



LIFE FOR EARLY PIONEERS

Background Information

The early European settlers were Canada's first **immigrants**, people who leave one country with the intention of settling in another. In Canada, a more common historical term used to refer to these early immigrants is **pioneers**, the first people from other countries to settle in Canada.

Life for these pioneers was challenging in many ways. The winters were cold and snowy, the indigenous peoples were often unfriendly because they were unhappy with how they were treated and with the changes the settlers brought about, and diseases claimed many settlers' lives. Even

before facing the challenges of living in a harsh new land, the pioneers had had to survive an arduous voyage across the Atlantic Ocean.

Pioneers came from Germany, Italy, Scotland, England, France, and other European countries in hopes of a new and brighter future. Some hoped to acquire land of their own — something that they had not been able to do in Europe. Some hoped to find an easier life than they had left behind. Instead, life was difficult for most of them. The majority took up farming, which at that time involved cutting down trees, clearing stumps, rocks, and brush from the land, constructing fences, and building shelter for people and animals — all this before the land could be plowed and seed planted. Other pioneers represented many occupations, such as teachers, doctors, bakers, carpenters, storekeepers, surveyors, fishers, traders, domestic servants, blacksmiths, and weavers. Typically, men outnumbered women two to one. Many men had come to Canada as part of the fur trade, and were joined only later by their families.

Several issues arose as the numbers of pioneers increased, including differences in beliefs between aboriginal peoples and the pioneers, attitudes of some pioneers toward aboriginal peoples, building tension over land, and increased exposure of aboriginal peoples to alcohol and diseases.

The pioneers and the aboriginal peoples had very different beliefs. For example, the pioneers believed in owning their own land, but the aboriginal peoples believed that the land belonged to everyone. Even more, the aboriginal peoples thought that land could

not be owned. As the pioneers started to claim land and prevent others from traveling or hunting on it, this difference in perspectives caused aboriginal peoples many hardships in their dealings with the newcomers.

In spite of these differences, aboriginal peoples in the very early days helped pioneers in many ways, with farming, exploration, food, clothes, and medicine. Corn was a new crop for Europeans, so aboriginal peoples taught the pioneers how to plant, harvest, and use corn. The aboriginal peoples taught the pioneers the importance of rotating crops, which farmers still do today, and how to grow companion crops among the corn stalks, like beans, squash, and pumpkins. With their long experience in exploring and living on the land, the aboriginal peoples showed the pioneers trails used to get to game, fishing sites, and where berries grew. The pioneers also learned what nuts and roots were edible. Maple sugar and syrup became a sweet addition to the pioneers' diets. The aboriginal peoples showed the pioneers how to tap sap from trees, then boil it down to make syrup and sugar. Over time, the pioneers provided metal items to help with these tasks, such as steel drills to cut holes into tree trunks to collect sap, and iron pots for boiling it.

Hunting and trapping were also welcome lessons for pioneers. The aboriginal peoples taught the pioneers methods for preserving meat to last through periods of scarce game or harsh weather. At a time when cloth was very expensive or not readily available, learning how to prepare animal hides for clothing helped the pioneers stay

alive through the cold winter days. Getting around on foot in deep snow was much easier with the use of snowshoes. Aboriginal peoples showed the pioneers how to make and use snowshoes, along with other useful inventions such as the toboggan and birch bark canoes.

After their long journey at sea, pioneers usually arrived at their new home in poor health. Without the aid of aboriginal peoples, many more pioneers would have died after their arrival in the new land. Through countless generations, aboriginal peoples had learned how to make effective medicines from plants. For example, a tea aboriginal peoples made from the bark of juniper and spruce trees cured scurvy. Today, Canadians still use the natural products that aboriginal peoples discovered and developed long ago.

In spite of the knowledge many aboriginal peoples shared with them, many early pioneers took an attitude of superiority during their earliest contact with aboriginal peoples. Some pioneers did not recognize aboriginal peoples as human. Other pioneers viewed aboriginal peoples as beings in need of religious salvation or simply as curiosities without feelings. A few Europeans even kidnapped aboriginal peoples as souvenirs to take back to their country of origin across the Atlantic. This was in the earliest days of contact and may have contributed to the fact that for the most part, later aboriginal and pioneers communities stayed separate and independent.

Royal orders from France told the French military and French subjects in Canada to be kind, just, and equitable to the

indigenous peoples. These orders also said that representatives were not to claim indigenous lands in the name of France. That was true to a point — if there was a sovereignty challenge from another European nation, then the indigenous lands fell under the protection of France. For a long time, many indigenous peoples living near French settlements were comfortable with this relationship. They had protection from their enemies and were left to self-govern.

Then some pioneers had the idea of establishing **reserves**, areas of land set aside for the sole use and benefit of certain aboriginal peoples. **Jesuits**, a Catholic order of priests founded in 1534 to do missionary work, invited nomadic hunter tribes to practice agriculture on reserves near French settlements, and some tribes accepted the offer. With time, the Jesuits gradually began moving the reserves further away from European communities. One common reason given was that the move protected the aboriginal peoples against negative European influences such as alcohol and gambling.

At first, personal relationships between the aboriginal peoples and pioneers were exclusively between French men, especially fur trappers and traders, and aboriginal women. These women knew how to live on the land — a skill trappers and traders valued because of all the traveling they did. Some couples had lasting relationships that the local French government recognized as legal. These relationships between French and aboriginal peoples marked the beginning of the Métis culture, whose people spoke a language combining aboriginal and French languages.

If any group profited from the meeting of cultures at this time, it was the Métis. They were usually friends with both aboriginal peoples and pioneers. In the area now known as Winnipeg, for example, the Métis were centrally located to service the fur trade with provisions. An important Métis product was **pemmican**, a concentrated food made of thinly sliced or pounded and dried buffalo, moose, deer, or elk meat, rendered fat, and dried fruit, seeds, and berries. Pemmican has a long storage life, is high in calories and nutrition, and is easy to transport. It was perfect food for trappers working in the fur trade.

Other allegiances between pioneers and aboriginal peoples also formed. France sometimes presented money, clothing, and weapons to their aboriginal allies as thanks for their expert services as guides and fighters. The French did not interfere with the war practices of the aboriginal peoples, and in battle viewed the aboriginal peoples as a self-reliant and effective auxiliary force. Throughout the late 1600s and into the 1700s, French and British pioneers and troops increasingly battled over control of lands each country had claimed. When the French lost to the British and had to sign documents of surrender, they remembered their aboriginal allies by ensuring that the aboriginal peoples who had helped them kept their lands and had religious freedom under British law.

Commercial partnerships between the British and aboriginal peoples had begun expanding when the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) came to Canada in 1670. Initially set up as a fur-trading company, the **HBC** was granted the right by the British monarch to furs acquired from all lands

draining into Hudson Bay. Said to be the largest inland sea in the world, the Hudson Bay and its tributaries drained from a huge area of land in north-central Canada, which includes what are now called Ontario, Quebec, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and the southern part of the Northwest Territories. The area made up about 40 percent of present-day Canada. Aboriginal peoples carried on trade with the British in the same manner as they had with the French. Again, trade in furs was of some

benefit to aboriginal peoples, but negative factors went along with it, such as loss of lands and many dying of disease or becoming incapacitated by the consumption of alcohol.

This final part of this section on life for the early pioneers uses the basic research questions as a structure to present basic information about pioneer farmers, who formed the majority of early pioneers in Canada.

Did you know?

Two coureurs de bois, Pierre-Esprit Radisson (c. 1640–1710), and his brother-in-law, Médard Chouart Des Groseilliers (1618–c.1696), are credited with laying the foundation for the forming of the Hudson's Bay Company. In the mid-1660s, Radisson and Groseilliers had journeyed west of Lake Superior and found beaver in unbelievable numbers. When they returned to New France, people were amazed at the enormous load of beaver pelts Radisson and Groseilliers had brought back. However, the governor took Radisson and Groseilliers to task for side-stepping the French law requiring trappers to deal only with the government in trading pelts. He confiscated the furs, fined Radisson and Groseilliers, and told them that no one in New France or France would support further expeditions by the pair.

Radisson and Groseilliers then approached the British with an idea to bring ships into Hudson Bay, then to the southern tip of James Bay, and load up the ships with beaver pelts. A group of British business people provided financial support, forming the Hudson's Bay Company to trade for the furs obtained from Hudson Bay. In 1668, a pair of ships were provisioned and set sail, with Radisson on one and Groseilliers on the other. Storm damage forced Radisson to return to his home port, but Groseilliers successfully made the trip. When he returned, people were amazed with the size and quality of his load of furs. King Charles II (1630–1685) was so impressed that he granted a charter to the Hudson's Bay Company in 1670.

Note to the teacher

The information on early pioneer farmers is presented in point form so that a selection of statements can be printed or copied, cut, and mounted on cards for students to use when first compiling a list of basic research questions on early pioneer farmers. If the teacher and students also wish to investigate the history of early pioneers in other occupations, the teacher can present activities in this way, first working through some possible basic research questions with the students — or, if more appropriate to the students' skills and needs, big-picture questions or any other system the teacher chooses. After applying initial research questions to early pioneer farmers, the students can proceed on their own, researching the history of the early pioneer farmers in more detail or researching the history of the other early pioneers, such as teachers or storekeepers.

A list of possible basic research questions about pioneer farmers appears at the end of this section, and the Canadian History curriculum support CD provides a blank basic research questions sheet that can be copied for use by students investigating these or any other pioneers.



A sod house

Historical timeframe

- Pioneer farmers began working the land in the 1600s.
- Initially, pioneers came from Western Europe to farm in Canada. Later they came from Central and Eastern Europe.
- At this time, European civilizations such as France and England were well developed. Most of the pioneers who wanted to farm in the new land were experienced in farming in Europe, many coming from established farms with houses and buildings, livestock, crops, acres of pasture, and a variety of metal farm tools. None of the pioneers had experience in farming in the wilderness that was Canada at that time.

Natural environment

- Early pioneers started farming in New France as well as in what now would be called southern Ontario and the Prairies. Each of these areas had its own climate and geographical features.

- Numerous rivers, lakes, ponds, and rain provided the water needed to raise crops.
- Most land was full of rocks, shrubs, and trees, with no roads and none of the conveniences of modern life at that time. To farm, the pioneers had to first clear the land.
- In most places, the climate was cold in the winter, with summers ranging from warm to very hot. In the summer, most pioneer farmers were plagued with mosquitoes, blackflies, and other biting insects.
- Plants the early pioneer farmers encountered included wildflowers, berries, many kinds of shrubs, and huge forests of deciduous and evergreen trees. Wildlife included beaver, buffalo, moose, rabbits, squirrels, game birds, and fish.

Daily life

- Clothing was simple for most early pioneer farmers. Upon their arrival in Canada, most continued to wear the serviceable clothing they brought with them. Cloth imported from England or France could be purchased, but it was usually expensive and in limited quantity. Later, when weavers were able to make cloth from wool, pioneer farmers could acquire new clothes.
- Most men who farmed wore rough cotton shirts, thick wool pants and socks, and heavy boots. In winter, woolen hats, scarves, mittens, and coats protected them from the cold. Winter clothing was made warmer by the use of animal hides and fur. In summer, many men wore straw hats.



Pioneer woman churning butter

- Most women who farmed wore clothing similar to the men, but instead of pants wore dresses or skirts and instead of straw hats in summer wore bonnets.
- Pioneer farm women washed clothes on washboards. Most women used home-made soap containing **lye**, a strong alkaline solution made by mixing water with wood ashes and straining the mixture. Lye soap was fairly effective in breaking down dirt on clothes, but was very hard on the hands. Washed farm clothing was usually hung on lines outside, but in winter, could be hung inside to dry. Washed and dried clothing was pressed with flat irons heated over a fire or on a stove.

- Most pioneer farmers had few clothes and wore them constantly. Mending clothing was a constant job.
- Preserving food for the winter was important. Aboriginal peoples showed the pioneers how to smoke meat. Pioneers who were fortunate enough to have a cow were provided with milk and butter. Butter was made by pouring milk into a **churn**, usually a barrel-shaped wooden container with a tight lid and a handle in the middle, then turning the handle until the fat (butter) separated from the liquid. Once the liquid was poured off, the fat was molded into shapes and kept in a cool place.
- Pioneer farmers took baths in a stream, river, or lake unless they wanted warm water. Then they would haul water to the house for heating over a fire. The hot water would then be ladled into a large tub circled by blankets hung on ropes for privacy. One by one, family members would take a quick bath, often starting with the oldest and ending with the youngest.
- When they arrived in an area they wanted to farm, many early pioneer farmers built a **sod house**, which was made of pieces of turf cut from the ground and placed in over-lapping layers on a wooden frame. Sometimes the wood frame was placed over a hole dug in the ground. For extra protection from wind and cold, sod houses were also often built into the side of a small hill. Most farmer pioneers lived in sod houses until they had time and materials to build wood houses. In either case, the floor usually consisted of packed earth. As recently as the early 1900s, sod houses were still in use by farmers in parts of Canada.
- If pioneer farmers were able to get a crop in their first year, they would have something to eat through the winter, such as root vegetables, squash, beans, grains, and corn. If not, they foraged for game or were forced to depend on the kindness of neighbors.
- Common tools and utensils were axes and knives. With these, pioneer farmers could fashion items from wood, such as spoons, bowls, rolling pins, furniture, oxen yokes, fences, mallets, shovels, hay rakes, and pitchforks. **Coopers**, also known as barrel-makers, made pails and barrels by forcing thin wooden boards into round shapes, fastening them with leather or iron strips, and making them watertight with a sealing substance such as **tar**, the thick black residue formed by the heating and distilling of coal or charcoal and water.
- In early pioneer farm settlements, most women and men worked together on the land, whatever the task. Later, as farms began to take shape, men tended to do the labor associated with the land and livestock, and women to take care of the household work and the children. However, many women also cared for livestock and tended a garden planted for family use.
- In places where there were no schools, parents took responsibility for educating children. Many pioneer farmers could read and write, but not all. Education at home therefore depended on the level of education of the parents. If there was a

school, children would attend for as many years as they could.

- Children's labor was much needed on the pioneer farm, and children were expected to help their parents. Many farm children quit school after just a few years because they were needed at home.

Economic activities

- Most early pioneer farmers practiced mixed farming — raising both crops and livestock.
- Aboriginal peoples taught the pioneer farmers about the benefits of rotating crops in order to let the soil recover nutrients, about collecting and processing maple syrup, and about processing animal hides for clothing and other uses.
- Clearing the land by hand was no small task. The pioneer farmers cut trees down with a hand-axe and, often with the help of teams of oxen, pulled out the stumps. The branches were removed from larger trees, and the trees were stacked for drying and later use for building or firewood. The large quantities of brush produced were usually burned.
- Many pioneers brought crop seeds from their homeland to plant their first crop. Crops usually consisted of corn, rye, oats, wheat, vegetables, and fruit. Farmers could sell grain to a mill or have it ground for their own use.
- Flax was grown because the plant fibers could be woven into **linen**, a durable but soft fabric well suited for underclothes, curtains, tablecloths, sleepwear, and bedclothes. Linen was also used to make cool summer clothing.
- Cows and pigs were the most common animals raised. Pigs needed little attention, and could eat whatever the farmers gave them. Cows gave nutritious milk that could also be made into butter and cheese.
- Other animals included oxen, horses, sheep, chickens, ducks, and geese. Oxen were sturdy and strong creatures, ideal for the hard work of clearing land. Most horses were used for riding or for pulling wagons and plows. Some farmers raised sheep for wool and meat. Chickens were useful both for their meat and for their eggs, and ducks and geese provided meat and feathers. Feathers were used to stuff clothing, pillows, quilts, and mattresses to make them warmer.
- Once wool could be produced locally, weavers traveled from community to community to create bolts of cloth from yarn wound into skeins. Farmers paid a weaver with extra skeins of yarn. The weaver would use this yarn to create cloth to sell to general stores.
- Spanish money and banknotes were the currencies used by the early pioneers. The money was valued in the British system of pounds, shillings, and pence. Spanish money was used because British coins were scarce in Canada at that time.
- Most communities had a general store where pioneer farmers could sell or barter for their produce. Milk, eggs, and

sacks of grain could be traded for such goods as buttons, cotton fabric, ribbons, china dishes, tools, school materials, window glass, salt, and nails.

Social development

- In the earliest days of pioneer settlement, a resident governor usually made decisions about the land and all the people on it. The head of the European country claiming possession of the land appointed the governor.
- Within developed communities, class structure resembled that of Europe. Those with money and position could afford a more comfortable lifestyle compared to the modest lives of the pioneers who came to work the land.
- Some pioneer farmers had borrowed money for their passage fees to cross the Atlantic Ocean and had to pay the money back with what they were able to earn by farming. For many pioneer farmers, such debt caused great hardship in the early years before farms started producing enough to pay off debt and still have enough to buy seed and feed and clothe a family.
- As pioneer settlements grew larger and larger, aboriginal peoples were pushed further away from their traditional lands, many onto reserves. As a result, the relationship between aboriginal peoples and pioneer farmers became tense. Especially in isolated areas, pioneer farmers had to be ready to defend themselves, their families, and what they considered to be their land. At times, confrontations between aboriginal peoples and pioneer farmers ended in deaths and injuries on both sides. Pioneer

farmers may not have had experience in fighting in Europe, but in Canada they had to if they were to survive.

- The pioneers brought European games, songs, and dances to Canada. Games included jacks and checkers.
- Recreation was often a part of work. Some jobs were too big for a single family, and neighbors would get together for a **bee**, a gathering where work was combined with socializing. Tasks that involved a bee could include paring apples, husking corn, harvesting crops, slaughtering pigs, making quilts, or even building a barn. Several families gathered at one farm, and the pioneer women would take food to be shared by all. After the work was done, anyone who could sing, dance, or play an instrument provided entertainment. Some made rhythm instruments out of dried gourds and blocks of wood. Usually there was at least one fiddler. If there were no musicians, the people would make their own music, chanting, singing, clapping, and stamping their feet.

Expressions of civilization

- The early pioneer farmers came from all over Europe and brought their languages with them. Some also learned the languages of the aboriginal peoples.
- Pioneer farmers who could write wrote on paper with quill pens made from bird feathers. Ink was usually homemade. A common recipe for ink consisted of mashed walnut shells, vinegar, salt, and **lampblack**, the black soot collected by holding a dish over a kerosene lamp or candle flame.

- Religions included many different forms of Christianity. Most pioneer farmers were Roman Catholics or Protestants, including Jesuits, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Baptists, Mennonites, and Methodists. The pioneer farmers celebrated Christian holidays as they had in Europe.



- Music for pioneer farmers was simple. If a settler had an instrument, it was usually something small and portable such as a fiddle, harmonica, or flute. At first, many of the songs were familiar ones from Europe and tended to extol the virtues of the countries left behind. New songs, which were designed to be sung or danced to, told stories of the land and the new people who were settling in it. The echoes of those early days can still be heard in Canadian folk and country music.

Did you know?

Paper was expensive and scarce in early Canada, so pioneer farmers often wrote in two directions on a single page. First, they would write left to right until the page was full. Then they would rotate the paper one quarter turn and write from the bottom of the page to the top over the other words going in the usual direction. The text could be difficult to read, but the method certainly made maximum use of one side of a page. As a final step, the writer would fold the paper to create an envelope with the writing on the inside and the address on the outside.

Archeological evidence/records

- There are few, if any, actual farms dating back to early pioneer days. Some provinces have created heritage parks that show examples of how pioneers lived in the early years.
- The lives of pioneer farmers in the 1700s and 1800s were well documented by those who lived in those times, and there are some records from the 1600s. Most museums in Canada show examples of pictures or written records about early pioneer farmers and their way of life.

Did you know?

Women pioneers played important roles in the colonization of the **New World**, the term used by early European explorers and settlers to refer to all the lands in North, Central, and South America. Like their male counterparts, many of the women were adventurous. Beyond the hard work they did in helping clear land and creating homes in the wilderness, women gave birth and raised children in often harsh conditions. As pioneer families grew, women often played a major role in initiating the building of permanent homes as well as schools, churches, and other structures that had been part of their communities in Europe.

History records fascinating stories about the heroic feats of pioneer women. Here are two examples:

- Jeanne Mance (c. 1606-1673) arrived in Canada from France in 1641 to do mission work in the still forming community of Montreal. She was New France's first nurse and was responsible for the building of North America's first hospital in 1645. Mance managed hospitals, gave nursing care, baptized newborns, and survived a major earthquake as well as numerous attacks by the Iroquois. Her contributions made her one of Montreal's founders.
- Marie-Anne Gaboury Lagimodière (1780-1875), also from France, was high-spirited and adventurous. Braving long canoe trips and portages, she became the first-known woman of European descent to travel to the wilds of the area now known as Western Canada and to live voluntarily among the aboriginal peoples. She and her husband had many children, including the future mother of Louis Riel, a major figure in later Canadian history. Lagimodière lived to be 95 years old.