
A brief introduction to Indigenous Peoples in Alberta



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Contents

In the beginning...	4
Indigenous Peoples	7
First Nations Peoples and Treaties	9
Life after Treaties	10
First Nations in Alberta	12
Cree	12
Blackfoot	13
Dene	14
Dene Suliné	14
Dene Tha'	15
Tsuut'ina	16
Beaver First Nation	16
Nakoda and Nakota	17
Anishinabe	18
Aseniwuche Winewak Nation (AWN)	19
Michel Band	20
Papaschase First Nation	20
First Nations colonial timeline through 2000	21
Métis People	23
Métis colonial timeline through 2000	26
Inuit	28
Urban communities	30
First Nations reserves and Metis Settlements	31
Indigenous youth	32
Footnotes	33

In the beginning...

Long before Alberta became a province, Indigenous Peoples inhabited this land, speaking distinct languages, creating complex governments, social and economic systems, and moving with the ebb and flow of the natural world. Indigenous history is etched into the Alberta landscape going back more than 11,000 years and 500 generations—from ancient rock carvings at Writing-on-Stone in the southern part of the province, to a 10,000-year-old spear point unearthed in the Athabasca lowlands in the north.

By the most recent projections, Alberta is home to an estimated 324,000 Indigenous Peoples (the word ‘Indigenous’ encompasses First Nations, Métis and Inuit people).¹ Their presence predates both Alberta and Canada, yet not all Canadians are familiar with the rich histories and cultures of Indigenous Peoples, or with their present-day contributions and aspirations.

The unique world view of Indigenous cultures—or any cultures, for that matter—can be traced back to their creation stories, symbolic narratives of how the world began and how people first came to inhabit it.

Creation stories explain a people’s sense of who they are in the context of the world, and in so doing, they reveal real priorities, as well as values. Creation stories develop in oral traditions so they have multiple versions. The one shared here is adapted from a version told by the late Francis Tootoosis, originally from Poundmaker First Nation in Saskatchewan. He lived on the Samson Cree Nation at the time of the telling of this story.



The Cree creation story—Wesakechak

Wesakechak is a famous Cree trickster figure and cultural hero – two archetypes often combined into a single figure in First Nations mythologies.

Wesakechak lived when the Earth was still being formed and had many powers, such as the ability to change shape and be anything he wants to, and he could speak the languages of the animals, birds, insects and plants. No one really knows what he looks like. Wesakechak stories are meant to be narrated and not read. The spirit, humour, and excitement of his experiences are best appreciated in the language in which they were first told.²

Wesakechak was a young man who often got into trouble. After the Creator had made all the animals and the first people, he said to Wesakechak, “Take good care of my people, and teach them how to live. Show them all the bad roots, all the roots that will hurt them and kill them. Do not let the people or the animals quarrel with each other.”

But Wesakechak did not obey the Creator. He let the creatures do whatever they wished to do. Soon they were quarrelling and fighting. The Creator, greatly displeased, warned Wesakechak, “If you do not keep your world peaceful and beautiful, I will take everything away from you, and you will be miserable.”

But Wesakechak did not believe the Creator and did not obey. Becoming more and more careless and disobedient, he tricked the animals and the people and made them angry with each other. They quarrelled and fought so much that the Earth became red with blood.

This time the Creator became very angry. “I will take everything away from you and wash the ground clean,” he said.

Still Wesakechak did not believe the Creator. He did not believe until the rains came and the streams began to swell. Day after day, and night after night, the rains continued. The water in the rivers and the lakes rose higher and higher. At last they overflowed their banks and washed the ground clean. The sea came up on the land, and everything was drowned except one otter, one beaver, and one muskrat.

Wesakechak tried to stop the sea, but it was too strong for him. He sat down on the water and wept. Otter, Beaver, and Muskrat sat beside him and rested their heads against him. In time the rain stopped and the sea left the land. Wesakechak took courage, but he did not dare to speak to the Creator. After long and sad thoughts about his misery, he said to himself, “If I could get a bit of the old earth beneath the water, I could make a little island for us to live on.”

He did not have the power to create anything, but he did have the power to expand what had already been created. As he could not dive and did not know how far it was to the old earth, he did not know what to do. Taking pity on him, the Creator said, “I will give you the power to remake everything if you will use the old materials buried under the water.”

Still floating on the sea, Wesakechak said to the three animals beside him, “We shall starve unless one of you can bring me a bit of the old ground beneath the water. If you will get it for me, I will make an island for us.” Then he turned to the otter. “You are brave and strong and active. If you will dive into the water and bring me a bit of earth, I will see that you have plenty of fish to eat.”

So the otter dove, but he came up again without having reached the ground. He tried a second time with no success, and Wesakechak praised Otter and persuaded him to go down once more. When he returned the third time, he was so weary that he could not dive again.

"You are a coward!" exclaimed Wesakechak. "I am surprised by your weak heart." Then he turned to Beaver. "You are brave and strong and wise. If you will dive into the water and bring me a bit of the old earth, I will make a good house for you on the new island I shall make. There you will be warm in the winter. Dive straight down, as a brave beaver does."

Twice Beaver dived, and twice he came back without any earth. The second time he was so tired that Wesakechak had to let him rest for a long time.

"Dive once more," urged Wesakechak when Beaver had recovered. "If you will bring me a bit of earth, I will make a wife for you." To obtain a wife, Beaver went down a third time. He stayed so long that he came back almost lifeless, still with no earth in his paws.

Wesakechak was now very sad. If Otter and Beaver could not reach the bottom of the water, surely Muskrat also would fail. But he was their only chance.

"You are brave and strong and quick, Muskrat, even if you are small. If you will dive into the water and bring me a bit of the old earth at the bottom, I will make plenty of roots for you to eat. I will create rushes, so that you can make a nice house with rushes and dirt.

"Otter and Beaver are fools," continued Wesakechak. "They got lost. You will find the ground if you will dive straight down."

So Muskrat jumped head first into the water. Down and down he went, but he brought back nothing. A second time he dived and stayed a long time. When he returned, Wesakechak looked at his forepaws and sniffed.

"I smell the smell of earth," he said. "Go again. If you bring me even a small piece, I will make a wife for you, Muskrat. She will bear you a great many children. Have a strong heart now. Go straight down, as far as you can go."

This time Muskrat stayed so long that Wesakechak feared he had drowned. At last they saw some bubbles coming up through the water. Wesakechak reached down his long arm, seized Muskrat, and pulled him up beside them. The little creature was almost dead, but against his breast his forepaws held a piece of the old earth.

Joyously, Wesakechak seized it, and in a short time he expanded the bit of earth into an island. There he, Muskrat, Otter, and Beaver rested and rejoiced that they had not drowned in the flood.

Some people say that Wesakechak obtained a bit of wood, from which he made the trees, and some bones, from which he made the second race of animals.

Others say that the Creator made all things again. He commanded the rivers to take the salt water back to the sea. Then he created mankind, the animals of today, and the trees. He took from Wesakechak all power over people and animals and left him only the power to flatter and to deceive.

After that, Wesakechak played tricks on the animals and led them into much mischief.

Every First Nation, as well as the Inuit, possesses creation stories. The Blackfoot tell stories of Napi (Old Man), who is similar to Wesakechak, and who created what is in the world. The Nakoda have Iktomi, whose trials and errors are shared in stories that young people can learn from, and the Anishnaabe have Nanabush. The Inuit look to Sedna, who lives under the sea and who provides food for them, even in the depths of winter. Stories of these cultural heroes are often humorous and reflect the values of First Peoples.

Indigenous Peoples

Indigenous people, as the first inhabitants of this land we call Canada, are divided into three distinct groups recognized under the *Constitution Act* 1982: Indian (a legal term, see *First Nations* below), Inuit and Métis. In Canada, they are three separate peoples with unique heritages, languages, cultural practices, and spiritual beliefs.

Alberta is home to the third largest Indigenous population of the provinces. As of the 2016 Census, Indigenous people make up 6.5 per cent of the provincial population, with 53 per cent being First Nations, 44 per cent Métis, 1 per cent Inuit and 2 per cent with multiple Aboriginal identities or who didn't fit the categories offered.

Formal definitions of Indian, Métis, and Inuit Peoples are complex and they have been revised from time to time as a result of court challenges and changes to legislation. Here is a quick overview of definitions, court rulings, and legislation that apply to determining who is eligible to claim status or membership as an Indian, Métis, or Inuit person.

Status Indian:

A First Nations person who is registered according to the *Indian Act's* requirements and qualifies for Treaty rights and benefits. The *Indian Act* is Canadian federal legislation, which was first passed in 1876 and amended several times since.

Treaty Indian:

A status Indian who belongs to a First Nation that signed a Treaty with the Crown.

Non-Status Indian:

A First Nations person who is not registered under the *Indian Act*, for whatever reason, according to the act's requirements and does not qualify for the rights and benefits given to people registered as status Indians.

First Nations:

Refers to individuals and to communities (or reserves) and their governments (or band councils). The term arose in the 1980s and is politically significant, because it implies possession of rights arising from historical occupation and use of territory. Thus far, there is no Canadian legal definition of this term (the Constitution refers to "Indians"). There are 48 First Nations in Alberta.

Métis:

The Métis National Council defines Métis as "a person who self-identifies as Métis, is distinct from other Indigenous peoples, is of historic Métis Nation ancestry and who is accepted by the Métis Nation." Alberta is home to the largest Métis population of all the Canadian provinces.

Inuit:

Inuit Peoples are those of the north, who live primarily in Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, Labrador, and northern Quebec. Inuit Peoples also live in Greenland, Russia and Alaska.⁴

In recent history, two specific amendments to the *Indian Act* have significantly impacted who is eligible to be registered as an Indian under the *Indian Act*.

- Bill C-31: This Bill eliminated discriminatory provisions in the *Indian Act*, including a section that resulted in Indian women losing their status when they married non-status men and allowed non-status women to gain Indian status when marrying status-Indian men. Women who had lost their Indian status through marriage could reclaim their status as a result of this Bill.
- Bill C-3: In 2010, the *Indian Act* was amended through Bill C-3 in response to the decision of the British Columbia Court of Appeal in *Mclvor v. Canada*. The court found that section 6 of the *Indian Act* discriminated on the basis of gender.

As a result, a child of someone in these circumstances is entitled to be registered as an Indian.

Métis people were for many years refused political recognition by the federal government, under Section 91 (24) of the *Constitution Act* 1867. However, Métis people received recognition as Indigenous Peoples in the *Constitution Act* of 1982.

In its 2003, a landmark decision in *R. v. Powley*, the Supreme Court of Canada laid out a test to be used in determining whether a Métis person holds an Indigenous right to hunt. This Supreme Court decision outlined three factors to recognize people claiming Métis rights. An individual must:

- be part of a contemporary Métis community with links back to a historic Métis community
- self-identify with the Métis community and demonstrate an ancestral connection to the historic Métis community
- be accepted by the contemporary community, the core of which is a past and ongoing participation and shared culture and traditions that constitute a Métis community and distinguish it from other groups.

Daniels v. Canada, the federal trial court case, found in 2013 that Métis and non-Status First Nations people are “Indians” under the *Constitution Act*, 1867. The case has been appealed to the Federal Court of Appeal.

Bill C-15 was passed by the Senate in June 2021. It is an act that ensures the laws of Canada are consistent with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). UNDRIP consists of 46 articles recognizing the basic human rights of Indigenous people, including articles affirming the right of Indigenous Peoples to create their own education systems, receive restitution for stolen lands, and participate in decision-making that affects their interests.

First Nations Peoples and Treaties

Treaties are sacred foundational documents for First Nations Peoples. We often hear First Nations talk about honouring Treaty rights, and their strong ties to the Crown. To gain a greater understanding of the past and present lives of First Nations Peoples, it is important to gain an understanding of the relationship of First Nations Peoples to Treaties and Treaty rights.

In the Canadian west and north, between 1871 and 1921, the Crown entered into Treaties with various First Nations that enabled the Canadian government to actively pursue agriculture, settlement, and resource development. Because they are numbered 1 to 11, these Treaties are often referred to as the “numbered Treaties.” They cover northern Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, as well as portions of the Yukon, Northwest Territories, and British Columbia.

Under these Treaties, the First Nations who occupied these territories gave up large areas of land to the Crown. In exchange, the Treaties provided for such things as reserve lands and other benefits like farm equipment and animals, annual payments, ammunition, clothing, and certain rights to hunt and fish. The Crown also dealt with matters such as schools on reserves, teachers, or educational help to the First Nation that signed Treaties. Not all Treaties are exactly the same. For example, Treaty No. 6 included a clause about a medicine chest.

There are different interpretations of what the signing of the Treaties meant. For most First Nations, Treaties were viewed as establishing a peaceful coexistence where land would be shared, not given away.

Alberta has three main Treaty areas:

Treaty 6

- Signed at Carlton and Fort Pitt in 1876
- Covers central Alberta and Saskatchewan
- Includes 16 First Nations

Treaty 7

- Signed at the Blackfoot Crossing of Bow River and Fort Mcleod in 1877
- Covers southern Alberta
- Includes 7 First Nations

Treaty 8

- Signed at Lesser Slave Lake and Fort Chipewyan in 1899
- Covers parts of northern Alberta, British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and the Northwest Territories
- Includes 24 First Nations

Adhesions to Treaties

Treaty adhesions are agreements signed with First Nations who were not present at the original Treaty negotiations. From the First Nations’ perspective, adhesions are as significant as the Treaties because, like the original Treaties, they created an ongoing relationship with the Crown. Adhesions signed with First Nations throughout the areas dealt with the initial Treaty negotiations.

Numerous adhesions were made to Treaty 6 between 1877 and 1889, and several more were made between 1944 and 1956. Four adhesions were made to Treaty 8 over the first year.³

Life after Treaties

The land had a great influence on the First Nations' way of life and also determined how they governed themselves. Those who lived in the warmer, more open, easily travelled flatlands of Alberta, like the Blackfoot Confederacy, had highly structured organizations.

The members of First Nations worked together to harvest buffalo and gathered for ceremonies, and they had a decentralized power base with different types of leaders so that, for example, the leader during times of peace was often different from the leader who took over during times of conflict.

In Alberta's north, Dene Tha', Dene Suliné, Dunne-za, and Woodland Cree Peoples hunted game such as moose and caribou. This could not be done in, nor could it sustain, large groups. As a result, northerners lived in smaller, extended family groups, each with its own leader. That's why there are more First Nations reserves in the northern part of the province.

In general, First Nations took an egalitarian approach to governance. They valued consensus, co-operation, sharing, and adopted a holistic view.

The way of life of First Nations Peoples changed dramatically with the signing of the Treaties and enactment of the *Indian Act* in 1876. While Treaties were being negotiated in the West, The *Indian Act* was being legislated by the federal government. This legislation was a consolidation of regulations concerning First Nations Peoples and it would have deep and long-lasting effects across Canada.

The *Indian Act* was based on the premise that it was the Crown's responsibility to care for and protect the interests of First Nations. It would carry out this responsibility by acting as a "guardian" until such time as First Nations could fully integrate into Canadian society. The act allowed the Department of Indian Affairs to intervene in a wide variety of internal band issues and make sweeping policy decisions, such as determining who was an Indian. Under the act, the department would also manage Indian lands, resources, and moneys, control access to intoxicants and promote "civilization."

The federal government intended to teach First Nations Peoples to live the way Europeans lived and to assimilate them into society. Indian agents had the job of enforcing the rules. Appointed by the government and sent to administer the reserves and people living on them, Indian agents held all the legal power on reserves. They had sweeping powers ranging from control of First Nations' movement to control of agricultural equipment and expenditures by the band.

Indian agents were responsible for assigning housing, making sure children went to school, seeing that First Nations members started farming, and giving permission to Indigenous Peoples to leave the reserve. Their power undermined that of traditional leaders.

Indian agents also introduced a pass system that required First Nations Peoples living on reserves to get the Indian agent's written permission to leave the reserve. First Nations Peoples who did not live on the reserve needed a pass to visit. Although the pass system was never legislated, it was enforced until the 1940s, and made many transactions Indigenous people needed to support themselves impossible.

It is believed that the pass system benefited the agents and the government by preventing First Nations Peoples from gathering and forming alliances, making it difficult for parents to visit children in residential schools and making it less likely that they would break the ban on some ceremonies.

The *Indian Act* outlawed traditional activities such as giveaways, and the spiritual practice of the sun dance. Under the *Indian Act*, the federal government also implemented the residential school system. Designed to promote assimilation by removing children from their families and traditional ways of life, the residential school system led, in many cases, to loss of identity, culture, language, parenting and traditional skills and self-esteem. It resulted in intergenerational trauma, affecting thousands of individuals and numerous communities.

The residential school system is a dark legacy in the education of Indigenous Peoples. In addition to being isolated from their families, communities, cultures, and languages, there were cases of physical and sexual abuse.

From the 1880s to the 1990s, First Nations children were sent to federally funded, church-operated Indian residential schools, most often far away from their parents and their homes. Approximately 150,000 Indigenous children attended residential schools across Canada.

Alberta had 25 Indian residential schools—the most anywhere in Canada.

In May 2021, Tk'emlups te Secwépemc First Nation in British Columbia reported the discovery of the remains of children buried on the site of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School. The ground-penetrating radar survey detected about 200 potential burial sites. Over the next months, similar grave sites were found at former residential schools across Canada, and shock reverberated through Canadian society.

Though the grave discoveries were heartbreaking, the news about children who died at residential schools was a catalyst to increase awareness about the trauma inflicted over long periods of time on students and their families. Efforts toward reconciliation accelerated.

April 2022 saw an Indigenous delegation hear Pope Francis apologize on behalf of members of the Church who committed abuses against Indigenous children, though the delegation wanted him to apologize on behalf of the whole Church. Several churches have already issued apologies, and The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada, active between 2008 and 2015, documented and informed all Canadians about what really happened in residential schools and the impacts the schools had on Indigenous Peoples, and continues to have on many generations.

A historical record, housed in the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, was created, and a list of 94 “calls to action” encourages further reconciliation between Canadians and Indigenous Peoples. All Canadians are encouraged to read the entire 6-volume TRC final report released in 2015.

Orange Shirt Day, a day when Indigenous people began wearing orange to bring attention to Phyllis Webstad a residential school student in the 1970s, who had her bright orange blouse taken away (and never returned) by nuns who thought her attire to be too “flashy” has become National Day for Truth and Reconciliation Day each year on September 30.

The 60s Scoop is another chapter in the ongoing efforts of the Canadian government to assimilate Indigenous Peoples. It refers to a period of time between roughly 1961 and 1980 when the removal of Indigenous children from their families was very common. Children were moved into the child welfare system and placed with foster families, in most cases without the consent of their families or bands, usually by government social workers who deemed Indigenous parents as unfit to parent. Birth records were kept from these children and many never knew their own parents or siblings.



A tree symbolizing reconciliation in Alberta was planted in Edmonton by former Grand Chief Dr. Wilton Littlechild, former Chief Billy Morin, Rick Wilson, Minister of Indigenous Relations, and other leaders on Sept. 30, 2021 as part of an Alberta government event commemorating the Day for Truth and Reconciliation.

First Nations in Alberta

An overview of the First Nations cultural groups in Alberta. First Nation websites are a good source of further information, and they can be found in this list of Indigenous communities and organizations: <https://www.alberta.ca/Indigenous-organizations-and-service-directory.aspx>

Cree

Nehiyaw (Cree people)

There are 32 federally recognized Cree First Nations in Alberta. The reserves are located in the Treaty 6 and Treaty 8 areas.

History

Cree people call themselves *Nehiyawak*—a two-part word that breaks down to mean the sacred number four (*nəwo*) and “the original healers” (*iyiniw*). Traditionalists refer to themselves as “four directions people.”

The Cree are one of the largest First Nations in Canada and their geographical distribution is also expansive, extending from Alberta to Quebec. The Plains Cree are situated south of Edmonton, and the Woodland Cree are north of the city. The northernmost Cree community is Fox Lake, a fly-in community in the northeastern corner of Alberta, while the southernmost is Suncild, 44 km northwest of Rocky Mountain House. Historically they were much the same, sharing a language and customs, but they lived differently because of their environments. For instance, Woodland Cree built their lodges out of birch bark while Plains Cree used buffalo hide to build tipis.⁵

Entrepreneurial at heart, the Cree played a role in the fur trade as voyageurs, hunters, and trappers. Because some Cree women married European fur traders, Métis culture often shares elements of Cree culture.

Language family

Cree is a language in the Algonquian family. Plains Cree and Woodland Cree have their own dialects, which, while different, are mutually understood.

Social and economic activities

Cree First Nations are socially and economically diverse. Communities located close to resources like oil sands and timber have enthusiastically developed companies to extract or harvest them, or provide services to existing industry. For instance, Mikisew Cree First Nation in Fort Chipewyan has built a highly successful group of companies that services the oil sands industry.

The Sawridge Group of Companies was founded by the Sawridge Cree First Nation of Slave Lake, Alberta. The first enterprise was the construction of a hotel at Slave Lake in 1972. Ten years later in 1982, a parcel of land was acquired from Parks Canada and the tradition continued with the construction of a second hotel in Jasper National Park. The Sawridge Group of Companies consists of various real estate holdings, land developments, retail and service businesses.⁶

Of interest

Among the Plains Cree, when a child was born, the parents prepared food, bought lengths of cloth, filled the ceremonial pipe, and called in an old man. Many people came into the tipi to watch the ceremony. They told the old man what they wanted and gave him the cloth and pipe. The old man lit the pipe and put it down, then talked to the Creator and to the Spirit that taught him to give names. After singing a song, he asked for the baby and gave it a name, begging the Creator to give it good luck, so that it would grow up and become old. He asked the Spirit that gave him the power to give names to be the guardian of that child. Then the child was passed around the people until it reached its mother. As they held the child, the men and women expressed a good wish for the baby.

Some place names in Alberta that come from the Cree language are:

- Fort Chipewyan – named for the Cree word for the Chipewyan people, which means “pointed skins.” It referred to how the Chipewyans prepared beaver pelts.
- Wetaskiwin – an adaptation of the Cree word *wi-ta-ski-oo ch-ka-tin-ow*, meaning “place (or hill) of peace.”

Blackfoot

Niitsítapi (Real People)

Located in the southern part of the province, the three Blackfoot Confederacy Nations are all relatively large in terms of population.

History

The Kainai (Blood), Piikani (Peigan), and Siksika nations in Alberta and the Blackfeet Nation in Montana, a division of the Piikani, form the Blackfoot Confederacy. Historically they were a single group that lived in large, clan-based groups on the plains and in the foothills. Today they are closely allied.

The culture of the Blackfoot Confederacy is traditionally linked to the buffalo, both economically and spiritually. Historically they used piskans or buffalo jumps near foothill streams, like the one that can be seen at Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump Centre near Fort Macleod.⁷

Language family

The Blackfoot language is part of the Algonquian language family.

Social and economic activities

Ranching and farming have long been important economic activities for the Blackfoot, and still are today. These First Nations have also operated other businesses with varying degrees of success, including an operation fabricating jeans.

The Blood Tribe Agricultural Project, a community-owned project on the Kainai reserve, is successful. Established in 1991, it provides water to about 10,000 hectares of farmland and produces hay for export to other countries, including the U.S., Japan, Korea, and the Middle East. The project provides employment and opportunities for education, training, and mentorship for Kainai First Nation members.⁸

As on many reserves, band-owned facilities provide members with necessary services as well as opportunities to engage in traditional practices. For instance, Siksika Nation has a sportsplex, college, daycare centre, and health and wellness centre as well as an Elders' lodge, medicine lodge, men's lodge, and a place for holding powwows.⁹

Of interest

The Blackfoot and Cree were often at war, and although adoptions were common among Plains people, heads turned when the great Siksika Chief Crowfoot adopted a young Cree warrior, Poundmaker, who would later become a famous leader in his own right. Poundmaker reminded Crowfoot's wife of a son the couple had lost, and so they brought him into their family circle. It was an alliance that prevented some bloodshed.

The Blackfoot Confederacy has collaborated with the Government of Alberta on tourism projects such as Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park and Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump, an UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The word "Blackfoot" is the literal English translation of "Siksika." A version of the origin of the word indicates that it referred to the dark-coloured soles of moccasins the people wore, perhaps because they crossed over land that had been scorched by fire.¹⁰

Some Alberta place names that come from the Blackfoot language are:

- Medicine Hat – the translation of *saamis*, which means "medicine"
- Ponoka – Blackfoot for "elk"



Dene

In Alberta, four groups identify as Dene: Dene Suliné, Dene Tha', Tsuut'ina, and Dunne-za. These groups share similar spiritual beliefs and social organization as well as a similar language from the Athapaskan language family, but historically they had differing relationships to the land and are unique from one another as a result.¹¹

The Dene and the Navajo in the southwest U.S. share the same language group.

Dene Suliné

(de-nay-soong-lin-ay)

The Dene Suliné reside close to the Saskatchewan border. Cold Lake First Nations' reserve land is located in the Treaty 6 area, 300 kilometres northeast of Edmonton.

History

Dene Suliné is the contemporary name for the cultural group formerly identified as the Chipewyan. Their traditional territory was the boreal forest and waters covering a large area in the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and northeastern Alberta. Living and migrating in family groups, they hunted caribou, wood buffalo, and waterfowl and caught fish. The Dene Suliné began trading with the Europeans when the Hudson's Bay Company opened in Fort Churchill.¹²

Social and economic activities

Since the creation of the Air Weapons Range in 1952, much of the Dene Suliné traditional territory has been lost. Amid this challenge, leadership emphasizes education and awareness in its protection of people, environment and culture.

Economic activities have changed over time. For example, families on the Cold Lake reserve practised agriculture in the form of cereal crops and cattle production for many years. They had horses and eventually purchased a steam engine and caterpillar to help with farming.¹³

Today, the First Nation owns businesses including Casino Dene and the Primco Dene Group of Companies, which services the oil industry, operates consumer franchises, and employs over 900 people. Cold Lake First Nations Economic Development offers business grants to community members who require financial assistance to start businesses, or expand services in existing businesses.

Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation continues to keep the traditional activities of hunting, trapping, gathering, and fishing central to the community's way of life.³³ Leaders of Dene Suliné, Cree and Métis communities have worked to create a school in Fort Chipewyan with a curriculum that includes credit-based courses focusing on moose hunting, winter trapping and botany. With flexible hours, remote learning, and 12-month operation, the school boasted 41 graduates in 2021, after there had been none for each of the two years prior.¹⁴

Chipewyan Prairie Dene First Nation, located south of Fort McMurray near the hamlet of Janvier, has several joint ventures with partners like Horizon North Logistics, to service the oil industry.¹⁵

Of interest

Thanadelthur (Marten Shake) holds a place in northern Canadian history as a forceful and charismatic woman who helped forge peace between the Dene Suliné and the Cree people in the early 1700s. She was a guide to the Hudson's Bay Company, a skilled orator, and interpreter who could speak Chipewyan, Cree and English.¹⁶

Acclaimed artist Alex Janvier owns and operates an art gallery designed by well-known Blackfoot architect Douglas Cardinal in Cold Lake.¹⁷

Dene Tha'

(*de-nay-thah*)

(People Common to the Territory, or Common Peoples)¹⁸

The Dene Tha' live in northwestern Alberta on three reserves: Chateh, Meander River, and Bushe River.

History

The Dene Tha' homeland includes the Caribou Mountains and Hay River regions of Alberta, and the people traditionally went far into the Northwest Territories for hunting.

They typically stayed in woodland areas even when caribou could be found in abundance on the barrens, and they were skilled at hunting, trapping, and fishing. Their early nomadic lifestyle followed a circular motion from Zama Lake to the west from where Chateh is now (west of High Level in northern Alberta), south to Rainbow Lake and further east until the people returned to Zama in their season search for game.

Dogs were important to the survival of hunters and trappers and were usually fed even before the hunter ate his meal.

Social and economic activities

Highlights of Dene Tha' First Nation's facilities are the Chateh K-10 Community School and Dene Tha' Health Centre. Through a First Nation – Municipal Community Economic Development Initiative, three joint initiatives were established: a waterline connection between the Town of High Level and Bushe River, a joint emergency plan and a multi-purpose facility social services include home care for adults and a children's centre.¹⁹

Economic activities include businesses in small engine repair, taxi service, home building, and electrical services. Chateh also benefits economically by the presence of a gas station and food store; a laundromat, bottle depot, and coffee shop; natural gas distribution; and a construction company.²⁰



Of interest

Tea dances, Dahot s'ethe, are still held in the three Dene Tha' communities of Bushe River, Chateh and Meander River, though not as often as they used to be. These are spiritual gatherings held within a circular enclosure in which fires are lit. Tea, moose grease and tobacco are placed in the fire, and prayers spoken. Drummers sing while the people dance clockwise around the fire. Through their dreams, prophets or spiritual leaders know the reason to have a Dahot s'ethe. Petitions for a successful hunt or good weather might be made, or perhaps when meetings with another neighbouring community are held. The ceremony might also be held when a community member has died.²¹

Nogha (pronounced No-ah), of northern Alberta, was Ndatin—a Dreamer. Today, few Dene Tha' are old enough to have seen him lead a tea dance in the 1920s, but most have heard of this legendary spiritual leader. Nogha would call a tea dance before a moose hunt to ask the Creator for good weather and success in killing animals, and it might also be held after the hunt in thanksgiving. People recall Nogha always urging the people to get up and dance, and to be thankful for what they had, and for each other. "As you leave your footprints in the dirt around the tea dance circle, you are making your trail to heaven," Nogha would say.

More recently, the late Alexis Seniantha and the late David Providence were revered as prophets who looked ahead for the people.

Tsuut'ina

(*tsotli'na*) (Earth People)

The Tsuut'ina First Nation is adjacent to Calgary's southwest border.

History

The Tsuu T'ina have been closely allied with the Blackfoot Confederacy for a long time, but their homeland was originally in northern Alberta and they are related to the Dunne-za. They may have split when the Cree and Nakoda moved into the province. As a result, the languages of the Tsuut'ina and the Dunne-za are now quite different and the Tsuut'ina adopted a Blackfoot Plains lifestyle revolving around the buffalo. The Tsuut'ina and the Treaty 7 First Nations have a close relationship.

Social and economic activities

Tsuut'ina First Nation has taken advantage of the reserve's urban location to build its economy. The reserve has the usual infrastructure, and also owns a golf course, the Grey Eagle Casino, and a busy gas station. The community also owns an energy corporation, construction, management, and gravel companies. Band members own businesses offering everything from arts and crafts and cultural consulting, to landscaping and transportation and trucking.

Of interest

An old legend describes a time when the Tsuu T'ina were crossing a frozen lake in their wintertime migration. A little boy saw something sticking up out of the ice and cried for his grandmother to get it for him. She yanked on what turned out to be the horn of a water monster sleeping just below the surface. Unwittingly, she woke it up, and it thrashed so hard the ice broke and water seeped upward, trapping some people on the north side, and some on the south. The crack separated the people and some stayed in the north while some travelled south as far as Arizona to become the Navajo Nation.

Beaver First Nation

Tsa'tinne People (*tsati-ne*)

Tsa'tinne, or the Beaver people, live in northern Alberta 50 km east of High Level.

History

Expert hunters and trappers, the Tsa'tinne traditionally lived along the Peace River in small family groups that would increase or decrease depending upon food supplies. Familial groups would get together in larger groups for ceremonies and other social events.²²

Of interest

The late Dominique Habitant of Child Lakes remembered a Tsa'tinne medicine man, Sijoli, who saved his community one autumn when the Cree, with their rifles, surrounded them. He told his people to put on all of their winter furs and silently meet in his lodge. He spoke his "medicine power" wording and, one by one, bullets from the Cree's rifles materialized and dropped into the bowl. Sijoli then commanded a storm to rage for days and the enemy disbanded and returned to Cree territory.



Nakoda and Nakota

Alexis Nakota Sioux Nation and Paul First Nation are in the Treaty 6 area northwest of Edmonton. The population of Stoney Nakoda First Nation is distributed among three communities: Bearspaw, Chiniki and Goodstoney in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains between Calgary and Banff.

History

The Sioux travelled over a vast territory from the Hudson Bay to the Rocky Mountains, along the foothills and into what is now Montana. Allied with the Cree, the Nakoda acquired modern tools and goods from the Hudson's Bay Company, and trekked westward with the fur trade, settling mainly in the foothills up into Canada. Two other groups of Stoney split off and one became Paul First Nation, acquiring land on Wabamun Lake where the fishing was good. The other, Alexis Nakota Sioux First Nation, were given land on Lac Ste. Anne.

Language family

Nakota and Nakoda are in the Siouan language family.

Social and economic activities

Like other First Nations cultures, the Nakoda engage in a variety of social and economic activities, including a casino, restaurant and gas station. A golf course and a gas station plus convenience store contribute to the economy of Paul First Nation, while Alexis Nakota Sioux Nation has a store, casino, and gas station and is involved in oilfield service and forestry.⁴⁷ The Alexis Nakota Sioux Nation and Paul First Nation are also equity owners of the Cascade Power Project, along with the Enoch Cree Nation, Kehewin Cree Nation, O'Chiese First Nation and Whitefish Lake First Nation.

Of interest

Among the Sioux, and in other tribes, speech between father-in-law and daughter-in-law, and between mother-in-law and son-in-law was strictly prohibited. Conversation was allowed between the two men and between the two women, but only in the third person plural and in a soft tone of voice, to show respect. They never spoke directly to each other, but always in a roundabout fashion.²³

The round dance of the Nakoda was once a healing ceremony that evolved into a social occasion. It is said that relatives who have passed away dance with participants of a round dance. The dance itself mimics the movement of the Northern Lights, which the Nakoda believe are the spirits of loved ones who have died.²⁴

Anishinabe

(a-nish-na-bay)

The Anishinabe population in Alberta is relatively small. The O'Chiese First Nation is located in Treaty 6 area northwest of Rocky Mountain House.

History

In the late 1700s, a branch of the Saulteaux from the Eastern Woodlands in the Sault Ste. Marie region of eastern Canada, moved west with the Northwest Company. They settled in Manitoba, eventually moving further west to the eastern slopes and foothills of the Rocky Mountains, where they hunted moose and deer, and trapped. Band members say their people came from various areas of North America. In 1950 a group of 15 families decided to sign an amendment to Treaty 6 and take a reserve near Rocky Mountain House. They were one of the last Indigenous people to sign a treaty.

Language family

Saulteaux is in the Algonquian language family. About 70 per cent of people living on the reserve speak Saulteaux, and most can understand Cree and English. Children learn their traditional language in daycare, in a Head Start program, and in school.

Chief and council conduct business in Saulteaux.

Social and economic activities

The O'Chiese First Nation has community resources that include a pre-school to Grade 12 school, an adult upgrading program, daycare, pool hall, public works building, store, health centre, dental clinic, and a fire hall. The First Nation also provides cultural programs, including sun dances, feasts, culture camps and a yearly powwow. Besides providing opportunities to train in trades and careers in such areas as heavy equipment, management, early childhood development, and security, leadership offers cash incentives to young people when they graduate high school, or advance to post-secondary schooling to obtain a diploma or degree.

Leadership has created a business investment centre and established ventures to create economic stability. These include a gas bar, a truck stop, and a sand and gravel company.²⁵ The community has also built low-rent off-reserve housing in Edmonton and Red Deer for members pursuing post-secondary education.

O'Chiese First Nation Elders are invited to meetings and into schools, and treated to adventures travelling in the band's coach bus. Highly revered, they are well known as respected guests invited to other First Nations communities and to their ceremonies.

Of interest

There is no word in the traditional Anishinabe language for "saving" because the idea goes against the value of sharing.²⁶

Aseniwuche Winewak Nation (AWN)

(*Uh-sin-ee-wih-chee-wih-nee-wuk* - Rocky Mountain People)

Aseniwuche Winewak Nation is not a First Nation under the *Indian Act* but a society under the *Provincial Societies Act*. Most of its membership, more than 500 adults and youth, are non-status. Many of the people are descendants of Cree people and also of Iroquois people who travelled west with the fur trade.

Their traditional territory covered Jasper north to Grande Prairie and from McBride east to Lac Ste. Anne. In 1907, they were forced to leave the Jasper area when the national park was created.

The people lived a traditional life in the Grande Cache area, providing for themselves through hunting, trapping, and gathering. Life changed when development reached their area in the late 1960s.

In the early 1970s, the Alberta government established co-ops or enterprises to hold land parcels for the use of the descendants of the people who had been forced to leave the Jasper area. Co-operatives and enterprises hold a fee simple title to the parcels of land. They also have legal authority to manage their affairs.

To advance the socioeconomic circumstances of the people and deal with the challenges that continued to be created by development, including the effects on their traditional lifestyle, the six co-ops and enterprises joined as Aseniwuche Winewak Nation in 1994, a representative body based in Grande Cache.

Of interest

Elders living near present-day Grande Cache talk reverently about the caribou and how, in winter's deep snow, they were a ready source of food when hunting was difficult. Industry and traffic on Highway 40 has contributed to the drastic drop in their numbers. Aseniwuche Winewak members formed the "Caribou Patrol" program to promote conservation of local herds, and members refrain from hunting them.

Tommy Wanyandie, 91 at the time of printing, is a guide and outfitter in the areas around Grande Cache, Hinton, and the Willmore Wilderness backcountry. His knowledge is of great value to the Aseniwuche Winewak Nation of Canada because he can point out graves and old camps of Indigenous people that mark traditional land requiring protection from industrial development.



Michel Band

Michel, who signed an adhesion to Treaty 6, was the son of Louis Callihoo, a Mohawk from Kahnawake who came west with the fur trade. Michel First Nation was involuntarily enfranchised in 1958 and its reserve lands were sold by the Government of Canada. Enfranchisement is a legal process whereby members of First Nations lose eligibility for registration and membership in their home communities. The Michel Band people continue to fight for recognition and reinstatement.

Papaschase First Nation

Chief Papaschase signed a Treaty in 1877 and was given about 48 square miles of land in what is now a densely populated area of south Edmonton. By 1879, bison herds were almost extinct and the Papaschase people were starving, yet Frank Oliver used his newspaper, *The Edmonton Bulletin*, to advocate for their removal. Descendants of Papaschase say their land was illegally surrendered and they continue to fight for recognition and compensation for their loss.

First Nations colonial timeline through 2000

1763 – Royal Proclamation

The King of England acknowledges that Indigenous people have Indigenous title over their land, recognizes them as nations, and declares a special relationship between First Nations and the Crown. The proclamation forms the basis for the numbered Treaties and the reserve system.

1867 – *British North America Act*

Canada's original constitution, the *British North America Act* establishes Canada's jurisdiction over First Nations and the land reserved for them.

1879 – Davin Report

At the request of the federal government, Nicholas Flood Davin studies and reports on how the United States educates Native American children. The report recommends removing First Nations children from their families and sending them to residential schools to assimilate them. Attendance is made compulsory. By the 1930s, there are 80 schools across the country.

1960 – First Nations Vote

The federal government gives First Nations Peoples the right to vote in federal elections. Alberta gives First Nations Peoples the right to vote in provincial elections in 1964.

1969 – White Paper

The federal government announces a shift in policy direction that would have eliminated Indian status and the Department of Indian Affairs and would have given the provinces responsibility for First Nations. First Nations view the plan as a way for the federal government to stop fulfilling its Treaty obligations. The White Paper is withdrawn.

1969 – Removal of Indian Agents

For the first time, First Nations Peoples are not living under Indian agent control.

1969 – *The Unjust Society*

Harold Cardinal, a Cree activist from Alberta, responds to the white paper with a book that mobilizes First Nations to take action and plays a role in the government's eventual withdrawal of the paper.

1970 – Citizen Plus (Red Paper)

The Indian Association of Alberta issues a detailed response to the White Paper. The White Paper is formally withdrawn.

1972 – Indian Control of Indian Education

The National Indian Brotherhood issues a policy statement that recommends restructuring First Nations education around parental responsibility and local control. The federal government responds positively, and by 1975, 10 First Nations across Canada are operating their own schools.

1982 – *Constitution Act*

Section 35 of the act defines who Indigenous Peoples are, recognizes Indian, Inuit and Métis as Indigenous Peoples; and recognizes and affirms existing Aboriginal and Treaty rights.

1985 – Bill C-31

Important changes are made to Canada's *Indian Act* on June 28, 1985, when Parliament passes Bill C-31, *an Act to Amend the Indian Act*. Bill C-31 brings the act in line with the provisions of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The three principles that guide the amendments to the *Indian Act* are:

- removal of discrimination;
- restoring status and membership rights; and
- increasing control of Indian bands over their own affairs.

1996 – Royal Commission on Indigenous Peoples

The report examines the social, cultural, and economic challenges First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples face and recommends far-reaching change.

2000 – Strengthening Relationships, the Government of Alberta's Indigenous Policy Framework

The first of its kind in Canada, the framework sets out the basic structure for Alberta government policies that address the needs of Indigenous Peoples in Alberta. It emphasizes well-being, self-reliance, effective consultation regarding resource and economic development, partnerships, and the clarification of roles and responsibilities.

Métis People



This proud Indigenous group has a foot in both the Indigenous and European worlds, and a distinct identity recognized under the Constitution of Canada. Skilled voyageurs, buffalo hunters, traders, and interpreters, the adaptable Métis helped shape Canada, especially the prairie provinces, as the West was developed. Some Métis have French ancestry while others are descended from Scottish or English Hudson's Bay Company employees.²⁷

As the only province in Canada to grant the Métis a land base, Alberta shares a unique relationship with these proud Indigenous Peoples. The Métis, with their colourful history and culture, strong sense of entrepreneurship, and willingness to actively participate in politics, add to the mosaic of the province.

History

A mixture of two very different peoples, the first Métis were born in eastern Canada as early as the 1600s, the children of European fishermen and their Indigenous wives. Their understanding of both societies helped bridge cultural gaps, placing them as integral players in the fur trade.

They spoke European and First Nations languages and had the knowledge to take European ideas and make them work in a wilderness landscape, creating, for example, the Red River Cart, which allowed fur traders to move large amounts of freight product across the country.

In 1869, about 8,000 Métis people lived in the Red River valley in what is now Manitoba, but was then Rupert's Land, a territory owned by the Hudson's Bay Company. Many were involved in the fur trade and agriculture, and the buffalo hunt was very important to them. When Canada took over the area and Europeans began settling the region, the Métis lost the land they had called their own for many years. After they moved west and again found their borders encroached, Métis leader Louis Riel helped petition the federal government to secure land, but Ottawa dragged its feet. Riel's followers and the government clashed, resulting in the famous and final Battle at Batoche.

Riel surrendered his freedom and was charged with high treason, found guilty, and sentenced to hang in November 1885.

As time passed, Métis people here in Alberta established communities where they engaged in their traditional activities of farming and hunting buffalo.²⁸

St. Albert, Lac Ste. Anne, and Lac La Biche are three such settlements. In these new communities, the Métis laid out farms just as they did in the Red River valley, in narrow strips that ended at the river.

Establishing a Métis land base in Alberta

In 1928, Métis people in Alberta began to organize politically, forming associations. In 1932, James P. Brady, Malcolm Norris, Peter Tomkins Jr., Joseph Dion, and Felix Calliou created, L'Association des Métis d'Alberta et les Territoires du Nord-Ouest to lobby for social and economic improvements and a land base.

The Alberta Legislature resolved to investigate the conditions Métis people in Alberta were experiencing and established the Ewing Commission in 1934. The report, tabled in 1936, recommended establishing agricultural settlements on provincial Crown land for the Métis people to use.

In 1938, the provincial government passed the *Métis Population Betterment Act*. Written by the Government of Alberta in consultation with people in the Métis Association of Alberta, it set aside settlements for Métis people and made Alberta the first province to enact legislation specific to Métis people.

In 1975, the Alberta Federation of Metis Settlements Associations was formed. Its role was to represent the interests of the settlements, and it argued that Métis people had the right to self-determination. The organization also gave settlement councils a way to share information, coordinate efforts, and develop policies on matters requiring co-operation.

The settlements were located on provincial Crown-owned land at this time. But the Métis people wanted their own land base and continued to lobby for their interests. A historic package of proposed legislation, the Alberta-Metis Settlements Accord, was signed in 1989, followed the next year by legislation. It led to a governance framework for the settlements that included councils in each settlement and an overarching body called the Metis Settlements Council

(MSC) that would represent the settlements collectively. The government transferred the settlement land to the Metis Settlements Council.²⁹

L'Association des Métis d'Alberta et les Territoires du Nord-Ouest eventually became the Métis Nation of Alberta Association. Adding the word "nation" reflected the people's understanding that they had been recognized as such.³⁰ Today the Métis Nation of Alberta Association includes Métis members who may or may not be members on the Metis Settlements.

Metis Settlements with their governments are unique to Alberta. Eight settlements covering 512,121 hectares (1.25 million acres) of land in northern Alberta give Métis people a land base, autonomy at a local level, and self-sufficiency.

NOTE: The accent on the word "Métis" is used in all cases, except when referring to the Metis Settlements' legislation, regulations, or entities established by the legislation.

Buffalo Lake

Buffalo Lake is located 50 kilometres southwest of Lac La Biche. Economic development activities include: oil and gas, logging, and construction of local infrastructure projects such as new roads and houses through a partnership with Habitat for Humanity.

East Prairie

East Prairie is located 40 kilometres southeast of High Prairie. Economic development activities include: forestry, construction, and transportation.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth is located just south of Cold Lake. Economic development activities include oil and gas, and construction.

Fishing Lake

Fishing Lake is located 93 kilometres from Cold Lake. Economic development activities include oil and gas, cattle farming, tourism, mining, transportation, and outdoor recreation.

Gift Lake

Gift Lake is located 40 kilometres northeast of High Prairie. Economic development activities include forestry, oil and gas, construction, transportation, and outdoor recreation.

Kikino

Kikino is located 80 kilometres south of Lac La Biche. Economic development activities include oil and gas, forestry, construction, ranching, and tourism.

Paddle Prairie

Paddle Prairie is located 77 kilometres south of High Level. Economic development activities include oil and gas, agriculture, transportation, construction, and outdoor recreation.

Peavine

Peavine is located 56 kilometres north of High Prairie. Economic development activities include oil and gas, agriculture, transportation, construction, and outdoor recreation.

Moving forward

In 2017, the Metis Settlements General Council (MSGC) signed an agreement with the Canadian government to develop a framework that addresses socio-economic gaps and improves outcomes for Métis in areas such as health, education, child and family welfare, and Métis rights.

The MSGC consists of all councillors of the eight Metis Settlements and the offices of the general council. The elected officers include the president and vice president. A political and administrative body, the MSGC develops and implements programs and services to the settlements. It has law-making authority over membership, hunting, fishing, trapping, and land-related matters.³¹ When the MSGC passes a law, it is just as if the province has passed the law.³²

An elected council consisting of a chair and up to four councillors, elected by settlement members, governs each settlement. The councils provide a wide range of services

from public works, emergency services, health services, and road services to social development programs, recreational services, and training. The settlements have statutory authority similar to local governments.

The Métis Nation of Alberta Association

The Métis Nation of Alberta Association (MNAA) is an active participant in government policy and decision-making. The MNAA promotes and facilitates the advancement of Métis people through the pursuit of self-reliance, self-determination and self-management. It also works to ensure the social and economic well-being of Métis people in Alberta.

The MNAA is governed by a 14-member provincial council comprised of:

- A provincially elected president and vice-president
- The six MNAA Regions' presidents and vice-presidents, who are elected by the region members. The six MNAA regions cover the province of Alberta.

Many Métis speak Cree. The Métis Nation of Alberta actively promotes the preservation of the Michif language, a combination of Cree nouns and French verbs developed by the Métis.³³

Of interest

Sashes are an important part of Métis identity and are worn by all ages and both genders.³⁴ Historically, the sash identified the wearer as Métis and could be used for practical purposes when needed, like a scarf to hold heavy items, or as rope, wash cloth, a saddle blanket when needed. Today, it's a symbol of connectedness, with the woven fabric representing how the lives of the Métis have been woven from various cultures. Like the Métis people, the sash is a mixture of elements that, taken together, are an integrated whole and a rich tapestry.³⁵

Common Métis surnames you might hear in Alberta include Belcourt, Cunningham, Thompson, Letendre, Dumont, L'Hirondelle, Racine, and Delorme.

Métis colonial timeline through 2000

1869 – Red River Resistance

Métis people assert their rights, forming a provisional government after Canada buys their territory in the Red River valley from the Hudson's Bay Company and claims authority over them.

1870 – *Manitoba Act*

The province of Manitoba is created. The act sets aside land for Métis people. Unable to secure a land base, many Métis people leave Red River and move into Saskatchewan and Alberta.

1885 – Resistance

The government fails to respond to petitions for title to land and the Métis people declare a provisional government, led by Louis Riel, at Batoche. First Nations join the resistance. Canadian troops defeat the resistance and leaders are sent to prison for treason. Riel is executed.

1928 – Métis begin to organize themselves politically in Alberta.

1932 – Malcolm Norris, Jim Brady, Peter Tomkins, Joseph Dion and Felix Calliou organize L'Association des Métis d'Alberta et les Territoires du Nord-Ouest.

Its purpose is to lobby for improved social and economic conditions and a land base for Métis people in Alberta.

1938 – *Métis Population Betterment Act*

Based on the 1936 recommendations of the Ewing Commission, Alberta passes the *Métis Population Betterment Act*. This act sets aside land for Métis people. Alberta becomes the first province in Canada to enact legislation specific to Métis.

1982 – *Constitution Act*

Section 35 of the act defines who Indigenous Peoples are, recognizes Indian, Inuit, and Métis as Indigenous Peoples; and recognizes and affirms existing Indigenous and Treaty rights.

1987 – Framework Agreement

The Government of Alberta and the Métis Nation of Alberta Association sign an agreement that is the first of a series of agreements to promote the advancement of Métis people.

1990 – *Metis Settlements Act*

"The act establishes a governance system for the Metis Settlements. Title to about half a million hectares of land is transferred to the residents of eight Metis Settlements in north-central Alberta."³⁶ In addition to the *Metis Settlements Act*, other pieces of legislation were passed. The *Constitution of Alberta Amendment Act*, 1990, provides that the Legislative Assembly of Alberta cannot make a law without the agreement of the Metis Settlements General Council that would:

- amend or repeal the *Metis Settlements Land Protection Act*,
- alter or revoke the grant of the settlement lands to the Metis Settlements General Council, or dissolve the Metis Settlements General Council (or result in its being composed of persons who are not settlement members).

The *Metis Settlement Land Protection Act* ratifies the grant of lands to the Metis Settlements General Council and lays out a process to be followed if the General Council ever wants to sell the settlement lands. It also provides that settlement lands cannot be used as security and establishes processes for the Crown to acquire interests in settlement lands for public purposes. It also has provisions requiring the consent of the settlement council and the General Council for people to enter settlements to explore and develop minerals.

The *Métis Settlement Accord Land Implementation Act* is passed to establish funding provisions to facilitate the transition from the old legislation dealing with the settlements to the new legislation.

1992 – Tripartite Agreement

The Governments of Alberta and Canada participate in a tripartite process with the Métis Nation of Alberta Association (MNAA). The partners work together to:

- Create economic opportunities and promote well-being for Métis people and communities in Alberta.
- Identify mutual priorities.
- Discuss issues of common interest.
- Convey practical solutions to issues facing Métis people in Alberta.

1996 – Royal Commission on Indigenous Peoples

The report examines the social, cultural, and economic challenges Canada's First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples in Canada face and recommends far-reaching change.

2000 – Strengthening Relationships, the Government of Alberta's Indigenous Policy Framework

The first of its kind in Canada, the framework sets out the basic structure for Alberta government policies that address the needs of Indigenous Peoples in Alberta. It emphasizes well-being, self-reliance, effective consultation regarding resource and economic development, partnerships, and the clarification of roles and responsibilities.

Inuit

Alberta has a small Inuit population that comprises Inuit who have left their northern homes to live south of Latitude 60. Inuit Peoples are distinct from other Indigenous Peoples and understanding their heritage is important in developing a better understanding of all Indigenous Peoples in Alberta.

History

Inuit Peoples made the Arctic their home, managing the challenges of the climate—long periods of darkness; blizzards, snow and ice, little vegetation—in innovative ways. For example, they protected themselves with insulated, waterproof clothing made of animal skins and furs and built homes out of snow and ice or from earth, driftwood, moss, bone, skins, and rock.

Family is important. Inuit Peoples lived in small family groups that joined in camps that varied in size with the seasons. Most camps had 30 to 50 people, the perfect amount to monitor the many breathing holes in the ice that might yield a nutritious seal in the winter.³⁷

Population and communities

Inuit communities are found in Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, northern Quebec, and Labrador, with only about 10 percent of the population living outside the Arctic. Most of those who leave the Arctic choose to move to urban centres like Edmonton.³⁸

Language

Inuit speak Inuktitut. The language is expected to endure, as most people who speak it live in traditional territories that have been less affected by settlers and outside influences.³⁹

Social and economic development

Historically, Inuit people lived off the land. In the mid-1950s, mining projects and other changes resulted in the federal government promoting and providing opportunities for education and training and incentives for economic development, including co-operatives and credit unions.

Co-ops were developed to promote tourism, soapstone carving and printmaking, and many other artistic endeavours. Radio and television broadcasting also offered opportunities. In 1972, about 16 per cent of broadcasts in the north were in Inuktitut.

Inuit people living in Alberta are socially linked through such groups as Inuit Edmontonmiut, a volunteer group that aims to gather Inuit throughout Edmonton and its surrounding areas to build and nourish a sense of belonging, and to share their lives with the general Canadian public. Also, the Inuit Community Development and Education Foundation works to support the health and wellbeing of Inuit who live outside of Inuit Nunangat, and even provides country food to Inuit in the Edmonton area.

Governance

Traditionally, most Inuit groups were led by an isumataq, “one who thinks.” People chose to follow the isumataq if they thought he was a good hunter, decision-maker, and role model, and they were free to ignore his advice.⁴⁰

Inuit people did not sign treaties with the Crown and were originally not included in the *Indian Act*. They were added to the act in 1924, and the federal government took responsibility for administering programs and services for the Inuit people.

In the 1930s, declining numbers of game animals resulted in many communities facing starvation. The government instituted a relocation program, moving Inuit Peoples to permanent communities where they could access government services. But relocation brought its own hardships. For example, some communities were moved to areas where they could no longer hunt and trap in the winter because of the area’s ice patterns. The program was discontinued in the late 1970s.⁴¹

Inuit people gained the right to vote in 1950. One year later, they were excluded from the provisions of the *Indian Act*. Self-determination is important to the Inuit, just as it is for other Indigenous Peoples. When the territory of Nunavut was created in 1999, the Inuit people gained the right to be major participants in how the territory is governed. Today, the territorial government is a public government in which anyone can hold office but, because the majority of the population is Inuit, it gives Inuit people more control.⁴²

A consensus style of government is used in the Legislative Assembly of Nunavut. This is a unique form of government in Canada—only one other legislature uses consensus, and all others use the party system.

The consensus system differs from the party system in many ways. For example, MLAs are elected as independents instead of being aligned with a party, and all legislative members choose the premier and cabinet ministers. In most cases, a majority vote is required rather than unanimous agreement.⁴³

Of interest

Of Inuit descent, Edmonton's Dr. Norma Dunning won the 2021 Governor General's Award for *Tainna: The Unseen Ones*, a book of six short fictional stories. Though she did not grow up in the Arctic, she writes to dispel the perceptions of Canadian people who generally think Inuit are "standing at a seal hole with a harpoon – we are not that, we are present day people," she said. "We get up and go to work and stop at Tim Hortons." When distinct peoples are categorized as one, they become part of an imagined, fictional coalescence of stereotypes and generalizations, and lose their autonomy.

Nunavut's flag features an inuksuk and the Niqirtsuituq, or North Star, which is used to navigate. The North Star symbolizes the leadership of community Elders.



Urban communities

Indigenous people abound in Alberta's urban centres, creating cultural opportunities in the city and working in a broad range of careers. To maintain a cultural connection and share traditional values with others of like mind, many belong to organizations like friendship centres, cultural societies, and Elder's centres. Indigenous small businesses are popping up everywhere providing residents with food, clothing, and cultural activities that include dance lessons, language lessons, and camaraderie for like-minded residents.

Still, moving to the city can be a challenge and the unemployment rate for Indigenous people living in urban areas across Canada is much higher than that for non-Indigenous people in the same area. The experience of losing community and the support of social ties can make the experience stressful and unrewarding. On more isolated reserves or settlements, education and training may be unattainable, and Indigenous people face discrimination and differing values and expectations. Poverty is widespread among urban Indigenous people, and statistically, a larger percentage of Indigenous people off reserve live below the poverty line compared to non-Indigenous people.

First Nations reserves and Metis Settlements

The people living on First Nations reserves or Metis Settlements are mostly Indigenous, though some non-Indigenous people may have married into the community. Families are involved in everything from farming, ranching, and teaching school to home craft businesses, trucking firms and fashion design. You'll find a range of amenities like schools, churches, stores, health centres, radio stations, water treatment plants, sports facilities, and community centres, depending on which community you visit.

Some First Nations reserves are within or near urban centres, but most are rural. Tsuut'ina First Nation is right on Calgary's doorstep, and band members may live on the reserve, but spend their working hours downtown. Conversely, Fox Lake, a part of Little Red River Cree Nation, is an isolated community in northeastern Alberta where everyone—even small children—still speaks Cree, moose and buffalo are important sources of food, and the back-breaking process of hide tanning 'the old way' is still carried out.

All eight Metis Settlements are located in rural areas.

Life in one community differs from life in any other due to location, culture, economic development, politics, social issues, services, size, and a host of other factors. Some individuals stay in the community while others choose to leave, temporarily or permanently. Reasons for leaving include access to opportunities, including education and jobs, and the desire for an urban lifestyle.

Living in a First Nations, or a Métis or non-status community allows people to be close to family and friends and to live surrounded by their own culture. There are opportunities for hunting, fishing, and trapping, and for choosing a more traditional way of life and living according to traditional values.

Ceremonies and traditional activities are an important part of life in Indigenous communities. Though Tsuut'ina First Nation may be close to Calgary, many families have built sweat lodges in their yards, and the sun dance ceremony has been revived and practised there since 2000. Ceremonies are held for various reasons, and it is best to speak with an Elder or ceremonial leader to learn more about each one.

At the University nuhelot'jine thaiyots'j nistameyimâkanak Blue Quills culture camp you can experience four ceremonies throughout the week: the Chicken Dance, Horse Dance, Night Lodge, and Bear Ceremony. During the day, participants can attend sessions that explain each ceremony and the protocols surrounding it. Horse and wagon rides and arts and crafts round out the day. Families are invited to attend, and camping areas are available.

Ceremonies are integral to the fabric of many First Nations and Metis Settlements, meant to strengthen ties to the Creator, spirit world, and each other. During the winter, round dances are held across Alberta. Some are held to remember loved ones who have passed on, while others are celebrations of kinship and gratitude.

Indigenous youth

More than 500 generations of Indigenous people have inhabited Alberta over the more than 11,000 years that they have lived here – but it is this generation that may have the biggest effects.

The demographically driven labour shortage that is being and will continue to be experienced in Alberta and across the country, due to an aging population, is predicted to be a major opportunity for Indigenous youth. Additionally, because they make up such a large proportion of the population in Indigenous communities, youth will have opportunities related to leading community and economic development.

Alberta Future Leaders

Alberta's Future Leaders is a sport, recreation, arts, and cultural leadership program for Indigenous youth that provides healthy recreation opportunities, so they can develop life and leadership skills. The program is offered in First Nations and Métis communities across the province and funded by government, corporations, and service agencies.

Urban Society for Aboriginal Youth

This society provides essential services to Calgary's Indigenous youth, aged 12 to 29, by nurturing self-empowerment and fostering healthy collaborations and communication to ensure healthy future generations.

Young Indigenous Women's Circle of Leadership

Empowered by the sessions she attended at this University of Alberta program, one 11-year-old participant said she no longer dreads National Indigenous Peoples Day every year on June 21. "Before, the kids would make fun of me, making war whoops and stuff, but now I have the courage to say, 'You know, what you're doing is not right, and it really hurts me.'" The Circle of Leadership, once a summer program, is now offered throughout the year.

Otap imisskaan: Indigenous Youth Leadership Program

This community-based Indigenous youth outreach program, designed to inspire Indigenous youth to become future leaders and seek the leader within, is managed through the University of Calgary's Native Centre and provides three levels of certified leadership training (personal, team, and community) motivational presentations, and campus tours.

"This generation is the seventh one since the light-skinned ones came from the east. There is talk of an Eighth Fire – an eighth generation that will come forward with their knowledge connecting with the western knowledge and from this union a new people will emerge lighting the Eighth and final Fire. These New People will retrace their steps to find what was left by the trail. This will begin the golden age of peace. It is also said the light-skinned ones will come to a fork in the road at this time. One is the road of materialism and one is the road of Spirituality. If they choose the right road, then the seventh fire will light the Eighth one and there will be peace and love. If the light-skinned race makes the wrong choice, then the destruction which they brought with them in coming to this country will come back at them and cause much suffering and death to all the earth's people."

*Indigenous art and history educator
Phil Cote, Anishnaabe*

First Nations-focused post-secondary education

To help youth succeed, a number of post-secondary education institutions have been created to offer courses, programs, and services so First Nations students don't have to leave their communities.

Old Sun Community College at Siksika Nation is one example. There, the Indigenous Practical Nurse diploma program gives students knowledge and skills for practical nursing, but Indigenous culture, values, spirituality, and traditional healing methods are all part of the curriculum.

Footnotes

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