

Maria Campbell, *Eagle Feather News*, October 2011

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He was scared straight by Jim Kotter

My cousin and I overheard some kids in a coffee shop the other day talking about meeting at a graveyard on Halloween and "scaring the crap out of the girls."

"I don't know why people are so scared of graveyards," my cousin said. "I have always found them incredibly interesting and actually quite beautiful."

I'd never really thought much about them although they were once places where we as children, with our families, always spend one day a year visiting and cleaning them. In fact my memory of that day was as exciting an event as a community picnic which I guess in a way it was, a picnic spent visiting each other and family members who had passed on.

"This is Zubut, your nokom's youngest sister," mama would point to a grave. "But mama, it has Elizabeth written on the cross," I corrected her.

"That was her English name," Mama said as we pulled weeds from around the head stone.

That was the year I realized that I did in fact know all the people buried there but I didn't understand why we couldn't use their real names and write them in our own language.

Clean-up day was in late April or early May depending on the kind of spring we were having. It was always done after we'd finished burning and cleaning our yards and putting a new coat of mud plaster and whitewash on our cabins.

Families would come from all over. They would come by horse and wagon, and old trucks loaded down with shovels, rakes, hoes, scythes for cutting grass, old people, kids, mamas and papas and lots of food. The day would be filled with stories, laughter, tears and prayers. When we were finished the graveyard would be clean, the wooden crosses and head-stones repaired and repainted, the fence and gate mended.

Later we would gather under the trees and feast on the food we had brought with us. Sounds idyllic doesn't? Almost like the old Carter Family folk song, "There's a church in the valley by the wildwood..."

But it was a beautiful day for all of us, full of love and kindness. Our lives were hard, poor and often violent, so these special days when there was no alcohol involved and families came together are the wonderful bright times that make the often, bad memories of childhood bearable.

Along with the memory of grave cleaning and picnics I also remember scary stories of "some" of the people buried there. The old man who was cranky and reclusive and who in death was buried off in a far corner by himself and, as the story went, could be heard on clear moonlit nights complaining loudly about everything just as he had done when he was alive. His grave was kept clean but no one ever lingered after to recall good things about him.

We often had to run to the store in the evening or run errands for our parents and the foot path out of our yard went along his grave. We would be fine until we reached him, then we'd run as fast as we could or if there was more than one of us we would all cling together and sidle past, positive he was going to grab us.

There was also stories of lights, small rounds ones that floated above the graves on dark nights.

"Restless chi puyes" our nokom would say, "They don't want to leave so stay away from there." Meaning of course, don't go hanging around the store at night. Once, one of our visiting boy cousins, to prove there was no Chi puyes, went through the whole graveyard criss-crossing it on the darkest night whistling as loud as he could and scared us almost into insanity.

We were positive we heard whistling every night for almost a year after and under no circumstances did anyone go to the store without an adult or gang of kids.

My last graveyard story came from a friend of mine who spend many years of his life in and out of provincial and federal prisons before he changed his life around. He said he was 17 when he entered his first jail and on the wall of his cell was written: "Jim Kotter was here."

He thought it was pretty cool and did the same thing. He said over the next 25 years or so in nearly every prison across Canada he found Jim Kotter's name on the cell wall and always signed beside him. Then one day he was sentenced to Prince Albert Pen and, hard as he looked, he couldn't find Jim Kotter's name anywhere until one day while he was helping other inmates clean graves he saw a cross that read "Jim Kotter" and under it, "Rest in Peace."

He said he knelt down by the grave and cried. He finished serving his time and never got in trouble again. Of all the graveyard stories I have ever heard that is just about the saddest one of all.

Anyways, have a Happy Halloween.