

## *We Know Who We Are: Métis Identity in a Montana Community*

Martha Harroun Foster

University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 2006. Maps, tables, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. 306 pages. \$29.95 hardcover.

Reviewed by Nicholas CP Vrooman

Given the dearth of existing titles on the Métis in the United States, it is a real pleasure to read Martha Harroun Foster's new book. Her work has untangled and explained pieces of a little-understood yet central story to Montana history. When Anglo society took hold of this state in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it committed a huge error—the aggressively unjust treatment and tragic denial of our Métis population. This book is a story of one group of Métis families who became sedentary in a specific place upon the demise of the buffalo; the town which grew around them is now known as Lewistown. Foster does a superb job of recounting those families' struggle to maintain their distinct identity amidst a most often uncaring society.

Yet I have serious concerns. Foster names her group the Spring Creek band, saying they belong to the state's "longest continuously occupied Métis settlement" (p. 4). Determining "continuous occupation" is a highly charged notion used against Aboriginal peoples (Montana Métis specifically, to this day) throughout the colonial and national period as a judicial determinate to divest land and ignore prior rights of habitation.

Historically, native communities shifted in co-relation to ever-changing environmental conditions. Is this how we want to speak of Indigenous community status of land tenure in this era? It also projects, from an external source, the "We're #1" syndrome of individual supremacy onto one native community. Even applying the insatiable American and Western craving for exceptionalism, Lewistown still is not the "longest continuously occupied Métis settlement in Montana." Suffice it to say, Métis have been living "continuously" throughout Montana since at least the 1830s and probably before.

I love Lewistown. It exists because it fits within the intrinsic unifying flow of river valleys and ancient roadways through permeable pulsating ecosystems to and fro' areas of seasonal sustenance and power on an east/west and north/south axis across the Northern Plains. Throughout these environments Aboriginal communities, including the Métis, have long lived and continue to circulate. It is all related. It still exists. It is there to be known. The Medicine Line remains mysterious.

Foster, currently Assistant Professor of History at Middle Tennessee State University, relies heavily on the work of University of California anthropologists Robert Franklin and Pamela Bunte. They were hired by the Little Shell to write the *Supplemental Evidence and Analysis in Support of Federal Acknowledgement of the Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians of Montana* in 1994. They missed crucial historical relationships and primary sources; their analysis was premature and incomplete. The Little Shell petition is unresolved today. Franklin and Bunte devised a construct they named the "Havre–Wolf Point–Lewistown Triangle" (*Supplemental Evidence*, p. 41) to describe a strong pattern of Métis family

relationships in towns across Montana's Hi-Line and down to Lewistown that "qualify" as "Indian." It formed the basis of their petition rationale. Foster takes their idea, renames it, and says, "The Spring Creek families and their relatives who remained on or returned to the Milk River formed the kinship network *that has come to be known as the Lewistown/Havre/Glasgow triangle or Lewistown/Milk River triangle* [italics reviewer's]" (p. 4). She uses this construct of relationships as the basis for her analysis. First, the (uncited) use of this anthropological consanguinity model is not in general parlance among Montana Métis; and, secondly—even if some few who've read the Little Shell federal petition might use the words made by an academic—it is a structure superimposed on a portion of the Métis community, not one that came organically from within the whole. That conceptualization of native community did not exist among Montana Métis until Franklin and Bunte put it forth. Foster, following Franklin and Bunte, perpetuates an external perception.

This book's value far outweighs my concerns. But *We Know Who We Are* will have a real impact on our interpretation of Montana history. Foster mentions that Vern Dusenberry's 1958 article, "Waiting for a Day That Never Comes: The Dispossessed Métis of Montana," in *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, "was the first scholarly work to call attention to the Montana Métis experience." She continues, "Unfortunately, it is also the only historical work devoted to the Montana Métis" (p. 12). Yet Dusenberry, himself, in that piece acknowledges Joe Howard's inspiring *Strange Empire* (1952) as a "remarkable book." And Foster, too, uses Howard's book extensively. Agreed, *Strange Empire* is more than *just* about Montana's Métis; that story cannot be told

separate from its full cultural milieu. I sense the case the author builds embodies not only an American and Western exceptionalism in perspective, but also a personal exceptionalism. The University of Oklahoma Press notice on the book's release in February 2006 states *We Know Who We Are* is "the first book-length work to focus on the Montana Métis." Exceptionalism pervades and limits this story that, as Joe Howard and Vern Dusenberry both knew, is communitarian at heart.

Foster goes on to name others "who have studied the Little Shell Chippewas, a group that is closely related to the Métis" (p. 12). My gosh, they are the Montana Métis, along with many descendants of the Little Bear and Stone Child bands of Cree and Chippewa, and numerous Montana Assiniboinés, Blackfeet, Crow, Gros Ventre, Salish, and Kootenai. Many of these people's ancestors were part of a larger, fully integrated cultural, political, and economic alliance, based on family ties and known as the Nehiyaw Pwat (in Cree). Foster misses the Aboriginal take completely.

The introduction to her study closes with what's been done to date in the field by stating "no work has examined the Montana Métis at length or explored the relationship of their history to that of Canada or the United States" (p. 13). Beyond the long existence of *Strange Empire*, which is heralded as the book that put the story in international perspective, there is in fact a major cooperative Canada-United States publication titled, *Métis Legacy: A Métis Historiography and Annotated Bibliography* (Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications, 2001, 512 pages) that covers exactly that ground. In it, Foster has a short essay on the Lewistown Métis. She includes it in her bibliography (though never footnoted).

Additionally, *Métis Legacy* is of, by, and for the Métis and scholars, published by Canada's premier Aboriginal press, with funding from numerous high profile U.S. and Canadian cultural and educational institutions.

I emphasize the introduction in this critique because it's there that Foster sets up her take on the topic. Her closing paragraphs are telling. After explaining her use of lower case "métis" as meaning "all people of mixed American Indian and European descent," she states that

The term "Métis" with a capital "M," refers, more specifically, to an ethnic or social group that is, or is in the process of becoming, distinguishable from others. I do not intend to make a statement as to the date that the Métis people became an identifiable ethnic group. Ethnogenesis is a process, and I find it counterproductive to attempt to determine an exact moment when a group fits a specific definition and qualifies, in some way, as an ethnic group. Therefore, in this paper, "Métis" is used to refer to those people of mixed-Indian descent who take part in the process leading to a distinct Métis ethnic development (p. 14).

I think this is the crux of my discomfort. She mistakes national for ethnic identity. What distinguishes upper case "Métis" from all other mixed Indio-Euro-Africans in the North American experience is that this specific group of mixed bloods on the Northern Plains at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century

came to nationhood right in the midst of the hemispheric independence movements. Just as Americans (comprised of numerous ethnicities) came to be at "an exact moment," July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1776, the Métis (also a people of multiple ethnicities) came to be on June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1816, at a place called Seven Oaks, outside the settlement of Red River, now Winnipeg. A battle occurred there that coalesced Métis political identity. It was Canada's Lexington and Concord. The Métis sided with the Canadians (Nor'West Company), in opposition to the Crown (Hudson's Bay Company). Later, in 1869–1870, the Métis created their own independent nation, the New Nation, that subsequently secured Canadian Confederation when they negotiated terms for inclusion as the Province of Manitoba. Again, in 1884–1885 the Métis sought to gain territorial enfranchisement in Saskatchewan through the misunderstood Northwest Rebellion. More accurately it was a resistance by a sovereign people in defense of their human as well as citizenship rights. The Métis are not "those people of mixed-Indian descent who take part in the process leading to a distinct Métis ethnic development." The Métis are, and have been "distinguishable from others" for almost 200 years, as a sovereign people. Their ethnogenesis was the two hundred years prior to that. That is what the Little Shell fight is all about: sovereignty, not ethnic identity. They have long known who they are.

Yet *We Know Who We Are* is a noble work. It moves the discourse of Métis rights and aspirations within the United States to the next level. In this era of Montana's "Indian Education for All," Foster's book is timely, important, and extremely helpful as evidence reinforcing policy decisions to include the Métis—still shunned. We have direly needed a clear and cogent telling of who,

what, why, when, and wherefore the Métis in Montana. Here is a significant piece of the story.

In praise of Foster, this is great micro-history with hard-working topnotch analysis of local records, census data, treaties, and genealogy. She does an amazing job telling the story of central Montana's Métis. Furthermore, she has made an incredible contribution by clarifying a century's worth of confusion surrounding the debacle of governmental dealings with American Métis. As all politics are local, all history is personal. Foster's

tracking a group of families from the late 18<sup>th</sup> through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century gives us one of the best historical accounts we now have of the movements of peoples over time and place that came to comprise a root element of Montana society. There is astonishing work here. Don't let my rant keep a soul from picking up this book. To everyone interested in the missing link to the formation of our society: Go get Martha Harroun Foster's *We Know Who We Are: Métis Identity in a Montana Community*. It has just taken its place as a "must read" for Montana history.