

Winter on the Prairie: Lower Fort Garry, 1859

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Every year more than 100,000 persons briefly revisit part of Canada's past at Lower Fort Garry, Selkirk, Manitoba, 30 kilometres from Winnipeg, on the shores of the historic Red River.

To step through the stone walls into the spacious grounds and walk among the buildings of this expertly restored fur-trading post is to glimpse life as it was on the frontiers of civilization 125 years ago.

The furnishings, costumes and fittings of a nineteenth-century Hudson's Bay Company post have been retrieved or copied to evoke the atmosphere of a period when the Canadian West was still very young and relatively little known.

One of the best accounts of life at Lower Fort Garry occurs in a memoir *Father of St. Kilda*, by Roderick Campbell, published in 1901.

Its subtitle *Twenty years in isolation in the sub-arctic territory of the Hudson's Bay Company*, indicates the extent to which that area was then considered remote and undeveloped. The following extracts from the book describe everyday life at the Fort:

"Lower Fort Garry, as I found it in 1859, certainly showed outward signs of future prosperity, however misty its past history might have been.

"As I climbed to the top of the high river bank I found before me the Stone Fort, so called because its houses and loopholed wall were actually built of stone, and in this were unique in my company's vast domain. Its buildings were shops and stores, with dwelling-houses for the company's officers and servants.

"The whole fort was arranged in the form of a parallelogram surrounded by a wall 12 feet high. At each of the four corners was a bastion pierced for guns, like the turrets of the old Scottish embattled castles.

"At that time the fort was the station at which, during the summer, boat brigades were outfitted for Fort York or other posts inland. Besides, a very large farm had been brought under cultivation in the immediate vicinity. The task of surveying this farm in acres was my test service for the company.

"The experiment in agriculture proved most encouraging, and the harvest was

everything that could be desired. The golden-tinted wheat, the plump round barley, the capital potatoes and turnips, soon showed the fertile capabilities of the Red River Valley.

"The residents in the fort formed a very lively community by themselves. They had regular hours for the dispatch of business, and afterwards, to beguile the tedium of the long sub-Arctic nights, they met together for a few hours' jollification, when old Scottish songs were sung in voices cracked and sharpened by the cold northern blasts.

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"On the whole, I soon made up my mind that the place was but a bit of the ruder civilisation thrown haphazard into the wilds.

"Its population consisted of four principal elements: first, the descendants of the early French traders, or voyageurs, who intermarried with the Indians and were the progenitors of the Métis or Bois-brûlés....

"The second element, akin to the first, was provided by the descendants of the company's servants, mostly Scotsmen from Orkney and the other islands who also had married native wives....

"The third element was the Sutherland, Kildonan and Selkirk colony, who lived in the parish of that name, and were in easy circumstances. The warm, hospitable instincts of their race still lingered



in their Scottish bosoms.

"The fourth group were the Swampy Indians, who had somehow managed to make their way up from the Bay, and settle between Lower Fort Garry and Lake Winnipeg. They too were polite and kind in disposition.

"I might have included as a fifth element a native Indian population of two or three thousand. There were two distinct groups of these, the Ojibway and the Salteaux, ruled over by five chiefs....

"To save us all, red and white alike, from ourselves, there were no less than ten Roman Catholic, eight Church of England, and four Presbyterian places of worship within the legally defined limits of the colony.

"Our officials, when they wished to become Benedicts, often married Indian girls. Many, however, did not care to do so, and would petition the company to select wives for them and send them out by the next boat. Their wishes were, as a rule, complied with, and the selection was nearly always satisfactory. Among the archives of the company are found receipts from factors running thus: 'Received *per* Lapwing, Jane Goody, as *per* invoice, in good trim' and 'Received *per* Osprey, Matilda Timpins, returned *per* Lapwing as not being in accordance with description contained in invoice.'

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"After some skirmishes between autumn and winter, snow and frost laid hold of the ground sufficiently to enable the annual northern packet to leave the fort for the northern districts. The first stretch was 350 miles over the ice on Lake Winnipeg to Norway House.

"The party set out on December 10, and the means of transit were in the first place sledges, drawn by splendid dogs, and in the second snowshoes. These sledges (of Indian design) were drawn by four dogs to each, and carried a burden of 600 to 700 pounds. With such a load they travelled 40 miles a day.

"They traversed the frozen lake in eight days, running at a quick jogtrot from long before daybreak until dusk, when a frozen whitefish, about two pounds in weight, was thrown to each dog.

"At the end of this stage the packet was overhauled and repacked, one portion for the Saskatchewan and the far-off Mackenzie districts. For this, new sets of packet-bearers travelled eastward, westward and northward."