

Michif Speakers Planning Workshop

On April 24-25, 1999, a Michif-speaker's planning workshop, with proceedings in Michif and English, was held in Yorkton, Saskatchewan. Sponsored by Saskatchewan Education, the Gabriel Dumont Institute and the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan, this event provided Michif speakers with an open forum to network with one another and to voice their concerns about the state of the Michif language. It was also noted that the Michif speakers had a great deal of cohesion when they spoke Michif during the workshop. By watching these sessions, it is clearly evident that Michif is more than a language: it is a belief system with a unique worldview. All workshop participants were adamant that the Michif language and culture are linked together in a holistic system.

The Michif speakers, most of whom were elderly, came largely from displaced Métis communities that once existed around Yorkton and Lebret, Saskatchewan. During the workshop, they shared their ideas about how to preserve and promote the language, identify speakers, organize for future Michif conferences, create Michif language cassettes and develop Michif curricula for teachers. The group also noted that Métis children should acquire more self-esteem and pride in their Métis identity. An enhanced pride for the Métis' vibrant culture among Métis youth would further help to preserve the Michif language. This workshop was the first tentative step taken by many concerned Métis to ensure that Michif will be handed down to future generations. The most tangible result from the workshop was the development of Michif speakers' advisory groups. The first group was the Elders' Advisory Committee, a group of six people who are over sixty-five years of age, and who are keepers of the Michif language and culture. These Elders will provide ongoing guidance and support to the Michif Speakers' Steering Committee, a group of five fluent Michif speakers who are dedicated to preserving the language. The second group, the Michif Speakers' Steering Committee, will take a lead role in stressing the need to preserve Michif in the public consciousness.

Knowing that Michif is in danger of dying out, the workshop came up with a number of recommendations:

- I. Incorporating Michif language instruction into Aboriginal Headstart Programs.**
- II. Identifying Michif-speaking Elders.**
- III. Developing language programs and curriculum.**
- IV. Creating a Saskatchewan-based Michif dictionary.**
- V. Implementing Michif immersion programs.**

- VI. Creating an inventory of Michif resources.**
- VII. Certifying Michif language teachers.**
- VIII. Networking with other like-minded organizations.**
- IX. Creating awareness among Métis political leaders, government and the Métis community about the state of the Michif language.**

General Sessions:

George Pelletier (GP.) Opening Prayer

Oh God, our Creator, I thank you again for helping us. These people here have a long ways to go. Please keep them and guide them on their way home. We have families and we have relations. So, help us so we can get home to our relatives again, and give us a good journey home. And also we ask you, our God, our Creator, so we may meet again. We can work together and we can work in the ventures that we're working, working on the Michif language. We ask you again, oh Lord to take care of us, you the one who belongs to us as human beings, as Métis people. We ask you again to help us. We thank you. Amen.

Norman Fleury (NF.) Importance of Michif

This language was given to us by the greater power, by our parents; our grandparents gave us this language. What we are trying to do here can be a big job, and we're trying to do something for ourselves as Métis people. This is our opportunity to teach the Michif language to those that don't understand it. That's another reason why we are having this meeting. For two days...we have to talk about the Michif language.

Families and extended families

As a child, I was always curious. I always asked questions, and I guess that's way I know so many things today. I'm asked by many people, my family, even my mother asks me questions and she's gonna be ninety-seven years old in June. My mother will ask me "How are we related to those people and specifically people that lived out in Ste. Madeleine?" And I says, "There were a lot of Fleurys there and those Fleurys got married to many people from different names, different backgrounds, different family backgrounds." A lot of those people came from Baie St. Paul, St. Francis Xavier along the Red River.

The old Fleury people, there was a big family of the Fleurys, and they had sisters also. And they got married in Ste. Madeleine and a lot of those people had their, also had big families so that there's a lot of those Métis people out, in all over the country now. My grandmother, my mother's mother, was related to all those Fleurys. Her mother was also a Fleury, and she was always very proud of her extended family until she was very old. I

remember she used to ask my uncle, his name was Riel Fleury, to take her to visit her relatives. Years ago, that was our way. That was the way of the Métis people to be proud of your family, and that's the way it was. My grandmother's first cousins were like her brothers and sisters. There was also a way of calling your older brother and your older sister. It was "*Nishtash*" was your oldest brother. "*Nimmish*" was your older sister. "*Nasimmish*" was your younger brother and younger sister. The Métis people were very proud of what they called the relationship, their relations, their relatives. We had all those things in the past and those are the kind of things that we have to regain. I thank my grandmother and my grandfather for teaching me the Michif language and the ways of the Métis people. And that's why I am here with you today, to share my experiences. We lost a lot and I think we must try to regain what we have lost. We just about lost all of our culture and that's why we're here today gathered to come with all those things and regain that what we just about lost...

Social events

At the wedding, they would also take off the shoe of the bride...They used to also have basket socials, they sold baskets at the dances and that's how they raised the funds for whatever they wanted to do with their money... Another thing that I remember was when a baby was born they would take their rifles and their shotguns and they would shoot up in the air, a big way off cheering and welcoming this child into the world. When New Year's came it was also a tradition to shoot up in the air with a rifle...They'd start dancing from New Year's day until January 7th, All King's Day. Another thing, another tradition that I heard was that on the 7th of January, it was All King's Day, and that's when they would give one another gifts...that was the tradition, they'd even exchange horses, they'd even give away their homes...

They used to also dance from New Year's to All King's Day. I remember my grandmother's brother. His name was Peter Lépine, but they called him "*le vieux Saint Pierre*," "Old St. Peter" was his name. And old man Peter Lépine his birthday was on January 7th, which is All King's Day. So, they'd start dancing from New Year's Day until January 7th, All King's Day. Another thing, another tradition that I heard was that on the 7th of January, it was All King's Day, and that's when they would give one another gifts. I remember my Godfather "*Pchi bon homme Flammand*" was his name, and he told me [that when] you met somebody on the road, he would take off his watch or you would take off your watch and exchange gifts, right there on the road. That was the tradition. They used to even exchange horses – give horses away. They'd even give away their homes. That is another one of our traditions that's been lost, and this is why we have to talk about these things, otherwise they will be lost for good. [And] this is one good reason why we use videotapes, so when people are talking about things you could replay them and everybody could see them and they could learn from our tapes. That's why it is quite important that we have to have people translate our stories, and what we have to talk about so they will know what we are talking about...

They used to also have basket socials, they'd sell the baskets at the dances and that's how they raised the funds for whatever they wanted to do with their money. I remember going to a dance in Binscarth. They called it the "Corner," and they, they were selling baskets. There was a big dance there and there was an elderly person by the name of Tommy Fleury, he's gone now, and he was a real good dance caller. Tommy Fleury was also really good at auctioning baskets. He was really good at selling them. He had a way of doing this since he always used to do this and this was one of the traditions in the Métis communities. Another thing they used to do is, if somebody liked to have a little liquor, used to have, like to have a little drink, the person who made the basket would hide a little bottle of whisky in one of the baskets. And that way if somebody knew about it, the sale went much higher. And if there was going to be another dance then they had funds to go to another dance. This is the way they had their fundraising.

Another thing that I remember was when a baby was born they would take their rifles or their shotgun and they'd shoot up in the air, it was a big way of cheering and welcoming this child into the world. We've also lost another one of our traditions, and when New Year's came that was another tradition, was to shoot up in the air with your rifle. They also used to get drunk once in a while.

Nanabush

One of the stories that Nanabush told was how we got the red willow...Nanabush dropped his scab, he burnt his rear end...When he was walking through the bush, the scabs fell and that's how we come we got red willow – that's like the blood of Nanabush...One of the stories that *Nanabush* told was how we got the red willow. *Nanabush*, he dropped his scab, and that's where we get the red willow. He burnt his rear end. *Nanabush* had killed a lot of ducks. *Nanabush* cooked all those ducks, and he had a lot of meat left over and he says "Now what will I do with all of this meat?" Well he was tired, *Nanabush* was tired and he wanted to go to sleep. I guess he ate too much, so, he, but he then realized "What will I do now? I've got all this meat and how will I take care of it while I sleep?" So *Nanabush* he talked to his rear end. He says, he says "You, you talk quite a bit," he says, "Maybe when I sleep I'll get you to wake me up when Indians or wolves or something tries to steal my meat." And I don't think his rear end would wake him up, but that's what he thought they it would do. So he fell asleep anyway, so somebody did come and steal it, I don't know if was a wolf or an Indian or somebody came to steal his meat. So [then] he took those little legs out of the fire when he woke up, and he took one leg out. There was nothing just the bones and took another leg and there was nothing left, there was just the bones and he took another leg and there was nothing left. There was just the bone, no meat. So he got really angry and he said "Somebody really cheated me." So then he looked and talked to his rear end and he says "I thought you were supposed to wake me up?" You've got such a big mouth. You should've woke me up!" *Nanabush* got really mad. He says

"You were supposed to wake me up," he says. "I'm gonna teach you a lesson." So [then] he heated up a rock really hot and red, he sat on it, and it went "cheek." Of course, his rear end did not, could not talk. He really abused him. So anyway what happened is, of course, had scabs right away on his rear end. So [then] I guess he had to go. So while he was walking through the bush, his scabs fell and that's how we come we got those red willows today, when you see it looks like scabs on the red willow and that's like the blood of *Nanabush*.

And that's one example of *Nanabush* and those legends, and that's how we got those red willows, but there are many, many stories that we can be talking about and telling, and, but most of all we always talked about legends only in winter time...

GP. You forgot a little bit about when Nanabush left.

NF. Well, you finish it you then.

GP. When *Nanabush* was walking there was a little bird, and he says "Nanabush he lost part of his rear end." And again when he was walking another bird said "*Nanabush*, he ate his rear end." My grandma left some dried meat here," *Nanabush* said. "Oh is that what that is?" *Nanabush* said and he started to spit, but it was too late, he already ate his rear and he said "Well who are you?" And the bird said "I am a partridge." *Nanabush* got scared by the partridge. So he, when the partridge took off *Nanabush* got scared, and he fell in the mud. So [then] *Nanabush* said "Well how am I going to get out of here?" So [then] he took a stick, and he took the stick and he dug himself out of the mud.

Loss of language

GP. We've lost a lot of our language and the reason I know some of the Michif language is because my father taught me the Michif language. When we moved to Binscarth. That's when I started to learn how to speak Michif. When I moved to Duck Bay, there they spoke Saulteaux. What we speak here is what we call the Michif language. It's a mixture of French and English and Cree... Nobody speaks Michif where I come from hardly, and when I come over here, I speak Michif and when I come over here, I speak Michif and when I am travelling with Norman, we speak Michif.

NF. Years ago that was our way, the way of the Métis people to be proud of your family. That's the way it was...My grandmother's first cousins were like her brothers and sisters...The Métis people were very proud of their relationships, their relatives. The Indian people are further ahead than we are with their languages, they seem to be getting more ahead than we are. The Indian people are stronger because they live in the same community. Look, up North, they're very powerful...We're pitiful here. When we lived in our community, we spoke our language, but as soon as the homes started to be broken down, people started moving away...

They used to talk about "*li rougarou*," "*Nanabush*" and "*Wisakechak*," but the question is: how do we translate this into English, from Michif? We, the Michif People, have to translate this in our language. We're just like teachers since Michif is our language. This language was given to us by the greater power, our parents; our grandfathers gave us this language. What we are trying to do here can be a big job, and we're trying to do something for ourselves as Métis people. I was born in St. Lazare and that's the way we spoke. When we met in town, in stores or wherever, we spoke in Michif. We greeted one another in the Michif language. We've lost our language through marriage outside of our nationality. My brothers and sisters have married outside of our nationality, and that's how we start losing our language. Your daughters-in-law and your sons-in-law, through marriage [are leading to less people speaking Michif]. It's very difficult to relate to one another and in order to relate to one another we usually speak in English and that's how we start losing our language. Now those offspring, they also are asking questions about speaking the Michif language. So [then] this is our responsibility – is to teach the Michif language to those that don't understand. And that's another reason why we're having this meeting, for two days. We're here to talk about the Michif language.

I have a tape recorder there, and it's all about interviews that were took in Camperville, Manitoba. And if you would like to listen to those tapes, they're accessible to you. Several questions were asked during these interviews. For example, "What's your name?" "Where were you born?" "What was the name of your parents?" "Where were your parents and grandparents born?" "Were they involved in the Louis Riel Resistance – where the Métis people were trying to win back their country?" "Were your parents and grandparents involved during that time?" Those were some of the questions. Some of the old songs that the Old People used to sing, nobody seems to know those songs anymore. We've lost those songs. Young people would like to learn those songs today. For example, when there was a wedding, there was always one person that would sing the songs or whomever would like to sing those songs, but it was usually an elderly person. Like an older man would stand up and sing the songs, and at a wedding, they would also take off the shoe of the bride, and they'd auction off the shoe to raise monies for the bride and the groom. Oh, yes would you like to say something, would you like to talk about something also?

Unknown speakers Not [a] long time, not very long ago, the old Métis people, when we used to have wakes, they used to speak the Michif language. It was really nice to here the Old People talking Michif about things that happened a long time ago. Years ago when someone died they had the wake for about three days. Not like today, I don't think they have any wakes anymore. It's very pitiful today, now. There's nothing anymore. The way we used to live, it's just about all gone. There isn't anything anymore. We have to talk to our people because nobody else will talk to

them if we don't, they're not going to be able to change. When we're gone, you could say "That's it, there won't be anymore."

The Indian people are further ahead than we are with their language(s). They seem to be getting more ahead than we are. The Indian people are stronger because they live in the same community. Look, up north, they're very powerful in the north. We're very pitiful here. We seem to be getting turned around. Nobody's ever going to turn me around. You can't blame the kids. You [have] got to blame us for that. It's our fault. Well at one time, remember, when we used to live over here we all lived together so we spoke the same language. Well that's [why] we are meeting here today so we can start to regain our language. Years ago you didn't hear the kids speaking English; they only spoke their own language. When we lived in our community, we spoke our language, but as soon as the homes were starting to be broken down and people started moving away, how could you keep your language? We just want those people that speak Michif in these groups. We don't want the politicians involved... A lot of the children would like to learn, but who's going to teach them? There's nobody to teach them.

And sometimes at my place, I talk to myself. That's how I keep up with my language. When you speak to someone that speaks Michif, it's just like you're just, just renewed. It's just like just alive. And you take like the young people today, if you talk to them in Michif, they'll look at you and they'll kind of look at each other and they kind of smirk, and they don't know what you're talking about. And it's not only our fault because when you were moving around, you lose your language, and when you were in school, when you spoke your language, the teachers would give you a spanking.

How to preserve Michif

NF. How could you keep your language? It's not only our fault because when you were moving around, you lose your language, and when you were in school, when you spoke your language, the teachers would give you a spanking. We could take advantage of the kindergarten classes and nursery classes or daycare or Headstart and teach our young kids from there. That would be a good start. We could also learn from our Elders...We could do some interviewing, we could play tapes, and this is where the young people could learn from. We could also teach English and Michif...We have to exchange both languages for them to learn both languages.

Unknown speakers We have to teach these young kids through Headstart or through kindergarten class. How would we do it? Where would we start? How could we teach them? That is, what you're saying is true we could take advantage of the kindergarten classes and nursery classes or daycare or Headstart and teach our young ones from there. That would be a good start. We also could learn from our Elders when we do some interviewing, and we could play these tapes and this is where the young people could also learn. We could also teach them both English and Michif. We have to seem to exchange both languages for them to learn the both

languages. When Harold went to school he brought a book home, and he was learning and he said it was very easy to learn. And look at your daughter Roseanna she understands everything, and she even speaks the language. And the kids, when we're talking they pick words here and there, and that's how they learn. My boys here, they speak a bit of the Michif language. Some of them talk too much. I kind of don't know what my grandchildren think of me sometime because I'm always speaking my language to them and I say "I never was English and I'll always speak my language as long as I live." Well a lot of these people they grew up speaking the Michif language or hearing other people speak Michif, I, I don't understand how come they don't know how to speak it. Ah, Rosie was going to come here today. I don't know how come she never showed up. Well maybe she might be babysitting today. Well one thing, another thing we have to talk about is what are we gonna do here? How are we going to form this committee? It sounds good here when we are trying fibbing one another.

... I think those people that are sixty-five and over should be sitting on this committee. What kind of a committee? An advising committee. Those people that are or will be sixty-five, I think should be sitting on that committee. Those people that are living around here, it would be handy because they could be sitting on the committee.

It was just like this old lady she says "My mom died before I was born." And they said to her "How did you, how were you born?" "Were you born in an egg just like a duck?" "You weren't born, you were hatched?" Those people that are going to be sitting on this committee should be very vocal and also able to speak the Michif language. That's my language. What do you guys think? And what about you, what do you think? And what do you think about being sixty-five years and older sitting on the committee? Isabelle says it's okay. I think it's a good idea to have more older people on this committee because if somebody is not able to make it, well you're sure to have somebody at the meeting. Oh, why do you have to be sixty-five and older? Well, we need somebody to give advice in this committee. Well it's those people that are going to advise us, and it's also those people that know the Michif language. Well the older people are much wiser. That's why we need those people to be on that committee.

Legends and stories

NF. Some things that we'd be talking about would be legends and songs, and if people listened to these tapes, like we're doing today, they'll say "These are the kind of things that Norman was talking about." I remember my grandmother talking about when the Métis people were going on buffalo hunts to Pembina, and there was an old man, Malaterre. His name was Malaterre, that was his last name, and he was killed by the Sioux Indians. The Métis used to talk about the Sioux Indians. They were fearful people. They were people that were warlike people, and they'd talk about the Sioux Indians as if they were people that were warlike people. And I remember

part of the story that my grandmother told me was [that] the Métis were gone on a big buffalo hunt. And they had scouts. So they'd send these scouts ahead of the rest of the group to see if there were any war parties or Sioux war parties or also to see where the buffalo were, and they were always watchful of whatever might be in the way of the buffalo hunt. There was always a lot of danger in those days, and people always watched the dangers that might be happening. And I realized after that this story that my grandmother was telling me was I read it. I read it in one of the books, a journal that I had picked up. The scouts spotted Sioux Indians, so immediately they said "We have to put these, our Red River Carts in a circle." There was a priest with them, and the Métis people were very religious, they were believers, and they believed strongly in God, and they believed that's who led them in their [struggle], whatever they had to do. This priest was walking back and forth and praying with his bible. Malaterre and two other scouts had gone ahead ah, of the party, and they didn't realize that the Sioux Indians were hiding in the bush. So the Sioux Indians jumped out of the ambush and grabbed a hold of the horses. One horse reared up, and the scouts were able to escape but one person didn't escape. And the two scouts returned and looked for their partner and when they got there he was all hacked-up, all in pieces, and that was there, [it] was a pile of meat. They did have a fight with the Sioux Indians. The Métis won their fight that day. There might have been a thousand Sioux Indians or more and there might have been three or four hundred Métis people, but the Métis people were good sharpshooters. They had guns, so they, they won their fight that day, and that day the Sioux Indians vowed that they would not fight the Métis again. And they called them the "Wardens of the Plains." They were the rulers of the Plains and so they, the Sioux Indians, respected the Métis people very, very much at that time. When my grandmother told me this story I thought maybe she was just fibbing or kidding us as kids just to kind of scare us, but I remember opening up this book, and there was this story about the story that my grandmother told me. So I then knew my grandmother was telling me history.

Now these are the kind of stories that I am referring [to the stories] that we must learn or we must teach so others may know that these stories happened, and there's also legends. We must talk about our legends and we must share our legends. I remember when they used to tell us legends; you could sit up all night. There was always one person that was really good at telling these legends, and he'd be the one that'd be entertaining everybody. He also used to tell us stories about how the world begun, how everything started in this world.

Breakdown of traditional society

Unknown speakers And today the people don't help one another. When somebody has problems, if they have bad luck, nobody is there to help them out. I wasn't talking about nuns or brothers I was talking about relatives. It's the relatives that don't help one another anymore. Years ago people helped one another. You didn't have to pay anybody when they helped you

out. Today, now it seems people are crazy about money; the only time they'll do something is when money is involved. The white people taught us how to run schools. It's pitiful isn't? Years ago when somebody lost their mother and father and there were children that were involved, relatives got involved and they raised those children, and there were no problems, everybody helped one another. If you had a Godmother or a Godfather, and you lost your parents when you were small, your Godmother and Godfather replaced your parents. The Godmother and Godfather replaced your parents, and took you into their family as their own. It was written in the bible – and we followed the bible – that we must help one another...

It's pitiful today. Look it years ago, people used to go around visiting with horses. Today if you go visit somebody even if you're there for five minutes nobody will come and bother with you. It's not like it used to be a long time ago. Today if you go visit someplace they start taking care of their hair and their head and they're looking at the clock, and it's five o'clock. And they want to go to bingo, and they don't care about their visitors. Nobody feeds you. There's nothing there; there's not even bannock for you to have something to eat. They'll leave you there alone. You're visiting by yourself. And nowadays people, they just don't even bother with their visitors, they're too busy doing other things. They start hinting [at] one another, and everybody starts looking at their bingo dabblers. Like today, everybody's too busy being jealous of one another, and that's what ruins everything, that's what ruins the whole Métis people. Today that's the worst thing this jealousy. People at one time could joke around and laugh at one another, and they'd get along. And not like today. That's what's really ruining our people. Years ago people used to help one another, and now today that's the worst thing that people could do, because they're jealous of one another and there's hatred. Not like a long time ago when people had hard luck, there was always somebody there to help you. Like years ago when people used to dig a grave. Now you have to pay people. At one time, they used to dig for nothing, and now today, you've always got to have money ahead so you could pay, pay, pay everything that you have to get done. There's no more helping one another.

Fear of death

Years ago the Métis people were scared of the dead people, and they'd be talking about werewolves, like they used to call them "*li rougaroo*." The Old People used to tell us ghost stories and we were so scared that we'd wet our bed. And Lent time was another time of the year, which you heard stories and you really got scared. And once we're gone from this world, the young people – who's gonna carry these traditions. Nobody is going to know all these things that we are talking about. We have to keep on going and not let it go. We must work hard to keep these things alive. Another thing is; what could we do for these young people, so we can teach them what we know?

Natural resource harvesting

...Just like when we used to dig Seneca root, we always had a little bit of money. It was like years ago when we used to go looking for duck eggs. We were always looking for eggs and especially the mud hen eggs. They used to abuse those poor mudhens. We used to strip those poor mudhen eggs, but those eggs were very, very good. Then when it came fall time, then we were after the rabbits. We used to make rabbit soup, there used to be a lot of rabbits at one time. There used to be a lot of wild animals, used to be a lot of rabbits, but today you can hardly find anything cause a lot of those animals are poisoned, because today the grain is treated. And the rabbits can be affected and other animals by it. Years ago people used to eat the ground squirrels or gophers. Many times I would think about what we used to eat and now it just, when we think about it, it's just like a dream. It's just like it never really happened. The muskrat used to be good eating in the springtime, but now it seems they're not as tasty as they used to be. There was a gopher that ran across the road when my dad was driving, and he killed a gopher, and then he says, "Well he'll know better next time." In the springtime, we used to drown those gophers. We used to use water. My, were they ugly when they came out of their holes. They were ugly, but they very good eating. When somebody drowns, they're very ugly looking. We also used to talk about eating tripe. You don't clean that, overly clean the tripe. It's gotta be a little dirty in order to taste good, and you got to leave a little bit of cow manure in the tripe. Yes, it's all together different today. Isn't really something that it's not the same that it used to be. The insides of the animal are so good to eat the tripe and all those other organs. Years ago we didn't throw anything away. Nothing was wasted. Those are the different names of the internal organs, the "dee," they call that the "dee," the "fiya." That's the different parts of the stomach.

Years ago there were a lot of rabbits, you seen them all over the place. They were running all over. You're driving over the road now; you'll never see a gopher running anywhere, even a rabbit you never see one. We don't see anymore prairie chicken. Look at years ago, there was all kinds of prairie chicken. Look at where we used to live at one time, there was all kinds of animals. Now you don't see anymore... The whole country was clean in those days...Today, I would not even drink from a slough or marsh. You'd get poisoned.