being from large, intergenerationally employed HBC families. Such references were not restricted to female labourers, but also included groups of male workers. On 10 February 1892, for instance, Charles Maurice, son of François Maurice and Angèle Laliberte, went with his stepfather, Raphaël Souris and his in-law, François Xavier Daigneault, to Water Hen River with eight horses to pick up freight.²⁴ Five days later, the post journal recorded that Joseph Bouvier, Marcial [*sic*] Desjarlais, François Bouvier, and Vincent Daigneault's son had left Île à la Crosse for Buffalo Narrows with a load of flour destined for Portage La Loche.²⁵

Each incident that included detailed lists of individuals – when cross-referenced within a genealogical framework – provides some insight into the range of relatedness between Company families and the manner in which families worked for the HBC. However, this insight is not readily apparent unless one seeks to know more about the connections between the labourers by evaluating their genealogical connections, which, in turn, can illuminate their familial association with the Company. In the 1889 potato field example, Julie Bouvier was actually Julie Marie née Morin, the daughter of HBC freighter Raphaël Morin and, therefore, granddaughter of one of the first HBC men in region, Antoine Morin. In 1868, Julie Marie married occasional HBC tripper, freighter, and fisherman Michel Bouvier, Jr. at Île à la Crosse.²⁶ There is no recorded connection between Julie Marie's daughter, Augustine Mary, and a male Desjarlais at this time, although there could have been a relationship prior to her known marriage to HBC fisherman Charles dit Ladébeauch Caisse in 1891. After Charles' death, Augustine is recorded as having married another HBC employee, John Thomas Corrigan (see Figure 2).²⁷

23. HBCA B.89/a/36 & 37, Île à la Crosse Post Journal, 1889–1896, 11–15 April 1890. The contemporary spelling for the surname Case is Caisse, and Malbeuaf is actually Malbouef.

24. HBCA, B.89/a/36 & 37, Île à la Crosse Post Journals, 10 February 1892.

25. HBCA, B.89/a/36 & 37, Île à la Crosse Post Journals, 15 February 1892. The given name Marcial is more typically spelled Martial.

26. LAC, RG 15, vol. 1337, Michel Bouvier, 22 September 1906; LAC, RG 15, 1337, Julie Bouvier-Morin, 22 September 1906; and Registres paroissiaux, 1867–1912. Eglise catholique, Mission de Saint-Jean-Baptiste, Île à la Crosse, Saskatchewan.

27. There is no record of Augustine having a daughter named Eliza Desjarlais. LAC, RG 15, vol. 1342, J.T. Corrigan, 22 September 1906; LAC, RG 15, vol. 1342, Augustine Bouvier Corrigan, 24 September 1906; and Registres paroissiaux, 1867–1912. Eglise catholique, Mission de Saint-Jean-Baptiste, Île à la Crosse, Saskatchewan.

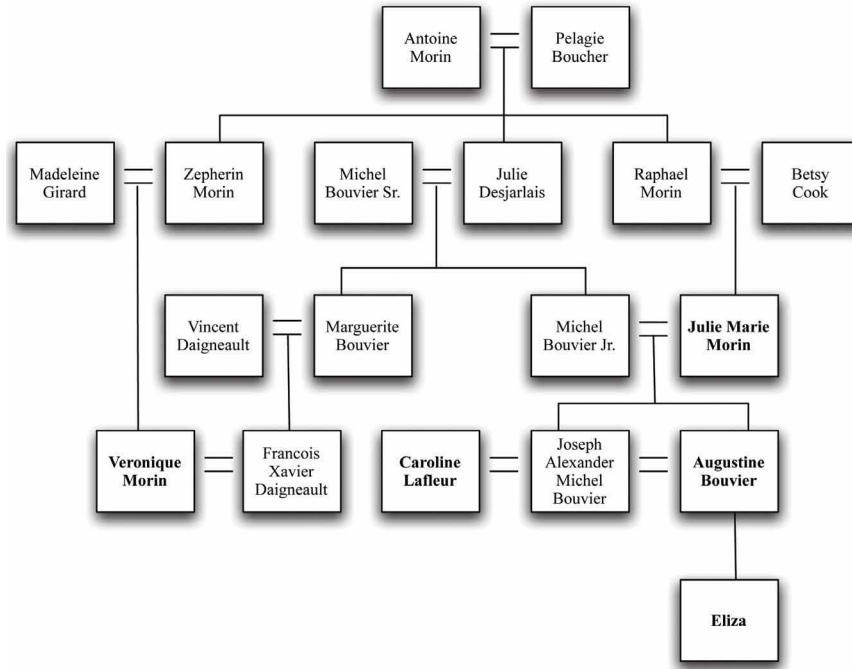


Figure 2. Family Connections Between the Women Working in 1889

Angela Catfish was the daughter of John Catfish, an HBC employee, and was, in 1889, married to her second husband Louis Caisse, a seasonal labourer for the Company.²⁸ Caroline Lafleur was the daughter of HBC fisherman Baptiste Charlot Lafleur and the wife of servant Joseph Alexandre Michel Bouvier, while Marguerite's father was HBC interpreter Charles Pierre Lafleur.²⁹ Véronique Daigneault was the daughter of servant Zépherin dit Catholique Morin and the wife of François Xavier Daigneault, another Company fisherman and the son of HBC carpenter Vincent Daigneault (see Fig. 2).³⁰

28. Angela's first relationship was with Baptiste Misponas or L'Esperance in the 1890s. The name Misponas is a phonetic variation of L'Esperance. At some point, the French surname L'Esperance, which translates as "the hope" or "the promise," became in the English River District the surname Misponas, for which there appears to be no translation; LAC, RG 15, vol. 1339, Louis Caisse, 20 September 1906; and Registres paroissiaux, 1867–1912. Eglise catholique, Mission de Saint-Jean-Baptiste, Île à la Crosse, Saskatchewan.

29. Registres paroissiaux, 1867–1912. Eglise catholique, Mission de Saint-Jean-Baptiste, Île à la Crosse, Saskatchewan. LAC, RG 15, vol. 1337, Caroline Lafleur, 24 September 1906; and LAC, RG 15, vol. 1337, Marguerite Lafleur-Boyer, 18 June 1900.

30. LAC, RG 15, vol. 1348, William Gardiner, 24 September 1906; LAC, RG 15, vol. 1348, Lucia Gardiner, 21 September 1906; and Registres paroissiaux, 1867–1912. Eglise catholique, Mission de Saint-Jean-Baptiste, Île à la Crosse, Saskatchewan.

Likewise, within the 1890 fish hanging reference, there is an intricate web of interrelated women from families with long associations to the HBC. Véronique Bouvier was the daughter of HBC servant Michel Bouvier, Sr. and married to Company fisherman Thomas Lariviere. Courrone Roy (née Maurice) was the granddaughter of long-time HBC employee Pierriche Laliberte and daughter of deceased servant François Maurice. Courrone was working with her mother, Angèle Souris, who, after her first husband, François, died, married Raphaël Souris, the then 39 year old local fisherman also working that day. In 1877, Courrone Maurice married Lousion Roy, an HBC voyageur, and, in all, had seven uncles and five brothers who were servants of the Company. The Widow Case was likely Philomène Caisse (née Malboeuf), daughter of HBC fisherman Pierre Malboeuf. Philomène had been married to servant Joseph Caisse, who had died two months earlier in February of 1890 and left her with four young children to raise. Mary Case, another of the ten women working, was therefore Philomène's mother-in-law. Meline Malboeuf was Mélanie Tssehlyous, wife of Augustin Malboeuf, an HBC fisherman and another child of Pierre Malboeuf. Mélanie Malboeuf and Philomène Caisse were sisters-in-law to each other and the nieces of Charlotte Harper. The Widow McKay may have been Angèle Lariviere, the wife of Henry McKay, who died in March of 1890, a month before the women were drying fish. Anne Jourdain was likely Anne Bekattla, the wife of Baptiste Jourdain, Jr., an HBC fisherman whom she wed in 1879 at Green Lake. Based on the information currently available, this Marie Desjarlais is unidentifiable in the genealogical record (see Figures 3 & 4).³¹

The connections of many of these women to one another and the Company is made all the more obvious when compared to the male labour groups mentioned in two separate Company records from 1892. Joseph Bouvier was HBC fisherman Joseph Alexandre Michel Bouvier[?], while François Xavier, himself a company fisherman by 1892, was the son of servant Vincent Daigneault. HBC fisherman and labourer Charles Maurice was married to Julie dite Canadienne Bouvier, the daughter of HBC fisherman Michel Bouvier, Jr. "Marcial" Desjarlais was actually Jean Marie Martial Desjarlais, husband of Marie Octavie Bouvier, the sister of Joseph and François Xavier.³² Raphaël Souris was the second husband of Angèle Laliberte Maurice and therefore stepfather to HBC servant Charles Maurice (see Figure 5).

31. LAC, RG 15, vol. 1365, Carmine Maurice, 21 September 1906; LAC, RG 15, vol. 1367, Raphaël Souris, 21 September 1906; LAC RG 15, vol. 991, File 1247280, Angèle Souris, 27 June 1907; LAC, RG 15, vol. 1358, Ambroise McKay, 24 September 1906; LAC, RG 15, vol. 1352, Anna Jourdain, 24 September 1906; and Registres paroissiaux, 1867–1912. Eglise catholique, Mission de Saint-Jean-Baptiste, Île à la Crosse, Saskatchewan.

32. LAC, RG 15, vol. 1343, François Xavier Daigneault, 20 September 1906; LAC, RG 15, vol. 1357, Charles Maurice, 19 September 1906; LAC, RG 15, vol. 1367, Raphaël Souris, 21 September 1906; Registres paroissiaux, 1867–1912. Eglise catholique, Mission de Saint-Jean-Baptiste, Île à la Crosse, Saskatchewan; and Registres paroissiaux, 1890–1912, Eglise catholique. Mission de la Visitation Portage La Loche, Saskatchewan.

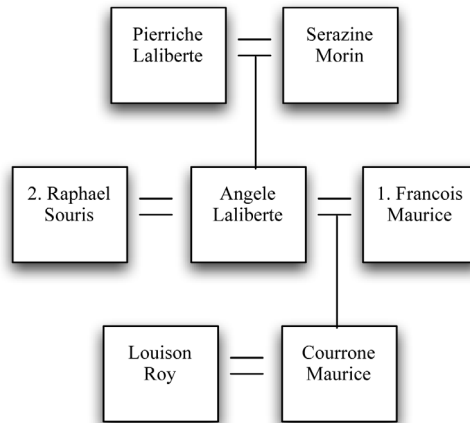


Figure 3. Laliberte/Maurice Connection

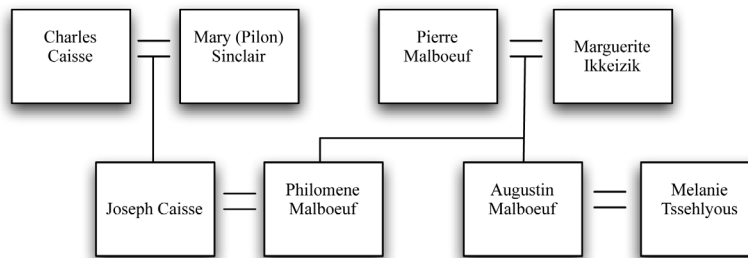


Figure 4. Malboeuf/Caisse Connection

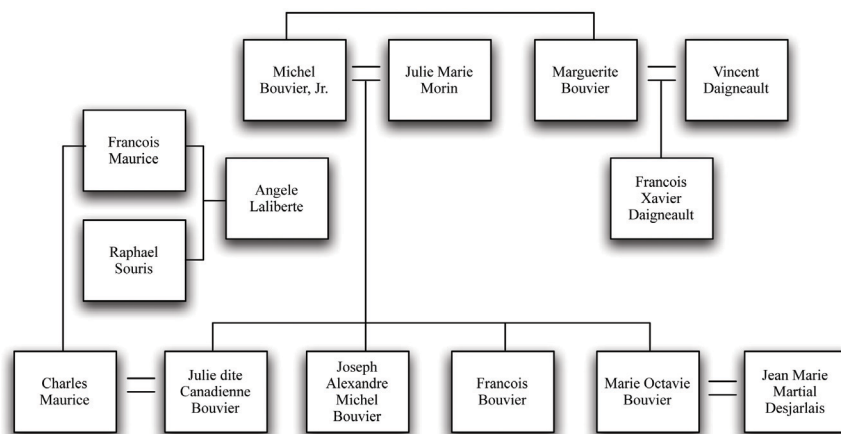


Figure 5. Men's Work Groups, 1892

Families in the English River District functioned within a social framework that had a direct impact on the economic operations at posts like Île à la Crosse. The social behaviour and cultural values of Metis families were expressed through the Cree term *wahkootowin*, which regarded family as the foundational relationship of society, and was, therefore, the conduit for pursuing any economic activities and alliances. As a conceptual framework guiding interpersonal behaviours, *wahkootowin* established that relatedness of individuals was of primary importance for establishing a variety of arrangements between families, communities, and institutions.³³ This idealized representation of relationships marks the socio-cultural values by which people were expected to aspire and serves as a theoretical framework by which to evaluate the interactions of HBC families with one another and with the Company. Family as a theoretical framework is an important means by which to evaluate and interpret how Aboriginal community members are expected to behave. Drawing on family as a theoretical construct, Sioux anthropologist Beatrice Medicine observed that the conceptual model guiding social and economic interaction within Aboriginal societies was best described as a “reciprocity family model,” which established familial alliances by providing a broader network for group social and cultural interaction through a web of flexible support systems.³⁴ Although Medicine’s work spoke to her own Sioux cultural

33. Because Cree was the dominant language of the English River District during the fur trade era, the significance ascribed to familial relationships by *wahkootowin* was as an idealized social value by which Metis people attempted to order society through personal behaviour and interaction with one another. Cree language dictionaries provide concise definitions of the root word *wahkootowin* (meaning relative, relationship, kinsmanship, or simply relation) and its various derivatives, such as *wakotuhisoo* (he forms a relationship), *wakottuwok* (they are related), or *wakomakun* (close relation), which have related but more precise meanings depending on their usage. There is considerable variation in spelling, including *wahkootowin*, *wakottuwinn*, and *wahko'towin*, reflecting the newness of Roman orthography’s application of the Cree language and a lack of standardization. See R. Faries (ed), *A Dictionary of the Cree Language, as spoken by the Indians in the provinces of Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. Based upon the foundation laid by E. A. Watkins, 1865* (Toronto 1938 edition); Gérard Beaudet, *Cree-English English-Cree Dictionary = Nehiyawe mina Akayasimo, Akayasimo mina Nehiyawe ayamiwini-masinahigan* (Winnipeg 1995); H.C. Wolfart and Freda Ahenakew, *The Student’s Dictionary of Literary Plains Cree: Based on Contemporary Texts* (Winnipeg 1998); and Anne Anderson (ed), *Plains Cree Dictionary in The ‘Y’ Dialect* (S.I. 1975). Perhaps the best application of *wahkootowin* as a cultural value is found within *Kisewatotatowin: Loving, Caring, Sharing, Respect*, 2nd ed. (Saskatoon 1998), which is a parenting handbook published to assist in strengthening young families. *Wahkootowin* was also used as the framework of a recent First Nations and Metis Justice Commission established in Saskatchewan to conduct an inquiry into the relationship between Saskatchewan Aboriginal peoples and the provincial justice system. Significantly, the Commission took as its motto “*meyo wahkotowin*,” or “one community,” indicating that in order for meaningful change to occur, the people of the province must regard themselves as members of a shared community, not two solitudes. Without making explicit statements, there is an implication of relatedness in a shared community.

34. Beatrice Medicine, “American Indian Family,” *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 18, 4 (1981), 13–23, 17–19.

experience, this notion of family resonated historically with such geographically distant peoples as the Sioux, Plains Cree and Metis, Woodlands Cree and Dene, and Subarctic Metis. Furthermore, the reciprocal family model is easily related to the conceptualization of wahkootowin, where all relatives, no matter how far removed from direct genealogical ties, were recognized as family members, and, as such, were obliged to provide social and economic assistance and hospitality to one another.³⁵

Through the HBC, families associated with the Company made strategic marital alliances with other Company families, thereby establishing through this economic conduit a complex web of interfamilial alliances that worked together and supported one another in the reciprocal family model as embodied by wahkootowin. Within this web of interfamily marriages, the demands of reciprocal familial commitments, in turn, supported the Company by establishing a chain of connection upon which it could call for additional labour, supplies, and general assistance. However, despite relying on the relatives of their servants, by 1850 the Company's overall collective and institutional attitude towards families was increasingly ambivalent as it balanced the benefits of this "unpaid" labour force against the added costs associated with supporting large Metis families at their posts.

On one level, the HBC assumed responsibility for, and authority over, its servants and their wives and children. From the benefit of hindsight, the Company is often described as being paternalistic in its economic policies towards First Nations and Metis communities, and in many ways this is

35. The form and structure of Aboriginal family life has been examined most thoroughly by anthropologists. For a fuller discussion of each group's style of family, see Henry Stephen Sharp, "The Kinship System of the Black Lake Chipewyan," Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1973; Henry S. Sharp, *Chipewyan Marriage* (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, no. 58, 1979); Bernard Bernier, *The Social Organization of the Waswanipi Cree Indians* (Montreal 1968); M. Inez Hilger, *Chippewa Families: A Social Study of White Earth Indian Reservation, 1938* (St. Paul, MN 1998); David G. Mandelbaum, *The Plains Cree: An Ethnographic, Historical, and Comparative Study* (Regina 1979); David Meyer, *The Red Earth Crees, 1860–1960* (Canadian Ethnology Service, no. 100, 1985); Scott Rushforth, *Bear Lake Athabaskan Kinship and Task Group Formation* (Canadian Ethnology Service, no. 96, 1984); Patricia Albers, "Sioux Kinship in a Colonial Setting," *Dialectical Anthropology*, 6 (1982), 253–269; Raymond J. DeMaille, "Kinship and Biology in Sioux Culture," in Raymond J. DeMaille and Alfonso Ortiz eds., *North American Indian Anthropology: Essays on Society and Culture* (Norman 1994), 125–146; Regina Flannery, "Cross-Cousin Marriage Among the Cree and Montagnais of James Bay," *Primitive Man*, 11 (1938), 29–33; A. Irving Hallowell, "Kinship Terms and Cross-Cousin Marriage of the Montagnais–Naskapi and the Cree," *American Anthropologist* 34, 2 (1932), 171–199; Alfred Louis Kroeber, "Athabaskan Kin Term Systems," *American Anthropologist* 39 (1937), 602–608; Toby Morantz, *An Ethnographic Study of Eastern James Bay Cree Social Organization, 1700–1850* (Canadian Ethnology Service, no. 88, 1983); and James G.E. Smith, "Historical Changes in the Chipewyan Kinship System," in Raymond J. DeMaille and Alfonso Ortiz, eds., *North American Indian Anthropology: Essays on Society and Culture* (Norman 1994), 49–81. Furthermore, the importance placed on familial connections is echoed by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal scholars, but perhaps the best expression of this sentiment was by Ella Cara Deloria in her 1945 book, *Speaking of Indians* (Lincoln 1998 reprint).

true. But by evaluating the genealogical interaction of families and communities throughout regions such as the English River District, as well as how the Company responded to large Company families locally, a more appropriate representation may be to describe it as an ambivalent benefactor.³⁶ As noted in his study of the northern Manitoba fur trade, Frank Tough stated that, “The Company’s ‘kindness’ and ‘indebtedness’ were basic to the relations between the Company and Native people.”³⁷ While HBC officials in Winnipeg and Company elite in the District did what they could to minimize the costs associated with families at its posts, local officials had to call upon families to support them through tangential occupations such as those associated with food production.

While women and children were uncontracted and therefore unwaged workers, the Company paid a price for family labour – it became a benefactor. Company servants used the HBC to anchor the responsibility, rights, and obligations between their families, and so the HBC became the repository of wills, distributor of pensions, operator of a transportation system, advisor for retirements, supporter of freemen ventures, dispenser of rations (food and goods), and landlord determining who did and did not have a right to Company housing. Chief factors and traders working in the region understood that familial harmony assured the Company’s economic viability. According to Tough, the HBC assumed the “overhead or social cost of production” as essential to maintaining the labour force in the face of economic fluctuations and the uncertainty of hunting.³⁸ Even if they did not live within the structure and dictates of *wahkootowin* themselves, local chief factors and chief traders asserted a relationship that firmly encapsulated it within the reciprocal family model by assuming a position that cultivated and harnessed the loyalty of its servants through support of their family life.

One of the clearest manifestations of the HBC’s role as benefactor for the Metis of the English River District can be observed through the deaths of Company servants and the subsequent emergence of widows at posts. There were occasional references in the post records to “old widows,” or simply widows living at District posts either because they continued to serve an economic

36. Arthur J. Ray’s work has presented the most in-depth research dealing with the relationship between the HBC and its Native, primarily Indian, personnel. See Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role as Trappers, Hunters, and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay, 1660–1870* (Toronto 1974). Furthermore, Brown’s *Strangers In Blood* provides a succinct examination of the Company’s stratification, which was based largely on the model of the English household with a patriarch, his wife, and children, and a number of unmarried young female servants and male apprentices.

37. Frank Tough, “As *Their Natural Resources Fail*”: *Native Peoples and the Economic History of Northern Manitoba, 1870–1930* (Vancouver 1996), 7.

38. Tough, “As *Their Natural Resources Fail*,” 269.

role or had become a financial burden.³⁹ As seen with the group of women working in the fisheries in April 1890, widowhood often meant continuing on as before – working where and when needed. While the consequence of losing a servant within the social milieu of the English River District affected both the post's economic health and the regional *wahkootowin*, it had additional ramifications. From a Company perspective, the death of a servant meant that it was faced with the spectre of a widow and her dependent children requiring support and looking to the Company for that aid. However, some widows, such as Philomène Caisse and Angèle Larivière, remained vital contributors to the local economy and lived in or near the posts, were employed by the Company, and sold the produce of their hunting, fishing, and gathering, or more simply worked in fields or fisheries. Regardless, chief factors and traders feared scenarios where the Company was left with the responsibility of caring for widows and children with no alternative means of support.

On the one hand, widows possessed important skills necessary for the post's daily operation, but because they had no husband to support them, it often fell to the Company to cover their expenses. In the mid-1880s, Pierriche Laliberte had occasion to write that an unidentified "Old Widow" at his post had provided a lot of furs for the Company in her younger days, but now required its assistance to live because, "Poor old wife, she was maken [*sic*] wooden traps [and then] got a blow on her Eyes" – she was now blind and had no relations to care for her. While Laliberte indicated that he planned to give the woman some of his own goods, he believed that the Company should support her because of her long service.⁴⁰ In a sense, Laliberte was making a case that this elderly woman, who had worked hard for the Company during her able years, deserved the sort of pension afforded males who had held actual contracts. An elderly woman without family needed to locate *wahkootowin* or face serious hardship, and so Laliberte acted as required – he assumed responsibility for a woman who had worked hard for the Company by supplying her from his own personal supplies and advocating for her as a member of the trade's family.

In addition to dealing with widows, there was also an issue of dispensing the deceased servant's estate and settling of debts that the Company felt it was owed. One of the more troubling local incidents, from the Company's perspective, was the death of Benjamin Bruce. On the morning of 19 April 1823, "Old" Benjamin, a Company interpreter, left the Île à la Crosse post alone to hunt waterfowl. While out in the bush, a tree branch apparently fell, fracturing Bruce's skull and killing him. When Bruce did not return that evening, his son and son-in-law, Patrick Cunningham, went out to search for him. Upon discovering Bruce, the two brought the body back to the post where the rest of the family began preparations for the funeral and burial that were to take place

39. HBCA, B.89/g/1, file 1, 1833–1864, Abstracts of Servants Accounts.

40. HBCA, B.89/c/3, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Inward, 1886–1889, n.d. from Mr. Laliberte.

the following day. According to Company records, the elder Bruce's children were inconsolable at the sudden loss of their father. The men of the establishment took turns sitting with Bruce's remains throughout night as part of the pre-burial customs. At the funeral, the men in attendance were given two drams of rum to toast the deceased, one at the Company's expense and the other at Cunningham's.⁴¹ The Company's act of supplying rum might have been an informal Company policy, but it might also have been interpreted by the people of Île à la Crosse as the act of a good relation and benefactor. Patrick Cunningham's motive was clearly to honour his wife's father, a man to whom he was economically allied as a fellow employee of the Company, and a demonstration of the family's generosity to those who came to honour the deceased. There is no reason to believe that the Company's actions would have been viewed any differently – it was behaving as required.

Upon his death, Benjamin Bruce left a will distributing his property to his heirs, but according to the Company – the administrator of both the will and assets that he had at the time of his death – Bruce had nothing to leave. George Keith observed that Bruce had invested £300–400 (\$1500–2000) with an Orkney speculator who went bankrupt, leaving the Bruce family destitute and the Company to determine their fate in the English River District.⁴² The details of the Company's decision are not revealed in the records, but because there are no substantial records for a Bruce family in the English River District after this time, it might be surmised that the widow and her children relocated to Red River or elsewhere.

In the case of old widows specifically and families of deceased servants more generally, the HBC had an obligation towards them that went beyond the typical employee/employer relationship. As was seen in the examples of the widows Caisse and McKay, these women continued to work in the fisheries despite the deaths of their husbands, even though they would have had no obligation to do so, and in Charlotte Harper's case, she turned to the Company to write a letter and provide information on her behalf.⁴³ It could be argued that these women continued to work or rely on the Company because the Metis believed that it was in some measure a part of the reciprocal family model. Their male relatives all had contacts of some fashion with the Company, be they long-term or seasonal in nature, or in the upper or lower strata of the HBC hierarchy. In the case of Angèle Souris, she was the daughter of Pierriche Laliberte, who had served as postmaster for Portage La Loche and Green Lake,

41. HBCA, B.89/a/5, Île à la Crosse Post Journal, 1822–23, 19–20 April 1823.

42. HBCA, B.89/a/5, Île à la Crosse Post Journal, 1822–23, 19–20 April 1823.

43. Ray detailed this economic model based on semi-social assumption of responsibility, first in *Indians in the Fur Trade*, and then in *The Canadian Fur Trade in the Industrial Age* (Toronto 1990), 67–68, 137–139. The HBC offered economic assistance, particularly to Indian traders, in traditional or ceremonial forms, such as proffering debts, “gifting,” and issuing relief to the sick and destitute.

and several of her younger brothers had likewise later served as postmasters in those locations. Angèle's first husband had been in charge at Portage La Loche at the time of his death, after which her eldest son, Magloire, took over as postmaster while another son, Charles, became a Company servant. It would not be difficult to imagine that Angèle, although never personally holding her own Company contract, regarded herself as part of that institution's structure. Furthermore, regardless of their jobs, Angèle would have been fully within her rights to request that her male relatives protect and support her and her children by providing them with opportunities to support themselves, such as working within the fisheries or potato fields.

Just as it faced having to deal with the costs of supporting widows, throughout the latter half of the 19th century the Company was confronted with the issue of rations for HBC families and how far to extend the right to receive them to the populace of the English River District. Rations, in the form of basic food staples, were typically advanced to Company servants, with the proportion being based on the servant's number of dependents as well as his rank. Well into the mid-19th century, apportioning food rations appears to have been a fairly standard, expected, and accepted Company practice. However, in 1872, William McMurray, the officer in charge of the English River District, received a memo stating that with regard to the families of HBC servants, they would receive their usual ration allowances for that season, but "no allowances will be made to the Families of any employees after this date."⁴⁴ Furthermore, anyone entering the service from 1872 onward, particularly in the English River District, was to be informed that their families were not entitled to maintenance from the Company.⁴⁵ McMurray was also informed that servant contracts were no longer to exceed three-year terms except in the most exceptional circumstances.⁴⁶ By the late 19th century, the HBC no longer wanted families feeling that they had a claim to Company resources based simply on service.⁴⁷

Despite the Company's desire to scale back the use of rations, this 1872 edict was not implemented in the District. In 1885, James Nicol Sinclair of Green Lake wrote to Joseph Fortescue at Île à la Crosse, expressing concern that, if

44. HBCA, B.89/c/2, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Inward, 1871–1885, Memo to Wm. McMurray from Inspecting Chief Factor Christie, n.d., 1872.

45. HBCA, B.89/c/2, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Inward, 1871–1885, Memo to Wm. McMurray from Inspecting Chief Factor Christie, n.d., 1872.

46. HBCA, B.89/c/2, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Inward, 1871–1885, Memo to Wm. McMurray from Inspecting Chief Factor Christie, n.d., 1872.

47. Tough addressed these issues in northern Manitoba, concluding that while Native trappers suffered or were exploited under the HBC's paternalistic system based on debt peonage, they nevertheless expected long-term obligations from the Company. However, when this old fur trade system gave way to a more modern market economy, the new regime defied the order of social obligations of the older fur trade society. See Tough, *As Their Natural Resources Fail*.

required, Green Lake would not be able to provide surplus fish to the District that year because any surplus from that fishery would have to feed Company families at Green Lake so as to prevent a repeat of the previous year. The previous year, Sinclair had had to provide families with bacon and flour rations after the Green Lake fisheries failed and left them without enough food. According to Sinclair, a great many of the Green Lake servants were married and had families to support.⁴⁸ Almost a decade later, in April 1892, Charles Lafleur was advised by Moberly in Île à la Crosse to give goods to a woman married to an individual named Martial in the amount of ten Made Beaver plus some fish rations, so that she would be fed until her husband returned.⁴⁹ There was not enough information to determine the identities of Martial or his wife, but, clearly, the Company continued to act upon an obligation to ensure that the families of its servants did not starve.

While Company officials in Winnipeg may have resented supporting the families of servants labouring for them, locally the Company demonstrated a degree of responsibility and obligation to them because their support was not only often required in the short-term, but also benefited the Company in the long run. The support of families was often unavoidable, not only because of their expectations of the Company, but because of natural resource strain or failure in any given year. Because fish was the main diet at Île à la Crosse, when the fisheries failed, everyone felt the strain. In 1873, the Île à la Crosse fisheries were doing well, and so McMurray decided that the post would not require additional fish from the Bull's House fisheries to supplement their supplies. McMurray had intended to send a couple of men to assist the Company fisherman at the Bull's House fishery, but had learned that François Maurice had already sent John Thomas Kippling from Portage La Loche to assist the operation, presumably because that post required additional fish supplies. McMurray added that if the Bull's House fisherman worked hard and was productive, he and his small family would have enough fish to last them until spring and not be dependent upon Île à la Crosse.⁵⁰

Over a decade later, in the 1888 District Report, the chief trader at Île à la Crosse, Joseph Fortescue, lamented that the post was in serious jeopardy because of an almost universal failure of the District's fisheries. As a result, "food" would have to be purchased from Prince Albert or Winnipeg in order to ensure that there were enough rations for the families and also to feed the dogs

48. HBCA, B.89/c/2, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Inward, 1871–1885, James Nicol Sinclair to Joseph Fortescue, 25 September 1885.

49. HBCA, B.89/b/18, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Book, 1891–1893, Henry J. Moberly to Charles Lafleur, 2 April 1892.

50. HBCA, B.89/b/4, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Book, 1872–1891, William McMurray to François Maurice, 12 December 1873. Joseph Vadoit had 38 years in the service and was employed at Portage La Loche.

that winter.⁵¹ Fortescue reported that there were no more than three unmarried adult males in the entire region, and these were the only men whom the Company could employ to provision the post because married servants were supplied food rations for their families. To employ married men was to add even more people to the rations list and raise the costs of feeding the District. However, the post report pointed to the paradox he faced – “the only men obtainable [for service] who know the country and Indians are all married.”⁵² It would have been foolish, in the chief trader’s estimation, either to not hire married men or to discharge them early to minimize expenses, because men from outside the District would know “neither the trade, language, Indians nor country.”⁵³

In *The Canadian Fur Trade in the Industrial Age*, Arthur J. Ray explored the Company’s continued use of rations or relief well into the 20th century despite efforts to cease the practice. To explain the continuation of this practice, Ray pointed to two factors. First, he noted a widening division within the HBC between officials in the administrative centres such as Winnipeg and the officials and servants in the field dealing with the economic realities of its trading partners. This pattern of the administrative centres being out of touch with the realities of a region was clearly evident in the English River District. Second, and more important, he pointed to the HBC fulfilling the expectations of its trading partners, recognizing that “Indians who remained loyal believed that the Company still had an obligation to look after them even though the legal responsibility [for them] may have rested [with other agencies].”⁵⁴ While that is a difference from providing rations to trappers and rations to servants who also worked for a wage, the notion that loyalty to the Company could be garnered through extra efforts received a similar response. The families in the English River District, by virtue of being from the region, initially accepted outsider males employed by the Company into the regional wahkootowin in large measure because of the benefits that they could provide. In turn, their sons became Company employees when they were old enough and their daughters married Company servants. Conversely, local officials clearly recognized the additional assets that married men brought to their position, and that unconnected men – men without wahkootowin – were seriously disadvantaged and potentially liabilities to trade.

Even for the most loyal and obedient of servants, though, the Company did not necessarily feel obliged to fulfill its role as benefactor under all circumstances. In a March 1884 letter to the chief factor of Île à la Crosse, Magloire Mirasty of Green Lake wrote that his growing debt with the Company was

51. The type of food to be obtained from Prince Albert was not specifically identified.

52. HBCA, B.89/e/6, Île à la Crosse Post Reports, 1888.

53. HBCA, B.89/e/6, Île à la Crosse Post Reports, 1888.

54. Ray, *The Canadian Fur Trade in the Industrial Age*, 210–211.

due to a prolonged, debilitating illness that prevented him from working that winter. Because he was unable to hunt for himself or work for the Company, Magloire proposed to pay off his debt by giving the Company his horse. In suggesting this exchange, Magloire reminded the chief factor that he had never been in debt before and had always traded his furs to the Company, not its many competitors. Magloire's letter was as much an expression of loyalty as it was a request for assistance and a call for familial reciprocity. While Magloire was assuring the Company of his loyalty to them, he also chided them for their disloyalty to him. He stated that two other Company masters, McMurray and McDonald, "told me if you always do right they will be able to give you something for nothing." But this was not the case, and so Magloire was forced to offer his horse as payment. Still sick in the spring of 1884 and unable to provide for himself, Magloire also asked that the Chief Factor direct servant James Nicol Sinclair give him fish every now and then until he was fully recovered and able to care for himself.⁵⁵ Sinclair had married his second wife, Josephte Durocher Mirasty, in the early 1880s. Josephte had first been married to Bazil Merasty and had taken treaty in the Green Lake adhesion to Treaty Six. At this time, there is no apparent genealogical connection between Magloire and Josephte's first husband, despite the shared surname, but Magloire may have been surreptitiously requesting the assistance from his relatives through formal channels.⁵⁶

Faced with the Company's growing disenchantment, familial loyalty of male servants eventually superseded their loyalty to the HBC as an institution. The balance between formal Company policy and the reality of trade practice in their fur district created, by the latter half of the 19th century, an uneasy relationship between the local Company elite in the region – represented by chief factors, chief traders, and socially remote officials in Winnipeg – and HBC servants and their families living and working in the English River District.⁵⁷ In his study, Tough noted that in the late 19th century, low fur prices caused the Company to reduce operating costs, change the post

55. HBCA, B.89/c/2, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Inward, 1871–1885, Magloire Mirasty, Green Lake, 16 March 1884.

56. Apparently this trade of livestock for services, in payment of debt and in lieu of receiving salaries, was not an uncommon practice in the English River District. In a similar instance in 1888, Pierre Laliberte of Portage La Loche informed Fortescue at Île à la Crosse that Joseph Janvier wanted to sell his horse, which he assured was of good quality, to pay off his debts. HBCA, B.89/c/3, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Inward, 1871–1885, Pierre Laliberte to Joseph Fortescue, 24 July 1888.

57. It is beyond the scope of this study to fully examine quantitatively the economic impact and viability of family life at the many posts in the English River District. However, based on the qualitative evidence in post journals and correspondence books, it is clear that for the better part of the early 19th century the Company believed that a well-developed family life was beneficial to its own interests. Towards the end of the century and into the 20th century, this perception changed substantially to the negative, whether because of racism, as suggested by Sylvia Van Kirk, or because of the Company's support costs.

system, and alter the mode of transportation, thereby reducing the demands for labour and resources in local trade regions. Tough concluded that “over time, this functioned to tear apart what had been a closely linked economy.”⁵⁸ Yet, in the English River District, despite relying on the female relatives of their servants, because the Company’s overall collective and institutional attitude towards them and their children was increasingly ambivalent, a shift in loyalties occurred. By the 1850s, the Company was consciously balancing the benefits of this “unpaid” labour force against the added financial costs associated with supporting large Metis families at their posts. This matter was most clearly visible during the free trading era in the English River District.

By the mid-19th century, the Company was drawing a subtle but important distinction between freemen – an uncontracted but largely independent HBC-supported class of labourers – and free traders – men who competed against the Company for fur profits in support of their own commercial ventures. Freeman were often retired servants who lived inland with their families post-retirement, where they had been married and their children had been born, serving as essential components in the Company’s commercial operations. Conversely, HBC officials regarded free traders as interlopers who operated independently of the local post’s support mechanisms and in violation of the monopoly.⁵⁹ A distinct economic niche within the Company’s trade structure, freemen, while occasionally engaging in wage labour, largely pursued personal business opportunities such as commercial hunting and trapping to procure provisions and furs, which they sold to the posts, or they operated freighting, transporting, and trading establishments with the support and encouragement of the Company, which drew upon those ventures as needed. Between 1857 and 1870, Île à la Crosse began keeping an extensive and growing list of freemen in the District (see Figure 6 on next pages). Amongst the list of freemen was “the Widow Morin,” the former wife of HBC servant Antoine Morin, and many men who had once been regularly contracted as HBC servants.⁶⁰

By the mid-19th century, it had become less likely that disengaging servants

58. Tough, “*As Their Natural Resources Fail*,” 58.

59. The most comprehensive description of the freemen can be found in Marcel Giraud’s, *The Metis in the Canadian West*, 2 vols, George Woodcock trans., (Edmonton 1986). Freeman, or *les gens libres*, originated in the 18th century French trade. Perhaps the best known incident of a freeman becoming a free trader was the famous trial of Pierre Guillaume Sayer at Red River in 1849. The buffalo hunters of the plains also worked for no one but themselves and commonly infringed on the Company’s ability to operate. For more on freemen, see Heather Devine, “Les Desjarlais: Aboriginal Ethnogenesis and Diaspora in a Canadian Family” Ph.D. diss., University of Alberta, 2001, 129–132.

60. HBCA, B.89/z/1, fos. 27–42, 1857–1870, Freeman’s Balances, English River District. Freeman might indicate the endurance of an earlier usage that equated freemen and Metis as one and the same, but there is no indication that this was indeed what was occurring, and there is not enough information to determine precisely how it was being utilized when those lists were being compiled.

	1857	1858	1859	1860	1861	1862	1863	1864	1865	1866	1867	1868	1869	1870
Anderson, William							x	x	x					
Bell, Thomas								x	x					
Cook, George	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Cook, William	x	x					x	x	x	x		x	x	x
Cook, William [a]	x	x												
Daigneault, Vincent										x				
Desjarlais, Joseph	x	x	x	x	x	x								
Frog, John Pibor			x	x										
Girard, Joseph														x
Jourdain, Baptiste							x	x	x	x				
Jourdain, Est. of Baptiste											x	x	x	
Jourdain, Baptiste Daigneault												x	x	
Lachance, Charles	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	x	x			
Lafleur, Charles											x	x	x	x
Lafleur, Pierre							x	x	x					
Laliberte, Pierre										x				
Lariviere, Abraham								x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Malbauf, Pierre		x	x	x	x									
McCallum, James												x	x	
McCallum, John												x	x	
McKay, Thomas									x	x				
McKenzie, Thomas	x	x	x	x	x									
McKinnon, Robert or Est. of										x	x			

Figure 6. Freeman in the English River District, 1857–1870

— by now many of whom had been born in the northwest, married, and had families — would willingly retire to Europe, eastern Canada, or even Red River. The economic niche of freemen subsequently expanded in relevance and became a payment for service position, eventually leading to the establishment of the free trader class by the latter half of the century. In contrast, by the 1870s, free traders were involved with American fur companies, the Paris-based Revillon Frères, the local Catholic mission's trade operation, or small, independent trading companies.⁶¹ It appears that in the post-1870 period, free traders at

61. At about the same time, Revillon Frères, the Paris-based furrier, had diversified its operations and began opening up fur posts in the Canadian Subarctic to compete with the HBC. The history of the Revillon Frères is interesting because, unlike other small trading firms, it was the most comprehensive assault on the HBC monopoly in the Subarctic since the era of competition with NWC (although it was decidedly less violent in nature). See Marcel Sexé, *Two Centuries of Fur Trading, 1723–1923: Romance of the Revillon Family* (Paris 1923) for a comprehensive survey of that company's history. Furthermore, Robert Jarvenpa has provided

	1857	1858	1859	1860	1861	1862	1863	1864	1865	1866	1867	1868	1869	1870
Mirasty, David			x	x		x								
Mirasty, Magloire												x	x	
Mirasty, Philip		x												x
Morin, Antoine or Est. of			x	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	x	x
Morin, Baptiste														x
Morin, Raphael	x													
Morin, Widow									x	x				
Morriseau, Michel			x											
Nepetappeanaise														x
Rat, William							x		x	x	x			
Ray, William								x						
Robillard, Alexis											x			
Roy, Francois										x			x	
Rupert, George								x						
Sanderson, George C.										x				
Sanderson, William										x				
Sasty, Charles				x	x	x	x	x						
Stevens, George	x													
Sylvestre, Jean Baptiste		x		x		x		x	x	x	x			
Tapecappo, Louison													x	
Tawepissime, Michel	x	x	x	x										
Testawich, Michel or Est. of								x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Touslesjour, Andre		x		x	x	x	x			x	x			

Île à la Crosse purchased trade outfits from Lac La Biche, Prince Albert, and Winnipeg, and then sold their furs to those locations, thereby diverting fur returns and profits away from the English River District despite its best efforts to work with men in the establishment of viable freeman operations.⁶²

The line between freemen and free traders blurred over time and became the site of an increasingly tense relationship between the Company and Metis. When freemen moved beyond a role defined, supported, and encouraged by the Company, they were labeled free traders. In an 1892 Green Lake Post

an excellent political economic interpretation of the event by looking at the Roman Catholic mission's involvement in trading in the English River District. This HBC/Church trade war, as Jarvenpa described, mimicked, in many ways, the NWC/HBC, and later the Revillon Frères /HBC, competition. See Robert Jarvenpa, "The Hudson's Bay Company, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Chipewyan in the Late Fur Trade Period," in Bruce Trigger, Toby Morantz, and Louise Dechêne, eds., *Le Castor Fait Tout: Selected Papers of the 54th American Fur Trade Conference, 1985* (Montreal 1987), 485–517.

62. HBCA, B.89/a/36 & 37, Île à la Crosse Post Journal, 1889–1896; HBCA B.167/e/3, Portage La Loche Post Reports, 1896.

Report, postmaster George Dreaver suspected Pierriche Laliberte and James Nicol Sinclair, a retired Company clerk with a pension, of free trading because they were occasionally employed by a competitor to deliver furs.⁶³ Pierriche had gone free in 1890 and with the Company's permission had begun operating as a freeman at Green Lake while also collecting an HBC pension.⁶⁴ Dreaver advised that their pensions be revoked and that they no longer be permitted to operate as freemen because they were now attempting to trade for their own gain.⁶⁵ Moberly, however, believed that revoking Laliberte's pension in particular and barring him from trading entirely would be a mistake, and so furnished him with an outfit that year despite Dreaver's recommendation. In a subsequent letter to Winnipeg in 1892, Moberly reasoned that Laliberte "has a huge part of his family married and settled in the vicinity of Green Lake, and by his keeping a small stock of goods, which are actually sold by some of his sons under his inspection, [they] are kept from taking Outfits to oppose the HBC from the Merchants at Prince Albert and as we gain by the Transaction in more ways than one, I thought it advisable to furnish him."⁶⁶ In return for Moberly's consideration, Laliberte sold the HBC furs he had collected that season at a reasonable price and, perhaps as importantly, ensured that his sons worked with him and not against Company interests.

To understand Moberly's rationale for not cutting off Laliberte and his family entirely, appreciating the complex interfamilial connections of this man's extended family is useful, and this, in turn, explains the Company's growing apprehension about the power exerted locally by families. Pierriche was first hired by the Company in 1838 and until 1892 worked on and off throughout the District from Green Lake in the south to Portage La Loche in the north. After his marriage to Serazine Morin in the early 1840s, Pierriche became the head of a large family that spread across northwestern Saskatchewan and was integrated into the HBC system at every level of employment (see Figure 7). Many of the nine Laliberte sons, as well as a son-in-law, were likewise employed by the Company upon reaching adulthood and worked throughout the District in various capacities. Once relying on Pierriche, who had forged for himself a marital alliance with another large and well-connected family – the Morins – the Company was faced with the possibility of having an extremely skilled trader and manager who had been born inland, and by now had a few adult

63. HBCA, B.89/c/4, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Inward, 1890–92, George Dreaver to H.J. Moberly, 6 September 1890 & George Dreaver to H.J. Moberly, 16 October 1890; HBCA, B.84/e/3, Green Lake Post Report, 1892.

64. HBCA, B.89/c/4, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Inward, 1890–92, J. Wrigley to Henry J. Moberly, 22 August 1890.

65. HBCA, B.84/e/3, Green Lake Post Report, 1892.

66. HBCA, B.89/b/18, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Book, 1891–93, Henry J. Moberly to C.C. Chipman, HBC Chief Commissioner, 8 December 1892.

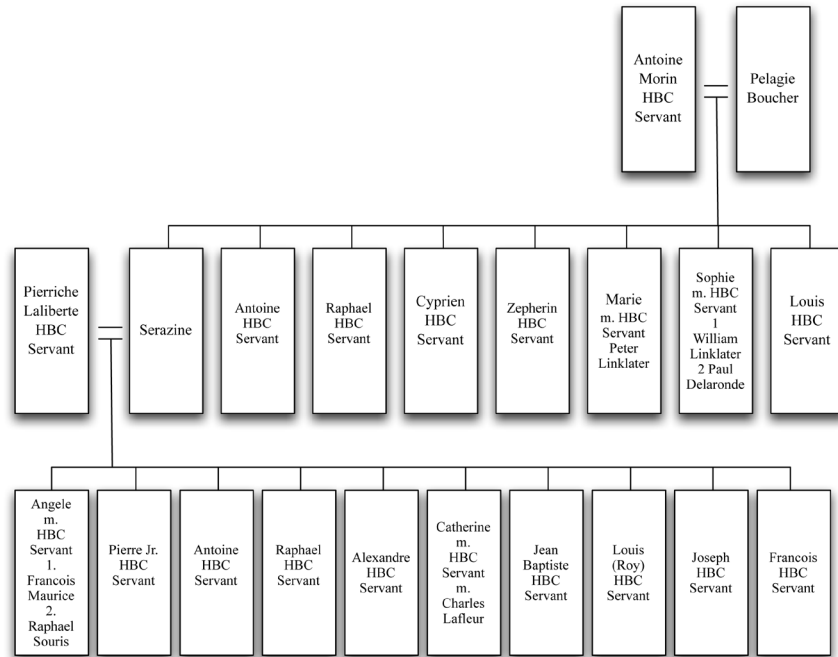


Figure 7. Laliberte and Morin Families' HBC Connections

children beginning to forge their own alliances and further expand their wahkootowin with other Metis and Indian communities.⁶⁷

In 1876, when Pierriche first requested an opportunity to begin a freeman's freighting operation on the Green Lake Road, William McMurray remarked that he did not "think that Mr. Laliberte has any intentions of setting up as a 'free trader' if he can do otherwise."⁶⁸ Perhaps more importantly, according to McMurray, Laliberte "is besides connected with the Morins and others in this district – If he were to get a contract for Freight, his relatives would receive employment from him, and would thus be prevented from entering the service of our opponents" (see Fig. 7).⁶⁹ By legitimizing Laliberte as a freeman, the

67. HBCA, B.89/b/18, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Book, 1891–93, Henry J. Moberly to C.C. Chipman, 2 April 1892; HBCA, B.89/b/18, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Book, 1891–93, Henry J. Moberly to C.C. Chipman, 30 June 1892; HBCA, B.84/e/3, Green Lake Post Reports, 1892; HBCA, B.89/b/19, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Book, 1892–94, Henry J. Moberly to Baptiste Laliberte, 17 June 1893.

68. HBCA, B.89/b/4, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Book, 1872–91, William McMurray to James A. Grahame, HBC Chief Commissioner, 5 December 1874.

69. HBCA, B.89/b/4, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Book, 1872–91, William McMurray to James A. Grahame, HBC Chief Commissioner, 5 December 1874.

Company understood that they would face no opposition from either his sons or his wife's relatives, who would likely be more inclined to support their relative than the Company.

The Company had obvious reasons to be concerned about the influence of Pierriche and his relatives' economic opportunities because they clearly had an impact on the overall profitability of the HBC's English River District operations. McMurray further wrote that he understood that the Company did not like to extend credit to individuals who were establishing their own business ventures, but felt that on this occasion it should make an exception, stating once more that as long as Laliberte received aid he would not contribute to the betterment of their competitors. Citing newly arrived free trader Paul Delaronde, Sr., Pierriche's brother-in-law, as an example, McMurray cautioned that he was seeking Laliberte's assistance in his own efforts. Between 1874 and the early 1890s, Paul Delaronde, Sr., the husband of Serazine's sister Sophie, established various commercial free trading enterprises throughout the English River District.⁷⁰

Delaronde's free-trading activities regularly appear in the HBC records as the Company sought a means to contain and neutralize him.⁷¹ Indeed, Delaronde's activities made enough of an impact on the Company's trade that it attempted to engage him as a servant in the 1880s.⁷² Described as having once been a thorn in the side of the English River District, Delaronde was in the employ of the Company by 1888. At the time, it was believed that he was finally defeated economically, but in the 1900/1901 season he resumed his earlier career after obtaining an outfit on credit from Winnipeg.⁷³ The Green

70. Little personal information is available regarding Delaronde's life and career in Île à la Crosse. He came from Manitoba and had children with Marguerite Sinclair and Sophie Morin, although he did not marry either of them in the Île à la Crosse mission. Nothing is known about Marguerite Sinclair except that an alternative last name for her was Quinclair. Sophie Morin was the daughter of Antoine Morin and Pélagie Boucher, and therefore the sister to Sarazine Morin Laliberte and sister-in-law to Pierriche Laliberte.

71. HBCA, B.89/c/2, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Inward, 1871–85, Lawrence Clarke to Ewan McDonald, 10 October 1880; HBCA B.89/b/6, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Book 1877–81, Ewan McDonald to Lawrence Clarke, 1 November 1880.

72. HBCA, B.89/b/4, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Book, 1872–91, William McMurray to Roderick McFarlane, 2 December 1874 & William McMurray to James A. Grahame, Chief Commissioner, 30 June 1875; HBCA, B.89/b/6, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Book, 1877–81, Ewan McDonald to James A. Grahame, 1 October 1880; HBCA, B.89/b/7, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Book, 1881–85, Ewan McDonald to Lawrence Clarke, 22 July 1881; HBCA, B.89/c/2, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Inward, 1871–85, Lawrence Clarke to Roderick Ross, 16 October 1884.

73. HBCA, D.20/59/20, Commissioner's Office, Inward Correspondence, Joseph Fortescue to Lawrence Clarke, 10 May 1888; HBCA, B.89/b/19, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Book, 1892–94, Henry J. Moberly to C.C. Chipman, 31 March 1893; HBCA B.89/c/7, Île à la Crosse Correspondence. Inward, 1893–1902, Lawrence Clarke to Henry J. Moberly, 4 October 1893; HBCA, B.89/c/7, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Inward, 1893–1902, Lawrence Clarke to

Lake District Report that year noted that Paul Delaronde was the Company's "most persistent opponent [and] with his sons and relatives reaches almost every camp tributary to Green Lake. His experience must be out of proportion to his trade and he cannot, I think, be making headway. He gives more trouble than all of the other petty traders in this section."⁷⁴ McMurray had also cautioned several years earlier that Pierriche's brother-in-law, Raphaël Morin, had just returned to Île à la Crosse with an "astonishing ten cart loads" of goods from Manitoba, and it was widely believed that he would be travelling north in the spring to trade with the Dene against the Company.⁷⁵ Through maternal relatives, the Morins were closely related to the Dene around Portage La Loche, and Raphaël himself had been born in Dene territory at Athabasca.⁷⁶

It is evident that the HBC believed that there was a possibility that some Metis families wielded enough socio-economic power to threaten its sense of economic security. Dreaver's assessment of the situation demonstrated a naïveté about the reality of life in the English River District, where family loyalty could, and sometimes did, supersede Company loyalty. Dreaver himself knew the powerful influence that family could have on a man. In October 1893, he expressed to Moberly his profound loneliness. At the time, Dreaver was without his wife Elizabeth and two daughters, and proclaimed that "after a man has tasted of the Comforts of Married life this living alone comes pretty tough."⁷⁷ The persistent discussion about whether to support the elder Laliberte's aspirations to be a freeman was because the Company believed that Pierriche held power over a family that extended beyond his sons, and, as an array of sympathetic local HBC officials observed, potentially included his wife's relatives and other family alliances established through the marriages of his sons and daughters in local Metis and Indian communities. The Company feared, however, that if unsupported, Pierriche could turn these families against the Company. It is this apprehension that warrants a reevaluation of

Thomas Anderson, 24 December 1901.

74. HBCA, B.84/e/7, Green Lake Post Report (English River District), 1900–01.

75. HBCA, B.89, b.4–9[4], Île à la Crosse Correspondence Book, 1872–1891, Wm. McMurray to F. Maurice, 12 December 1873.

76. Pélagie Boucher, mother of Raphaël, was recorded by the Commissioners as being known "by the HalfBreeds and Indians generally as a halfbreed, the child of a French Canadian and an Indian [Montagnais] woman." Montagnais was a term used by French speakers to indicate the Dene, also known as Chipewyan, people. LAC, RG 15, vol. 558, file 167786, Pilagie Morin, 22 October 1887.

77. There are First Nation and Metis Dreavers in Saskatchewan today that may be descended from George Dreaver and his wife. However, this particular family left no lasting imprint on the English River District Metis family network. After October 1893, Dreaver and his family were gone from the English River District, and he faced a long winter alone except for the other Company men living at the Green Lake post. HBCA, B.89/c/7, Île à la Crosse Correspondence Inward, 1893–1902, George Dreaver to Henry J. Moberly, 21 October 1893.

the HBC's authority to direct or control the behaviour of Metis families within its trade districts.

The Company recognized the value of its servant's personal lives when they served its economic interests, so that in the English River District by the early 19th century families thrived within its institutional structure. However, by the end of the century, it was evident that the HBC found family life had become burdensome and interpersonal relations difficult to manage. The wives and children of HBC servants had provided invaluable assistance as an uncontracted, informal (albeit necessary) labour pool, but they could also act as an obstruction to the Company's economic viability by draining local resources and serving as conduits for illegal trade networks through their many familial relationships. Consequently, as Company resources became strained because of the rise of free trading operations and the overall poor fur returns, the financial impact of those families came to be resented.⁷⁸ In turn, the familial loyalty of male servants slowly superseded their loyalty to the HBC, for which many of their families had worked for generations. These families neither controlled the trade nor the Company. By and large, Metis families were loyal to the HBC, having patriarchs who had good relationships with their local superiors or the greater institution. However, the interfamilial loyalty within the community at large and the demands of the reciprocal family model structures that bound them in an intricate network created a tension within the District. Large families asserting cultural solidarity within the workspace could come into conflict with Company interests. Furthermore, evaluating the significance of *wahkootowin* on the economy of the English River District is not to suggest that the Company was not a powerful economic force in the region, but to establish a greater understanding of how the Metis recognized their role within this economy. To understand how *wahkootowin* was expressed through economic activities, it is important to look at the role of female and male labour groups, as well as freemen and free traders within the context of their familial alliances, and how the former could quickly become the latter if

78. Giraud concluded that between 1820–1850 the Metis faced economic uncertainty because of larger forces that reduced the Company's profit margin and resulted in their restructuring. Similarly, ethnoarcheologists Robert Jarvenpa and Hetty Jo Brumbach, after conducting audits on the financial returns of the English River District from the 1870s to 1890s, concurred, and further noted that Metis self-sufficiency only increased in this later time period as economic opportunities diversified. They concluded that the HBC at Île à la Crosse, upon determining that it could only afford to feed a small number of servants, nevertheless required full-time employees to hunt and sow gardens to support themselves and their families. As a result, the Metis adapted by becoming more economically self-reliant than earlier in the century, with some families pursuing their own economic agendas by freighting, trapping, and/or trading independently, and obtaining essential trade goods such as flour and tea from the Company's posts as needed. Robert Jarvenpa and Hetty Jo Brumbach, "Occupational Status, Ethnicity and Ecology: Metis Adaptations in a Canadian Trading Frontier," *Human Ecology*, 13, 3 (1985), 325; Giraud, *The Métis in the Canadian West*, 2: 330.

the HBC failed to recognize the families' economic impact when removed from the HBC structure.

At the Convention of Forty held at Red River in 1870, Louis Riel called the HBC, "A Company of strangers living across the ocean," accusing it of selling the Métis as it sold Rupert's Land to the Canadian state.⁷⁹ In opposition, both convention chairmen, Judge John Black and representative Charles Nolin, stated that it was important for the Métis to remember the assistance and kindness of the Company to them on more than one occasion. Specifically, Nolin felt that some acknowledgement of the HBC's contributions to communities in times of need was required. However correct Riel may have been, within regional communities such as those of the English River District, and indeed within Red River itself, the notion that the HBC was a "Company of strangers" did not ring true.⁸⁰ Locally, the HBC was made up of relatives. It is clear that the men of the English River District, whether servants, freemen, or free traders, enjoyed a family life that both supported and frustrated the Company. As trying as the families could be, the Company tried to harness, or at least direct them, when it suited its interests. The power of family alliances resonated in the region's 19th century economy as men moved from being loyal servants, to freemen, and then to free traders when it suited their interests. The HBC is generally regarded as an all-powerful force that greatly altered the economies of Aboriginal societies and imposed dependency, yet the experiences of many English River District families suggests that economic choices were available and that a certain amount of independence was available and asserted, up until at least the early 1900s.

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79. W.L. Morton, "The Proceedings in the Convention, 3–5 February 1870," in W.L. Morton ed., *Manitoba: The Birth of a Province* (Winnipeg 1984), 20.

80. Morton, "The Proceedings in the Convention," Morton, ed. *Manitoba*, 22–24.