

THE FORT MCKAY MÉTIS NATION: A COMMUNITY HISTORY

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Early History of the Fort McKay Métis: Origins to 1899

The first French Canadian voyageurs entered the Athabasca region in the late 1700s.¹ This group, as will be described below, included fur trade employees who would establish relationships with the local Indigenous (primarily Dené) women in the region and would lay the groundwork for the establishment of the Fort McKay community.

The employees of the North West Company (NWC) and, to a lesser extent, the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) encouraged local community members to reorient their economic efforts to maximize the collection of small fur-bearing animals, which were traded for a range of goods mostly from outside the region.² Through the nineteenth century, small hunting groups became specialized in this new "bush economy," and, at what was to become Fort McKay, the Bouché, Piché, and Tourangeau families formed the most important group in the region.

The arrival of Peter Pond's trading party in 1778 and the creation of Fort Chipewyan in 1788 spurred the transformation of Athabasca country into the "Emporium of the North," where the fur trade became a new and key aspect of local Indigenous life.³ Men, primarily from the St. Lawrence Valley, moved to the region for work and married local women.⁴ It would be their children who became the founding members of the Fort McKay Métis community. These men typically aligned themselves through marriages with Indigenous families to encourage trapping and the production of furs and provisions for sale.⁵ The first fur trade posts after the establishment of Fort Chipewyan were constructed around 1790 at the confluence of the Athabasca and Clearwater Rivers (Fort on the Forks near present-day Fort McMurray).⁶ Around the same time, Vincent St. Germain built a post near present-day Fort McKay, though it only lasted a handful of years.⁷ In the early 1800s, the

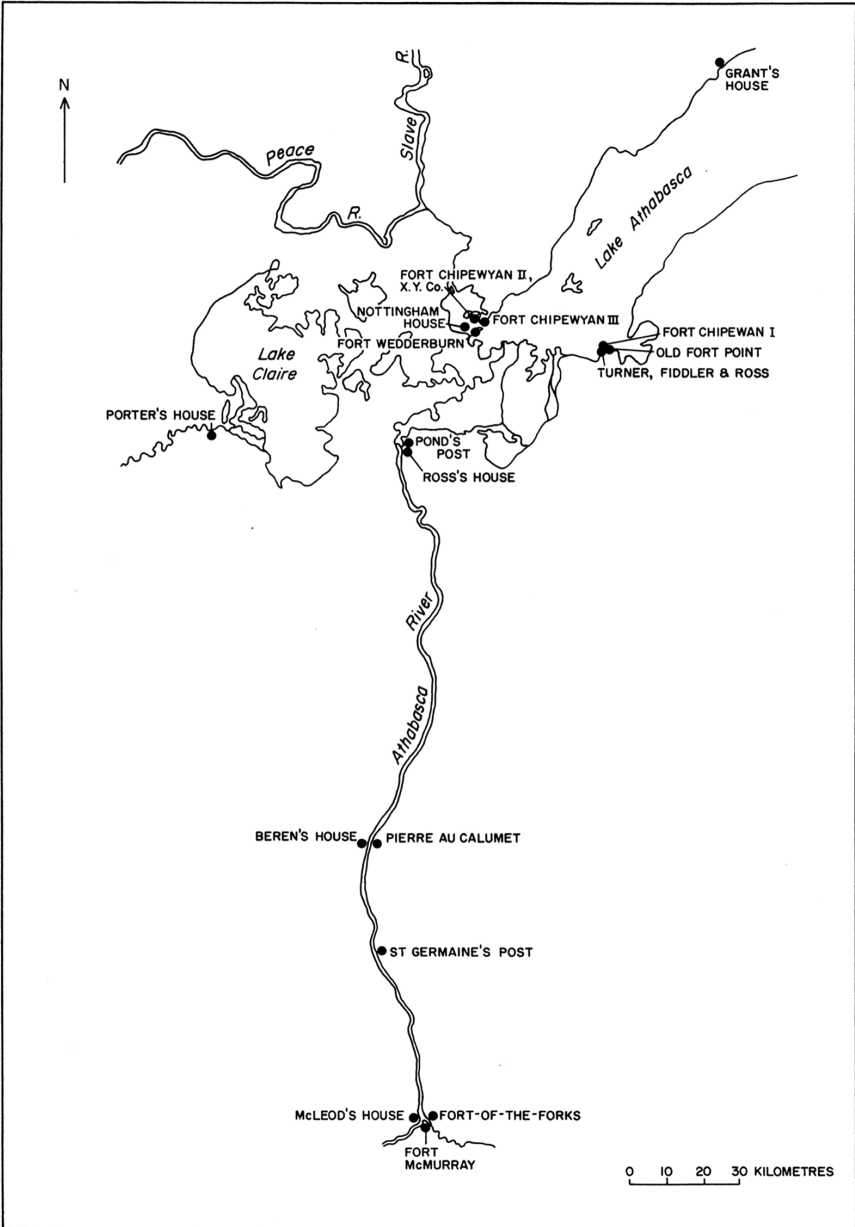
NWCo built a post named Fort Pierre-au-Calumet approximately twenty-five miles below present-day Fort McKay on the Athabasca River.⁸ After Pierre-au-Calumet was built, HBC established Beren's House on the Athabasca River at the mouth of Calumet Creek.⁹ In 1819–20, it was reported in the Fort Wedderburn (near present-day Fort Chipewyan) district report that:

A few years ago there might be reckoned between thirty and forty families of Cree Indians, who in general hunted in the vicinity of Pierre au Calumet (lower Athabasca River), but they could not be considered as particularly belonging to that place, as they were in the habit of going between there and Lesser Slave Lake according as they found game, or it suited their inclination. Of late great numbers of them have died, so that at present there are not about twenty families at most.¹⁰

While these posts were “abandoned shortly after the coalition” of the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company in 1821,¹¹ many workers who had operated the posts stayed in the country and established their independent trading networks along the Athabasca River.¹²

Partly in response to this increased competition, in 1870, HBC founded Fort McMurray, and a short time after that, the Little Red River Post (sometimes referred to as Old Red River House), which likely began as an outpost of Fort McMurray.¹³ Ernest Voorhis, in his monumental *Historic Forts and Trading Posts of the French Regime and of the English Fur Trading Companies*, suggests that the fort at what was to become Fort McKay was founded at the same time as Fort McMurray,¹⁴ though the first post records only begin in the late 1890s.¹⁵ By 1899, the *Edmonton Bulletin* explains that “The Hudson's Bay Co. have almost completed the removal of their post from Fort McMurray on the Athabasca to [Little] Red River, about 30 miles further down. The McMurray post will be abandoned. The change is owing to their being more Indians at [Little] Red River, and the fur trade, in consequence, being better there.”¹⁶ The post was renamed Fort McKay in 1911–12.¹⁷

These new HBC posts were meant to stem competition with the local traders who dominated the trading region. As recorded in the 1885 HBC Fort Chipewyan journal: “In consequence of the presence of opposition in the Athabasca at Red River, 35 miles north of McMurray, we have had to establish an out or winter post, which will have to be kept up as long as they remain



MAP 1.1
 Early Fur Trade sites in the Athabasca Region. From Forsman, "The Archeology of Fur Trade Sites in the Athabasca Region," 76.

there.”¹⁸ As such, the HBC posts at Fort McMurray and Little Red River were reactive, as the company hoped to protect its financial interests in the face of the growing regional competition.¹⁹

Early Genealogy of the Fort McKay Métis Nation

It is a mistake to understand the Cree, Dené, and Métis families that lived in the region as parts of separate communities. Rather, as Patricia McCormack points out, in the latter half of the nineteenth century traditional divides between “Cree,” “Chipewyan,” and “Métis” broke down in the Athabasca region, as the developing bush culture “contrasted with the ‘settlement culture’ of the people living in Fort Chipewyan.”²⁰ In areas along the Athabasca River, most Indigenous families began speaking Cree as the trade language and “marriages between Chipewyans and Crees” became normal, creating a “cultural convergence” that replaced historical “Chipewyan-Cree antagonism.”²¹ This pattern of social organization follows more generally what was happening in the provincial north, where, as James G.E. Smith describes, the hunting band was the primary means of social organization amongst the Cree and Dené.²² The hunting bands consisted of several (typically two to five) extended families numbered between ten and thirty. For most of the year (typically through the fall, winter, and spring), these groups lived in relative isolation on traditional lands often used for generations. In the summer, they might gather with other similarly organized groups on the shores of lakes that would sustain large fish camps and local hunting (which in Fort McKay was usually Moose Lake, sixty miles west).²³ The larger bands resulting from this gathering could number from 100 to 300. Membership in both the local and regional hunting bands was adaptable. It allowed individuals to move freely from one group to another and encouraged community members to speak multiple languages and remain open to different ways of thinking. In fact, as late as the mid-twentieth century, members of Fort McKay spoke multiple languages and moved with ease between various cultural configurations.²⁴ These groups, along with women connected with other traders and trappers in the region, ultimately formed the basis of the historic Fort McKay community.

By the late 1800s and early 1900s, the majority of Fort McKay community members were interrelated through a handful of close-knit families. The first was the Dené–Métis Bouché[er] family of the Little Red River valley, who were leading free traders in the region.²⁵ The Bouché family at Little Red River

were likely descended from one (or more) Bouchés who were engaged in the region's fur trade by the late eighteenth century. François Bouché and Jean-Marie Bouché were two of the earliest voyagers in the region, and both were referenced in *The English River Book* in the 1780s.²⁶ Additionally, Joseph and Louis Bouché were North West Company employees working in the region in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, with Joseph transferring to the Hudson's Bay Company after the HBC–NWCo 1821 merger.²⁷ It seems likely that Joseph Bouché referenced in NWCo ledgers was Joseph “Wakan” Bouché, who was a mixed-ancestry man who joined HBC in 1816 as an interpreter and worked at Fort Wedderburn (near present-day Fort Chipewyan) under George Simpson from 1820–21.²⁸

In 1824, Joseph Bouché “Sr.” (most likely Joseph Wakan”) signed a contract renewal as a “canoe middle man and fisherman at Fort Chipewyan” with HBC.²⁹ His probable son Joseph “Jose Grand” Bouché was born in the 1810s, and would eventually rise to become the family patriarch by midcentury. Upon his death in 1882, Jose was recognized in the HBC post journal as “a noted hunter and headman of the Chips,” with a “large grown up family which constitutes about half of the hunters” in the Little Red River region.³⁰ Jose Grand Bouché was married to Madeline Piché, who lived at Little Red River along with her brothers Charlot and Chrysostome Piché.³¹

Much like the Bouchés, the Pichés also had a long history in the region. François Piché was first recorded as being in the Athabasca District in *The English River Book* in May 1786,³² and may have been responsible for the death of John Ross at Athabasca in 1778, an event which caused him to hide with the “Chipewyans” for three years.³³ Duckworth suggests that François remained at English River as late as 1821 and that “Métis employees named Piché in Athabasca in the 1820s were probably sons of the elder François Piché.”³⁴

As brothers-in-law, Charlot Piche and Grand Jose Boucher followed the traditional pattern of local organization in the region, forming a small, interrelated hunting group.³⁵ This is unsurprising, as both the Bouché and Piché families were descended from voyageurs who had married into the local Chipewyan community. McCormack has argued that these families were likely considered “Chipewyans.” However, it seems equally probable that their identities were fluid and centred around the growing fur trade in the region rather than distinct “Cree,” “Chipeywan,” or “Métis” communities. For example, in her scrip application, Charlot's daughter Isabelle would claim halfbreed scrip in 1899, listing her father, “Charles,” as a “halfbreed”

despite the fact he had chosen to sign onto Treaty 8.³⁶ Such an act seems to suggest that, in the least, Charlot likely spoke English as well as French, and his daughter at least viewed him as a “halfbreed.”

His choice of marriage further demonstrates the complexity of Charlot’s identity. His first wife was Josette Martin, the daughter of an important Fort Chipewyan Cree family.³⁷ Patricia McCormack argues that Josette’s father, Job, married “all of his children strategically to both Chipewyan and Cree men and women, thereby gaining access to those lands for all their families and the local bands in which they lived.”³⁸ The marriage of Charlot and Josette proves that by the mid-nineteenth century, traditional ethnic boundaries were breaking down, and communities were organized strategically around extended family units.³⁹ It also suggests that Charlot had some knowledge of the Cree language, which would have been important as Cree was the preferred trade language in the region.⁴⁰ Furthermore, while his lineage undoubtedly had strong Dené roots, he chose to marry the daughter of a regional Cree leader. Charlot’s identity should, therefore, be understood as fluid and complex, with his ability to speak multiple languages and claim multiple ethnicities a local strength.

The Piché–Bouché group’s focus on the fur trade, cultural plurality, and ability to welcome outsiders would be important to their growing influence along the Athabasca River. Matsui and Ray note that by the 1880s, “the Bouche kinship network extended toward Little Red River,” where “members of this family traded extensively with HBC and its competitors for furs, birch bark, and shingles. Some of the Bouchés including Adam, Lewis, and Maurice, were engaged as temporary workers for the fort.”⁴¹ The Bouchés and Pichés were both identified as Little Red River Indians on the North West Mounted Police (NWMP) census, which was completed in preparation for the Treaty 8 negotiations, as well as an earlier census completed in 1881.⁴²

While the relationship between the Bouché and Piché families was extremely important to their success, they were not the only locally connected families. The Tourangeaus were a key third founding Fort McKay family. Like the Bouchés and Pichés, the Tourangeaus were also partially descended from voyageurs who travelled to the region in the late eighteenth century, with Antoine Tourangeau being identified in *The English River Book* as trading with “the Indians between L’Isle a la Crosse & River au Rapid—May 1786.”⁴³ While it is not perfectly clear, it seems that Antoine had a son of the same name, who married Madeleine Larocque. They had multiple children in Fort

Chipewyan, including Jonas Tourangeau. Both Antoine and Jonas are identified on the 1899 NWMP Census titled “List of Halfbreeds at Chipewyan, 1899,”⁴⁴ Though in his squatter’s right claim made a few years later, Jonas states he was living on the Athabasca River at what would become Fort McKay with other members of the Piché and Bouché family by at least 1898.⁴⁵

Jonas married Isabelle Piché, the before-mentioned daughter of Charlot Piché and Josette Martin.⁴⁶ Jonas’s marriage into the Piché family likely helped cement his place in the regional trading network where he “hunted, fished and gardened.”⁴⁷ In 1899, Jonas claimed Métis scrip for himself and his three underage sons, Isidore, Antoine, and Louis.⁴⁸ As already noted, his wife Isabelle also claimed scrip simultaneously.⁴⁹ Like his father, Louis Tourangeau settled in Fort McKay, marrying Fort McKay First Nation member Adeline Boucher in 1913. The marriage of Louis Tourangeau to Adeline Boucher provided another intergenerational connection between the Bouché(er), Piché, and Tourangeau families at the Little Red River post. Louis’ son Edward Tourangeau would marry Mary Boucher (the great-great-grandchild of Grand Jose Boucher), providing yet another intergenerational marriage in the modern era.⁵⁰

Unsurprisingly, these three families would form a strong connected trading network, as they all grew up in the same geographic location with similar backgrounds. In addition, they all seemed committed to the bush economy, which helped to establish them as key fixtures in the region and the development of the community of Fort McKay.

This complex pattern of pre-treaty relationships carried into the twentieth century and helps to explain why Treaty 8 had such a marginal impact on Fort McKay’s way of life, even for people who opted for half-breed scrip. As Heather Devine notes, “because of the continued intermarriage à la façon du pays between aboriginal [i.e., “Indian”] and métis groups living in the remote forests and parkland of Athabasca, the Native population outside of the large settlements was more or less homogenous culturally,” with “the arbitrary ascription, and subsequent separation, of these same groups into ‘Indian’ and ‘Métis’” not taking place until after the negotiation and implementation of the treaties.⁵¹ In Fort McKay, it could be argued that this did not happen until at least the mid-twentieth century, as recently designated Métis and First Nations members continued to marry one another and live a similar lifestyle, cooperating despite government attempts to divide them. In his study of the community in 1978, Edward W. Van Dyke noted that “Ft. MacKay, a

settlement of 204 persons, allows literally everybody to know everybody else in a relatively intensive manner. Not only that, but virtually every individual has multiple relationships within the kinship system. The entire village is inter-related”⁵²

Early Fort McKay Métis Culture and Land Management 1800–1920

The Bouché–Piché–Tourangeau hunting group members were part of a regional fur trade network that maintained relative independence through much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. An important aspect that contributed to the group’s success was their commitment to family, which helped to cement alliances. As noted in the genealogy above, the multiple marriages across generations helped to build trust and alliances. Some scholars have suggested that these types of interconnections, at least in Cree and Cree–Métis communities, are best described through the concept of *wahkotowin*. As explained by Brenda Macdougall, *wahkotowin* is “a style of life’ that reflected a shared cultural identity.” With relation to her study area, Sakitawak (Île-à-la-Crosse), she suggests that *wahkotowin* allowed the local people to organize all aspects of their lives, from intergenerational knowledge transfer to “Métis cultural and socio-economic activity.” For Macdougall, *wahkotowin* reflects part of a “larger cultural world view that informed the ways in which relationships were formed and resources utilized.”⁵³

Similarly, the “Dené Laws” in Dené communities defined people’s relationship to the land. As described by the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, a neighbouring community that shares a similar ancestry to Fort McKay:

Dene laws depend on sharing, helping, and living in loving relation with the land and water, and with all human and non-human kin. Under Dene law, living in good relations with the land and water is closely interconnected with living in reciprocal and caring relationships with community and kin.⁵⁴

As Fort McKay Métis ancestors shared Cree and Dené lineage, they likely incorporated the two ways of knowing with an emphasis on their connection to their surrounding environment. As explained by the Fort McKay Tribal Council, “since time immemorial we have roamed this land, lived from this land, been a part of this land. To separate us from this land would be to split

our very identity in two.”⁵⁵ Through the community’s relationship with the land and each other, Fort McKay’s ancestors maintained their way of life, moving purposefully throughout their traditional territory to sustain their families.⁵⁶

It was, and continues to be, Fort McKay’s connection to one another and to the land that centres its community, supported by the traditional (bush) economy, medicine, ceremonies, and kinship connections. As described by the Fort McKay Tribal Council:

The life of the community and all of its families revolved around the traditional economy. Hunting, trapping, fishing and gathering were a way of life and the people moved over their large area making sure they had food for their families, skins for clothing and pelts for sale. Store bought goods were limited to dry goods, equipment and bulk supplies of flour, sugar, and salt to sustain them in the bush. Game, fish, and berries were plentiful and eaten fresh, dried or smoked. The subsistence lifestyle and the extended kinship network provided secure work for everyone, young or old, food and income, maintenance of the traditional values such as sharing and respect for man and nature as well as ample leisure time to enjoy the environment in which they lived, to have Tea Dances, spiritual ceremonies and to provide the Elders with opportunities to pass on the oral history, the traditions, the culture, the experiences of a life time of learning.⁵⁷

Ceremonies like the Tea Dance connected Fort McKay’s long-ago past to the present, providing an opportunity to establish connections and share wealth and knowledge. As a Fort McKay Métis community member explained:

the tea dance was a spiritual event. Because if they do that, you know some, like long time ago, people used to lose their children, and stuff like that . . . It’s for good luck, that they would give a big feast. And it was for good luck for the year, like here. They’re paying God for their luck and others, by sharing with people.⁵⁸

As described by community member Francis Orr, “at Tea Dances we invited people six months ahead of time. [At the dances] there was a lot of give away:

Horses, saddles, dogs, guns and everything. Hopefully it'll come back.”⁵⁹ Johnny Orr added: “Everything was free at the tea dance. There was no drinking. We smoked pipes and offered something on the fire for the spirits” and that the dances were held every year and “they included trading a gun or moosehide jacket for a hundred dollar bill. If you got a gun you had to shoot one shell to thank the person who gave the gift.”⁶⁰

The Tea Dance provided an opportunity for the redistribution of wealth that was part of a larger system of kinship reciprocity that helped the community to ensure everyone could live a good life. As described by Edward van Dyke:

Traditionally, the principles underlying economic transactions for residents of Fort McKay was one of reciprocity. When food, shelter and so on were available to an individual, one had an obligation to distribute these goods in a prescribed manner within one's own kin group. Conversely, when one's kin had goods available, one had a claim to a set portion. The kinship system indicated to the individual those persons to whom one had economic obligations, as well as those from whom one might receive economic privileges. Reciprocity was activated and operated through the kinship system.⁶¹

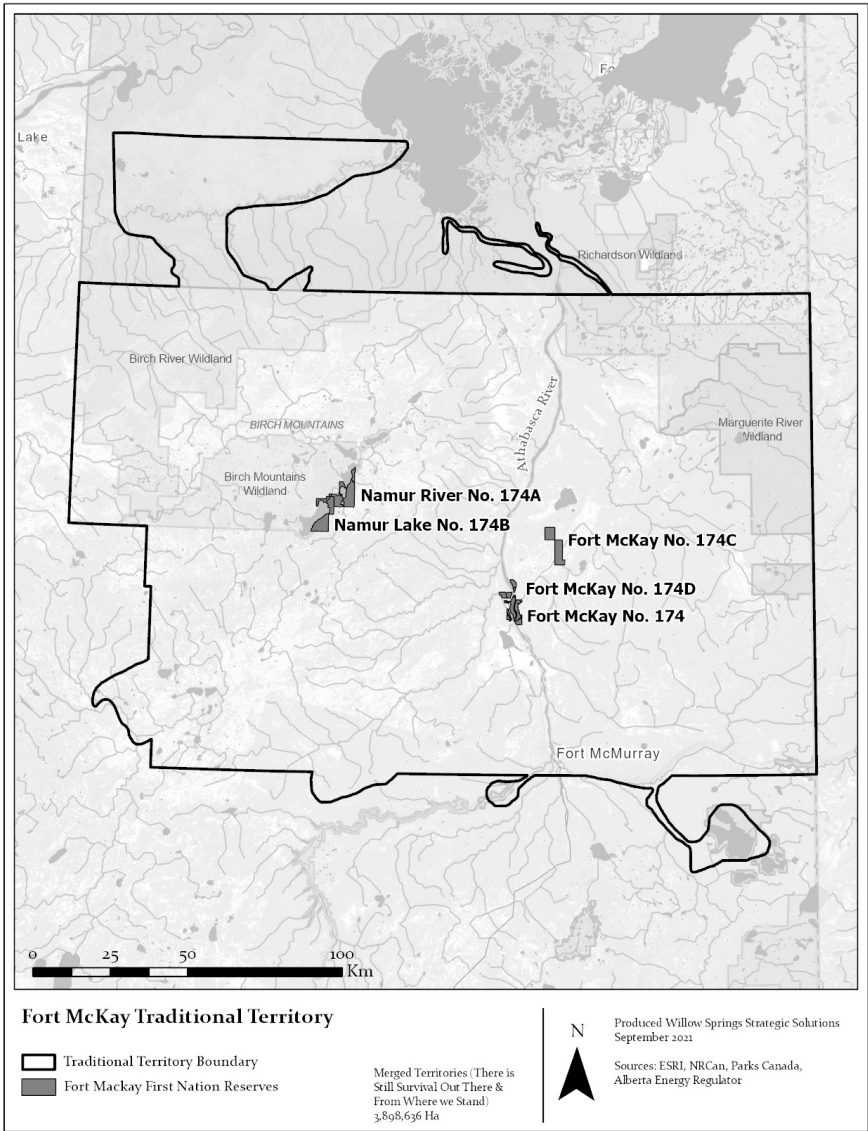
At the core of the pre-1960s community culture was the bush economy, which was closely connected to kinship, reciprocity, and use of the land. Community gatherings — whether dances or other special events — flowed into this cultural system, providing opportunities for these cultural exchanges.

In Fort McKay, sharing extended beyond material goods and included the land. Ernest Thompson Seton observed this process when he travelled through the region before treaty, explaining that when community members along the Athabasca River came together,

by an ancient, unwritten law the whole country is roughly divided among the hunters. Each has his own recognized hunting ground, usually a given river valley, that is his exclusive and hereditary property; another hunter may follow a wounded animal into it, but not begin a hunt there or set a trap upon it.⁶²

It is unsurprising that Seton, when viewing the bush economy through the lens of English common law and land tenure, would see a highly structured and divided territory based upon property lines passed down through the generations. In reality, communities like the one that developed around Fort McKay had their own system of land organization that did not include the notion of “land ownership.”⁶³ Rather, community members shared the space and the various animals, plants, and spirits necessary for the community to practice the bush economy.⁶⁴

Since the first trading posts were founded along the Athabasca River, the local Indigenous community was increasingly drawn to participate in the fur trade economy that came to dominate the region. Before 1899, the ancestors of almost all Fort McKay people lived a life on the move within their traditional territory. While it is difficult to determine the specific limits of the territory, particularly in the time before treaty, there are definite clues provided in the historical record. For example, the Hudson’s Bay Company Post journals for Fort McMurray (1877–1885) and Fort McKay (1901–1911) make frequent mentions of Little Red River community members travelling throughout a territory that extends from Fort Chipewyan in the north, Moose Lake in the west, Portage La Loche in the east, and Willow Lake/Lac La Biche in the south.⁶⁵ While the purpose of these trips (and, more importantly, the recording of the trips) was primarily for company business, they demonstrate the various places that members of the historic Fort McKay Métis community regularly visited and maintained connections. Additionally, as part of the 1983 *From Where We Stand* project, the community completed a series of map biographies, which were combined to create a map of their traditional territory.⁶⁶ A second set of territory-wide map biographies was created with community members in 1994 as the main impetus of the *There is Still Survival Out There* project.⁶⁷ In both cases, the map biographies primarily interviewed community Elders who actively participated in the local bush economy before the industrialization of the territory in the 1960s. Furthermore, the territories are validated when other pieces of evidence, including federal government requests for “Indian” harvesting areas produced in the 1940s and historic Registered Fur Management Area (RFMA) maps from the 1960s, are compared.⁶⁸ The maps, when overlayed, provide a rough estimation of Fort McKay’s traditional territory.⁶⁹



MAP1.2
 Fort McKay Traditional Territory



FIGURE 1.1
Felix Beaver, Mary Ann Beaver, and granddaughter, Mary Beaver. Rod Hyde collection.

Before 1960, Fort McKay had five seasons: “dry meat hunt [fall], early winter hunting and trapping, late winter hunting and trapping, spring beaver hunt and the summer slack,” during which men would sometimes take jobs in the shipping industry.⁷⁰ Community members managed their hunting and trapping areas through a series of cabins or camping locations along pre-determined routes. The trappers and their families returned to Fort McKay at Christmas, in late winter or early spring, and in the fall before trapping season. Women and children usually travelled with the men, particularly in the winter months, helping with the trapline. In the summer, they picked berries, fished, and processed moose meat and hides to prepare for the coming winter. They lived mainly in small family groupings, or “local bands,” which should not be confused with the legal Indian bands created by Treaty 8.⁷¹ The local bands gathered together during special events (most notably Christmas and New Year’s) and to fish in the summer at Moose Lake, but then dispersed into smaller groups after that.⁷² As described above, before 1900, the family grouping in and around Fort McKay was made up almost exclusively of members of the Bouché, Piché, and Tourangeau families. In the first decades after 1900, they were joined by members of the Shott, Powder, Lacorde/Janvier, and Beaver families who married into the original group (and whose genealogical connections will be described in length below) and together they used a traditional territory that extended roughly from Fort Chipewyan to the Saskatchewan border, to Willow Lake, and to Moose Lake.⁷³

They regulated and organized their land uses through kinship patterns and social customs. As James Parker explained, Indigenous people in the oil sands region (including Fort McKay community members) explained that their early “decision making” was “centred on the trapping economy,” with an annual meeting of the trappers in the fall used to “decide upon their trapping areas, which in the early days were not zoned or registered.”⁷⁴

Land has always been important to the community of Fort McKay. The deep and intertwined family interconnections were responsible for using and governing the lands over a large geographical space, and boundaries to this space were fluid and not easily mapped in a European fashion, though always there.⁷⁵ In the twentieth century, external government and industrial pressures forced Fort McKay members to adapt to new policies and procedures that reduced community members’ land availability as they strove to maintain their traditional bush-based way of life. The following section will look at how the community of Fort McKay managed land through to the early 1920s.