**History Matters: Round Prairie Métis made Saskatoon their home in early 20th Century**

By Bill Waiser – Saskatoon Star Phoenix, April 26, 2017

http://thestarphoenix.com/opinion/columnists/history-matters-round-prairie-metis-made-saskatoon-their-home-in-early-20th-century

It’s often assumed that indigenous people did not settle in Saskatchewan cities until after the Second World War. That certainly was not the case for Saskatoon.

Beginning in the early 20th century, Métis families from Round Prairie began migrating to the city in search of employment. Thirty years later, the community had effectively relocated to the southern edges of the city.

This movement to Saskatoon was not the first time the Métis had left their traditional lands along the east bank of the South Saskatchewan River in the Dundurn area. Fearing retribution for their involvement in the 1885 North-West Rebellion, the Métis had sought refuge in Montana and remained there for almost two decades.

When the families returned to Round Prairie in 1903-04, they found that the region that had once been ideal bison-hunting grounds was generally poorly suited for agriculture. Some families tried farming the marginal land, while others carved out a hardscrabble living through traditional harvesting, serving as farm labour for white settlers, or cutting cordwood and fence posts.

This marginal existence prompted Métis families to look to Saskatoon — just 40 kilometres to the north — for better opportunities. It was not an unrealistic expectation. The “Wonder City,” as Saskatoon styled itself, was booming before the Great War. Then, the real estate bubble burst in 1912-13, and the city limped through several decades of uneven growth.

The downturn in Saskatoon’s economic fortunes did not deter the Round Prairie Métis from heading to the city in the 1920s and 1930s. Low-paying and part-time work was better than the limited horizons they faced.

The Métis occupied property on both sides of the river on the southern outskirts of the city. Some moved into available housing in the King George and Holiday Park areas. Many more lived in tents in the Nutana district, south of present-day Eighth Street. The one major exception was the Landry family in one of the “three sisters” brick homes on York Avenue — a residence that only became available because of the collapse of the boom.

By living on the edge of the city, the Métis were able to settle close to one another as large extended families, organized around female elders. They could also continue to hunt and harvest food on land immediately to the south.

But their location reflected their marginal place in Saskatoon society. School-aged children, for example, learned to hide their Métis identity, including their Roman Catholic faith, in order to avoid being ostracized.

The Métis also encountered hostility, if not outright racism, when they sought government assistance during the Depression.  Saskatoon civic officials maintained that destitute Métis families had no right to relief since they were not normally residents of the city and would never become ratepayers.

Charlotte Whitton, a widely respected Canadian social worker and future mayor of Ottawa, agreed with this assessment. Asked in May 1932 to examine relief distribution in western Canada, she blamed “the breed” for their condition and found it “hardly justifiable” that they qualified for the same relief as “the ordinary population.”

A proud, independent people, the Métis survived these dismal years as best they could. The men were willing to do any odd job, including hauling with their horses and wagons. A lucky few managed to get work on some of the city’s relief projects, in particular the Broadway Bridge.

Women, in the meantime, often worked as housekeepers in private homes and hotels. They also fell back on traditional pursuits, including planting large community gardens at the present-day site of Aden Bowman Collegiate (Taylor Street and Clarence Avenue).

These gardens served an important social role by bringing several generations together. So too did the regular community dances and Saskatoon’s annual exhibition. Indeed, this emphasis on kinship and identity helps explain the persistence of the Round Prairie Métis in a place that did not welcome them.

Saskatoon-born Nora Cummings, a descendant of the Round Prairie hunting families, explained during an interview that the Métis always viewed themselves as members of one community even after they moved to the city. If they were going to survive as a distinct people, especially when the South Saskatchewan River separated them into east and west side Métis, then family connections had to be nurtured and affirmed. That’s why, she fondly remembered, “There was always lots of visiting back and forth across the Broadway Bridge.”