
Things I did Last Summer

by Martin Shulman

Illustrated by C. Belhumeur



Hello. My name is Bonnie Parenteau and I'm 10 years old. I live in Eastern Canada with my parents. My mom's a veterinarian and my dad's a teacher. My father's parents live in Duck Lake and my mom's parents live in St. Louis. These towns are both in Saskatchewan.

Last year my parents let me go and spend the summer with my grandparents. It was the best thing that ever happened to me because I learned things about myself that I never knew before. The most important thing I learned is that I am Metis.



I never knew that before. When grandpa Lepine told me I didn't know what he meant. I thought it was his way of telling me that there was something he was upset about. He said, "Do you know that you are Metis?" I said, "No, I don't, but I'm sorry and if you explain it to me I won't do it again." He just laughed and told me that when he told that story to my grandparents in Duck Lake they would find it just as funny and sad as he did.

I still didn't know why he thought it was funny but I really wanted to know why he was sad. He said he was sad because I didn't know anything about my culture or my people, because that is what Metis means. The Metis are a people with their own culture and ways of doing and thinking about things. I wanted to know more and started asking about where we came from. He said we should go and visit my other grandparents before answering my questions.

That Sunday we drove to Duck Lake so I could spend a week with grandma and grandpa Parenteau. Grandma Lepine told them what had happened and they all started laughing.

I was a bit upset because I didn't think it was right to laugh at me just because I didn't know something. Then grandpa Parenteau said it was time I learned a thing or two about myself and my people. He said, "Let's go sit down and talk about the Metis and what it means to be Metis." I thought the time had finally arrived when I would get some answers to the hundreds of questions that were running through my brain.

I was wrong because just then my grandma Parenteau shouted NO. She said, "Don't tell her anything. Words are things that go through your mind and out of your head. She has to learn and see what it is to be Metis." My grandparents started nodding their heads and agreeing that this was true. Grandma Lepine said, "Next week we can show her what Metis means." I couldn't take it anymore. Everybody knew what was being said except me. So I shouted "WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT!!!" They all laughed and after comforting me they said we would be off to Batoche on Friday for the annual Metis Heritage Days celebration. It sounded exciting but I never dreamed that I would soon see and learn so much about myself.

We arrived in Batoche on Friday at supper time. On the way to the campground we passed the old church and graveyard in Batoche. Grandma Parenteau said this was where the Metis, who had fought for their land and rights and had died in the final battle at Batoche, were buried. I asked them to explain what had happened and I learned the story of the Metis and Indian people who had defended themselves from those that wanted their land. I learned about Gabriel Dumont, Louis Riel, Big Bear, Poundmaker and other Metis and Indian leaders of 1885. I was also told about the battles at Duck Lake, Fish Creek and the final battle at Batoche. We even went over and saw the rifle pits where the Metis and Canadian soldiers had shot at each other. I was starting to feel like a Metis because I felt sad that my people and my country had once fought against each other.



We finally arrived at the campground and set up our tent. We had a supper of bannock, which is a bread cooked over an open fire. It has no yeast so it doesn't rise and it looks kind of bumpy, but is it ever good to eat. We also had bullets which are Metis meatballs. After supper we wandered around and talked to the other people. There were thousands of them there and, to my surprise, most of them were Metis. They came from all over the province of Saskatchewan and there were even Metis there from Alberta, Manitoba, British Columbia and Ontario. I was surprised to learn that so many people were Metis and that they lived in so many different places in Canada and throughout Saskatchewan.

My grandpa Lepine introduced me to people and told them about my problem. I couldn't believe the stories I heard. I learned about my ancestors the Indian and European peoples who intermarried and made the Metis people. I was taught how the Indians lived and I learned all about the fur trade and the Hudson

Bay and Northwest Companies. I also learned that there are more than one kind of Indian and that the Indian groups differ from each other in their customs and cultures. People then started talking about the buffalo hunting, pemmican making, trapping and farming that were a part of the Metis way of life in the 1700s and 1800s in Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta.

Suddenly I heard a strange squeaking noise and the people around me started to yell and clap. "Let's jig, Red River Jig, start fiddlin ..." I didn't know what the people were shouting about but I soon found out. It was entertainment time. I sat and listened to the fiddlers and watched people do a dance called the Red River Jig. It was amazing to watch the people because their feet were moving faster than lightning and every now and then somebody would do something different. When this happened everybody would shout their approval.

Grandma Parenteau came to me and said it was time I learned to jig. She taught me some of the basic 36 steps but made sure I knew it was alright to make up my own steps. She said the Red River Jig was a Metis tradition, as were the fiddles. I was also amazed to learn that no two people ever did the jig the same because it's a creative dance, too. In no time at all I was jigging with the other kids. We all got tired after a while and sat down to watch and listen to people sing, fiddle or play other instruments. I could hardly believe that so many people were able to entertain us. Grandma Lepine told me in the old days the jigging and entertaining would go on for days at a time. I fell asleep in her arms while the entertaining continued into the early hours of the morning.





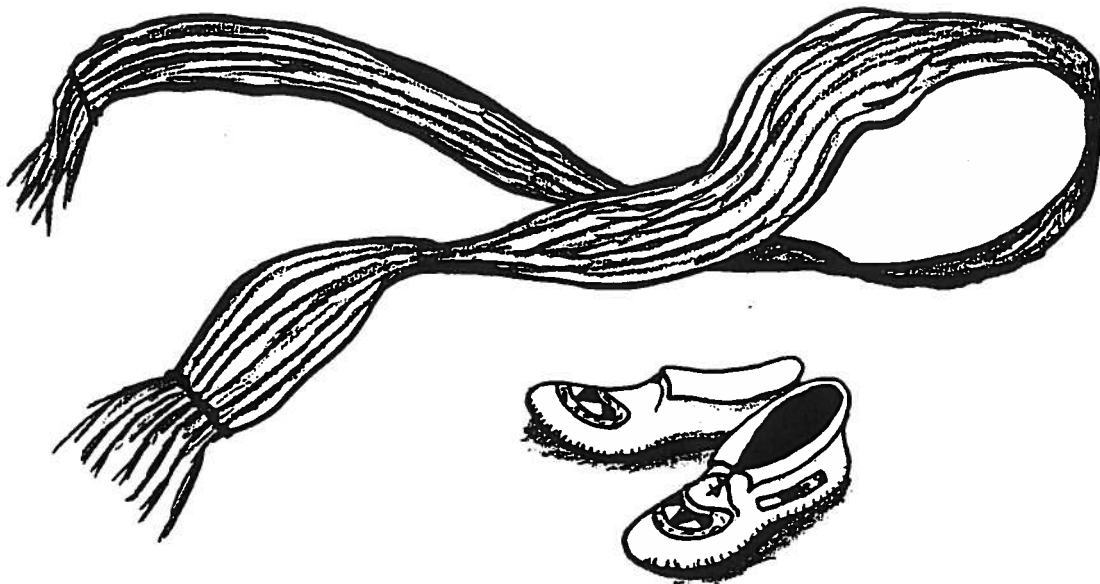
The next two days were amazing. I watched the bannock baking contest and ate so much bannock I looked like a balloon. There were fiddling and talent contests for everybody. Kids my age and people older than my grandparents were involved. There were canoe races in memory of the old fur trade days. Baseball games, horse shoe competitions, bingo and other contests were held. There were contests for the kids that included all kinds of races. I even won a second place ribbon in the 3 legged race with my new friend, Maggie Morin of Ile a la Crosse. She told me that's in Northern Saskatchewan.

I spoke to people from all over the place. I didn't know that Metis people lived in so many places. They live in cities, on farms and in the forest, or bush as they call it. I met doctors, lawyers, teachers, plumbers, trappers and lots of other people. Most important, I learned all about the old days of the buffalo hunt, fur trade and the struggles of my people for their rights in Manitoba and at Batoche. I went to the memorial services on Sunday at the graveyard for the Metis who died in 1885 at the Battle of Batoche. I was even taught about Metis government during the days when Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont were the leaders of my people.

All during the rest of the summer I learned about my people and I got prouder and prouder of my culture. People told me about the Association of Metis and Non-Status Indians of Saskatchewan which is our political organization today. I found out about the Gabriel Dumont Institute which is our education organization.

Just before I left I got all my grandparents together in one room. I was wearing my moccasins with the beaded flowers made by grandma Lepine and my Metis sash woven by grandma Parenteau. I hugged, kissed and thanked them all for teaching me about myself and promised I would never forget I was Metis. They hugged me back and asked me to teach my parents the same pride I had found in my culture. I said I would and it would be easy because there isn't any other culture that can be as much fun as being Metis.

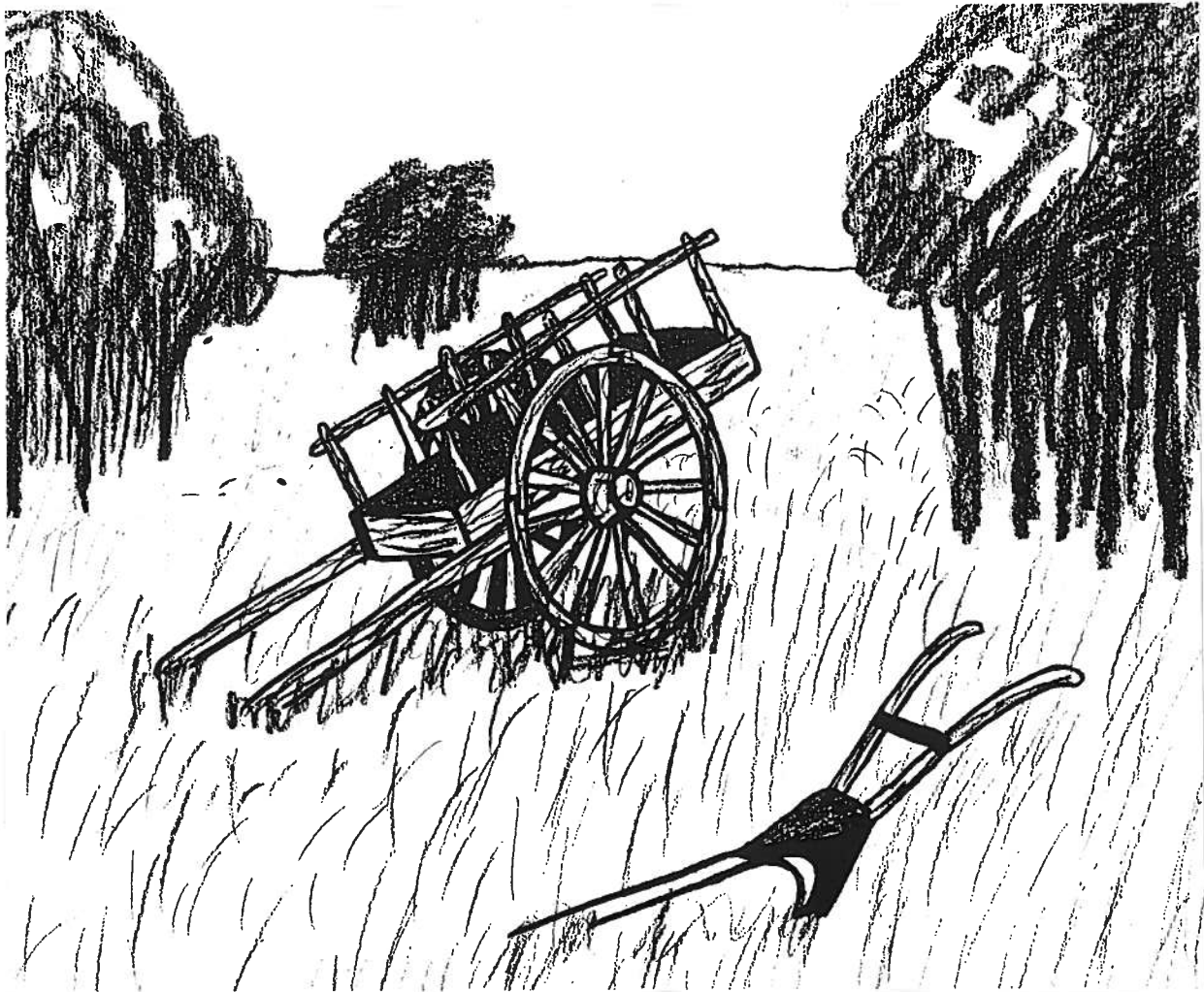
On the airplane home I thought about how I would tell all of my friends about my people when school started. I only wished that there was something I could tell my teacher to get so that everybody could learn some of the things I did last summer.



THINGS I DID LAST SUMMER

WORKSHEET 1

1. NAME THE TWO COMMUNITIES WHERE BONNIE'S GRANDPARENTS LIVED.
2. WHAT CELEBRATION DID BONNIE ATTEND?
3. EXPLAIN WHY BONNIE WAS GETTING UPSET WITH HER GRANDPARENTS.



4. WHERE WAS THE CELEBRATION THAT BONNIE ATTENDED?
 5. WHAT FOUR METIS AND INDIAN LEADERS DID BONNIE LEARN ABOUT?
 6. EXPLAIN THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BANNOCK AND BREAD.
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THINGS I DID LAST SUMMER

WORKSHEET 2

1. NAME FIVE PROVINCES WHERE YOU CAN FIND METIS PEOPLE?
2. NAME THREE OF THE CONTESTS HELD AT THE METIS HERITAGE DAYS CELEBRATION.
3. DESCRIBE THE 'RED RIVER JIG'.



4. NAME THREE KINDS OF JOBS THAT THE METIS WORKED AT IN THE 1700'S AND 1800'S.
 5. NAME THREE KINDS OF JOBS THAT THE METIS WORK AT TODAY.
 6. WHY DO YOU THINK THAT BONNIE WAS PROUD OF HER METIS CULTURE?
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