



Village of St. Eustache

Fort Rouge

Map of Saint-Eustache, Manitoba

Memories of Metis Women of Saint-Eustache, Manitoba¹ – 1910-1980

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Introductory Comments

In an article entitled "Hired Men: Ontario Agricultural Wage Labour in Historical Perspective"² Joy Parr wrote the following, telling, words:

Scholars too have claimed that from the beginnings of the province, agriculturalists' desire for independence combined with the rigorous seasonality of rural work to determine that "no hierarchical labour organization would persist in Canadian agriculture."³ Yet in each successive generation from the settlement phase onward, rural wage labourers have been essential to the functioning of the province's persistent and unmistakably hierarchical agricultural system. Through two centuries of clearing, tilling, seeding, and harvesting, the relationships between land and labour and capital and labour have changed, but the reality of the rural hierarchy has been as enduring as the season.⁴

The 'rural hierarchy' examined by Parr for Ontario also existed and endured in the Prairie region of Canada. Census data available since 1891 reveal that hired men, over the age of fourteen, were always an important

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1. I would like to thank the Manitoba Heritage Federation Inc. and the University of Ottawa for their financial support during fieldwork in Saint-Eustache. I would also like to thank Philip A. Beaudin for his help in creating phonetic transcription of the interviews.
 2. J. Parr, "Hired Men: Ontario Agricultural Wage Labour in Historical Perspective," *Labour/Le Travail*, 15 (Spring 1985): 91-103.
 3. H. Clare Pentland, *Labour and Capital in Canada 1650-1860* (Toronto 1981), 59 cited in *ibid.*, p. 91.
 4. Parr, "Hired," 91-92.

component of farm labour on the Prairie; they represented 13% (6,000) of all rural workers in 1891, 19.4% (84,000) in 1931 and 14.1% (46,000) in 1951.⁵ Yet, standard histories of North American agriculture have had difficulty probing beyond the positivist myth that surround the 'Family Farm'. Few studies discuss in any detail the existence of an impoverished underclass of rural wage workers. Even oral history projects dealing with rural inhabitants have tended to be celebratory; charting the progress of a community since its pioneering days without much regard or analysis to the price paid by some individuals for this 'success.' Or, other rural oral history projects have been apocalyptic lamenting the demise of the Family Farm again without much regard for the consequences of this economic and social restructuring for people other than the owners of farms or the businesses that service them.⁶

What is missing in many of the previous studies is an analysis of the 'other'. Those non-proprietors who had a crucial role in the creation and the maintenance of a rural economy that has endured, albeit with many changes and crises, till today. To progress, agricultural studies, especially those with an oral history component, must go beyond the public discourse and critically examine the life experiences of a rural proletariat that has, in the Prairie Region, existed for well over a hundred years. Even the official statistics quoted above do not yield a clear picture since only 'males over the age of 14' are counted. The participation of children and women in the wage labour rural economy is invisible with this type of counting. Yet, the narratives of eight women presented below clearly indicate that the paid labour of women and children was an important component of 20th century agriculture practices. Beyond this, the narratives also show that ethnic and racial identities, in this case Metis, played a role in the perpetuation of a rural labouring class. These women, and their families, are part of a much broader social category, composed of impoverished agrarian wage labourers, that spans the interior of North America. The Metis women discussed below have more in common with the Mexican and Chicano migrant workers of the USA than with their farm-owning neighbours. These *Métisses*, their parents, grandparents and, in some cases, their children, like

5. Recalculated from M.C. Urquhart and K.A.H. Buckley, *Historical Statistics of Canada* (Toronto 1965), 355.

6. Lu Ann Jones and Nancy Grey Osterud, "Breaking New Ground: Oral History and Agricultural History," *The Journal of American History*, 76 (September 1989): 553.

their southern counterparts, have been caught in a rural agrarian hierarchy that has them firmly at the bottom of the social scale by economic and racial means.

The Historical Setting

The village of Saint-Eustache is situated near the heartland of the territory occupied by the White Horse Plains Metis. It is an offshoot of the older, nearby settlements of Baie Saint-Paul, Saint-François-Xavier and, a bit further to the east, Saint-Charles. The Assiniboine River which runs to the North of the village was one of the main tributaries used by natives and by white traders for transportation and trade from Red River to the Qu'Appelle Valley and westward. Company employees and others associated with the fur trade began early on to congregate along its shores and those of its tributaries. There are signs of occupation along the wooded banks from the early eighteen hundreds. The White Horse Plains Metis, besides working for the fur companies as tripmen or freighters, were heavily involved in buffalo hunting, throughout the 19th century.

Saint-Eustache itself was established at the end of the nineteenth century. Its very first occupants were former residents of the Baie Saint-Paul settlement trying to escape repeated flooding of the Assiniboine river. Though its size has varied over the years Saint-Eustache has had an average population of about 500 people of either Metis or French Canadian origin. The village has always known certain ethnic divisions that reflect themselves in the settlement pattern. Until recently, impoverished Metis families congregated in what was derisively called *Fort Rouge*. This was a small agglomeration situated on the eastern fringes of the village on the 'wrong' side of the Coulee du Moulin. The core of the village contained a mixture of slightly better off Metis and some French Canadian families. The well-to-do farmers, enviously called *les habitants* by the Fort Rouge residents, had their land holdings all around Saint-Eustache but were perceived as residing largely to the west of the village.

The Metis Families

With some exceptions, discussed below, the majority of the Metis families living in and around Saint-Eustache during the first half of the twentieth century originated from the Saint-Francois-Xavier settlement. They left their parish lots in the 1870s and the 1880s; part of a much larger

movement that saw hundreds of members of these old fur trade families resettle in the Northwest namely in the Qu'Appelle Lake settlement, the Fort Ellice area and, some, in the Batoche area of present day Saskatchewan.⁷ Some family branches chose a more nearby Manitoba relocation, such as Saint-Eustache, Saint-Laurent and Oak Point.⁸ For the Saint-Eustache area this last group appears to have been made up mostly of the more impoverished elements of the White Horse Plains Metis. Surveys such as those conducted by the Hudson Bay Company in 1835 and by ecclesiastical authorities during the 1868 Red River colony famine show these families to have had few horses, oxen or cultivated acres. They were part of a socio-economic class described by Gerhard Ens as largely composed of 'tripmen' who survived the long prairie winters mostly on advances provided by the HBCo for the next canoeing or freighting season.⁹

Once settled in the Saint-Eustache the Metis families became differentiated into two groups. The 'village' Metis and the 'Fort Rouge' Metis. Both groups saw themselves, and were perceived, as being 'Metis' but the former group was considered by the community at large and by its members as slightly better off economically and, generally, socially more acceptable. An analysis of the family backgrounds of women respondents from both these groups is made further in this paper in an attempt to understand how this cleavage occurred and how it perpetuated itself.

The Narrators

Twenty interviews were conducted in Saint-Eustache, Manitoba between 1992 and 1994. Nine were with Metis women, eight of which had been born in Saint-Eustache and had spent the bulk of their lives there. The ninth was with a woman also born in the village but whose family had migrated in the 1910s, along with several others, to take up homesteads in the San Clara, Manitoba region. The eight women whose narratives were examined for this article are, in alphabetical order, Alma Richard née Branconnier (b.1911), Bertha McKay née Carrière (b.1910), Imelda St-Cyr née Larocque (b.1924), Irene Ducharme née Lécuyer (b.1915), Virginie

7. Marcel Giraud, *Le Métis Canadien: son rôle dans l'histoire des provinces de l'Ouest* (Paris 1945), 1137.

8. Giraud, *Le Métis Canadien*, 1137.

9. Gerhard J. Ens, *Homeland to Hinterland: the Changing Worlds of the Red River Metis in the Nineteenth Century* (Toronto, 1996), 136.

St-Cyr née McKay (b.1914), Graziela Piché née Paul (b.1917), Marianne McKay née St-Cyr (b.1911), Victoria McKay née St-Cyr (1912).

Family Backgrounds

Four interviews were made with women from the village metis families. Though the life stories of all four echo each other the origin of one, Bertha Carrière, differs from the rest slightly.

The Carrière clan originates from the Saint-Norbert settlement along the Red River. At some point, Bertha Carrière's great-grandfather, Daniel Sn, left Saint-Norbert to take up land in Saint-Charles. After the 1870 transfer he claimed and was recognised as the occupant of lot 33, 98 acres, for which he received a land patent in 1882. At some point the family moved to Saint-Eustache and, in the 1916 Tax Assessment Roles for the municipality of Cartier, the grandfather, Daniel Jn, was listed as a 'farmer owner resident' in ward six (Saint-Eustache area) owning 3 horses, 4 cows, 8 pigs and cultivating 10 of 112 acres of land. His son, Bertha's father William Carrière, owned 110 acres also in ward 6 and he cultivated fifty of these. This family differs from the other metis families of the community by having no direct link with Saint-Francois-Xavier and by being part of the 19th century Red River metis elite. However, this relative affluence would not carry over to Bertha's generation. None of the brothers and sisters married into the French-Canadian farming families of the area and most of the family's wealth was lost during the 1930s depression. In 1937, Bertha Carrière would marry Donald McKay, a Fort Rouge Metis. Her life would then resemble that of other impoverished Metis women of the area.

The other three village respondents, Graziela Paul, Irene Lécuyer and Alma Branconnier all come from old Saint-François-Xavier families. However, Irene Lécuyer's great-grandfather and grandfather had spent several years in Assumption, North Dakota and the families of several great uncles and aunts still reside there. None of the men appear to have worked under contract for the HBC and no river lots are listed as being occupied by them after 1870. Though the Paul and Branconnier paternal ancestors are listed as having cultivated land, cattle, horses and carts in the 1835 Survey, none of the paternal grandparents had river lots patented in their name after 1870. By 1916, the fathers of Graziela and Irene are listed as labourers, the first as a squatter on his father-in-law's land and the second as occupying land designated as a Road Allowance. Eventually Irene Lécuyer's mother, a schoolteacher from France, would buy 20 acres thus easing family

poverty. Only Jean-Baptiste Branconnier is listed in 1916 as the owner-occupant of four acres but none of it was labelled 'cultivated' and no farm animals are noted.

Again with the exception of Bertha Carrière the village respondents describe their fathers as having been agricultural labourers and winter wood cutters. Irene Lécuyer notes:

Il travaillait comme tous les autres. Il avait pas d'éducation. Il travaillait chez les farmers. On avait un peu d'animaux. Il faisait du foin. Ça vendait du foin, ça vendait du bois...

He worked like the others. He had no education. He worked for the farmers. We had some animals. He made hay. He sold hay. He sold wood.¹⁰

Alma Branconnier's voice still rings with indignation, decades later, when recounting her father's last winter job:

Oui à la journée un peu partout. Il était travaillant boy! Quatre journées avant qu'il meurt il fardochoit pour Fretton. Tu te rappelles quand ils avaient la terre... sur le bord du chemin. Il a été déraciner un arbre. Y a fait un trou plus gros que la table... à quatre pattes... le 20 février. Le lendemain y a attrapé une pneumonie. La dernière souche qui a déterré. À cette heure c'est easy y'ont toutes des engins!

Yes, he worked days everywhere. He was a worker boy! Four days before he died he was removing stumps for Fretton. You remember when they had the land ... near the road. He uprooted a tree. There was a hole as big as the table ... on his hands and knees ... February 20. The next day he caught pneumonia. The last stump he ever uprooted. Now it is easy. They have the machines.¹¹

The narrators maternal origins are slightly more diverse. Bertha Carrière's mother, Marie Rose Hogue, also came from a relatively well off Saint-Charles family. The grandfather, Louis Hogue, claimed and received patents for two river lots. As mentioned above, Irene Lécuyer's mother was a teacher from France who occasionally received money from her parents. Alma Branconnier's mother, Alice Paul, was a woman from the Saint-François-Xavier Paul clan who was largely raised in a convent after the death of her own mother. The mother of Graziela Paul, Marie Therese

10. Irene Lécuyer, transcript (phonetic transcription), 4.

11. Alma Branconnier, transcript (phonetic transcription), 5.

Lussier, was born in 1887, on a river lot occupied and owned by her father Toussaint Lussier.

The four respondents from the Fort Rouge area of Saint-Eustache are all members of the two large clans, the McKay and the St-Cyr, that settled there. Both these families have links to the Athabasca region of the Northwest. Virginie McKay's maternal great-great-grandfather, Ignace McKay, worked as a guide and steersman in that area. His daughter, Justine, became the first wife of Jean-Baptiste St-Cyr, the descendant of an old Athabasca metis family. All the St-Cyr's living in the Saint-Eustache area today are the descendants of either this union or of Jean-Baptiste's second union with Flavie Larocque of Saint-François-Xavier. The two St-Cyr sisters interviewed, Marie-Anne and Victoria, are the daughters of Elzear St-Cyr whose parents were the above-mentioned Jean-Baptiste St-Cyr and his second wife Flavie Larocque. In the 1835 census Ignace McKay, the occupant of lot 81 in Saint François-Xavier, owned three cattle and farmed four acres. His son, Pierre McKay Sn, Virginie's great-grandfather, claimed lot 5 in Baie Saint-Paul but did not receive a patent. However by 1916 he would be listed in the tax assessment rolls as the owner occupant of 33 acres, none of it cleared, covering what is now called Fort Rouge. Family lore recalls that when Pierre Sn came to Saint-Eustache "he took out a one sixty [acres]". He and his son Pierre McKay Jn parcelled out small plots to the other members of the extended family [both McKay and St-Cyr]. The fourth woman interviewed was Imelda Larocque, daughter of Daniel Larocque, of Saint-Francois-Xavier, and Eleonore McKay, the daughter of Pierre McKay Sn. Interestingly, Imelda Larocque married Alex St-Cyr whose grandmother, Flavie Larocque, was in fact Imelda's father's aunt. This is but one example of the complex web of kinship ties that exist in the Fort Rouge families.

When discussing the economic activities of the parents of the Fort Rouge respondents it is immediately apparent that life was difficult even though all three [counting the two sisters as one] had some small acreage. Imelda Laroque never knew her father who died when she was six. She was the youngest of eight children and her mother was able to support those still living at home by working as a house cleaner and cook in nearby farms. Imelda comments that what got them through the winter was her mother's "beautiful garden and great canning." Her two sisters-in-law, Marie-Anne and Victoria St-Cyr, comment that their father was a labourer and a hunter.

Ah mon doux seigneur, il faisait toutes sortes d'affaires. On avait-tu de la misère. Ya longtemps. Il travaillait... la chasse aux lièvres, les rats d'eau, les

canards [worked for wages?] Ah ben il travaillait à gâges pour les Chabot eux autres, les stooks¹²... il stookait, il faisait des gâges comme ça. [in winter?] Y avait pas d'ouvrage, pans toute. Il faisait la chasse. Y a tué assez des lièvres, on mangeait de la graisse pis de la galette pour déjeuner. Ça faisait dur y'a longtemps!

*Oh my god, he did all sorts of things. We had hard times. Long ago. He worked ... hunted rabbits, muskrats, ducks ... He worked for wages for the Chabot, them, the stooks ... he stooked. He got money like that. In winter he had no work, nothing. He hunted. He killed enough rabbits, we ate lard and bannock for breakfast. It was hard long ago!*¹³

In some ways Virginie McKay perhaps had the most difficult of childhood being one of three daughters of an unwed mother, Adeline Marie McKay, the daughter of Pierre McKay Jn. Her mother worked 'in the fields' most of her life.

Combien de fois que Freddie [Beaudin] a engagé ma mère... Même a faisait l'ouvrage des hommes... avec Marianna... C'était une petite mais dem aussi c'était une travaillante! Ça travaillait tout le temps ensemble. Des fois ça ramassait les racines. Ben foullait que ça travaille avec la hache pour couper les racines. Ah ben y'ont tu fait de l'ouvrage je suppose. Pis ca stookait, ça prenait des jobs...je me rappelle ça passait en wagon...ça emmenait leur lunchs, ça mangeait la-bas. Ça en faisait encore. Des fois ça travaillait tard le soir. C'était a la fraîcheur hein. Ça stookait. Ça prenait ça à l'acre.

*How many times Freddie Beaudin hired my mom ... She even did men's work ... with Marianna ... she was small but damn she was a worker! They worked all the time together. Sometimes they would gather the roots (i.e. clear fields). Well, they had to work with an axe. Well they did a lot of work, I suppose. They also stooked, they would take contracts ... I remember they would go in a wagon ... they would bring their lunches, ate there. Then they would work some more. They worked till late at night. It was cool then. They stooked. They took it by the acre.*¹⁴

However living with her mother and two sisters in their grandfather's house offered some compensation. Though not a farmer, Pierre McKay Jn, did spend a lot of time growing a large garden and taking care of several fruit trees that produced large 'blue' plums. He also had chickens, turkeys,

12. Stooks: an old English word used to describe a group of sheaves set upright in a field to allow the grain to dry.

13. Marie-Anne St-Cyr, transcript (phonetic transcription), 3.

14. Virginie McKay, transcript (phonetic transcription), 6.

horses and a milk cow. Perhaps this life style was financed by the selling off of parcels of land. Such actions might explain the latent animosity members of the St-Cyr family express towards Virginie McKay. They had been obliged to buy their lots from Pierre McKay Sn and Jn.

Childhood and Adolescence

The socio-economic status of the parents do not appear to differ greatly in the narrators different descriptions. It becomes a question of degrees of poverty. However, childhood experiences between the village and Fort Rouge women do. What becomes immediately apparent is the marked differences in the degree of formal education received by both sets of women.

Bertha Carrière comments that she went to school to age fourteen. In her last year, grade seven, she went to school in the morning and stayed at home 'to help' in the afternoon. When asked why she stopped Bertha associates herself to the French Canadian farm children.

[all stopped at 14?] *La plupart arrêtaît, oui. Ils savaient pas qu'est ce que c'était être instruite dans ce temps là. C'était tout des fermiers. Pis y avait besoin des enfants pour travailler. Chez nous y avait rien que deux garçons, le plus vieux et le plus jeune. Le reste c'était toutes des filles, huit. Y fallait qu'on remplace les garçons. On travaillait dans les champs...*

Most stopped, yes. They did not know what it was to be educated back then. They were all farmers. They needed the children to work. Us, there were only two boys, the oldest and the youngest. The rest were all girls, eight. We had to replace the boys. We worked in the fields.¹⁵

Irene Lécuyer also stopped school at age fourteen, part way through grade eight, to help at home and later on to work in farmers fields.

The other two village women spent much less time in the schoolroom than their counterparts. Graziela Paul attended school sporadically till age thirteen. She had to stay home to take care of her younger sibling while her mother worked as a cook in the Saint-Eustache convent where 35 novitiates and 'several' nuns resided. When she was 13 her parents sent her to the nearby Elie convent as a working boarder. She worked there till she was 18 in exchange for room, board, clothes and minimal schooling.

15. Bertha Carrière, transcript (phonetic transcriptin), 13.

J'ai été à l'école, quand j'ai rentré au couvent, quand j'avais la chance, à peu près une heure par jour. Il fallait que je travaille parce que les sœurs gardaient des pensionnaires. Y avait à peu près une quarantaine de pensionnaires, tout ben, plus. Il fallait que je lave la vaisselle, nettoyer la cuisine, aider faire la cuisine, même des fois le lavage, toute sortes d'affaires... Y payaient pas. C'était juste pour ma nourriture pis mon linge. Pour à rien... Pis les habitants il fallait qui donnent de la viande pour payer pour leurs enfants pour mettre au couvent après l'école. Y en a qui donnait la 'moqué' d'un cochon, quelque chose comme ça. Ça fait que nous autres on prenait la viande puis on faisait de la saucisse, toutes sortes d'affaires. Je regrette pas le couvent parce que j'ai appris à canner, j'ai appris à coudre, j'ai appris à faire toutes sorte d'affaires.

I went to school, when I went to the convent, when I had the chance, maybe one hour a day. I had to work because the nuns kept boarders. There were maybe forty borders, maybe more. I had to wash the dishes, clean the kitchen, help with the cooking, sometimes do the washing, all sorts of things ... they did not pay. It was just for my food and my clothes. For nothing ... and the farmers, they had to give meat to pay for their children's board after school. Some gave half a pig, something like that. That meant that we had to take the meat and make sausages, all sorts of things. I don't regret my convent days because I learned to can, I learned to sew, I learned all sorts of things.¹⁶

Alma Branconnier went to school only till the age of twelve. After that she was placed on the farm of a French canadian farmer, Raymond Senecal, to help in the house and barnyard for two dollars a month. Her father came and collected the money every month. She states frankly that she did not like school but that she cried the first few days of working on the farm. Asked why she was put to work so young she responds frankly:

[parents needed money?] I guess. Quand t'a six enfants pis un homme et une femme autour de la table. Rien que un homme qui travaille pour une piastre par jour. On était huit pour manger!

I guess. When you have six children and a man and a woman around the table. And only one man working for one dollar a day. We were eight who had to eat!¹⁷

16. Graziela Paul, transcript (phonetic transcription), 16.

17. Alma Branconnier, 7.

Alma continued to give her wages to her father up until her marriage. She notes she felt obligated to contribute especially after the death of her mother from birth complications when Alma was seventeen.

All four women from the village finished at least the equivalent of grade six. Though none express much enthusiasm for their convent education there is little overt hostility. It was a far different experience for the Fort Rouge women.

The two sisters, Marie-Anne and Victoria St-Cyr, only attended school till grade three. Poverty seemed to have been the number one obstacle to pursuing an education. Marie-Anne stated simply that there were not enough winter clothes for all the children. Victoria also blamed the racist attitudes of the French Canadian farm kids.

J'ai arrêté au grade trois. J'a pas appris grand chose... On avait de la misère pour le linge, le manger, les sandwichs, des affaires de même... On venait pas à l'école tous les jours; à pied, au bout là-bas à peu près un mille, un petit brin plus. Je te dis quand t'est pas bien habillé, pis aller à l'école... [laughed at you?] Oui, les petits canayens c'est assez haïssable... Je m'en rappelle le frère à Pascal, Joe-Louis, lui tout avait de la misère pour les sandwichs, hein, pis y avait des choutièmes, mashait ça les choutièmes, pis s'avait de l'air la couleur de beurre. Il faisait des sandwichs avec ça, pis les p'tits canayens s'en vient, "Avec cossai t'a beurré à matin?". "Du Beurre!" C'était des choutièmes! Je te le dis il étaient "viniènes," les Rivard pis les Lachance. On a mangé de la galette pis de la graisse...il fallait bien. On avait rien que ça.

I stopped in grade three. I did not learn much ... we had trouble for clothing, food, sandwiches, stuff like that ... We did not go to school every day; on foot, a mile away. I tell you when you are not dressed ... and going to school, the French Canadians were hurtful ... I remember Pascal's brother, Joe-Louis, he had problems with the sandwiches, eh, and they had turnips, he mashed those turnips up. They were the colour of butter. He made sandwiches with that. The little French Canadians would come 'with what did you butter today?' 'Butter!'. It was turnips! I tell you they were mean the Rivard and the Lachance. We ate bannock and lard. That is all we had.¹⁸

Their sister-in-law, Imelda Larocque went to school till grade four. All three, along with most of their siblings and spouses are in fact functionally illiterate.

18. Victoria St-Cyr, transcript (phonetic transcription), 5.

The fourth Fort Rouge resident, Virginie McKay, went to school up until grade eight. As noted above she was the daughter of a single mother but her maternal grandfather, Pierre McKay Jn, was somewhat better off than the other residents of Fort Rouge. She comments she finished grade eight but did not continue because grade nine and ten were given in the convent of Elie and there was not enough money to send her. Unlike the others, Virginie did not work for farmers after leaving school but rather worked as a cook in the Mayfair Hotel in Portage La Prairie. Despite having completed what education was given in Saint-Eustache she, like the other Fort Rouge residents, felt bitterness towards the French Canadian segment of the population.

Ben, avant t'étais Métis pis c'était toute. T'étais rien, t'étais Métis. Encore ben pire nous autres, on était des bâtards. C'est ça que la sœur disait, la sœur Wilfried aussi là. Ça fait que... Moi je ne me suis pas laissé là, je me débattais toujours, ben...

*Well, before, you were Metis and that was all. You were nothing. You were Metis. It was worst for us because we were bastards. That is what the sister said, sister Wilfried also. Therefor ... me, I never stayed there, I always struggled, so ...*¹⁹

Early Adulthood

All four village women had parallel experiences after leaving school. They worked for farmers either in their homes or in the barns milking cows. Bertha McKay also worked for a time as a cleaner and nurse's aid at the Saint-Boniface Hospital. Alma Branconnier, as noted above, started working for farmers at the age of twelve. Both Graziela Paul and Irene Lécuyer also worked for farmers. Irene Lécuyer is the only one of the four who began to work directly in the fields harvesting cucumbers and other vegetables. Graziella Paul continued the type of work she had known in the Elie convent with the added responsibilities of the milk cows:

J'ai parti de là, j'avais à peu près 18 ans... j'ai parti pour aller travailler pour les habitants, après ça... j'ai travaillé pour Gros Pouce Lachance. J'ai travaillé là pour un an à 35 cents par jour. [in the fields?] Dans la maison, pis 14 enfants. Je te dis dans les couches, pis faire le pain tous les 2 jours, c'est de l'ouvrage. Là j'ai parti pour travailler pour Dave Bremner. J'avais un p'tit brin plus cher là. Il me donnait cinq piastres par mois... C'était de l'ouvrage...

19. Virginie McKay, 24.

parce que y avait les hommes de Crépaud [Bremner] qui travaillaient là. Il fallait les nourrir hein! Ça fait qu'on avait le déjeuner pour les hommes, après ça on faisait le déjeuner pour les enfants... foulait qu' on tire à peu près 20 vaches avec la p'tite fille. Pis en plus séparer ça, c'était de l'ouvrage.

I left there when I was about 18 ... I left to work for the farmers, afterwards ... I worked for Gros Pouce Lachance. I worked there a year for 35 cents a day. In the house, and 14 children. I tell you we had diapers, and making bread every two days, it was work. Then, I left to go work for Dave Bremner. I had a bit more there. He gave me five dollars a month ... it was work ... because there were Crepaud's men who worked there. We had to feed them eh! So we had breakfast for the men, after we made breakfast for the children ... then we had to milk about 20 cows, with the little girl. Then we had to separate it, it was work.²⁰

Neither Bertha Carrière or Irene Lécuyer mention handing money over to their parents but the other two are very clear over the fact of seeing little of their salaries till their marriage. Graziella Paul commented:

Cet argent là allait toute à mes parents pour les faire vivre. J'ai jamais gardé de l'argent sur moi... je leur donnais de l'argent pour acheter des groceries, toute ça.

That money there all went to my parents to make them live. I never kept money on me ... I gave them the money so they could buy groceries, all that.²¹

Reactions vary between the four women when discussions centre on pre-marital socializing. Bertha Carrière talks about the fun she had in the local dance hall in Baie St-Paul.

On allait aux danses. Y avait des halls. On avait du fun... c'était du monde par icitte qui faisait la musique. Si on voulait danser un square dance, on leur disait de jouer un square. Alexandre Hamelin gardait le Hall... pis, c'était un bon danseur... Y avait tout le temps ben du monde... On marchait. On restait à la ferme chez Carignan là. On marchait, on dansait toute la nuite, on marchait pour s'en venir. On travaillait le lendemain toute la journée... Ils vous laissaient pas dormir... Toutes les jeunes de St-Eustache se rencontraient là.

We went to the dances. There were halls. We had fun ... it was people from around here that made the music. If we wanted a square dance we

20. Graziella Paul, 19.

21. Graziella Paul, 21.

*told them to play a square. Alexandre Hamelin kept the hall ... and he was a good dancer ... there was always lots of people ... We walked. We were staying at the Carignan farm there. We walked, we danced all night, and we walked home ... We worked all day ... They would not let us sleep. All the young people in St-Eustache met there.*²²

Graziela Paul comments that before she married she never went out. They socialized at home. She only started to go to dances after her marriage. Irene Lécuyer notes they were only allowed to go to house parties and dance there before her marriage. Alma Branconnier remembers she only went out at night when her father was away working:

[went out?] Nul part! J'avais plus de mère. Mon défunt père était trop marabout. À 10 h il disait "c'est le temps de dire le chapelet". Il fallait ben que ça sort les gars là. On avait pas le droit d'aller roder sur le chemin ben don... c'était rien que les buggys. Temps en temps j'allais prendre des rides en buggys... quand qu'il était pas!

*No where! I had lost my mother. My deceased father was too grumpy. At 10 p.m. he would say 'It's time for the rosary'. They had to get out those boys there. We were not allowed to go wander on the road or else ... it was just buggies. From time to time I would go for rides on the buggies ... when he was not there!*²³

All four women married in their early twenties except for Bertha Carrière who married when she was twenty-seven. The first three married Saint-Eustache Metis men, labourers they had known for years. Bertha married, to the disapproval of her parents, Donald McKay of Fort Rouge who was a farm hand. The Fort Rouge women also married in their early twenties with the exception of Imelda Larocque who married at sixteen. They married their Fort Rouge counterparts, men with little or no formal education. Though the village women marked the marriage ceremony with a family dinner and dance or a two day trip to Winnipeg, the weddings in Fort Rouge were much more humble affairs. For example Victoria St-Cyr married Pascal McKay in September 1937 at 7h30 in the morning. She comments on the lack of money:

Pas d'argent pour faire des noces. Pas d'argent pour traiter le gars qui nous a drivé seulement... Le curé a demandé à Pascal à la confession "As-tu de l'argent pour payer pour ton mariage?" Y a donné dix piastres. Y avait rien d'autres choses. [célébrations?] Un déjeuner chez ma mère. Tu sais ce qu'on

22. Bertha Carrière, 16.

23. Alma Branconnier, 8.

a mangé? Les patates réchauffées, la galette pis la graisse! C'est ça notre noces. Le déjeuner.

No money for the wedding. No money to pay the guy who drove us even ... The priest asked Pascal at confession 'do you have money to pay for your marriage?'. He gave him ten dollars. That is all he had. We had breakfast at my mother's. You know what we ate? Reheated potatoes, bannock and lard! That was my wedding. Breakfast.²⁴

Adulthood/Married Life

All eight women married in the depression era and their descriptions of their married lives reflect those times. There is no great difference in their accounts of their working lives after marriage. All describe precarious lives marked with hardship. Bertha McKay moved to Fort Rouge after her marriage and her life resembled those of the other women from there. The three women remaining in Saint-Eustache combined working for wages with the demands of raising families. Graziela Paul comments that after their marriage they rented rooms 'here and there' in the village and worked in the fields, She worked for 35 cents a day and her husband for 50 cents a day. She adds that they were able to get by because she managed to plant a large garden and do enough canning for the winter. Alma Branconnier also worked in the fields most of her adult life. The first few years she spent her summers hand weeding the vegetable fields:

Pour Laurent Chabot, 10 cents de l'heure. Avec Joe Pagée et Joe Lécuyer. Les crimes d'hommes. Ça piochait en avant. Pis nous autres, à quatre pattes en arrière. T'aurais du voir nos genoux. C'était toute rouge!

For Laurent Chabot, 10 cents an hour. With Joe Pagee and Joe Lécuyer. Those damn men. They hoed in front. And us, on our hands and knees in the back. You should have seen our knees. They were all red!²⁵

The five married women from Fort Rouge, including Bertha Carrière, also worked in the fields for French Canadian farmers most of their adult lives. When one compares their life histories again it becomes a question of differences of degrees of poverty. Victoria St-Cyr comments that for the first few years after their marriage, she and her husband lived in a small one room log cabin. This is not unusual for the times within the Metis

24. Victoria St-Cyr, 15-16.

25. Alma Branconnier, 15.

population in general of the village but what is surprising is that her 'shack', as she calls it, had no floor:

On a resté sur mon père, un mois. Après ça on s'est fait un petit shack... Pis on a battu sur le terrain de mon père. On a resté deux ans pas de plancher. Rien que la terre. Pas d'argent pour acheter un plancher... On était ben. On avait des cartons, des tapis, hein!

*We stayed at my father's perhaps a month. After that we made ourselves a little shack...and we cut hay on my father's land. We stayed two years without a floor. Only dirt. No money to buy a floor ... We were o.k.. We had cardboard, carpet, eh!*²⁶

She and the other women worked in the sugar beet fields in the summer and helped the men 'stooking' during the grain harvest. The only work they appear not to have done was wood cutting and field clearing in the winter, something all the husbands appear to have done at some time or another.

Differences become apparent between the two groups of women later on in their lives, after the Second World War. The three women still residing in the village eventually acquired a milk cow and some barnyard animals. Both Alma Branconnier and Irene Lécuyer eventually sold milk for 10 cents a quart, butter 25 cents a pound and eggs 10 cents a dozen. They also raised pigs and salted their own pork. This gave them an extra source of revenue and allowed them to cut down substantially on the cost of feeding their growing family. Their husbands acquired horse teams and worked clearing land for farmers with 'stoneboats' or found employment in the Pine Falls lumber industry as freighters. The only woman to keep a milk cow in Fort Rouge was Imelda Larocque who took her animal with her when she worked in the fields so that it could feed on discards:

On partait du chemin icitte jusqu'à l'autre coulée là-bas à genoux. Dans les rang pour nettoyer. On l'ôtait... c'était les betteraves. On laissait rien qu'une betterave. On garrochait les autres. On amenait notre vache. [why?] Bien pour avoir le lait pour les enfants.

*We would start at the road here and go to the other coulee there. We removed ... they were beets. We left only one beet. We would throw the others. We would bring our cow. So the children would have milk.*²⁷

26. Victoria St-Cyr, 16-17.

27. Imelda Larocque, transcript (phonetic transcription), 42.

Perception of Self

All eight women see themselves as Metis and believe to varying degrees that they suffered because of their ethnic identity. They also see a clear distinction between themselves and their French Canadian neighbours in term of social status and material wealth. Bertha Carrière, a woman whose lifestyle in her youth resembled most that of the French Canadians of the village and parish still noted differences:

Pis à l'autre bout par là c'était pareil... ils se mélangeaient pas avec le monde du village. [who?] Nous autres on les appelait les Canayens. On était pas assez high class. Y onvaient plus d'argent. Y onvaient des grosses farms. Y pouvaient acheter des grosses machines pour travailler.

At the other end it was the same ... they did not mix with the people of the village. We called them the Canadians. We were not high class enough. They had more money. They had big farms. They could buy big machinery to work.²⁸

The economic difference translated into a social one. Irene Lécuyer remembers feeling left out of social life of the parish:

Y [a parish priest for forty years] était pour les riches. It was so insulting. Y allait rencontrer les riches. Les pauvres y en faisait pas de cas. Dans ce temps là y avait les dames de Sainte-Anne puis les enfants de Marie. Bien les enfants de Marie c'était rien que les enfants des riches. It's true. Oui c'est vrai! Tout le monde peut le dire ça. Toute la paroisse peut le dire si ils veulent dire la vérité; ils vont le dire.

He [priest] was only for the rich. It was so insulting. He would only go meet the rich. The poor were of no matter. In those days there were the Ladies of Sainte-Anne and the Children of Mary. Well the Children of Mary was only for the children of the rich. It's true! Yes, it's true! Everybody can say it. The whole parish can say it if they want to say the truth. They will say it.²⁹

The most bitter comments towards the French Canadian farmers came from the residents of Fort Rouge. When asked if there was a difference between the Metis and the French Canadians Imelda Larocque replied indignantly:

Ah oui! They say it's dead but its not! Je sais que toutes les dos blancs y ont fait leur... la raison qui ont l'argent, c'est a cause qui ont gardé les Métis

28. Bertha Carrière, 29.

29. Irene Lécuyer, 13.

travailler pis les payer moins... comme 25 cents de l'heure. Eux autres comment d'argent que ça faisaient? You're always under... Oui. Des fois, je m'en rappelle 4 heures, 5 heures le matin on partait pour travailler dans les champs.

Oh yes! They say it's dead but it's not! I know all the 'white backs' [French Canadians], they made ... the reason they have money, it is because they kept the Metis working and they paid them less ... like 25 cents an hour. Them, how much money they made? You're always under ... Yes, I remember 4 o'clock, 5 o'clock in the morning we would leave to work in the fields.³⁰

When asked if there were 'differences' between Metis families living in the village proper and those residing in Fort Rouge responses varied depending on place of residence and, in general, were more cautious. The women born in Fort Rouge avoided the question or simply commented, as Imelda Larocque does, that 'it was all the same'. The village-born women were more forthright in their opinions. Graziela Paul emphatically denied having relations in Fort Rouge adding:

Je me suis jamais occupé de personne. J'ai toujours rien que gardé mes enfants. J'ai jamais badré personne, jamais!

I never meddled with people. I always only took care of my children. I never bothered anyone, never!³¹

Irene Lécuyer comments, when asked if she was considered poor, that only the farmers were rich. When asked if she was as poor as the Fort Rouge residents she declares:

On était pas a ce rang là. Oh non...entre les fermiers et les gens pauvres. [still considered Metis?] Oh yah!

We were not at that level. Oh no...between the farmers and the poor people. [Still Metis?] Oh yes!³²

Bertha Carrière comments that she saw no difference between the two groups but finished with the telling comment:

[Difference between the two?] Non. Mais ils se mélangeaient pas comme là cet'heure. Avant ça ils se mélangeaient pas comme là cett' heure... Pis à l'autre bout par là c'était pareil... ils se mélangeaient pas avec le monde du village...

30. Imelda Larocque, 41.

31. Graziela Paul, 43.

32. Irene Lécuyer, 18.

[Differences] *No, but they did not mix like they do today. Before they did not mix like that. At the other end it was the same ... they did not mix.*³³

Concluding Remarks

Joy Parr writes that, in the 1930s, “five times as many temporary as annual wage-paying farm jobs were offered in Ontario ... half of all seasonal engagements being of female harvest hands.”³⁴ This situation was reflected in the Prairie region. What differs between the two regions, at least for the Saint-Eustache area, is that in the West paid farm labour became a transgenerational occurrence performed by a population perceived as being of distinct ethnic or racial origin.

The eight women whose narratives were examined in this paper all come from old fur trading era families with a history of at least partial involvement in a wage-labour economy. Their paternal ancestors worked as tripmen and freighters coupled with bison-hunting activities for the Saint-François-Xavier families. After 1870, they increasingly hired on as agricultural workers. For reasons still hotly debated by historians³⁵ these Metis families, with the possible exception of the Carrière family, did not hold on to their river lots and engage in full-time farming. Whatever the reasons, the twentieth century saw this population become increasingly poor and have fewer and fewer opportunities outside the farming wage economy.

These Metis families continued to practice a form of mixed economy. They worked seasonally for cash, clearing land, weeding, and stooking the grain harvest. All the while they maintained a small acreage where a garden could grow and occasionally a cow pastured. When associated with small game hunting, they could thus see to the immediate food needs of the family. Though these plots provided them with a modicum of security, they also tied them to the countryside and to seasonal, poorly paid, field labour. Certainly for the Fort Rouge families, linguistic and educational barriers along with an awareness of latent racism kept them away from urban areas where the possibility of better jobs existed. Several times in the interviews, Fort Rouge narrators expressed their fear and distrust at the idea of having

33. Bertha Carrière, 28.

34. Parr, “Hired,” 102.

35. Nicole St-Onge, “Thomas Flanagan: Metis Lands in Manitoba,” *Revue d’histoire de l’Amérique Française*, 46, 3 (Hiver 1993): 521-523.

abandoned or sold their plots and moved to Winnipeg or even a smaller city such as Portage La Prairie to look for better working conditions.

The generation of women interviewed appear to have been the first to be involved on a regular basis in the wage labour economy. Some did have mothers who worked for money but it appears to have been the result of exceptional circumstances such as widowhood or being a single mother. None mention their grandmothers working for money outside the home. This growth in female employment might easily be explained by the increasing demands of the farming economy linked to the decreasing possibilities for lucrative employment for Metis men as the fur trade receded and the bison herds disappeared. All the eight women interviewed indicate that the wages of their husbands, and often when they were younger their fathers, were not enough to maintain a household. Had Saint-Eustache farmers³⁶ followed Prairie wide trends and adopted more highly mechanized and intensive grain growing practices after the First World War this rural wage labouring class might well have disappeared. But, early on, farmers in the area became involved in dairying and, increasingly, in growing sugar beets, potatoes, cucumbers and other 'stoop crops'. These crops required intensive manual intervention throughout the growing season and their harvests were difficult to mechanize thus ensuring a steady demand for cheap seasonal workers. It was work women could do and, given the circumstances in Saint-Eustache, work Metis women had to do.

As mentioned in the body of the paper, the differences between the Fort Rouge and village women were those of degrees of poverty. All the Metis women in the village were somewhat better educated than their Fort Rouge counterparts and were able to maximize their income by selling the produce of their gardens or barnyard animals to their village neighbours. The fact that they came from families that hailed from the older settlements in the area meant that they often had the support of large kin groups. This can be seen in the early 1910s when related members of four village families, the Paul, Lussier, Branconnier and Laliberté, left Saint-Eustache as a group to take up homesteads in the San Clara area near the Manitoba- Saskatchewan border. No parallel exodus is seen in Fort Rouge. More isolated, less educated, coming from the Athabasca region where gardening and animal husbandry were not customary in the 19th century, with little or no land

36. In fact all the Portage La Prairie region.

claims in the Red River settlement, the Fort Rouge Metis families suffered the most during the transition to an agrarian economy. All the Fort Rouge interviews, by women and by men, note that their families were too poor to properly clothe their children in winter for the one-mile walk to the village school. Also, all the narrators from Fort Rouge note they resisted attending school because of the racism they felt there. Even when they attended they were so far behind in their studies that the nuns appeared to give up on them. Virginie McKay comments when speaking of her husband's, and other Fort Rouge men's, lack of education:

Les p'tits gars ça jouait... quand on s'en revenait, ça marchait avec nous autres... personne savait s'ils allaient à l'école ou non... même si ça venait à l'école, les sœurs les faisaient fendre du bois, les faisaient couper le bois... Eux autres aussi les sœurs sont pas plus fines, hein?

Those little boys played ... when we came back they would walk with us ... nobody knew if they went to school or not ... even if they went to school, the nuns would have them split wood, they made them saw wood ... Them, those nuns, were not very nice, eh?³⁷

As soon as possible the narrators, and their male counterparts, left school, or were taken out by their needy families, to work in the fields. Thus they perpetuated the cycle of a marginalised existence predicated on a complete dependence on the French Canadian farming families for work. This dependence was not mutual since farmers could bring in other labourers such as Indians from the Sandy Bay reserve or, more recently, migrant workers from Mexico. With greater access to education, the children of the village women interviewed moved out of agrarian wage labour. It took another generation before a significant number of Fort Rouge Metis stopped working in the fields. Even to this day, seasonal farm work is a fact of life for several of the interviewed Fort Rouge women's grandchildren.

37. Virginie McKay, 23-24.