

Maria Campbell, *Eagle Feather News*, October 2010

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

You can eliminate the stuff, but not the memories

"Are you stressed, stretched, cluttered and most days just feeling miserable? If you are, here are some ideas that might kick start your creative juices, take you down memory lane and who knows, might even motivate you not to think about, but, to actually make a lifestyle change."

This is a quote from an article in a magazine I was reading while waiting for my dentist. It is all about this whole new movement to de-clutter, downsize and move out of your big house into a tiny one. "You don't need all that room, all that stuff!"

In other words just live like we use to live not all that long ago on the Rez or on the Road Allowance. You know, a 12x12, 16x16 or if you were more well off, an 18x18 shack. Only the writer didn't call it a shack. He called it "Sweet petite home," a quirky little house with a tennis court and breathtaking view.

Well, I guess you could say our shacks were quirky and, yes, often with breathtaking views but surrounded by things that were related to survival, food gathering, hunting and fishing. There were no tennis courts in my memory.

Most folks in my childhood began their married life in a 12x12 shack and as children came along they would just cut a few poplar poles and slap another shack alongside the old one. The women would mud plaster and white wash it and presto! Another room. Some people had as many as four shacks strung together as babies started to arrive.

However more than four would have been costly as well as dangerous. Costly in that you had to buy an airtight heater for each room if you wanted to stay warm and dangerous because they would get red hot in minutes. How many of you have scars on your bums from getting too close to its hot red sides?

I didn't but my sister had a scar for life as did many other people. I remember visiting a bunch of Michif girlfriends one night and nearly everyone had a scar which they showed off after several shots of wine. We laughed and told "shack" stories all night.

How we ever survived those long freezing winters is beyond me. By rights we should have burned up or froze to death and some people actually did. Lots of them, in fact. Dangerous is too mild a word to describe those heaters.

They got red hot real fast and one had to be vigilant, watching small children who might fall against them, watching that the wet cloths hanging on the wall to dry didn't catch fire.

And the stove pipes, all held together with wire, could at any time come crashing to the floor no matter how well you secure them.

"Fire!" How many of you out there remember being woke from a dead sleep by your mom screaming "Fire! Fire! Pusi kook kway ahoo!" and you scrambling out of bed and racing into the freezing cold in your longjohns as the adults formed a human chain

filling the bucket from the water barrel beside "the heater" and handing it out to dad up on the roof where flames were shooting out.

And, of course, there were those nights when the firekeeper fell asleep and you woke up with your hair frozen to the wall. Yes, seriously. Frozen to the wall or the very least covered with frost. A cousin went to bed with wet hair one night and guess what? You can just imagine what his messed up hair looked like.

My dad was smart. When he could no longer add another shack due to the cost of purchasing more heaters, he decided to build up. It was 16x16, still small but taller, and best of all, after cutting a hole in the ceiling the heat came upstairs and we were warm. The hole was kind of troublesome. At first I think we all crashed into the kitchen at least once until we remembered to watch where we stepped.

We all slept in one room but mom separated the rooms with flour sack curtains so we had a two-story, three bedroom house. We were not exactly a small family either. There was mom and dad, our cheechum and our nokom plus my seven siblings and often one or two aunties. We also had a large extended family who visited often, sometimes for several days at a time. The adults slept on the beds and the kids, sometimes 20 of us would sleep on the floors.

Today when I am complaining that I don't have enough room I remember that house and I have to laugh and I think of my friend who has a room just for her clothes and shoes never mind the bedrooms, bathrooms, laundry and storage rooms, the huge kitchen, dining and living room. Our whole road allowance would have fit in it.

Her children are all gone and there's just her and her husband rattling around in it. Her kokom would have thought she died and went to heaven with all that room.

I have a two bedroom house, bigger than the house I grew up in and I have to rent storage space. What am I storing? Treasures, lots of treasures. I love fabric you see; I am one day going to stay home and just make quilts but I am not cheap but I am too thrifty to go to fabric stores.

I go to every second hand store I can find from one end of Canada to the other. I've even dragged old clothes home from Scotland, England and other far away countries. You'd be surprised what those people give away. I buy old skirts, nice soft wool ones in wonderful faded colors and I wash them and lovingly cut them up, iron them and put them in zip lock bags and store them in boxes clearly marked "quilting".

I've been doing that for years and I now have boxes and boxes and ... well ... you get the picture. I also have boxes of paper and hundreds of books. I've been collecting them for years. Some of them are collectors ... one day they will be worth a fortune. Well, you collectors out there know what I mean.

Yes I know I need to get rid of stuff but the thought of doing it gives me panic attacks, sends my blood pressure soaring, gives me a migraine. Move into a "Sweet petite home" an environmentally friendly little green house.

I don't think so ... I've been there and my memories although funny are not that wonderful and who knows, maybe I will quilt one day and I'll be sorry I have that fabric away.