

Ni KishKishin, I Remember

by Cheryl Marion

My grandmother once told me a story from her childhood. Her mother was alone in caring for the family of five children, including my grandmother. They were starving, not having eaten for days. There was no food and no money and no one in their tiny village of St. Malo in southern Manitoba would help. It was early spring, and they set out into the woods, scrounging for anything to eat. Returning empty-handed, and in desperation, they ate the leaves off the newly budding trees. As a young girl, I remember hearing this story and being bewildered. I couldn't understand why they were starving, why they were so poor and where was my grandma's dad. What I didn't know was that this reality was a consequence of being born Métis.

I am by every account a Métis, but growing up and for a good part of my adult life, if you asked me what my heritage was, I would have answered 'French Canadian', but that's only half of my story.

Both of my parents, and their parents, and their parents, going all the way back to Marie Anne Gaboury (my great, great, great, great grandmother) came from the Red River Settlement, what eventually became Winnipeg. My parents are both Métis, the Indigenous women of Cree and Ojibwa tribes who were the country wives of the voyageurs and their children and their children's children are my heritage. I was asked to share my story, my family's story, but to do that, we need to understand a bit of history. Bear with me, you probably weren't taught much of this history in school and if you were, you have likely forgotten it. For the sake of clarity, I use the term 'First Nations' for the various Indigenous Nations who occupied this land before the Europeans arrived.

Being Métis

The Métis (big M) are defined as those people of First Nations and European ancestry who formed into a distinct nation in what was called the Northwest Territory in the late 18th century. They were a distinct people, with a unique culture, a unique language, and their own form of government. The Métis often spoke two or three Indigenous languages and either French or English. From this, they created their own language, Michif, a mixture of French and Plains Cree. A Métis is not a French-Canadian, nor a Canadian, nor a Scot. Neither are they First Nations or Inuit.

The life of the Métis was rigorous; days were long, work was extremely hard, and always, life and death depended on their skills in the wilderness. The versatility and ability of Métis women and men to overcome incredible tests of intellect, strength and endurance during the fur trade, contributed to a growing sense of consciousness of what it was to be Métis. That sense of character, combined with a shared history and language created a sense of nationhood which would have a significant impact on the development of the country that would become Canada.

Women were an essential part of the success of the Métis. They kept close ties to their First Nations families and brought with them the skills for making food, tanning hides, and

making clothing. They guarded their spiritual beliefs and were the healers, having knowledge of traditional medicines and cures. My mother's grandma often used traditional cures on her as a young girl, boiling tree bark and making teas from leaves gathered in the forest. Métis women created a distinct form of beadwork that involved organic forms and floral motifs, learned from the embroidery patterns taught by missionary nuns. Known as 'the flower beadwork people', their beadwork decorated coats, mittens, pouches, saddle pads and blankets. It's an incredibly beautiful art form that became fashionable in Europe. The irony is that Europeans often wanted their artwork to come from "real native" artists, so the Métis sold their art to other First Nations groups, who then resold them to the European traders.



BEFORE 1870 - Bison and Fur

I've heard it said that the Métis are the 'children of the fur trade', but I had little appreciation for how important their role was to the fur trade and how that livelihood was instrumental to the origins of this country. Initially, First Nations were the key source for trading in furs, but the Métis were born into this lifestyle and evolved into highly skilled hunters and trappers. By 1821, the Hudsons Bay Company became the sole trading partner for furs and held a complete monopoly on the trading of furs with Europe.

Through the long cold winters typical of the prairies, the Métis fur traders lived off the land in remote 'hivernants'. Being multilingual, they were hired as interpreters and guides to the Europeans. Métis women were integral to this business. Their survival skills were invaluable. One of the keys to surviving through winters on the land was 'pemmican'; a mixture of dried buffalo meat, fat and berries. It was a high calorie, compact food that was essential to survival through the winter and Métis women supplied this food to the European trappers and voyageurs.

In the early 1800's, bison became the main source of survival and income for the Métis. They organized massive hunting parties twice a year, traveling several months at a time. The hunt was organized with military precision under a 'Chief' and several 'Captains', all playing a role in a consensual democracy, with its own laws and codes of conduct. The enormity of this hunt was made clear to me when I read an article from *The Nor Wester* newspaper that reported a single bison hunt consisting of: "154 families, 210 men able to bear arms (of whom 160 were 'buffalo runners'); and 700 women and children, accompanied by 642 horses, 50 oxen, 6 cows, 522 dogs, 533 Red River carts". In one way or another, the whole community relied on bison for food and income. The pride and independence, strength and intellect of my people and their ability to overcome

incredible hardships is inspiring. They knew their livelihood and the livelihood of their children depended on bison, and so they carried out the hunt under a strict set of "Prairie Laws" that would protect this finite resource from over-hunting. Government policies in the United States and later in Canada would eventually see the total decimation of this animal.

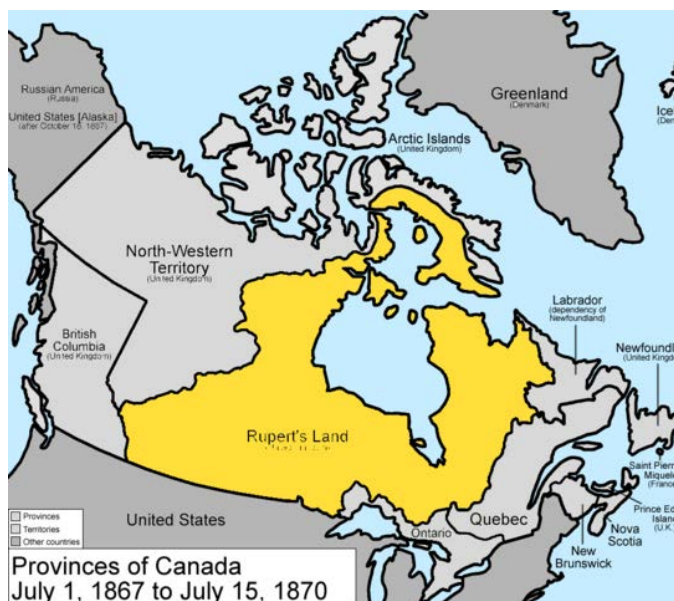
As dangerous and gruelling as a hunting expedition could be, it was matched by the exuberance and vitality of the celebration afterwards. Métis music is a combination of Celtic folk with the beats and cadences characteristic of Cree and Ojibwa songs. Reading about the boisterous parties with dancing, fiddle-playing and recounting of stories, I can't help but feel a sense of loss that this is no longer a part of my culture or my family's way of celebrating. In such a short period of time, my family, the Métis, would lose their culture. For most families, I think keeping the Métis culture alive meant leaving the Red River Settlement and this is not what my family did.

Red River Settlement

When French Canadian men 'married' First Nations women in the 1700's, the 'white' society more or less rejected these 'half-breeds'. The Métis kept a close kinship to their Indigenous families, but also had a different lifestyle, a different culture and a different language. They no longer belonged to one culture or the other. This set them apart and was the basis under which the Red River Settlement was born at the forks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. The HBC regularly attempted to claim political authority over the Red River, but the Métis always challenged the HBC's legitimacy as a government. The Métis continually asserted their freedom to organize their own governments, exercise justice and as necessary, use force to preserve the Michif concept of *kaa-tipeyimishoyaahk*, meaning 'we own and govern ourselves'.

Meanwhile, back in England...

North America was changing and the British owners of HBC could see that they neither had the desire nor the means to govern the enormity of Rupert's Land. This land encompassed the entire drainage basin of Hudson's Bay. The Province of Canada was about to become a confederation and it wanted Rupert's Land available for settlement, especially in the face of U.S. expansion. An increase in settlements however, was at odds with the fur trade; the more settlers, the fewer the animals. So the British Crown stepped in and negotiated a deal between the Crown, HBC and the Dominion of Canada. None of the inhabitants, the First Nations or my ancestors, the Métis, were invited to participate, or were even consulted.



The strength of character and culture and the incredible resiliency of my Métis ancestors are a far cry from the poverty and assimilation that my parents grew up in. Our indigenous roots had been ignored? forgotten? abandoned? dismissed? The answers brought me to understand how this country was founded on the lies, deception, aggression and murder of Indigenous people, right from the very start. It has been a country built on racist beliefs and actions. If we find systemic racism in this Canada today, I would say that this Canada was founded on it and it's been here all along. My family, along with most every Indigenous peoples, lived it first hand, because of - and despite - what happened in 1870.

1870

Canadian settlers coming to the Red River began taunting the Métis that soon their land would be taken from them by the Government of Canada. In 1869, my great great uncle, Edouard Marion came upon Canadian surveyors on his land. The presence of surveyors without any formal notice to the Red River Settlement had my uncle and the community fearful their land and livelihood would indeed be taken from them. So, in response, they formed 'The National Committee of the Métis' and halted the land survey. A month later, they erected a roadblock to prevent William McDougall, the Lieutenant-Governor designate, from entering the Red River. He arrived with a sizeable entourage that included a government-in-waiting. The Crown likely saw the Métis as British subjects while we saw ourselves as an Indigenous people, descendants of the original inhabitants and natives of the country. The same day that McDougall was turned away, the Committee walked up the path to the HBC trading post of Fort Garry and took control. This began the Red River Resistance.

Under the elected leadership of Louis Riel, the Métis created a Provisional Government made of a 50-50 split of anglophone and francophone Métis and this Provisional Government would negotiate the entry of Manitoba into the Dominion of Canada.

Up to this point, the Red River Resistance had been a relatively peaceful affair. But in late 1869, a man named John Christian Schultz had mustered a group of Ontario settlers to oppose Riel's uprising. Schultz was a settler from Ontario and belonged to a group called 'Canada First', a nationalistic political movement that promoted settlement of anglophone protestants and offered little place in confederation for First Nations and francophone Catholics. In early February of 1870, Schultz and his men prepared to attack Fort Garry, but Riel took the offensive, and seized the men as prisoners. Schultz eventually escaped through a window by tying his bed sheets together, no less, and the rest of the prisoners were released without incident. Later that month, some of Schultz's men regrouped and again they were captured. But this time, events would unfold differently. Among Schultz's men was an aggressive Orangeman from Ontario named Thomas Scott. While held at Fort Garry, Scott was contentious and abusive and promised to kill Riel upon his release. As a result, he was tried by a Métis tribunal for insubordination and rebellion against the Provisional Government. On March 4, 1870, Scott was convicted, sentenced to death and executed by a firing squad in the courtyard of Fort Garry. Protestants in Ontario, especially Orangemen, were outraged and called for Riel to be hanged.

Undaunted, the Provisional government under Louis Riel set to work and created a Bill of Rights that was based on a multicultural, bilingual and inclusive vision of a province that respected the rights of Indigenous peoples and minorities. It would eventually be called the 'Manitoba Act' and it outlined the conditions for the absorption of Rupert's Land into Canada. On May 12, 1870, the Manitoba Act became law. It laid out a framework for protecting Métis lands, culture, language and political autonomy, along with 1.4 million acres of land that was to be set aside for the children of Métis.



The Provisional Government under Louis Riel

The Manitoba Act could have served as pivotal moment in Canadian history. I often wonder how this country might have been a different place for Indigenous and minority people, if John A. MacDonal and his government had kept their word and their agreements as laid out in the Act.

AFTER 1870 - What Should Have Happened

With the Manitoba Act accepted by both parties, the transition into the new political world of Canada should have been simple. Upon the arrival of the Lieutenant-Governor, elections should have been called, and the Métis majority would have elected a government similar to the Provisional Government (an equal francophone/anglophone split). This new government, along with the Lieutenant-Governor would then implement the land policies that would secure Métis river lots and homes and negotiate land treaties with the Cree and Anishinabe in the new province of Manitoba. All of this was to be done before the arrival of Canadian settlers to the west. This vision was laid out during the negotiations and was agreed to by both parties. However, before the arrival of the new Lieutenant-Governor to the Red River, an expedition of British troops and Canadian militia arrived, throwing the whole region into chaos.

AFTER 1870 - What Did Happen

Four hundred British troops and 800 militiamen from Ontario and Quebec comprised the Red River Expeditionary Force lead by Garnet Wolseley. His supposed 'errand of peace' was, in effect, sent to establish British sovereignty and exact vengeance on the Métis. After 2 weeks, the British troops returned to Ontario, leaving the militia behind to begin a 'reign of terror' that lasted for two and a half years. These militia were the 'proud boys' of their time; members of the Canada Party and Orangemen, they were blatantly racist against Métis, First Nations, French and Catholics. This combined with Thomas Scott's martyr-like status in Ontario to create a militia set on hatred and revenge. For two and a half years, the Métis endured assaults, beatings, gang-rapes, looting, burning of their homes and murder. The actions of these Canadian militiamen extinguished any hope for the realization of the agreements set out in The Manitoba Act. My ancestors who struggled so hard to build a community, a vibrant culture and a democratic society suddenly found their world crumbling around them.

During the 1872 federal elections, the militia invaded polls and destroyed the printing press of Métis newspapers, effectively cutting off the flow of information. Meanwhile, the ultimate source of law and order, the Canadian government, was unwilling or unable to stop the violence. Métis leaders were forced into hiding, and some, including Louis Riel, went into exile. With the most experienced leadership gone, there was no continuity between the Métis Provisional Government and the new provincial legislature. While the federal government took their time to survey the Métis lands and come to a decision on how to allot that land, Canadian settlers from Ontario poured in and occupied the existing river lots and the land reserved for Métis children. Land was given away with an attitude that it should go to 'anyone but the Métis'. The Canadian settlers now controlled the government and established a set of laws to keep the land out of Métis hands. One of those laws stated that in the event of a dispute between an 'old settler' (Métis) and a 'new settler' (Canadian), the Land Office was to decide in favour of the 'new settler'. I can't imagine the anger, frustration and hopelessness of my people. Illegal amendments to the Manitoba Act followed and effectively removed the protection of the 1.4 million acres of land. The government instead, turned to the use of land scrip to allot the land. These land scrips offered no protection against fraud, land speculation and theft. Out of the 14,849 scrips issued, land speculators ended up obtaining 12,560 of them.

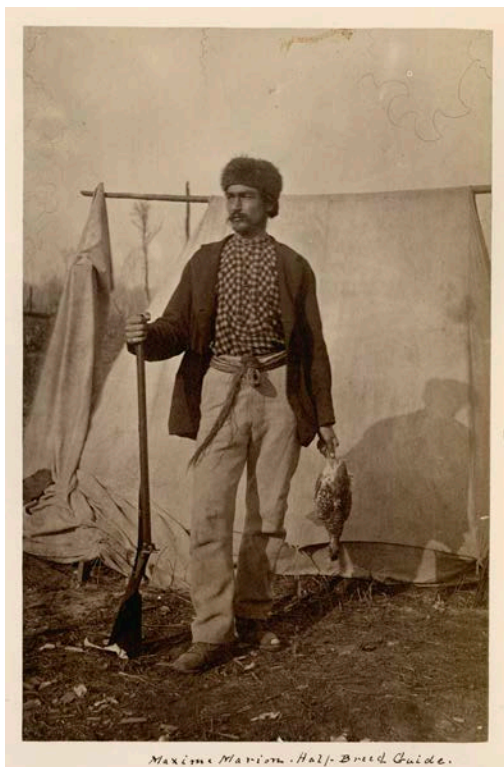
Roger Marion b. 1847 Julienne Carrière b. 1855

Francois Carrière b. 1830 Thérèse Morin b. 1832

I am listing the names of my direct ancestors who would have borne the brunt of the attack on the Métis. It is their story I really want to tell. Their lives thrown into upheaval, they were suddenly faced with no land, no social order and no means of supporting a family. My great grandfather on my father's side; Roger Marion, tried to reclaim Métis rights by working within the British colonial system. He was an educated man who eventually became mayor of St. Boniface and served two terms as an MLA. When I look at photos of Roger, I see a man who did his best to fit into the new Canadian anglophone system. But I also see someone who thought that this was the only way to protect our people and fight

for our rights. In 1891, he was elected president of the Union Nationale Métisse Saint-Joseph, an organization whose goal was to strengthen and fight for the Métis Nation - an organization that I now proudly belong to.

Roger's wife, my great grandmother, Jullienne Carrière was identifiably of First Nations descent, and as family stories go, Roger had to often hide her, attending political and extended family functions without her. His strategy of 'hiding in plain sight' and working to change a system from within served to bring him some financial and social success, but it also served to further distance the next generation, my grandfather and my father (also named Roger), from whatever Métis roots, culture and identity remained. The reign of terror created a dispersal of Métis further west into Alberta and Saskatchewan and Roger's brother Maxime left the Red River Settlement to become part of the Métis community in Batoche. After the failed Northwest Resistance again led by Louis Riel, he fled to the Turtle Mountain Reserve in North Dakota.



Maxime Marion



Roger Marion

Louis Larivière b.1851 Alvina Nault b.1850

Charles Nault b.1840 Louise Comtois b.1846

My mothers's ancestors left the Red River and moved to the southern-Manitoba Métis settlements in St. Pierre-Jolys and St. Malo. The void created by the absence of any real Métis leadership was quickly filled by the Catholic church. The priests and nuns ruled the social, cultural and political lives of my great grandparents. Métis traditions, culture and language were forbidden and punished. The story my grandmother told about having nothing to eat but the leaves off of trees, was retold to me by my mother. She explained that my great grandfather, Louis Larivière, was caught participating in a Métis ceremony; "going against the church" and the church was out to punish him. In an act of utter frustration, Louis brandished his rifle and as a result was sent to prison for five years. The

stronghold of the church over the village ensured that a once tight-knit community built on help and cooperation would now do nothing to help my great-grandmother. The nuns and priests ruled with an iron fist, determined to strip my ancestors of any Indigenous social, cultural or ceremonial forms of expression. By the time my mom grew up, nobody spoke of having an Indigenous history.

My mother, her parents and her eight brothers and sisters grew up in a three-bedroom house, without running water and without electricity. Illegal hunting was often the only way to feed the family. Stripped of their culture, their land and their shared strength, my great grand-parents, their children and my parents lived in poverty.

This is not to say they were without happiness or celebrations. I recall many family reunions in my grandparent's house full of laughter and joy, (and still no running water), but there was never any reference to our Indigenous roots or the fact that we were Métis. The strategy to survive as Métis was to hide and deny any of the cultural, political and social traditions and practices that could identify you as Métis. When my mom was growing up, being called an "Indian" by a white person was meant to be repugnant slur and my family distanced themselves from any hint that they were of Indigenous origins. This denial and shame borne from this sort of forced assimilation has become the fuel that drives me to write this. We are three generations of Métis who have been hidden so well, we forgot who we are. It is my sincere desire to bring the memory back and perhaps this (very long) essay will help us all to remember.



Me, my grandma, Rose Larivière and my mom, Anita

Reconciliation

I was asked by our union to tell my story after writing to them suggesting they take a more proactive stance on reconciliation. I believe every one of us should read and understand the 94 Calls To Action that resulted from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Hiding in plain sight, my family escaped the residential school system and the horrors of racism that continued across this country and still continues today. Many Métis did not. I am outraged on a daily basis at how the systemic racism against Indigenous peoples continues in our policing, our hospitals, our social safety nets, our stores, our banks, our attitudes and our beliefs. I am outraged at the complacency of Canadians. It is not enough to recognize that your meeting is taking place on the unceded lands of a First Nations people. This is a start, but to say you are occupying unceded lands and then do nothing about it, is the same as doing nothing about it. Of course Vancouver is not going to suddenly be given back to the Musqueam Nation, but every Canadian needs to know that there will be a land-reckoning of some sort.

In the face of the horrors enacted on our Indigenous people, it behooves everyone to learn the history of this country, to understand what the policies of the government have done, understand why the Downtown Eastside is full of indigenous people, why Indigenous people continue to live in poverty and then to come up with a plan, however big or small, to do something about it.

“The future of reconciliation is not just about Indigenous people, but the entire country. We need to recognize that this history, about the way that Canada has treated Indigenous people, is also about how Canada treated non-Indigenous people. Non-Indigenous people were educated to see Indigenous people as inferior and white, European society as superior. Until we get past that, we will always have a problem.”

- Murray Sinclair chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.