**Metis Scrip**

Up to this time, land ownership in the Northwest had not been straightforward or conducted in any official way. Still, the Metis had assumed that with the Canadian government now in charge, they would be confirmed as owners of land they already occupied. They also believed that they would be able to select land for their children once the new province was surveyed.

However, in order to gain title to the land that was reserved for them, all Metis in Manitoba were required to have scrip, a piece of paper similar to money. Two kinds of scrip were issued to the Metis—money scrip or land scrip. Money scrip had a value of $160 or $240, an amount based on the value of the farmland. Money scrip could be converted to cash. Land scrip could be exchanged for a homesteader's land grant—160 acres. Land scrip could also be sold for cash.

The survey of land in Manitoba progressed slowly, and it was not until late 1875 that land was finally made available and scrip issued. Adult Metis were entitled to scrip valued at $160 each; their children received $240. However, the children’s land grant was not what the Metis had expected. The land was open prairie up to 6km away from the rivers. It was distributed by lottery, and recipients had no control over where their land grant was located.

To claim land they were already living on, the Metis had to prove occupation. This meant that they had to have “adequate” housing and at least two hectares under cultivation. Many claims were rejected when these claims were not met.

**Scrip:** a piece of paper that could be used to certify possession of land or be exchanged for money
What Happened to the Bison?

In the 1600s, an estimated 70 million bison roamed the grasslands. Well before the 1870s, however, First Nations of the plains had begun to express concerns about the shrinking numbers of bison. The Blackfoot, Nakoda, and Sioux, and later the Metis, depended on the bison for food and shelter. Losing such a vital part of their livelihood threatened their existence.

The slaughter of bison was part of the American government's campaign to force First Nations onto reservations so that the American West could be made available to European settlers. Bison hunting by Europeans was encouraged. American General Phillip Sheridan knew the loss of the bison would weaken the First Nations of the plains.

The trade of hides and pemmican also reduced the population of bison, and in the 1800s, the building of the transcontinental railways in Canada and the United States both divided the great herds and brought in more hunters. Thousands were killed by the day, and in only decades, bison herds so large that they darkened the Prairie were becoming only a memory. First Nations and Metis struggled to maintain their way of life after such a swift devastation.

Facing starvation, many First Nations were eventually forced to ask the government for assistance.
The Treaty Process

The Canadian government was determined to open the Prairies to European and Canadian settlers. However, this was not possible until the question of First Nations title to the land had been settled. In 1870, all land in Manitoba and the North-west Territories was still held by First Nations. The exception was land in the Selkirk Settlement, leased by Selkirk in an 1817 treaty with the Saulteaux and Cree.

The government was determined to gain control of the land as quickly and as cheaply as possible. First Nations leaders, recognizing that they would have to share some land, wanted to make the best possible deal to secure the future of their people.

First Nations had a long-standing tradition of negotiating agreements. They were accustomed to give and take, which formed a key element in successful negotiations. First Nations also tended to bargain in good faith; people stood by their word and meant what they said. When negotiating treaties with the Canadian government, they believed they were making an exchange—sharing their land for the protection and support of their people.

In 1871, the Canadian government began the treaty process with the First Nations of the Prairies. Indian Commissioner Wemyss Simpson was sent to Manitoba to begin talks with the Cree and the Anishinabe. The Cree and the Anishinabe did not want to give up all of their land. They wanted to retain control of about 60% of the province of Manitoba. However, Simpson had instructions to offer only 160 acres, the standard homesteaders' quarter section, for every family of five. While this offer was not acceptable to the Cree and Anishinabe, they knew that no other offer would be made. Still, they managed to include some conditions: the government eventually agreed to supply farm equipment, supplies, and instruction in farming techniques.

Under the terms of the treaties, Aboriginal peoples agreed to share their land in exchange for specific rights. These rights included access to resources, health care, and education.
The Indian Act (1876)

The Canadian government introduced the Indian Act in 1876. This act formalized the assimilation of First Nations, providing government administration of reserves and treaty rights across the Dominion. The Act changed through time, with new regulations being applied as Canada developed. The Indian Act had an enormous impact on Aboriginal Peoples of Canada. The government had a paternalistic attitude toward Aboriginals as they made decisions on their behalf. Most decisions were influenced by prejudice or misunderstanding. The Indian Act ruled that:

- First Nations were wards of the government, living only on reserves.
- First Nations were required to register with the government; if they did not there were considered “non-status” and would lose their rights
- Special passes were required to come and go from reserves. For some time, Europeans were not allowed on the reserves, which created a feeling of distrust between First Nations and their neighbours
- First Nations children had to attend residential schools. The aim of these schools were to assimilate First Nations people
- Traditional ways of self-government, such as choosing leaders, were also denied

Many First Nations felt that the government had failed them. Poverty, isolation, and the loss of their rights and freedoms caused profound discontent.

Indian Act: an act created to regulate the lives of the First Nations of Canada

Paternalistic: an attitude based on a family hierarchy—the “father” makes decision on behalf of the “children”

Ward: a minor under the care of a guardian; in this case, the government is the guardian
**First Nations Farming**

By the end of the 1870s, seven treaties were in place across the southern Prairies. Many First Nations had already been escorted by the NWMP onto reserves, and they soon began to farm the land. Hunting and fishing were supplemented with crops, such as squash, corn, and beans. However, farming on the Prairies could be a challenge. Many farmers, both European and First Nations, struggled with poor crops, insects and drought.

The main problem for the First Nations farmers of the Prairies was the tools, supplies, animals, and instruction guaranteed by the treaties proved inadequate, when they appeared at all. The ploughs were poorly made and were useless for prairie soils. Furthermore, the oxen that were provided could not pull the ploughs. The seed was sent too late in the year and First Nations farmers were forbidden the use of steam powered **threshing** machines.

The Canadian government believed it was “unnatural” for First Nations to use machinery—although it is impossible to grow and harvest unsustainable amounts of wheat without it. By 1900 almost all the First Nations living on the prairie reserves had abandoned farming.

**Threshing:** a process of separating grain from stalks or husks; the steam-powered threshing machine saved time and labour
The Whiskey Traders and the NWMP
Even though Manitoba and the North-West Territories had come under Canadian control in 1869, it took time before Ottawa's authority could be fully enforced through such a vast region. One of the first problems facing the government was the arrival of American fur traders. The American fur trade consisted of a number of small companies that traded strong, cheap liquor called “firewater” to First Nations trappers in exchange for furs. Although this trade was outlawed, it was very successful. The centre of whiskey trade was Fort Whoop-Up. The whiskey trade devastated local Blackfoot communities, leading to widespread alcoholism, malnutrition, disease and death.

The Canadian government was worried that the presence of the American whiskey traders might lead to the loss of territory to the Americans. In 1873, the government created the North West Mounted Police (NWMP). This group acted as a police force, enforcing laws and establishing a Canadian presence in the region.

North West Mounted Police: Canada's national police force, now called the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP)

The Cypress Hill Massacre
In June of 1873, a group of Nakoda camping in Cypress Hills was attacked by a party of American “wolfers,” trappers who put out poisoned bison meat to will wolves and coyotes. More than 20 Nakoda were killed and the incident became known as the Cypress Hills Massacre. Outrage erupted in Eastern Canada, where people saw the attack as a threat to Canadian sovereignty in the West. In response, the government sent a force of 275 NWMP to the Prairies to take control.

By the time the NWMP reached Fort Whoop-Up, they discovered that the whisky traders had fled. Initially, the NWMP was welcomed by the First Nations because they believed the police might put an end to the lawlessness that had plagued the region.