

Métis Waistcoat

By Sheila Anderson

Items left behind by our ancestors sometimes lay quietly for decades, their stories forgotten. You likely have wondered at a family heirloom and thought to yourself, “if only it could talk, what a story it would tell”. With no written or oral history, you might find yourself curious enough to search and find as much as you can about that special item.

A man's antique waistcoat, nestled inside its display case at the Kettle Falls Historical Center caught my attention. Beautifully made by an unknown woman, each silk embroidered stitch is a story of love the artist had for the man who would wear it. Perhaps a son, husband or father, we don't know as that part of the story is sadly lost.

However, this beautiful work, created and worn with pride, still has many things to say.



The woman whose hands made the waistcoat and embellished it with a floral design was “Métis” (pronounced may-TEE). Métis are people of mixed European and Indigenous ancestry. They originated in the 1700s when French and Scottish fur traders married Aboriginal women. The Métis people have a distinct culture, language, and way of life unique from Indigenous or European roots. The Red River Settlement, which is present day Winnipeg Manitoba, is the birthplace of the Métis Nation. The Métis were pivotal in the development of the Pacific Northwest as employees of the fur trade companies, early farmers and settlers. Their many stories and impact of their people in Northeast Washington and the United States

have been generally neglected in written history. Early local historical documents sometimes refer to the Métis as French-Canadians, Mixed-blood, Crees and Half-Breeds.

Created between 1870 and 1890, the waistcoat likely traveled from the Red River Settlement and found its way to the Colville Valley. During the time of its creation, the Métis men often wore cloth shirts, wool jackets, buckskin pants, caps and sashes around their waist. Their wardrobe was most often embellished with beadwork similarly done in the floral design of the silk embroidery. Waistcoats, during this time, were a fashionable piece of a man's wardrobe to be worn under a jacket. The Métis men and women wore traditional European clothing often embellished with their vibrant beaded or embroidered artwork.

Hudson's Bay Company's Fort Colville drew many Métis people from the Red River to work, settle and farm around Fort Colville. There were always Métis people from, or connected to, the Red River Settlement living in the major fur trading posts and forts from their beginnings. These Métis men were the fur trading company's explorers,

mapmakers, trappers, traders, and boatmen. As early as 1841, large family groups of Métis were leaving the Red River to settle in the current states of Washington and Oregon. These were some of the first large groups traveling horseback and with their small wagons and livestock who settled, farmed the land, raised families, cared for livestock and built communities in the Pacific Northwest. One group of about 70 Métis families had built a village including a chapel in present day Chewelah. Jesuit priest Father DeSmet named this St Francis Regis Mission in August of 1845.

The leather of the waistcoat is unsmoked caribou hide. Silk threads of multiple colors create the floral design unique to Métis people. Silk embroidery was first introduced at the Red River in 1844 when the Catholic French "Grey Nuns" taught Métis girls and young women needlework, or fancy work as it was called in the mission schools. Silk embroidery was instantly popular with the Métis who used it to decorate their personal and household items as well as their clothing and the clothing of their loved ones. Many Métis women continued to practice the art of silk embroidery experimenting with styles, colors and designs. As a result the Métis developed a unique artistic tradition all their own.

This treasure of Métis culture, with ties to the time of Fort Colvile, the Hudson's Bay Company and the Red River Settlement has shared part of its story. More importantly, it has aided in teaching the history of the Métis people and opened the door to think more about their impact on our area's early history - a story long overdue in its telling. The waistcoat is on display at the Kettle Falls Historical Center in Kettle Falls.