

Social Studies 10

The Northwest to 1870

Aboriginal Peoples of the Northwest

Cree

Origin of Name

The tribal name originated from a group of natives near James Bay recorded by the French as Kiristinon and later contracted to Cri, spelled Cree in English. Most Cree use this name only when speaking or writing in English and have other, more localized names for themselves. Cree live in areas from Alberta to Québec, a geographic distribution larger than that of any other native group in Canada.

Location and Population

The major divisions of environment and dialect are the Plains Cree (Alberta and Saskatchewan), Woods Cree (Saskatchewan and Manitoba) and Swampy Cree (Manitoba, Ontario and Québec). Subarctic hunting cultures were thinly spread over the land and periodic hardships kept their population low over the centuries. In the 1600s the population is estimated to have been roughly 30 000 and in 1996 was more than 208 000.

Language

The Cree language belongs to the Algonquian language family, and the people historically had relations with other Algonquian-speaking tribes, most directly with the Innu ([MONTAGNAIS-NASKAPI](#)), [ALGONQUIN](#) and [OJIBWA](#).

Early History

For perhaps 7000 years the ancestors of the Cree were thinly spread over much of the woodland area that they still occupy. Following contact with the [HUDSON'S BAY CO](#), some Swampy Cree moved westward to trap in the new territories although many believe that they moved into areas already populated by ancestors of the historic Woods and Plains Cree.

Radical Changes

During the late 1700s and the 1800s, many of the more westerly Cree changed with rapid, dramatic success from trappers and hunters of the forest to horse-mounted warriors and bison hunters. Smallpox, destruction of the bison herds, and [INDIAN TREATIES](#) brought the Plains Cree and other "horse-culture" tribes to ruin by the 1880s. Obligated to live on [INDIAN RESERVES](#), they existed by farming, ranching and casual labour, yet the majority preserved their native language and religion.

Stable Traditions

During this time many Cree remained in the boreal forest and the tundra area to the north, where a remarkably stable culture persisted. In aboriginal times their living came from hunting moose, caribou, smaller game, geese, ducks and fish, which they preserved by

drying over fire. They travelled by [CANOE](#) in summer and by [SNOWSHOES](#) and [TOBOGGAN](#) in winter, living in conical or dome-shaped lodges, clothed in animal skins and making tools from wood, bone, hide and stone. For an unknown time they engaged in sporadic trade with more southerly peoples. Later, they traded meat, furs and other goods in exchange for metal tools, twine and European goods.

Social Relations

The Cree lived in small [BANDS](#) or hunting groups for most of the year, and gathered into larger groups in the summer for socializing, exchanges and ceremonies. Religious life was based on relations with animal and other spirits which revealed themselves in dreams. People tried to show respect for each other by an ideal ethic of noninterference, in which each individual was responsible for his or her actions and the consequences of his or her actions. Leaders in group hunts, raids and trading were granted authority in directing such tasks, but otherwise the ideal was to lead by means of exemplary action and discreet suggestion.

EuroCanadian Influences

The European traders were new authority figures, but only while the Cree were at trading posts, since few white people went into the bush. For many years the traders depended on the natives for fresh meat. Gradually an increasing number of Cree remained near the posts, hunting and doing odd jobs and becoming involved in the church, schools and nursing stations. Government programs and corporate exploitation of natural resources in the 20th century have brought the most radical changes.

Ojibwa

The term Ojibwa (Ojibway, Chippewa) derives from Outchibou, the 17th-century name of a group living north of Sault Ste Marie, Ontario. They were one of a series of closely related but distinctly named groups residing between northeastern Georgian Bay and eastern Lake Superior to whom the term Ojibwa was later extended. Those peoples who congregated near present-day Sault Ste Marie were also called Saulteurs or Saulteaux. Although groups identified as Ojibwa in 17th-century French records totalled around 4500 persons, historic population movements into new areas, combined with the later application of the label Ojibwa to some neighbouring groups, enlarged the population and the territory occupied. The Ojibwa speak a Central Algonquian language closely related to [ALGONQUIN](#), [OTTAWA](#), [CREE](#) and Potawatomi.

At contact, the Ojibwa subsisted by hunting, fishing and gathering, resided in conical or dome-shaped birchbark dwellings, wore animal-skin clothing and travelled by birchbark [CANOE](#) in warm weather and [SNOWSHOES](#) in winter. Politically autonomous summer villages of 150-300 persons appear to have borne totemic names. An appropriate spouse was a person categorized as a cross-cousin - the child of either the mother's brother or father's sister.

Ojibwa religion was animistic, the natural world being inhabited by numerous spirits both good and evil, some of which required special treatment. Bear ceremonialism and the vision quest to obtain a guardian helper were practised. A [SHAMAN](#) cured the ill and performed [SHAKING TENT](#) rites to communicate with spirits. After about 1700, the [MIDEWIWIN](#) or Grand Medicine Society was conducted by an organized priesthood among

the more westerly Ojibwa.

The European [FUR TRADE](#) profoundly affected the Ojibwa. Initially, they received French trade items for furs from Nipissing and Algonquin, but following the mid-17th-century dispersal of the [HURON](#) and neighbouring Algonquians, the Ottawa and their Ojibwa allies became middlemen to tribes farther west. The Ojibwa participated in the occasional multitribal [FEAST OF THE DEAD](#) at which furs and trade goods were distributed. The western expansion of the French fur trade and the establishment of the English [HUDSON'S BAY CO](#) trade near James Bay and Hudson Bay drew some Ojibwa into new areas, first as temporary trader-hunters, but later as permanent residents.

Between 1680 and 1800, 4 divisions of Ojibwa emerged, each representing a different adaptation to environmental and contact conditions. Those who moved south of Lake Superior into Wisconsin and Minnesota, displacing, often forcefully, the Dakota, are known as the Southwestern Chippewa. The harsher environment of the coniferous forests of northern Ontario and Manitoba was exploited by the Northern Ojibwa.

After 1780 some shifted to Manitoba, Saskatchewan and North Dakota, becoming the Plains Ojibwa or Bungi. Still others, now known as Southeastern Ojibwa, moved into south-central Ontario and the lower Michigan Peninsula. Although most Ojibwa continued to live by hunting, fishing and gathering, some, particularly those in southern Ontario, adopted farming. Today, Ojibwa occupy reserve communities in these 4 areas.

Before 1760 most Ojibwa supported the French, but they became British allies during the American Revolution and the War of 1812. The social and economic life of all Ojibwa groups was affected by the fur trade. Aboriginal items were replaced by western materials and certain natural resources became depleted. Family-possessed fur-hunting territories emerged among northern groups. First in the southeast and later in more remote areas, Ojibwa became at least nominal Christians. Most Ojibwa did not sign treaties with the government until after 1850, at which time each [BAND](#)-reserve community elected a chief and council.

From perhaps 10 000 persons at contact whose descendants are now called Ojibwa, the population grew to around 140 000 (registered) in 1996. There is also a large [MÉTIS](#) population.

Among and within Ojibwa communities there is considerable socioeconomic variability, depending on the ability to exploit natural resources and gain access to Canadian markets. Arts and crafts have recently been revitalized and several Ojibwa artists have gained international recognition.

Assiniboin

Assiniboine (preferred spelling now Assiniboin) received their name from an [OJIBWA](#) word for their practice of boiling food by dropping heated rocks into water. They were first described in the *Jesuit Relations* as having split off from the Yanktonai [SIOUX](#) sometime prior to 1640. From a homeland around the Mississippi headwaters, they moved northwestwards, to the Lake of the Woods and towards Lake Winnipeg. At the peak of their

power their territory ranged from the Saskatchewan and Assiniboine river valleys in Canada to the region north of the Milk and Missouri rivers in the US. Linguistically they belong to the Siouan family, speaking a dialect of Dakota or Lakota.

First Contact with Europeans

The Assiniboine people (who call themselves Nakoda Oyadebi) are representatives of the original Plains people of the North American buffalo hunters first described by Henry [Kelsey](#) in the 1690s. A young employee of the [HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY](#), Kelsey accompanied Assiniboine trading parties from the James Bay posts westward along the canoe route into present-day Saskatchewan, thereby ensuring that the fur pelts went to the Hudson's Bay Company in return for European trade goods such as metal utensils, firearms and gun powder, beads, cloth, tobacco, liquor and other manufactured goods.

Later traders and explorers such as [LA VÉRENDRYE](#) and his sons (1730s), Anthony [HENDAY](#) (1754-55) and Alexander Henry the Younger (1800s) confirm the widespread location of the Assiniboine throughout the western prairies and extending into North Dakota and Montana. Their way of life was recorded through the cultural perspective of these early travellers, who valued them for their economic contribution for the fur trade.

The Assiniboine trails became major travel routes to the south and their traditional camps sites became centres for the distribution of trade goods and for the collection of furs at trading posts built on the network of rivers flowing from the Rocky Mountains to Hudson Bay.

Impact of Fur Trade

Trading with the Hudson's Bay Company from the late 17th century, they were noted for their [PEMMICAN](#) production and their key role as middlemen, trading European goods to the distant Plains tribes. The acquisition of horses several decades before Henday's arrival in present-day Alberta (1754) and their early access to guns and metal trade goods enhanced their role in the fur trade economy with both the HBC and later the North West Co. Their new wealth as middlemen traders, successful horsemen, respected warriors and as provisioners of fresh meat to the numerous trading posts reached a peak from the 1780s to the early 1800s.

Through the 19th century they were closely allied with the [CREE](#), while intermittently in conflict with the [BLACKFOOT](#), the Gros Ventres and their Siouan relatives to the south. They suffered greatly from European diseases, especially smallpox. From an estimated population of over 10 000 in the late 18th century, their numbers declined catastrophically to 2600 by 1890. Numbers began to increase dramatically in the 1920s, owing to improved health and living conditions.

Culture

Assiniboine culture exhibited most of the classic Plains native traits. They were noted for their expertise in constructing buffalo pounds, and made a greater use of dogs to haul [TRAVOIS](#) loaded with [TIPI](#) poles, hides and personal possessions as they followed the buffalo herds during the seasonal hunts. The forest/parkland people also hunted big game (deer, elk and moose) and snared small fur bearers for food and tanned hides.

Religious and Spiritual Life

Their most sacred ceremony was the [SUN DANCE](#), which was held in early summer after the spring buffalo hunt. Men and women honoured the Great Spirit through sacred ceremonies involving praying, singing, drumming, dancing and fasting, and concluded with a feast. Young men would go on vision quests to sacred grounds in order to observe their guardian spirits and sacred songs or rituals (see [NATIVE PEOPLE, RELIGION](#)).

Political and Social Life

Assiniboine political and social structures are based on an extended family system residing in nomadic camps ranging in size from a few hundred members to as many as 3000. Based on a patrilineal society the men held positions of leadership and decision-making. A headman or chief was a "good man" chosen to deal with the outsiders, but his actions were guided by a Council with representation from each extended family group who came together to form a [BAND](#) or a nation of people. Leadership was earned by superior hunting skills, through personal achievement in battle or attacks on an enemy, and by showing kindness and generosity to others.

On special occasions special leaders were chosen, such as a war chief to lead in battle, or a hunting chief for large-scale buffalo hunts, or as chief of the soldiers' lodge. People of recognized wisdom or talent were heard at council meetings where elders, medicine men, pipe carriers, women and heads of families met periodically to reach consensus on issues. James L. Long listed 33 bands within the Assiniboine people in the 1930s. Stretched across the prairies, over the centuries the different village groups developed language variations, different histories and eventually formed separate autonomous tribal groupings in Saskatchewan, Alberta and the northern US. They also gathered wild vegetables according to location and season, which included picking Saskatoon berries and other fruits to mix with dried meat and bannock. Their image among white traders and settlers was generally positive, with frequent reports of their hospitality.

The making of modern treaties in the 1870s confirmed the government to government relationship between the British Crown and the right of Canada and their respective [FIRST NATIONS](#). Promises of annuity payments (ranging from \$5 to \$25), medical aid, schools for education, agricultural assistance and economic assistance were made by treaty commissioners in return for peaceful co-existence and for sharing the land and its resources with the newcomers, settlers, ranchers, police, missionaries and developers. With the near extinction of their main resource, the buffalo, in the 1880s, the First Nations people reluctantly submitted to living on [INDIAN RESERVE](#) lands based on a family of 5 retaining one square mile of reserve land. They came to suffer from poor housing, deteriorating health, high unemployment, discrimination, limited education and training, and government restrictions on religious ceremonies and political activity until a revised [INDIAN ACT](#) was passed in 1951 (see [NATIVE PEOPLE, SOCIAL CONDITIONS](#)).

Chipewyan

Chipewyan is a term of Cree derivation meaning "pointed skins," but Chipewyan call themselves [DENE](#) or "people," and use more specific names for regional social

communities. Their language is a branch of the northeastern Athapaskan language family, closely related to neighbouring [DOGRIB](#) and [SLAVEY](#). The name Chipewyan was eventually extended to a large number of Dene peoples who occupied the northern fringe of the boreal forest and adjacent tundra from the Seal River to Great Slave Lake. Some Chipewyan have also been called Caribou Eaters and Mountaineers (not to be confused with the Montagnais of eastern Canada).

Sometimes the term has been extended to the [YELLOWKNIFE](#), a neighbouring Dene people who spoke a virtually identical language and whose lands included part of the Coppermine River. By the 19th century Chipewyan lands included northern portions of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and the southern part of the NWT. In 1749 the population was estimated at approximately 4000 individuals. Epidemics of European diseases decimated the population, with the first great smallpox epidemic occurring in 1781-82, and other epidemics continuing through the first half of the 20th century. The population has now recovered; in 1996 over 15 200 persons were enrolled in Chipewyan bands.

Socio-Territorial Organization

In the past, Chipewyan socio-territorial organization was based on hunting the migratory herds of Barren Ground caribou. Hunting groups consisted of 2 or more related families which joined with other such groups to form larger local and regional bands, coalescing or dispersing with the herds. Leaders had limited, noncoercive authority which was based upon their ability, wisdom and generosity. Spiritual power was received in dream visions.

In Chipewyan tradition, it was Thanadelthur, also known as the "Slave Woman," who guided an employee of the [HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY](#) into Chipewyan territory and introduced her countrymen to Europeans. This successful meeting led the HBC in 1717 to establish Prince of Wales Fort, or Churchill, for the Chipewyan fur trade. The fur trade aggravated relations between Chipewyan and their southern neighbours, the [CREE](#), known to the Chipewyan as *ena* or "enemy." Peaceful relations began to be established between Chipewyan and Cree between 1716 and 1760, but in some places hostility continued much later. The fur trade also affected their relations in the late 18th century with their northern neighbours, [INUIT](#), whom they termed *hotel ena* or "enemies of the flat area."

The fur trade expanded west from Hudson Bay to Great Slave Lake in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The Yellowknife took advantage of their strategic location and in the early 19th century briefly occupied the Yellowknife River region, displacing its Dogrib inhabitants until the Dogrib retaliated in 1823. Some Chipewyan began to hunt and trap in the full boreal forest, where fur-bearing animals were more abundant, and they extended their territories to the south. Some Chipewyan even began to occupy the northern edge of the parkland, where they hunted bison. Other Chipewyan remained more aloof from the trade, though some were willing to trade food provisions. By the late 19th century most Chipewyan peoples were in the regions they occupy today.

20th-Century Life

All Chipewyan (and Yellowknife) established formal relations with the Canadian

government through the treaty process beginning in 1876. They experienced a century of federal policies intended to transform their cultures along European lines. Chipewyan ways of life were threatened especially in the 20th century, when they faced an increasing number of competing land uses, supported by federal and provincial government policies that encouraged the development of northern resource-based industries. As a result, it became increasingly difficult for Chipewyan to support themselves by their traditional bush economies. After WWII, this situation combined with government policies encouraging native peoples to abandon the bush and resettle in permanent administrative settlements, where most live today. Chipewyan have generally felt that their lives have been harmed by these changes, not helped. Today, they are exploring new avenues to regain control over their communities and traditional lands. Many Chipewyan are pursuing land claims with the federal government, as well as seeking to protect their culture and language and to re-establish traditional relationships with the land.