

Maria Campbell, *Eagle Feather News*, July 2007

This article is copyrighted by the author Maria Campbell and can only be used for reference purposes.

I would like to begin by extending my congratulations to the new president, executive and area leaders of the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan. I wish you all a successful term and as the old Irish say, “may the wind always blow gently on your back.”

Yesterday was Canada Day and I had lots of visitors stopping for tea on their way to Batoche for the ceremonies and for Christi Belcourt’s Art Exhibit. Métis people spilled out from the kitchen and onto the deck. Talking politics (of course), telling stories, sharing memories and lots of laughter. Sometimes when I listen to the stories I shake my head and think, “its no wonder outsiders think we’re a bit crazy.” We are of course, and I love us for that, but also I believe that those memories and stories have been our survival through some very difficult times. They hold truths and teachings that are important in our journey through this life. For example, I remember reading somewhere that ‘nations are not made in the houses of parliament, but rather they are made in the way people argue, laugh, love and make pilgrimage together.’

If that is the case we certainly are a strong nation. Ponder for a moment the pilgrimages we make, alone and together, into the memories of the past, and consider how and why those memories sustain us in our darkest times, giving us courage to move forward. Our elders are right when they say this is the kind of courage that is needed to rebuild Kikino, the homeland, the centre that is the essence of our being. I know for me the memory of Kikino and the people I love takes me to a warm April day in northern Saskatchewan.

There are patches of snow on the ground, little puddles of water. Children, myself among them shout and laugh as they run about carrying old blankets to fan small fires or put them out.

I see my father and the men of our community, red faced from heat, directing the fires over the brown and yellow grass. And by the cabin, my grannies, murmuring prayers, offering tobacco and singing the birthing song of spring.

Waniskak, waniskak, mewashsin ooma kitaskinow.
Waniskak, waniskak, asay piyesiasuk nikamoouk.

Spilling out of bed, we dress and rush outside to meet cousins and friends. Today our fathers will burn the yards and all the land surrounding our homes. Our mothers will prepare food all day and the smell of moose meat soup, smoked muskrat, sage and baking bannock will be everywhere.

When the burn is over, we will walk together to the burial ground and clean the graves, saying aloud the names of those whose bones rest there and later sitting on the blankets spread out on the dry ground, great grandmother, will say the prayer. When she is finished, we eat the food, remembering the relatives who have passed over, and as we eat, she and the grannies will tell us their story.

“Kiyas, mitoni kiya,” they would say. “Long ago, in the time of first grandmother, first grandfather, our people celebrated the passing of winter and the coming of spring, by burning the land they used, to purify and clean it so it could renew itself and to honour and respect the Mother who lent it to us.”

“Kikino ooma,” they would say. “This is our home. Give thanks to Creator for this clean land and for pimatisoowin, our life. Give thanks for the children, who will inherit it and for the old ones, who carry its teachings. Give thanks for the women and the men whose duty it is to protect it.....’

As they told the story, sang songs and laughed, the grannies taught us about community and the responsibility each one of us had in keeping it strong.

There are other memories. The first rain that would bring the green, green grass and the carpet of wild herbs and flowers that would become medicine to doctor us in times of sickness. Memories of hauling the furniture outside and mud plastering the cabin walls and later when it was dry, brushing on the new coat of white wash...Granny hanging the cloth and tobacco on the west corner for the thunder beings who would protect our home and mamma sprinkling holy water, ‘just to be sure.’

My last memory is the incredible sense of well being and security I felt when we were done. Our work would not only make our land beautiful, but it would make the gardens healthy and the berries plentiful. The feast and prayers would make our people strong for another year.

I was nine years old when a law was passed forbidding the burn. We were told it was a dangerous practice and all we had to do was cut the grass if we wanted to keep our yards clean, and so the ceremony stopped.

Many years later I read a report that said banning the burns had been a mistake. The writer gave all the reasons that it was healthy and safe for the environment. I don’t remember what the reasons were.

“The Indian Burn,” as the report called it, was not only an ancient ceremony that tied us to the land, but it was also a celebration of our strength, and out of that strength came a sense of purpose and direction.

I don't remember all the songs or all the stories, only bits and pieces. But, I do know there are grandmothers, who still remember the birthing songs of spring and the stories of the people. There are grandfathers, who remember how to take the fire from the family hearth to clean the land. All that is needed is for us to re-enact, even this one small ritual, the memory of a community burn. The bits and pieces will allow us to relive them, however uncertain our movements. The sights, sounds, and especially the smells, will give us courage. The courage needed to give our children a life and a history. The together remembering of the bits and pieces can, and will, realize our community and rebuild our nation. And who knows perhaps the teachings and lessons can help guide and direct our new leadership and if nothing else the re-remembering will be good for all of us. So please send your memories and stories to mariacampbell@sasktel.net. There is more to this story to be continued in the next issue.