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Close encounter with forest fire reminder of 'Indian farming'

I traveled to Ile-a-la-Crosse with Jenny, my co-worker, last week to prepare for a research project. The trip was memorable on many levels, the first being the beauty of the landscape.

There are few places, for me anyway, that are more beautiful than Saskatchewan's northwest side. The rolling green parkland seems to stretch endlessly. The ground, carpeted with miles of tiger lilies, bluebells, yarrow, and paint brush remind me of the hours that I spent as a child picking medicines with my kokom. The hills blue with haze that reminded me of horseback riding and deer hunting should have set off a warning bell, but I've been in the city a long time and forest fires are no longer a part of my experience.

The day we began work started out uneventful enough, the morning was sunny and clear, promising to be a real scorcher. We picked up my friend Marie Favel, who lives several kilometers out of town and we began visiting the elders who are a part of our research project. As we pulled up in front of one of the homes we noticed two small columns of smoke on the horizon and Marie remarked that the electrical storm the night before had started several fires.

"I hope they put them out," she said looking at the sky. "That smoke is too close to my house."

I remember telling her that I was sure it would be alright as we walked into the house. The smoke didn't look threatening at all. Little I knew, because by the time we came out, about 40 minutes later, the sky was dark with huge billowing clouds overhead, scouting planes buzzed like angry bees. A helicopter with a bucket was hovering over the lake scooping up water, and cars and pick-up trucks were racing to the site.

Everywhere on porches and yards, people were anxiously watching the sky. To make a long story short, a full scale forest fire was raging and my friend, along with several other families, were in danger of losing their homes. The road leaving town was closed. No one could leave or come in as the fire was expected to cross the road and it did, burning power lines as it went. We could hear the hiss and roar as we stood outside our vehicle and watched.

That night Jenny and I spent the night sitting in a dark motel room watching the red sky wondering what would happen next. Well, thank goodness nothing happened. In the morning the fire was almost out and we could come home. Marie's house and the other homes were safe.

For the people of Ile-a-la-Crosse it was just another one of those summer days with a little excitement. For us, it was a pretty frightening experience as we drove out of

the community and looked at the smoking landscape it was a reminder of the awesome power of fire.

"It was so lovely and not it's ruined," I thought, but before I could say that out loud, I remembered my late father, a trapper and bushman, who until the late 1940s practiced controlled burning. As children it was the highlight of our lives, waiting for that spring day that would have just the right amount of snow which would allow us to burn safely, the land around our homes and the selected areas in the nearby bush.

My father would say we were doing "Indian farming" preparing the land for the next crop. The heat from the fire, he said, "pops the seeds that are lying dormant on the earth and from those seeds come the trees, plants, berries, nuts and medicines of our territory."

And sure enough, the spring rain and sun would turn our yard into a lush green carpet and in the nearby bush, the following year, would be our new crop of food and medicine.

Remembering the spring burn and the excitement of that ritual, reminded me also of our traditional teachings. Fire, we are told, is one of the four sacred elements and is both life giver and life destroyer. He, for fire is masculine, is embodied in the sun who dwells in the sky-world. As life giver, he brings light and warmth to our world and melts the cold snows of winter.

Among many First peoples he is know as a grandfather and is honored in ceremonies, prayers, songs and stories. But we seldom think of fire or the sun as grandfather anymore and when we do, it is often without the respect of long ago.

We have been spoiled many of us by an instant society. Everything we need, including warmth and cold, can be purchased in a big box store or ordered on the computer. Maybe we need to do some "Indian farming" again and pick the food and medicine given to us by our mother.

And maybe we need to do those ceremonies, speak the prayers, sing the songs and tell the stories. And maybe, and maybe...Thanks Marie, Don, Phillip and Georgina and thank you Ile-a-la-Crosse, I hope you all had a wonderful anniversary.

See you in August.