

## METIS IDENTITY: A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE<sup>1</sup>

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It has often been quoted in books, by philosophers, by social scientists, by ponderers of history and even in movies, that you can only know where you are going if you know where you've been.

For me as a Metis, discovering my history helped me to focus on, and participate in, shaping my future; this has been a difficult and at times a trying task indeed. The reason is that information about my past as a Metis was always so limited and the information that was available to me through school and conversations about Metis people was unacceptable to me because of the negative images about the Metis that were often expressed. My non-acceptance led me to question, probe, investigate and eventually to form my own opinions. It is these opinions which I wish to share with you: through ideas that I have tried and tested on myself and other people during my upbringing; through my involvement in what can be classed today as the "Modern Metis Movement"; and through stories told to me by those Metis people I have been privileged to meet and know in my life. By sharing these with you, I hope that I can successfully provide glimpses that will give some depth to what you in your profession may already know about Canadian Metis.

I am a Metis born in St. Paul, Alberta, and raised in Edmonton. I completed high school, college and two years of university. I worked for a total of eight years with the Metis Association of Alberta in its Education and Communications Departments. In 1979 I joined the provincial public service as a public communications officer, and currently, I am the manager of the Native Peoples Programme office at the Attorney General's Department and have been in that position for almost two-and-a-half years.

In addition to working directly and indirectly with individual Native people, I also have twenty years of direct involvement with



a number of Alberta's Native organizations. I started out in 1966 travelling on weekends with my father, Stan Daniels, who was President of the Metis Association of Alberta for a number of years during the 1960s and 1970s. I was sixteen then and still in high school when I became exposed to the living conditions of many Metis people in remote communities. I did not know at the time that those weekend trips were the beginning of my task to discover my past and of my journey to shape a future for myself as a Metis.

In order to understand my thinking on the subject, I have often had to look at my own family situation and the dynamics of characters and events which provided "pictures" that have offered me a sense of being Metis and have helped me to understand how we fit into, and at times have not fit into, the larger Canadian society. Hence, I would like to share with you a personal description of the heritage of my family, and how we have maintained our sense of being Metis, biologically, spiritually and socially. I believe that this description is a fair representation of a number of Metis in this province.

I was born into a family comprised of both Indian and French-speaking Metis elements. My mother was a treaty Indian from the Saddle Lake reserve, located near St. Paul where my father originated. My grandparents had often socialized and traded with one another long before my parents married. My mother's family was closely associated with and included spiritualists and medicine men. Her family managed to maintain a certain connection to these roots and today, since the laws limiting Indian culture have been lifted and the revival of Native culture has occurred, the spiritualism which has always been an integral part of her family is practiced freely. None of my mother's family married out of the Indian lineage. My father's roots date back, so far as we have researched, to the early Metis settlements of Saskatchewan and also to the immigration of the Iroquois who came west during the fur trade. I am a descendant from the Michele Callihoo reserve which was located about thirty-five miles west of Edmonton, before it became enfranchised. Each



succeeding generation as far back as we have gone in my father's family has, at various points in our history, consistently married back into the Indian lineage. Because of this practice, my sisters and I are sometimes described as three-quarter breeds. All of our first cousins on my father's side, however, are considered one-quarter breeds because my father was the only one in a family of eleven to marry back into the Indian line.

On both sides my grandparents were extremely generous and proud of their families. I grew up looking at birthday pictures of my grandparents' children, decked out in intricately hand-sewn clothes made by grandmother Daniels. To the very end of their lives, my grandparents nurtured their family, while large gatherings for Sunday dinner at their place was a well-practiced tradition. All of this naturally fueled in the children a continuing sense of pride, self-awareness and self-reliance.

Until she passed away, my grandmother, Matilda Whiskeyjack (on my mother's side), came to Edmonton at least twice a year to pick up a car load of clothes from the Sally Ann shops for all her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. It was my father's coveted duty to pack as many of these clothes into the station-wagon as possible, drive back with my grandmother to Saddle Lake and there unload and deliver everything to his in-laws. It was also his duty, along with my mother's, to teach my sisters and me to withstand any ridicule and to understand the prime necessity of these acts by my grandparents on both sides of our family.

The relationship my father built with his in-laws over the years allowed and encouraged the kind of atmosphere in our home which gave my mother the freedom to express and teach my sisters and me aspects of Indian culture. It was not until the revival in the 1960s, however, that this freedom flourished and took a solid hold in our family. Both my mother and father, along with other Indian and Metis leaders, had much to do with contributing to this overall revivalism in Native society.

I wish to explain these aspects of my family's history because of the importance of their impact and effect. The slight



cautions I use in my explanations are intentional--particularly when I refer to the "freedoms" we took to express and practice our culture. These slight cautions can be interpreted as the way it was and has been in many respects for Indian and Metis people. Sometimes, even within the sanctity of our own homes, we spoke of "our ways" in secrecy and with caution because of the misunderstandings and severe judgments of the past. In order to understand these cautions, one has to take into consideration the negative view of Native peoples, perpetuated historically, and the temptation of some to renounce their Native heritage.

A case in point was the repeated denial over the years of one dear aunt who in her repetitive way would often say, "I'm not Indian, I'm not Indian--I'm French." The denial in part was related to the area in which she had grown up. She had been raised in a community once known as St. Paul des Metis, Canada's first "Metis Reserve" established in the 1890s. However, when the French settlers moved west into Alberta with the rest of the immigrant movement in the early 1920s and 1930s, the "des Metis" of St. Paul was dropped. My auntie therefore grew up most of her life in what became known as a primarily French community, although there were still many Metis in the area. But the denial also perhaps stemmed from the bias and taunts levelled at Native people. Certainly my father as a young child had experienced the ridicule and hostility of other children. As Maria Campbell pointed out in her book, Halfbreed,

Stan Daniels, a Halfbreed from St. Paul, Alberta. . . was one of many children. . . raised on bannock, rabbits and tea. The French kids used to kick his ass home from school, as he said, and his sanctuary was a sixteen by twenty-four foot mud shack where he'd hide and cover his ears from the taunts of "Sauvage! Sauvage!"<sup>2</sup>

When I grew up in small towns in Alberta (my father was a carpenter so we moved from location to location depending on where he worked), I did not hear the word "Sauvage" very often. Instead, I heard "Halfbreed." But even in my young years, I was able to interpret the not-so-complimentary connotations of the word.



It was not until the publication of Halfbreed that the implications of the word changed for me and for others in Alberta and other provinces. The result was a shift in the connotation of the term, in that we now adopted a pride in being known as "beautiful Halfbreeds." Then another change quickly followed. Whether it was society's preference or the preference of our own people, the word "Metis" became much more commonly used. I point these name changes out to you because I believe there was and still are today, effects attached to the terms used to describe Native people. It is these effects which have had a great deal to do with how we think of ourselves and how society thinks about us. As an example, I have a bright red T-shirt that has written down the front of it, a list of ways to write Metis. Written on the shirt is Mate, Matte, all crossed out, and then Metis at the bottom. The shirt had been printed about ten years ago--during a time when there was much questioning within both the Native and Non-Native community, as to just who these Metis were.

Just prior to the inquiry into what seemed to some to be a new phenomenon, the Metis had become a very vocal group in Alberta society. The vocalness came in large part from Native aspirations to improve our lot and from an effort to define or redefine certain Metis rights as related to what seemed to me at that time some distant historical maze. In order to unravel the maze, concentrated research began. All across this country, bureaucrats, academics, and we ourselves wanted to know just who we were and what that meant individually and to Canadian society. One of the early descriptions that emerged from the research was "the Forgotten People." Although personally the term never sat well with me, it indeed could and did describe in large part the situation in which Metis people found themselves. I only had to remember the conditions I saw when still in high school and travelling weekends into the Native communities--particularly the remote and isolated communities. The sometimes deplorable conditions in these communities could only be brought about because these people somehow had not reaped the benefits this great country had to offer. The situations could probably be



easily explained away if it were only a small portion of the people who lived in these conditions, but they were true of entire communities and regions.

The Forgotten People could not easily be recognized in the work force, in business, government, or any other aspect of Canadian society. As the research continued and the Metis leaders remained active and vocal, the Metis began coming out of the "woodwork." As they came forth, my resource base as well as society's resource base broadened. I no longer operated solely from the community based and organizational perspectives.

I listened and talked to many more of these Forgotten People. I found out from them that they were not forgotten by choice. It became increasingly clear that there were two main groups that made up these Forgotten Metis. One group consisted of those who biologically could "pass" as something other than "Halfbreed" and learned to do this as they were growing up in order to avoid the taunts of "sauvage" and "Halfbreed." The other group was composed of those who could not "pass" because of their strong physical features and who often lived in the remote communities I visited as a teenager or in the Boyle Street, Jasper Place or Highlands areas (Edmonton) of the urban cities in which they had grown up.

In addition, to the credit of our Nation, there were those Metis who worked very hard in organizations and in their communities, and would not let themselves or society forget that the Metis existed and were living in Canadian society. Too often though they were perceived, and received, more as a small squeak in a large wheel.

As the research continued, it became clear that Metis history had been written from what seemed a common perspective, which unfortunately did more disservice than anything else to the Metis. I have often met people who accuse me and other Metis of wanting to rewrite history when we raise objections to the words and inferences made in passages from the past and in the present.

During the 1960s and 1970s, society seemed to stop and listen for awhile and we could sense that a good deal of constructive



thought and consideration were being given to the way Metis and Indians were being portrayed in books, in film and even in individual conversations. Then the 1980s came and some of the backlash started to seep in. Three examples that have been of particular concern to a group of Metis in Alberta have occurred in the past few years. They are:

- 1) A western historical conference held in Calgary in April 1984;
- 2) A government news release published in the fall of 1983; and
- 3) A public forum dealing with Louis Riel and the Metis Resistance held November 1985.

In all three instances, groups of people who are often perceived as powerful influences on society's thinking have been involved. The first example involves a group of University academics, lawyers and judges; the second involves a leading western government which, at the time, was conducting a tolerance and understanding campaign; and the third example involves lawyers and doctors.

At the western historical conference a fellow participant took up conversation with me regarding my public objection to the word "savage" having been used during one of the presentations. We discussed the matter and concluded that the word may never have appeared in history books in the first place if there had been an Indian or even a Metis present during the editing processes.

I was similarly dismayed when a government news release announced the declaration of an historical site in St. Paul, Alberta. In the first two paragraphs of the release six words associated with the Metis were used in what could easily be interpreted in a derogatory way by the general public. Words like "failure," "critical," "plagued," "calamities," "limited," "abandoned" were highlighted in the release. In response a letter was written pointing out these words and making reference to the tolerance and understanding campaign which was being conducted at the time.



The public forum dealing with the Metis resistance held on the Centenary date of Louis Riel's hanging likewise proved to be a disappointment to the Metis. It rehashed information that has been kicking around time and again and that has only served to raise contention in both the Native and non-Native societies. Had Metis people been involved as advisors, perhaps their contribution would have provided new insights and perspectives on the Resistance. This idea was stated in a letter to the organizers, along with the suggestion that information on the human and psychological impacts of the events of the mid- and late-1800s on the Metis and society generally.

In addition to the backlash, there have also been some very positive and encouraging developments during the 1980s--developments which I truly believe will lead to a greater involvement and understanding of Native people in the future. These developments include the Glenbow Museum's "Metis Exhibition" travelling across Canada and concomitant efforts to involve Native people in the advisory, planning and implementation stages of the exhibit; efforts to involve Native people in the major Native exhibit being planned for the 1988 Olympics in Calgary; and documentaries on CBC television, particularly over the past ten years. There are visible efforts being made to treat material on Native people in new, creative, and constructive ways.

The Metis silence in the past one hundred years is also changing and I see where, in the future, we too can work within the established multicultural society to present new ideas and seek new alternatives. As a society, and for the benefit of all our futures, we will not have to operate within the limitations of our learned and conditioned thinking. Multiculturalism, I believe, will assist us in recognizing and considering various viewpoints and outlooks about our nature as human beings and how we choose to live life. As a Metis, I see for the future a light at the end of the tunnel which includes our active participation in Canadian society. I see the multicultural framework working because I too believe in what Maria Campbell once wrote: "that one day, very soon, people will set aside their differences and come together as



one. Maybe not because we love one another but because we need each other to survive. Then, together, we will fight our common enemies."

#### NOTES

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<sup>2</sup>Maria Campbell, Half Breed (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1973), pp. 168-9.