

Little Shell Tribe of the Chippewa Indians of Montana

Location

The Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians of Montana does not have a reservation in Montana. The office for the Little Shell Tribe is headquartered in its tribally owned commercial building located at 625 Central Ave. West, Suite 100, Great Falls, MT. Members of the Little Shell Tribe live in various part of the United States and Canada, with a strong concentration of members in communities throughout Montana. Because the tribe has not been federally recognized yet, the tribe is without a land base. The Little Shell Tribe is now recognized by the state of Montana; Montana's only state recognized tribe.

The Little Shell Tribe has recently purchased land and a building at 1529 Stuckey Road Great Falls, MT. which has been remodeled and a new addition to the present building. This property is now the Little Shell Tribal Cultural Center. Incidentally, this land is adjoined with the infamous Hill 57.

Population

The Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians of Montana is often shortened to "Little Shell." The name "Metis" refers to mixed blood and was first used during the 18th and 19th centuries because of the association with the Europeans. At that time it identified a specific Northwest society with its own culture and economic traditions, living in the areas of the Red River, The Saskatchewan River, Turtle Mountain, North Dakota and the area of Winnipeg and Pembina, North Dakota. A further discussion regarding this group is found in the subsequent section titled Ethnography and Historical Background.



The current population of enrolled tribal members has increased dramatically over the years to 6,400 members. There are thousands of Metis people throughout the United States and south central Canada.

In the mid-1800s, the tribe was numbered at several thousand in the Red River-Pembina region. At that time, there was no formal enrollment procedure, no reservation, and thus no documented population figure. After the 1892 renegotiation of the Treaty of 1863, (the infamous ten cent treaty) many of the Metis, including the Band of Chippewa under Chief Little Shell, were left without a land base or reservation, and many became nomadic.

Ethnography and Historical Background

The lack of a reservation or land base has been a profound determinant of the fate and destiny of the Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians of Montana, a defining part of their history.

The origins of the Metis date back to the late 17th century when the fur trade became a significant commercial endeavor. Before the establishment of the United States/Canada border in 1846, vast regions of the central and western parts of the continent in what are now known as Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, North Dakota, Montana, Idaho, and Washington were unsettled and under the chartered use of the Hudson's Bay Company (Rupert's Land). Trapping and harvesting beaver pelts and other furs for return to Europe through eastern markets required the alliance and support of the native inhabitants of the areas west of the Great Lakes. Working for Hudson's Bay Company and the competing North West Company, the trapping and trading was done largely by immigrant Irish, Scotch, and French (voyageurs) who formed liaisons with the northern tribes to trade for goods in exchange for the valuable animal pelts. Marriage "a la facon du pays" (according to local custom) was a basic part of the social interaction and liaison between the voyageurs and the local native inhabitants. Most of these

unions involved Saulteaux (Ojibwa) and Cree women, although there were also many unions with the Chippewa, Blackfeet and Sarcee, the latter two living further west.

Thus, thousands of Metis or “mixed blood” people came to occupy the areas nearest the trading posts along with thousands of Chippewa and Cree. This population increased to many thousands and took root in the region of the Red River in what is now southern Manitoba and northern Minnesota. In the early 19th century, they called themselves “Metifs,” “Bois-Brules,” and “les gens libres” (the free people).

The early generations were of Indian mothers and immigrant European fathers-parents who usually did not even share a common language. The resulting language, called “Mitchif” today by the Little Shell and Turtle Mountain people, was a unique blend of Chippewa native language, French, Cree, and a little English. By 1840, they had become a distinct and independent group, unique in the world with cultural ties to both French voyageurs and other Chippewa bands, but they also identified with their full blood parents’ communities.

They industriously trapped, hunted buffalo, and conducted trading business with the Hudson’s Bay Company, transporting goods from the far west to the trade centers at Fort Benton, Battleford, Red River, Batoche and Pembina. Their numbers grew and the settlements increased in size, containing both full-blooded Chippewa and Metis. Many lived in North West Company camps further west in Montana and southern Alberta. In 1867, New Brunswick, Quebec, Nova Scotia, and Ontario merged to form a British Dominion called Canada. In the late 1860s and early 1870s when colonization of Canada continued westward from Quebec, and the Hudson’s Bay Company began to relinquish control of these vast territories, the Red River settlements occupied by the Metis were geographically annexed to Canada, although there was no political alignment to the newly formed dominion of Canada by the Metis people. The Metis and Chippewa people of the Red River Settlements began resisting the colonization of what they perceived as their home territory and attempted to establish a sovereign nation in southern Canada to be known as “Assiniboia.” Louis Riel, their chosen political leader and representative to parliament for purposes of establishing the Metis-Indian nation, was only partly successful. Ultimately, the movement for independence from Canada was denied, and over the next two decades, two military rebellions by Riel and the Metis were put down, the last in 1885. Riel’s military leader, Gabriel Dumont, left for Montana. The execution of Louis Riel for treason marked the end of the Metis-Chippewa Nation as they had conceived of it, and white settlers poured into the region. A reservation in the Turtle Mountain Area had been set aside for the Chippewa and Metis who had taken up permanent residence in what is now North Dakota. The two principal chiefs of the tribe to be known as the Pembina Chippewa were Little Shell and Red Bear. Along with the United States government, these two chiefs were signators to the Treaty of 1863, which established a ten million acre reservation. Many of the Chippewa and Metis engaged in agriculture and ranching on this reservation, while others continued to subsist on buffalo hunting and trading endeavors to the west where they had migrated to insulate themselves from the westward expansion of white settlements, which accelerated after Manitoba was annexed to the Dominion of Canada in 1869.



In a manner similar to what happened on many reservations, white settlers continued to migrate onto the Indian lands on both sides of the 49th parallel, which had become the United States-Canadian border, and seeing no industry, they erected permanent buildings, businesses, fences, and roads, until the federal government moved to renegotiate the treaty. Chief Little Shell (son of the signator to the 1863 treaty) refused to sign. The new agreement provided approximately a million dollars for the ten million acres of land ceded under the 1892 document, which became known as the “Ten-Cent Treaty” in reference to the ten cents per acre being offered. In

the wake of Little Shell's refusal to sign the Ten-Cent Treaty, and because many of the group were on a prolonged hunting expedition in Montana, tribal members were removed from the reservation list and federal recognition was lost. The resulting reservation was then less than ten percent of its original size.

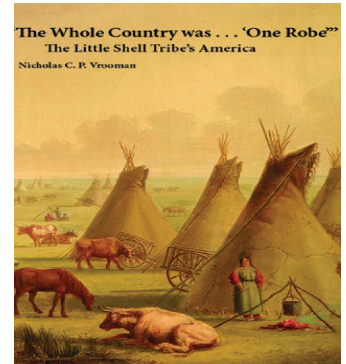
Eighteen Ninety-two was the beginning of the 120-year period of languishing as a tribe without a homeland and with little economic opportunity. Some took refuge in Montana and some migrated west to Alberta in their traditional two-wheel "Red River Carts." Some allied with other tribes, and some joined the Turtle Mountain Chippewa to the south in what is now North Dakota. Many wandered and hunted as a means to avoid drifting into poverty, as white settlers took over their settlements, fields and crops. As the buffalo disappeared, their subsistence and their way of life crumbled. Without federal recognition, they were without legal standing as citizens, without a land on which to live, and unable to qualify as homesteaders. There were instances of the Little Shell Chippewa being rounded up by the United States military and deported to Canada.

Facing starvation, many survived this era by salvaging buffalo bones and skulls from the prairie and selling them at trading posts to be shipped eastward to fertilize rose gardens in the east. Many could not read or write and had no access to education, taking jobs as servants and ranch hands for the very settlers who occupied their former homeland. Some integrated with other Indians on other reservations (French surnames are common on Montana reservations), and some lived in wandering destitution or in hovels on the perimeter of white communities. Many were poverty stricken, and without health care, many died during the harsh northern winters.

But efforts to re-establish their status as federally recognized Indians continued. After the third Chief Little Shell died in 1904, Joseph Dussome became a popular leader among the tribe, dedicating his life to efforts in locating members, enrolling members, meeting with officials in Washington, D.C., and organizing the splintered tribe. In 1927 he was organizing under the name of the "Abandoned Band of Chippewa Indians." In 1934, he incorporated a group known as the "Landless Indians of Montana," and in that same year, under the Indian Reorganization Act, congress offered land for a reservation for the Little Shell Tribe, but President Franklin Roosevelt vetoed the action, based on the tribe's lack of federal recognition. Dussome continued in his efforts to restore hope for the tribe, even as the nation suffered through the Depression. Dussome has come to exemplify hope to the people of the tribe and spirit—that same spirit that has shown itself in the tribe's relentless petitioning of the United States government for recognition—and the hope that one day they will be landless no longer. This hope began to be realized in the year 2000, under provisions of a 1978 program that established criteria under which a tribe may petition the federal government for acknowledgment. Congressional bills have been introduced by Senator Jon Tester of Montana and Congressman Steve Daines of Montana under the "Little Shell Restoration Act of 2013." Both bills are still pending at this time and still waiting for support to pass. Also, B.A.R. (Branch of Acknowledgment and Research) has been instructed to change some of the criteria to meet federal guidelines for recognition. They are to review the negative findings of the Little Shell's petition for federal recognition. Hopes are high among the Little Shell tribal members that they may see federal recognition.

Government/Education

The little Shell Tribe is governed by an elected Tribal Council, which has maintained its integrity throughout the 20th century. We abide by our Tribal constitution. There are seven elected positions to the Little Shell council (3 executive positions, 1 secretary treasurer and 3 council persons). Executive position is a four year term and council members a two year term.



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Nicholas Vrooman*

Current duly elected council members are as follows: (Note: These are not compensated for all their hard work and dedication to the cause of the Little Shell Tribe (Federal Recognition)).

Chairman	Gerald Gray Jr.
1 st Vice Chairman	Clarence Sivertsen
2 nd Vice Chairman	Leona Kienenberger
Sec/Treasurer	Colleen Hill
Councilman	Richard Parenteau Don Davis Shawn Gilbert

At this time, the Little Shell Tribe participates in several state and federal programs such as the Tobacco Program which is administrated by Little Shell members. We have many programs that are structured for our young members such as the cultural program and the language program.

As a group, which is not federally recognized, the Little Shell do not qualify for any educational or government support services such as housing, medical facilities, or federally funded educational facilities, which are typically provided for tribes recognized by the United States government. The Little Shell Chippewa have obtained such services only through public services available in urban centers.



Little Shell Tribal Headquarters

To survive and support their families, Little Shell tribal members had to seek employment and hold down a paying job. We have many talented individuals who are successful both in the private sector and the business sector. Many of our tribal members have attained college degrees without any assistance. Many Little Shell members have served in the armed forces past and present. We are proud of our veterans!

Contemporary Issues

The principal concern of the Tribal Government and most of its members lies in the federal acknowledgment process.

The petition, as it existed in the late 1990s, represented many thousands of hours of work by the tribal government, volunteers, and consultants. This historical document consisted of over 300 pages, according to deceased Tribal Councilman Robert VanGunten, who was the Director of Adult and Continuing Education at the Salish and Kootenai College in Pablo, and there are ten boxes of attachments to the historical document. The current petition consist of slumberous and lengthy reports submitted by the tribe to provide the historical, anthropological, and cultural evidence needed for the Interior Department’s Branch of Acknowledgment and Research (BAR) to review the petition. When BAR responded with a list of deficiencies and omissions, the tribe responded with further research. The supporting evidence of “community,” an important criterion, was strengthened by the report of Dr. Franklin Bunte, deceased and his wife Pam Bunte, also deceased et. al.k, of the Department of Anthropology of California State University, Long Beach, California, a report by Montana sociologist Milton Colvin of the College of Great Falls (1957), and a 1941 report by Stephen Gray, a leader of a factional group known as the “Montana Landless Indians.”

Council Chairman Tim Zimmerman praised tribal leaders such as Van Gunten, former Tribal Chairman John

Gilbert, and others who have worked tirelessly without compensation to keep the petition alive when the announcement came in May 2000. The Native American Rights Fund, and particularly Robert Peregoy, were also instrumental during the 1980s and 1990s as an advocate for the Little Shell Tribe.

Affecting a change in public perceptions of the citizens of Montana about who the Little Shell people are is among the goals of the tribe as recognition is imminent. Economic opportunities, training, and health care will be increasingly available to the tribe and it is important that the citizens of Montana continue to support the efforts of the Little Shell Tribal Council and its members.

Events of Interest

Joseph Dussome Day- An annual gathering of the tribe for cultural renaissance, social activities, election results, announcements, and committee meetings, usually in November.

Back to Batoche Celebration- An annual gathering of the Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa and sister Tribes of Metis in Canada, commemorating the Riel Rebellion, and including cultural activities, dancing, art, and socializing, at Batoche, Sasatchewan.

Traditional Native American Activities- Participants are 12 to 18 year olds sponsored by the Little Shell Cultural Committee.



Little Shell Tribal Cultural Center

Resources: More Information about The Little Shell

The Whole Country was One Robe : The Little Shell Tribes America, by historian and folklorist Nicholas Vrooman, is an extraordinary account of an extraordinary people. Dr. Vrooman, after a lifetime of engagement with the history of a burgeoning and distinctive aboriginal amalgam culture on the Northern Plains, gives us the untold story of the Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians of Montana. Available on Amazon.com.

The Great Falls Tribune, along with other area newspapers, has carried literally hundreds of stories, both current events and containing significant historical coverage during the period from 1930 to the present. The Tribune has often advocated federal recognition for the Little Shell Chippewa.

A Brief Historical Overview of the Little Shell Tribe of Pembina Chippewa, by Deward E. Walker Jr., July 1990- This historical digest may be obtained from the Little Shell Tribal Office in Great Falls.

The Free People-Otipemisiwak, by Diane Paulette Payment. This volume contains a detailed and articulate history of the Metifs and includes cultural issues, early photographs, political action descriptions, and other historical data-from a Canadian perspective. May be available on inter-library loan from Canadian affiliates.

Waiting for a Day that Never Comes, by Verne Dusenberry, published in “Montana Magazine of Western History.” This article highlights the efforts of Joseph Dussome and features easy reading cultural and historical information. May be available through the Montana Historical Society.

Buffalo Voices, compiled and published by Nicholas Churchin Peterson Vrooman. Stories told by Metis and the Little Shell Elders, part of Turtle Island 1492-1992, North Dakota Quarterly Vol 59 No. 4, Fall 1991, Univ.

of North Dakota, Grand Forks. Vrooman also produced a recording (cassette tape) for Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings, entitled *Plains/Chippewa/Metis Music from Turtle Mountain*. The recording includes drumming, Chansons, and 1992 Rock & Roll by Tribal Musicians. It is distributed by Koch Int'l for the Smithsonian and can be ordered from music stores.

Strange Empire, by Joseph Kinsey Howard. The definitive but cumbersome history of the Metis, Canadian Metis, Little Shell Tribe, Turtle Mountain, and Pembina and related groups, reprinted in 1994 by Minnesota Historical Society Press with a new introduction by Nicholas Vrooman.

Medicine Fiddle, by Michael Loukinen, produced by Northern Michigan University, 1992. This film (videotape) features Metis and Chippewa music, dancing, and spirituality and contains interviews with musicians from several tribes and bands in the Western Great Lakes Red River Area. Available through Up North Films, Northern Michigan University, 331 Thomas, Fine Arts Bldg, Marquette, MI 49855

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