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Storytellers were held in high esteem

There was no television in our community when I was a child and no radio until I was about six years old, so storytellers were important people and storytelling was still the core of our lives.

Everything came from these stories. Our creation narratives, our history, our heroes, be they long ago people like Gabriel Dumont, Joseph Vandal and Big Bear or new ones like our uncle Ambrose who had been wounded in a far away war or auntie Betsey who had taken on a bear over a berry patch and won.

Some of the stories were serious, others hysterically funny. Some were accompanied by songs others with prayer. Some were recent news from other communities carried by travelers and others were just plain gossip carefully edited so persons were protected.

"Kah kiyew miyo achimona," my nokom would say. "All good stories," teaching us from infancy to old age how to live in a good way and give us tools we would need in our life's journey.

Some storytellers were family members like my chapan (great-grandmother) who was respected for her ability not only in our community but also far away. She knew not only the ahtyokewina the creation stories, but also the family histories. There were also hunters, trappers and gatherers who knew the land intimately and could recount the history and stories of all the places on the land as well as their own adventures on it.

Protocols and rules were carefully observed. It wasn't like someone said, "you have to do this before you can hear or have a story," but the rules and protocols were a part of your life and you just did them. To not do them was to let people know you had been very poorly raised.

For example, storytellers, especially the old ones, were well taken care of by family members and community. To have one in your family was a great source of pride. They were provided with a special place in the homes they visited, with choice food and many gifts, like my chapan and our old uncle Pah chah neese.

They both moved among our extended family circle staying with each family for a week, a month, sometimes a whole season. The old people who still lived independently were provided with food, there was always a big stack of split wood by their door and kids like myself who would gladly gopher for them, running errands, hauling water and washing dishes just to be privileged to their stories. When older people wanted a particular story they would come with bigger gifts like several freshly baked bannocks or cakes, a moose tongue or the very best of all, a moose nose. Old Pah chah neese especially would tell stories all night for a moose nose or boiled whitefish.

I remember a story as I write this and I'll share it with you. John Lagimodiere didn't give me a moose nose but he and his daughter did give me a box of home baked cookies.

Old uncle Pah chah neese was my nokom's oldest brother. He was probably in his seventies when I was a little girl. Not really old but one of those people who was born old.

Pah cha neese had long grey hair and a handlebar moustache. He wore moccasins and rubbers, old grey suit pants, a blue shirt and a red scarf around his neck. He wore a fur hat all summer and winter and he always smoked an old crooked brier pipe. I don't think he even took it out of his mouth to sleep. Well, when we went traveling to pick Seneca roots and berries for the summer Pah chah neese, riding his old grey horse, would lead us out on to the land.

What an exciting time that was for all of us kids and how noble our uncle looked. We would be so proud of him. He was like the grand chief of olden day buffalo hunts thus sparking our imagination and giving us endless hours of buffalo hunts games which came, of course, from the stories he had told us.

As we traveled, the old ladies would tell us about the places where our people had camped for hundreds of years. Look! See that hill, that was where aunty Lisa had Chi Boy. She was picking raspberries you know ... and by that creek over there, that's where your moshom skinned that duck and when he put it down for a minute it flew off. All it had was feathers on its wings and tail. Hey! Hey! He thought it was dead.

And the stories would go on. Later, after we camped for the night and had eaten our supper, Pah chah neese would tell us a story about the buffalo who danced for the people on this very spot maybe 200 years ago.

Our kokom's people were traveling through this territory, he said, hunting buffalo, deer, berries, nuts, anything they could find. They were near starvation. There was hardly any water and the land was blowing away. There would be huge electrical storms at night, he said, but never any rain. One night the lightning was so wild that as it streaked across the sky it turned into balls of fire rolling across the dry woodland and setting fires.

He said the horses all ran away and the people were terrified, sure that they were going to perish, when suddenly an old bull buffalo stepped out of the smoke and began dancing. Pah chah neese said it was a pitiful looking old animal with a scruffy coat and almost as "skinny as the people." When he finished dancing the buffalo spoke. "Hahow ni too tame tik, my relatives I have great pity for you and I will not let you die in this fire or starve. Follow me and I will see that you are looked after."

Pah chah neese said the people followed the buffalo through the smoke and on the other side was a small green valley and a camp of people who were happy to see them and who fed them soup, blueberries and wild mint tea. When they had eaten their fill the old buffalo danced for them again and told the men to remember him by telling this story and doing this dance.

Pah chah neese said the people all fell asleep when he finished dancing and when they woke up it was raining gently and nearby a herd of buffalo grazed. After a

few days the land that had been burned black was green with new grass and the people grew strong and healthy.

When he finished his story Pah chah neese would get up and dance for us.

"Kisaynew pasqua moostoos oma oneemetowin," he would say when he finished.

"This is that old buffalo's dance." And we would go to sleep dreaming about that old grandfather spirit who saved our people in that long ago time.

Hiy hiy ikosi, merci.