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The Métis Golden Years

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My Grandmere had always told us stories of the Pemmican Wars and the Battle of Seven Oaks. Some of my older siblings were old enough to remember what these times were like in our Métis community, but being born the youngest in 1843, I was not able to recollect. To an outsider, all of this political conflict and contrasting of the different Nations trying to occupy Red River could make it seem like a tumultuous time to be a child, but it was to the contrary- our community and family life was consistently quite ordinary. We all went to school, and although I found school to be tedious at times, I enjoyed writing stories. Sometimes I would take a break from my farming chores, much to my brothers' dismay, and escape in my writing to far off places where the supposed Queen lived. I'd never met her, but I'd always imagine her to be glorious.

My family was very religious. We went to church every Sunday, without exception. Our parents would drag all 11 of us to mass in the blizzarding dead of winter. It didn't matter if we were sick or dying- we were going to mass. I didn't mind that much; all of my friends and their families were at church too. Sometimes I would get in trouble for making silly faces at my best companion Louis and my mother would glance at me with that stern look in her eye and I knew she meant business.

Occasionally life was boring to a youngster like me. There always seemed to be so much happening in the "grown up" world and I so desperately wanted to be a part of it. "Les temps changent tres rapidement" my father would tell me, indicating that things around us were going to be different sooner than we knew it. As a child I of course, didn't understand what he meant, but I was lucky to live in what would later be called the "Métis Golden Years".

Quite frequently there would be gatherings of all the adults and elders in the community, when I would ask my father if I could attend the meeting with him, he would always say "La politique n'est pas pour des enfants," and pat me on the head. I remember these meetings to take many days. Everyone had to be consulted in what was later coined as a "participatory democracy". It was the way of our People. We made decisions as a community, and even though the process was long, it was the best way to come to a consensus. We didn't have just one specific leader either. We had different leaders for whatever the task at hand was at the time. Later, my friend Louis would be appointed by the Métis community to present our nation's requests to the Federal Government. The community agreed Louis was the best for the task because he was bilingual, most of us only spoke Francais or Mechif, and Louis was someone that could communicate in English, a valuable asset. The community dictated to Louis what their needs were and he was the messenger. But before all of that happened, Louis and I were carefree youngsters



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sneaking into these community meetings to see what all the talk was about. Usually we'd grow bored quite quickly and leave to find a new adventure.

One of my clearest memories as a child was the trial of William Sayer, our neighbour and my father's close friend.

It was during this time my Grandmere would tell us stories of the Hudson Bay Company and the Battle of Seven Oaks. She always made our Grandfather Cuthbert seem so heroic calling him the "Warden of the Plains" with a great sparkle in her eye. I always thought that she was embellishing certain details, but I never said anything. My Grandpere Cuthbert died when I was 11 in 1854. I had never met him until my sixth birthday when he returned to Red River in 1849, soon after the trial of our neighbor that turned an ordinary Sunday into quite the spectacular event.

My Grandmere said that Hudson Bay Company had bought out the Northwest Company, ending the meager disputes they were having over pemmican. Both companies had realized that whoever controlled the pemmican controlled the fur trade, as pemmican was the nourishing fuel of the fur trade. It was easy, convenient, filled you up and didn't taste half bad. It was light, didn't take up too much space and gave you all the nutrients you needed to continue in your journey. The fur trade wouldn't have been successful without pemmican. We all knew how to make it, so it wasn't that big of a deal to me. But it was a huge deal to the dueling companies.

After the Hudson's Bay Company bought out the Northwest Company, it left many Métis people out of a job, so to compensate, we traded. My Grandmere said that in the early days, the Hudson's Bay Company had made a lot of silly rules. People needed licenses to do things that happened every day. Things like shipping and selling pemmican were prohibited. Grandmere said that these silly rules were useless to us, so we only followed the community benefiting rules. It made sense, why would we need a permit to trade pemmican, something we created?

One day when I was about 6, a white man in a funny uniform came into our community and charged our neighbor, William Sayer and his 2 brothers with trading with the Indians without a license. Louis and I were playing in the tree when this man came and we watched silently, intrigued by his presence. He handed Mr. Sayer something on paper, Mr. Sayer opened it, read it and burst out laughing. Then he handed it to his brother, who again, read it and burst out laughing. Louis and I giggled to ourselves as the white man walked away angrily.

We didn't think anything about this peculiar episode, but then that next Sunday something even more peculiar happened. After church all of the men in our community gathered outside fully armed with their guns. Louis and I were thrilled. Finally, we got to be involved in a grown up game. My mother told me to go home, but Louis and I were



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too excited to be excluded, so we snuck our way to the centre, still staying out of sight, but within earshot. The white man that gave Mr. Sayer the funny paper was there and said that there was going to be a trial. I didn't know what a trial was, but my father quickly volunteered to be the prosecutor and my uncle the defense, much to the amusement of the crowd. The white man looked uncomfortable and started to read off of a big paper that looked quite official. The last words he read was "Guilty, court adjourned" and everyone laughed and cheered.

My Grandmere told me some years later that that funny Sunday was the beginning of free trade because the government couldn't enforce their silly laws. Mr. Sayer was found guilty, but not punished because he had the support of the immensely populated Métis community behind him who was ready to fight for their livelihood and in his defense.

But as a 6 year old, during the Métis Golden years, livelihood and free trade meant nothing to me. I was just happy to have my Grandpere Cuthbert around.

Author's Statement

I chose to write about the Métis people of Red River because I believe that they have a story that is largely ignored in formal Canadian education. Although all of Canada's Aboriginal history is untaught, specifically the history of the Métis is ignored.

As Aboriginal people living in Canada we have a responsibility to be educated to the times of those that have gone before us and a lot of the time, there was a lot of positive events.

Rather than writing about the Riel Resistance of the late 1800s I chose to write about the Métis Golden Years because being a University graduate in the Native Studies program, I felt quite overwhelmed with all the negativity of the colonialism our people lived through. The systemic genocide and institutional racism is still evident today and I believe that telling a positive story rather than a negative one is a good thing.

We must never forget the pain that was endured so that we today can live in a better Canada, but we must also remember the full history, which does include some positive times.