

Metis Folklore: Little People, Ma-ma-kwa-se-sak or Memeguayiwahk.

The folklore of the Metis contains a varied mix of monsters, trickster spirits, “little” people and other fantastic beings—all of which are a syncretistic mix of Algonquian and Western European supernatural beings. The “Little People” or Ma-ma-kwa-se-sak (Me-me-quay-iwahk), are human beings, only very tiny. Myths of “Little People” are found in all cultures.

The Little People or fairies in England and Scotland are called Brownies (they dress in brown) or Gruagachs¹ (in Scottish Gaelic). In the north of England they are more commonly known as Hobs or Hobgoblins. Brownies are said to inhabit houses and aid in tasks around the house. They only work at night because they don’t like to be seen. Traditionally people exchange small gifts of food for their help—they enjoy honey and porridge. The house elves in the “Harry Potter” movie and book series are derived from the folklore on Brownies

It is the belief of Metis and other Aboriginal people that the “Little People” live along riverbanks, the sand hills by large lakes and in caves. They like to live under rock.² They are responsible for making the pictographs drawn on the rock-faces along the edge of the Cambrian shield. The “Little People” are there to protect you; if you see one your luck will change. If you feel sad or sick, you will feel better. Sometimes they venture into urban areas, mostly to visit the Native people. They are the reason your everyday objects go missing. They are said to particularly like shiny objects and will take tin foil or spoons and other cutlery out of people’s homes. They also like to eat sweets. For this reason Metis will put out sugar, candies and tobacco as offerings to them in places they are known to frequent. If one is camping on a lake shoreline and hears noises coming from the ground at night this is believed to be the Little People working.

Other groups have less benign accounts. In 1804, the Lewis and Clark stayed for a time with a band of Wichiyena Sioux on the Vermillion River (South Dakota). On August 25, Lewis, Clark and 10 other men, many of whom were Metis, traveled about 9 miles north of the river's junction with the Missouri River to see the “Mountain of the Little People”. Lewis wrote in his journal that the Little People were “deavals” (devils) with very large heads, about 18 inches (46 cm) high, and very alert to any intrusions into their territory. The Sioux said that the devils carried sharp arrows which could strike at a very long distance, and that they killed anyone who approached their mound. The Little People so terrified the local population, Lewis reported, that the Maha (Omaha), Ottoes, and Sioux would not go near the place. The Lakota who came to live near the “Spirit Mound” after the Wičhíyena Sioux have a story no more than 250 years old which

¹ The Grogan, a Highland Scot Brownie helps around farms. The Doonie is a shape shifting Scottish Fairy who could take the shape of a pony or an old man or woman.

² Albert Lightning says: “I have heard stories and read about the May-may-quay-so-wuk, known to the Cree as little people who live far under the ground, among rocky places, and under the water in marshy areas... Some say it was the task of the little people to record history and that their writings can be seen on rocks in the wilderness, yet no one can read them anymore.” In Diane Meili, *Those Who Know: Profiles of Alberta's Native Elders*. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1991: 80-81.

describes how a band of 350 warriors came near the mound late at night and were nearly wiped out by the ferocious Little People; the survivors were crippled for life.³

Crow folklore says the "Little People" live in the Pryor Mountains Carbon and Bighorn counties in Montana. Petroglyphs on rocks in the mountains were made by these demon-like creatures, according to the Crow. Because the Little People live there, the mountains are sacred to the Crow. The Little People are said to be no more than 18 inches (46 cm) (or knee) high. Crow folklore differs slightly from that of other tribes in describing the Little People of the Pryor Mountains as having large, nearly round bellies; incredibly strong but short arms and legs; and little or no neck. In the story of "Lost Boy" (or "Burnt Face"), the Crow told of a Little Person who killed a full-grown bull elk and carried it off just by tossing the elk's head over its shoulder. The Crow expression, "strong as a dwarf," references the incredible strength of these Little People. However, they are incredibly fierce warriors, feed primarily on meat, and have many sharp, canine-like teeth in their mouths. Nearby tribes told stories of the Little People tearing the hearts out of their enemies' horses, stories which may have helped keep these tribes from making war on the Crow. Each year, the Crow made an offering to the Little People at the Medicine or Castle Rocks (Hoodoos), where they believed some Little People lived. The Pryor Mountains Little People were also known for stealing children, food, medicine, and tobacco. The Crow also believed that the Little People created stone arrowheads, for the Crow themselves only knew how to make bone arrowheads.⁴

Brown and Brightman note:⁵ "There are also spirits which are relatively benign and comical. The Mīmīkwēsiwak or Mēmēkwēsiwak (Plains Cree) occupy coulees and river banks in the prairies. Sam Moostos from Fort à la Corne, saw a Mēmēkwēsiwak standing in the water of the North Saskatchewan River and yelled with fright. When his mother came, it ducked under the water but you could still see the ripples. Others have seen them at Gordon's Reserve, near Punnichy. They are harmless little people and friendly to humans but they can play tricks on some people who are non-believers. In the north I heard many stories of the Mēmēkwēsiwak. They are reputed to live in caves near Nistowiak Falls, at the north end of Lac la Ronge where it empties into the Churchill River, and many people had gone to see them."

Eleanor Brass writes: "Long ago, it was said these little people were crafters of arrowheads, flint knives and stone heads for hammers. These they traded with the Indians for buffalo meat, hides, porcupine quills, and other things they needed but couldn't get for themselves. These tiny people had mysterious powers and often played tricks on the Indians. Hence every time anything peculiar happened, they attributed it to the May-may-quay-so-wuk."⁶

³ Meriwether Lewis, *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition: August 30, 1803-August 24, 1804* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983: 505.

⁴ Rodney Frey, *The World of the Crow Indians: As Driftwood Lodges*. Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993.

⁵ Jennifer Brown and Robert Brightman, *The Orders of the Dreamed*, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1988: 197.

⁶ Eleanor Brass, *Medicine Boy and Other Cree Tales*. Calgary: Glenbow Museum, n.p.

David Westfall gives the following account from Pukatawagan, Manitoba:

Hunt mentions tiny but powerful supernatural little people of the northern woods who are often malevolent. In our interviews, the elders make it clear that the little people do not like humans, but it is usually the humans' own folly that is their undoing rather than any overt acts of the *mîmîkwîsiwak*, or 'little rock people'. Adam Castel's tale "The Women-Seekers Who tried to Follow the Mimikwisiwak into the Rocks," for example, focuses on human frailty. The little rock people are described as having faces like a fish, with no noses. They are shiny and glisten like a fish, as well. However, there may be two categories of little people at Pukatawagan, if one is to categorize them by appearance. The other little people, the *apisciðinîsak*, resemble Germanic dwarfs, hairy and walking about on land. The *mîmîkwîsiwak* move about on the water in tiny canoes, rob people's fish nets and live in the cracks of rocks by the water. Even today, some people claim to see both kinds of little people on rare occasions.⁷



The drawings of the *memegwesiwag* at Blindfold Lake, Ontario.
Photograph by Lawrence Barkwell, June 1993.

⁷ Davis Westfall (Brandon University), "Surmounting Barriers to Understanding: Spiritual Elements and Worldviews of the Elders of Pukatawagan, Manitoba, with a Look at Teaching Application in the Community." Presentation at the *CIESC Annual Conference* (Dalhousie University/University of King's College, Halifax, May 28, 2003: 6-7.)



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