

# Rooster Town develops into a neighbourhood.

Rooster Town, on the outskirts of the River Heights/Fort Rouge area, was settled by mostly Métis families in the late 1890s and grew to a community of over 250 by the 1940s.

This community lived on unserviced land. Despite great hardships, over three generations of Rooster Town residents worked, raised families, and painstakingly improved their lives, preserving their culture and traditions and supporting one another in the community. The population fluctuated as families moved in and away.

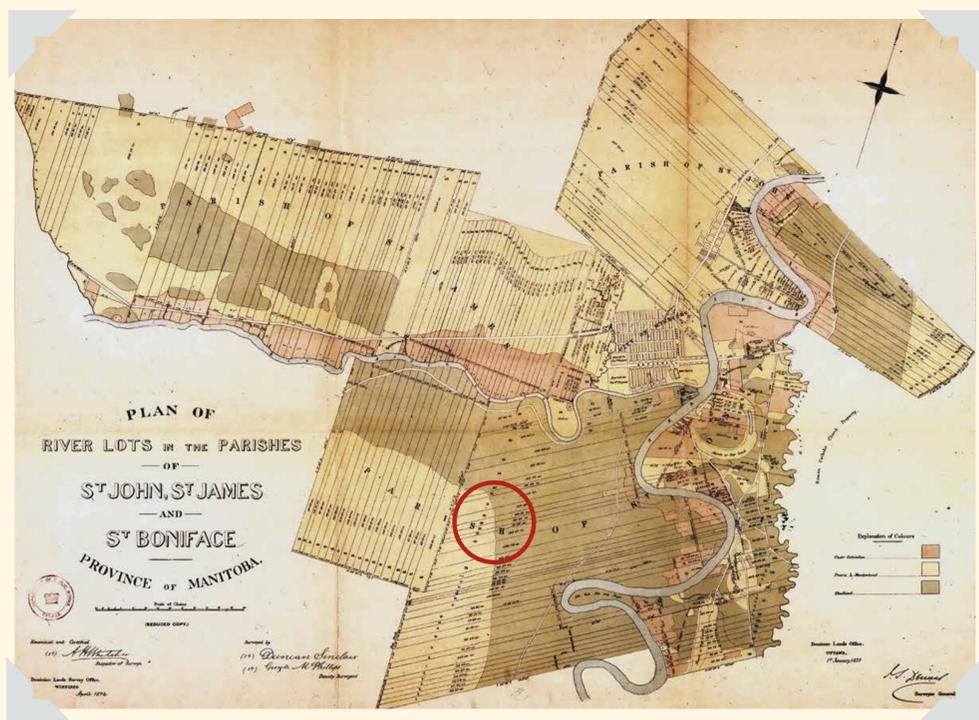
Over the course of the community's history, residents of Rooster Town were subjected to harassment—wrongly portrayed as dirty and lazy. Pressured to disperse, they were ultimately evicted by the City of Winnipeg in 1959 to make way for urban expansion.

Long, thin river lots, seen in this 1874 map, were based on the French model of land surveying. They provided each landowner with access to the river and close proximity to their neighbours. In 1870, when Manitoba joined Confederation, 99% of the river lots in Fort Rouge, where Rooster Town was located (circle), were owned by Métis families.

DUNCAN SINCLAIR AND GEORGE MCPHILLIPS, SURVEYORS, OTTAWA: DOMINION LANDS BRANCH, 1874.

Water cart belonging to Rooster Town resident Frank Sais, which he used to deliver water to community homes as a teenager. Pumped from the local standpipe, he would haul water year-round during the 1950s for \$0.80 per barrel, as there were no city services for the community.

UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA ARCHIVES & SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, WINNIPEG TRIBUNE COLLECTION, PC18-5874//18-5874-002.



# A community forced out.

In the early 1950s, the city's urban sprawl began encroaching on the borders of Rooster Town.

The City of Winnipeg and media reported false and humiliating stories about the residents and their homes in order to justify pushing the residents out of the area. Some found that their land had been seized without notice. The Sais family, whose land was officially expropriated by the City in late 1958, found out that they no longer owned their home only when they attempted to pay their annual tax in 1960. They had needlessly paid the previous year. Rooster Town families became dislocated. Most lost social support networks—the kinship, culture, and

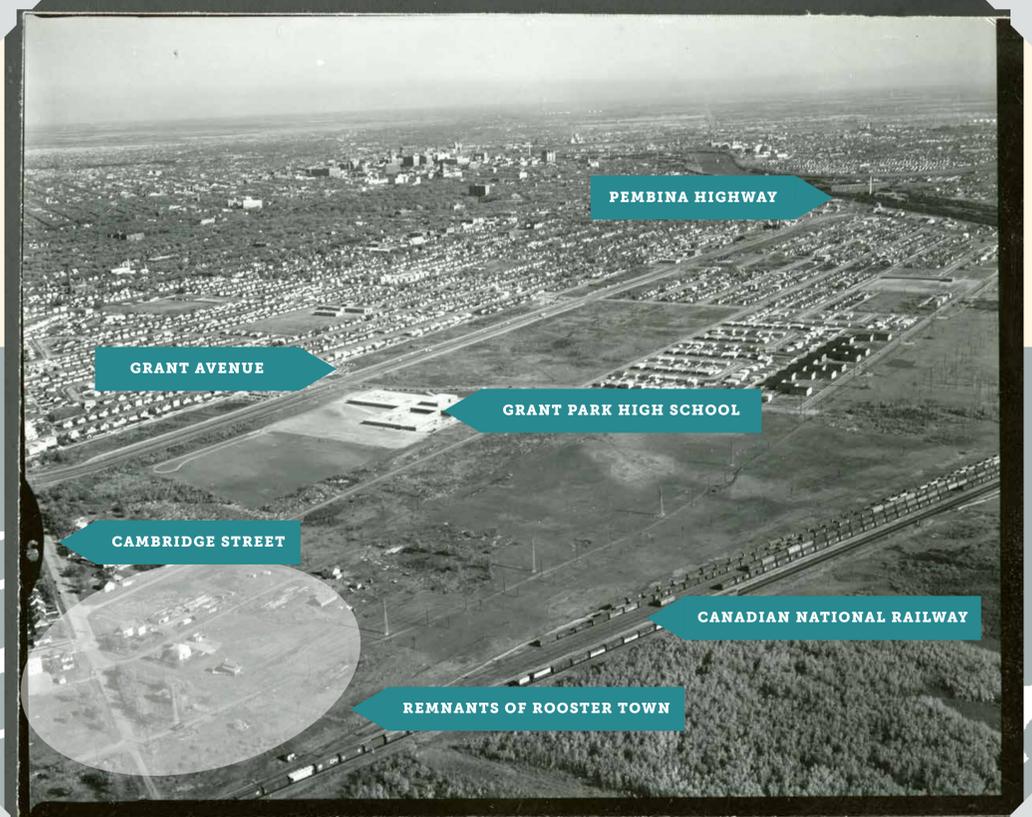
supportive nature of the community—as well as the strength and sense of community that came from living with other Métis families. Some lost employment opportunities with nearby businesses. All families lost access to low-cost housing.

**“When we had to move to the city, I was scared. I didn’t know anybody and I had to leave my home.”**

—FRANK SAIS

This 1961 aerial photo shows the remnants of Rooster Town (bottom left) along Cambridge Street.

CITY OF WINNIPEG ARCHIVES. CREDIT: DAVID PORTIGAL & CO. USED WITH PERMISSION FROM THE FAMILY.



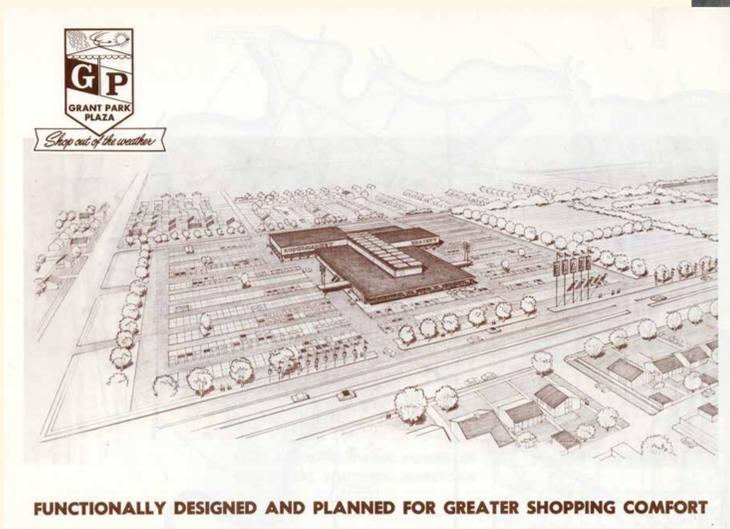
# We lost not just our houses, but our homes.

Due to pressure from the City to relocate, many Rooster Town residents moved to Winnipeg's North End, where houses were more affordable. Many families were heartbroken at the loss of their Rooster Town homes.

Most lost social support networks, as well as the strength and sense of community that came from living with other Métis families. Some lost employment opportunities with nearby businesses. All lost access to low-cost housing. For the Sais family, it took almost 40 years and two generations to own property again.

**"They never owned a home after that. They lost not just their land and their house, they had their home taken away from them. And that's just my grandmother and my papa, I can imagine how it was for all the other families who were forced out, having to live from house to house."**

—DARRELL SAIS



FUNCTIONALLY DESIGNED AND PLANNED FOR GREATER SHOPPING COMFORT

A proposed 1959 architectural drawing of Grant Park Plaza.

ARONOVICH & LEIPISIC LTD., GRANT PARK PLAZA, CITY OF WINNIPEG ARCHIVES, CITY CLERKS LIBRARY COLLECTION (A1200 FILE 6).

In 1960, the few remaining Rooster Town houses were bulldozed and a six-decades old community was destroyed.

WINNIPEG FREE PRESS, APRIL 8, 1959, P. 3.

Rooster Town residents were not the only people to lose their homes to the City. In 1967, Lena Birch, clad in an overcoat and slippers, wept while being evicted from the North Perimeter home she and her husband had owned since the 1930s. After the Birch family rejected the initial monetary buyout, the City moved to expropriate the land and sent bailiffs to forcibly remove the couple. The workers arrived with an axe to open the locked front door.

FRANK CHALMERS, WINNIPEG TRIBUNE PHOTO COLLECTION, OCTOBER 10, 1967, UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA ARCHIVES & SPECIAL COLLECTIONS.



# We were proud of our homes.

Winnipeg newspapers of the 1950s focused on Rooster Town houses, depicting the community as a poor slum full of squatters.

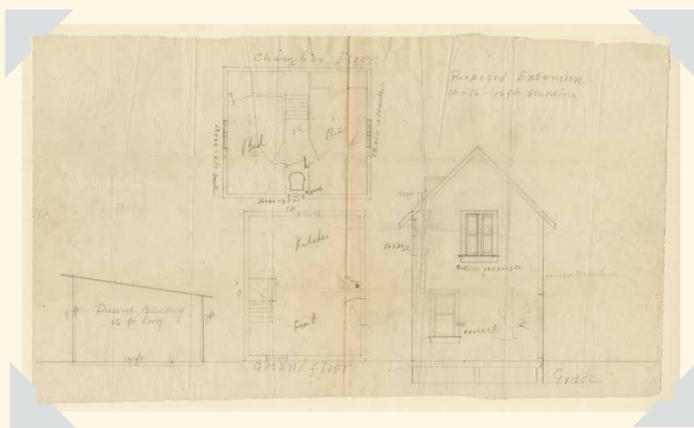
Even as recently as the mid 2010s, articles stated that the community consisted largely of shanties constructed from dismantled boxcars from the nearby Canadian National Railway yard. Other housing was described as involving saltboxes, sheds, and crude shacks with blackened shiplap walls and tar paper roofs, all poorly constructed from the salvaged materials. Former residents say this is not true of most of the community: Houses were largely self-built and ranged from single room dwellings to larger, multi-room homes. A few still stand in the Grant Park area, inhabited by families of today.

**“One of the stories that really upsets my dad is that people would steal the wood off the boxcars to build their homes, when in reality they built them with regular wood like everyone else. It wasn’t true.”**

—DARRELL SAIS

Philius Laramée's house, pictured in 2016, is one of the few original Rooster Town houses that still stand in the Grant Park area today.

EVELYN PETERS



Over the years, many Rooster Town residents renovated their homes, drafting and submitting plans for extensions, and paying for building permits from the City. Philius Laramée submitted this building plan to extend his home, which was approved in 1922.

CITY OF WINNIPEG BUILDING PERMITS, WARD 1, NO. 801/1922, CWARC.



# Winnipeg's media as a colonial weapon.

In the years leading up to the destruction of Rooster Town, Winnipeg's two daily newspapers (Winnipeg Tribune and Winnipeg Free Press) portrayed harmful stereotypes of the community and residents, and openly participated in supporting and justifying the removal of Rooster Town.

Both newspapers focused on imagined violence and rampant use of alcohol in the community, and featured photos of the poorest housing. In order to present Rooster Town residents as a threat to the growing city of Winnipeg, the papers falsely painted residents as lazy, dangerous, diseased, and dirty.

For example, after a well-known school trustee claimed that homes in Rooster Town were unsanitary and children were rife with skin infections (both of which were untrue), the Winnipeg Free Press ran a front-page article in December 1951 entitled *Village of Patched-Up Shacks Scene of Appalling Squalor*. The Winnipeg Tribune followed suit by calling Rooster Town "one of the stickiest social problems in the Winnipeg area."

**"They thought we were a bunch of savages."**

— FRANK SAIS

## This Is Rooster Town

- In South Winnipeg
- Strictly outdoor plumbing
- One old community pump
- Overcrowded shacks
- Squalor

**"That's how they've been portrayed, as trash, if you read the newspapers of the day. It was like, 'Look at this poverty! It's these peoples' fault that they're living this way. We've got to get them out of here.'"**

— LATE LAWRIE BARKWELL, FORMER CO-ORDINATOR OF MÉTIS HERITAGE AND HISTORY RESEARCH AT THE LOUIS RIEL INSTITUTE

## Rooster Town Is Dying - But It Had Its Wild Days

By JOHN DAFOE

### Village Of Patched-Up Shacks Scene Of Appalling Squalor

#### WINNIPEG 100:

### Remember Rooster Town



#### City Wants Rooster Town Land

### Cash Offer To Squatters

Squatters living in shacks on the Grant Park High School site will be offered a cash offer to leave. The city would have to bear the cost of removing the shacks. The site has been built up southward and forced shack dwellers out of residence.

### Winnipeg's Rooster Town...



door-neighbor Bill Ducharme, shown in insert (bottom right) has just found a temporary home on Warsaw Avenue. Photo is by Gerry Cairns.

### No Fuss, No Excitement, Squatters 'Just Moving'

By JOAN COHEN  
Free Press Staff Writer

god blanket thrown across them. This is what they have.

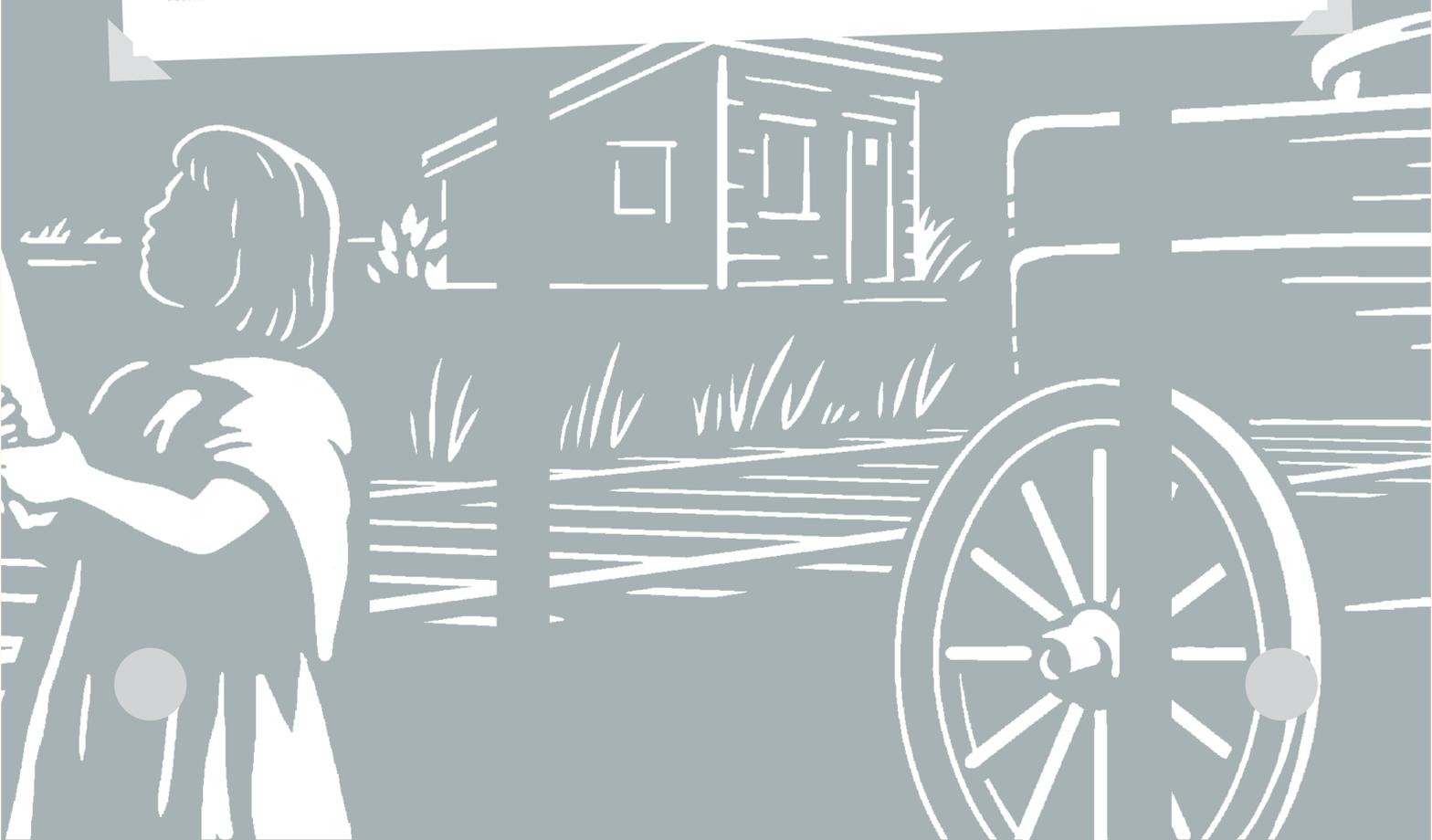
#### Nine Cats

s. Julia Hogg and Miss Ilda Conway, two old age pensioners, shared one of the smallest of these homes, along with nine cats, a large shaggy, part-collie dog, and a black wood stove kept the room hot and cosy. A table was squeezed into the centre of the room, littered with dishes from breakfast. Pictures on the wall — the bit of decoration a reporter

standing hospital bills is deducted from the pay cheque before Mr. Halchaker gets it. "We were on welfare for a long time. We have many debts to pay," says the large, complacent mother.

"There's no rent to pay, but the family spends a lot of money on food. Mrs. Halchaker likes to cook and bake in her giant stove. Today it was hot so she could do her ironing." We will rent a room somewhere," she says agreeably.

LIBERAL PRESI



# Neighbourhood on the move.

Métis settlements were founded on the outskirts of towns and cities across western Canada in the early 1900s.

Within these communities, work, family, and social ties combined, developing into kinship ties that stretched across many generations.

As urban centres grew, these fringe settlements were often forced to relocate. This forced movement and the final dismantling of these neighbourhoods for “modern development” occurred in major urban centres across Canada throughout the 1960s.



Frank Sais and his wife Elaine with his parents on Frank and Elaine's wedding day, November 1963.

PRIVATE COLLECTION

The map below shows Rooster Town's approximate location for its 60 years of existence, moving south as the residential district expanded.

BASE MAP: CITY OF WINNIPEG; BASED ON D. G. BURLEY, "ROOSTER TOWN: WINNIPEG'S LOST MÉTIS SUBURB, 1900-1960," URBAN HISTORY REVIEW, VOL. 42, NO. 1, 2013, P. 9



# Racism & relationships broken

Indigenous peoples have long histories and relationships to the land. European settlement and ongoing colonial systems have caused displacement of Indigenous peoples and dispossession of territories for centuries.

The Manitoba Act (1870) and Treaty No. 1 (1873) were made with the intent of parallel relationships and the sharing of land, while recognizing and respecting distinct Indigenous Nations and rights to territory. In an effort to improve the understanding of Canada's shared history, current realities rooted in colonial systems must be understood and acknowledged. Indigenous peoples have endured—and continue to endure—colonial racism so entrenched in Canadian society that many non-Indigenous people are not

even aware that it is racism; this can be termed “casual racism.” Rooster Town residents experienced this reality on a daily basis.

In the 1950s, newspapers reported stories about local Winnipeg residents, city employees, and school staff who noted non-Indigenous children did not want to play with Rooster Town children, or dare join hands with them for games, for “fear” of disease and dirtiness. However, based on memories and stories from former residents and those who lived nearby, these newspaper reports were hurtful and untrue.

**“We’ve heard stories from people who, as kids living in the nearby neighbourhoods, used to go play games with the Rooster Town kids all the time.”**

— LATE LAWRIE BARKWELL, FORMER CO-ORDINATOR OF MÉTIS HERITAGE AND HISTORY RESEARCH AT THE LOUIS RIEL INSTITUTE, WHO ALSO PLAYED IN THE AREA AS A CHILD.



## FRANK SAIS' STORY

**I had a bike, my dad's old one. I was so proud of it. The pharmacy nearby had a Help Wanted sign and was looking for someone to make bike deliveries.**

**I went in to ask about the job and was told right away, "Nope, the job's filled!" A boy who wasn't from Rooster Town came in after me and asked about the job too,**

**except he was told, "Yes! Come with me." He was hired and I wasn't. And I realized it was because of my colour.**

# Come in, there's room!

The community of Rooster Town offered the people inexpensive shelter and, for the vast majority who were Métis, the support of extended family and friends.

These kinship connections, social and work contacts that developed into familial relationships and friendships, created a vital network of mutual economic and emotional support.

Social visits and gatherings were very important pastimes. The kettle was always on the stove and ready to make tea for those who might drop in. Knocks on the door were often met with, "Come in, there's room!"

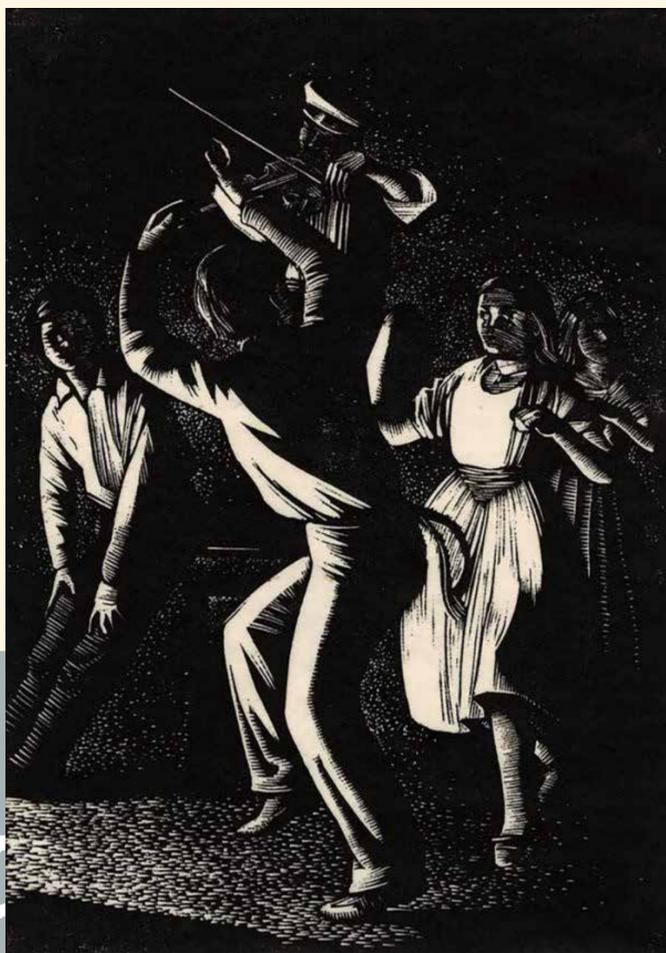
**"My mother and dad would make a square dance party at our house. They got me to dance jig. A few other men and my dad would play fiddle."**

—FRANK SAIS

---

The Métis have always been a festive people who place great emphasis on friendships, relationships, celebration, and culture.

THE RED RIVER JIG, 1931. WALTER J. PHILLIPS, LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA, ACC. NO. 1994-23, E01085251.



# Share your stories.

Are you from Rooster Town or a nearby neighbourhood? Do you or your family have memories or stories about the community that you would like to share?

In the spirit of reconciliation, the City of Winnipeg is committed to updating this exhibit as more stories, histories, and voices are shared.

**“I’m happy where I came from, I’m happy with who I am. I’m from Rooster Town.”**

—FRANK SAIS

**PLEASE CONTACT**

[roostertown@winnipeg.ca](mailto:roostertown@winnipeg.ca)

Elise Sais with her daughter Mary in Rooster Town, c. 1940.

SAIS FAMILY



# We called it Pakan Town.

No one is quite sure where the name Rooster Town came from.

According to some, the name was derived from the fact that residents owned chickens. Others claim it referred to the many seasonal railroad workers that “roosted” in the community at different times of the year. Some newspapers falsely claimed that it originated from illegal cockfights being held in the community.

What is true about “Rooster Town” is that it was a name that was given to the community by outsiders. The residents themselves called it Pakan Town, which referred to *bagaan*, an Anishinaabe word for the hazelnut bushes that grew wild in the area.

---

American hazelnuts (*Corylus americana*) were found in abundance in the area prior to the city's expansion.

