

The Métis in the 21st Century Conference

June 18-20, 2003

Saskatoon

Dinner and Play

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Norman Fleury: But this evening here, it really brings me back to when I was just a child. We had coal oil lamps and we had no electricity. We had no hydro and we'd sometimes use two lamps. And if you didn't have any lamps, you would take some grease and some, and you'd use a button. And you, we used to call it a bitch-lamp. And that's, that's what we used to use for light when I was a kid. So we were, they used to say, "Half-breed never gets stuck," and that was exactly the way it was back home.

But when, the feast that we're having this evening is, is something that has great significance in the lives of the Métis people because it brings us back to our childhood days. It also brings us back to when our grandparents used to talk about eating buffalo and eating different foods of, of the, of Mother Nature. And, and at these feasts, there was also reasons why and what transpired through the feast, 'cause I was talking to some gentlemen today at our, the conference, and he was saying that they used to read teacups at home, and that's what they used to do when they'd get together. And people used to tell, there was teacup readers, and so there was special people in the family who used to do that. And they also used to talk about their dreams. If they had dreamt the night before, they would say, "I wonder what this means?" And so they would talk about their, their dreams. **[Speaks Michif]**. And that meant a lot in their lives. **[Speaks Michif]**. The dreams used to tell you things in your life. They'd tell you things about good luck, bad luck, and there were things that were going to happen in your life. And that was done through dreams and same with the teacups. My, one of my aunties used to be a teacup reader, and sometimes she'd say, "Oh, this doesn't look too good." And, or she'd say, "Oh, you're

too young. I don't want to read your cup. When you get older, I'll read your cup for you."

And so, and then they'd also have after the feast, it depends what the celebration was. They would put the tables and chairs outside, and then the dance was on. Like Mr. Boyer's playing here. They'd always have somebody like that, this gentleman. That there was always a fiddler in the crowd, and people used to get together, and they'd have a big party, and there was great celebrations. And that was our way of healing. That was our wellness. It's the way we, we grew up, and, and you took care of those sad things in your life and there was also songs. The songs were very important. I know my grandfather and my grandmother always, they were great historians, they were folklorists. Like, they'd talk about the history of the Métis people through their songs or through their, their different stories.

My grandmother, like, it seems like our women, our mothers, and our aunties, and our cousins—they were the keepers of the language and they would tell us about our language. They'd tell us stories through our language. Like, I know when they talked about Louis Riel was mentioned at the conference, and when my grandparents spoke of Louis Riel they looked at him as a, a saintly spiritual figure. It's, it's similar to the way people in one way, that look at Elvis Presley like he, he lives on, and Louis Riel lives on. He's with us all the time. And my grandmother and grandfather said [**speaks Michif**]. He's still alive, we don't know where he is, but he's still alive.

So those are the kinds of things that they used to do a long time ago. And another thing, too, when you hunted, it was great times in your life. I know when I was a young boy, I killed a rabbit. I snared a rabbit, and my grandmother said, "Well, we're gonna have to invite the kids in the neighbourhood because you're going through initiation. You're going through, you're becoming a hunter." So she cooked that rabbit and she invited my cousins and we ate. And that was initiation. It was going into becoming a hunter. So those were the kinds of things we used to do.

And, and also, you respected whatever you ate. You respected the land. You respected the animals. I remember going with my grandfather

hunting, and there was a rabbit caught in a snare, and they were very cute. They're, you know, if you look at them as being a bunny, they're very cute. So I grabbed this little rabbit and I was gonna play with this little rabbit, and he says **[speaks Michif]**. He says, you know, "You're abusing that rabbit." and he said, you know, "It's gonna kill our, our hunt." Like you can't abuse animals. You have to kill them right away. And that's the kind of thing we, we were, we talked about. Things about environment, about conservationism, and we, we were taught about, and going hunting. And not only that, I go picking wild herbs and roots with my grandmother. She was a medicine woman, and she would also teach us that you respected the land. And when you picked up this medicine, you, you prayed, and you put tobacco, and it was a spiritual significance and we gave thanks because it was going to heal somebody. So you took and you put back, and those are the kind of things that I learned as a young boy. And they also taught us, the botanists today are teaching us things, we learned botany when I was a little boy. I knew about the herbs and the wildlife. I learned all those things as a young child.

And also the legends. Like, I know Paul Chartrand's one of the people that I'm very thankful to, and Maria Campbell, and giving me the honour to come before you this evening amongst yourselves. And, and I, I know all of us here, we come from all walks of life, but we're one family. As soon as you say you're a Métis, a Michif, we feel good, we know each other and we, we also respect people from other walks of life. We receive them in our hearts, and feasting is a way of, of honouring people. We feed people. As people came into your home, that was the first thing the old people would say **[speaks Michif]**. You know, they were probably hungry. **[Speaks Michif]**. And those were the kind of ways we shared in our lives and those were the richness that was given into our Métis culture, and then you also never, it was a way of preparing the animal, the food, and stuff. And if it was a wild animal, there was a certain way for preparing it.

And there's a lady and a gentlemen here that had jewellery on, and those were something that you did with your, with those, with the animals,

you made jewellery. You used everything. You didn't waste anything. Everything was, was utilized. And, and we had games, too. And we ate, when we ate rabbit, I remember when I was a kid we ate everything. All parts of the rabbit, and even the, the marrow. There was nothing for the dogs to eat even. We ate everything, you know. The dogs, they were wondering why their dogs were skinny, but they said, "Well, **[speaks Michif]**." And they said, "Well, I've been feeding them, but I don't know why?" But there was nothing in the bone. So, yeah, that's why, Harry, that's why Harry's so skinny. Harry the dog. **[Speaks Michif]**.

And we played games. And the rabbit head, we ate that head, and we ate the tongue and the cheeks, and we'd split the head. And we'd then, we played games with the head. We would say things like, we would twirl the head, and we'd say **[speaks Michif]**. You know, "Who, who farted here?" and it would, if it pointed to you, and then everybody had a good laugh, you know. And then, or, who's lazy **[speaks Michif]**, you know, and stuff like that. Or else it was time to do the dishes, so they'd say "Who's going to do the dishes here?" And if it pointed to you, you had to do the dishes. So those were the kind of things we played games with, with, with the animals. Like, and they were our tools. They were our nutrition, but we also socialized a lot.

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