

Maria Campbell, *Eagle Feather News*, June 2021

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Maria Campbell, not your typical Q&A

When you walk into Maria Campbell's house, it is easy to figure out she is a legend. In a row on the floor are the awards. Order of Canada. Saskatchewan Order of Merit. The Order of Gabriel Dumont. Lieutenant Governor Award. Random Honorary Doctorates. You know, the basics. Pretty intimidating for any visitor, let alone a guy who admires her and came to ask her weird questions like, "when the last time was you laughed so hard you peed?" But you forge on regardless because the people really want to know. Maria, the most decorated Métis person in the history of this country, has been written about endlessly and we wanted to honour her, after another couple awards were given to her in the last two months, but we decided to be a bit different.

What was the first ghost you ever met? Where were you?

I was at Fort San, that was the first ghost I had ever had conversations with. I was going to bed and my late husband was asleep already. This person kept coming to my bed and she was crying, at first, I thought I was imagining it, so I opened a pack of cigarettes. Honest to God at 4:30 in the morning I had smoked all of my cigarettes because I had been listening to her all night. She told me this amazing story about all these people being in that wing of this place, I didn't know it was a hospital. She kept talking about this area and I saw her life story, her telling me almost like looking at a film, the story went through different genres, sometimes I would see it as a film or hear it with my ears or she was sitting beside me. She came in at about 6 years old her parents left her and she never went home again. She lived there until she died, she had a baby and an affair in there. She was experimented on and most of the story was about people getting experimented on in that hospital. I felt incredible empathy for her. My husband woke up at 4 in the morning and sat up and said what the hell is going on in here. I started to say something, and she disappeared. I started to tell my husband what had happened and he didn't pay any attention. We got up in the morning and went into the lobby we didn't know which way to go and there was a woman in the window and I told my husband we should ask her where to go. She said she would take us to where we needed to go, and I said something to my husband and we looked behind us and she was gone.

You lived at Gabriel Crossing for years. Did you really meet the spirit of Gabriel Dumont? What's he like?

Before I had moved into my house, we were cleaning it and I decided to stay a night in the house on a cot. I woke up at about 2 in the morning and there was a man sitting by the kitchen window, a bearded man. I thought it was my late husband's brother or my older brother but then I realized it was neither one of them. I sat up and it smiled at me, and he said it looks really nice here. We had done a lot of work over the year, and he was really pleased with it. It was what he communicated to me. About two years later my daughter was babysitting and we were at

Batoche days. We came home and she was sitting in her bedroom at 2 o'clock in the morning. She asked if we had seen anyone outside and I said no there is nobody outside and she said there's some people drinking at the river, which would happen during Batoche days. She got really scared because they were pretty loud and close to the house. She got up in the dark and walked to the window to see what was going on. She said she saw a man come around the corner, a big man with a beard and his hair tied back. He came around the corner and stood in front of the house and turned and smiled at her and she said she wasn't scared anymore. John Cuthand and Harvey Knight also saw him. They were waiting for another guy who was going to stay in the tepee with them. Same thing happened. This bearded man came in. They were sleeping, he walked in between them and squatted down at their feet and had a smoke. They thought it was the guy coming to visit, but then John realized that's not who it was and he got spooked. In the morning he wasn't there. They both swore they saw him. He was friendly. This was almost 48 years ago.

What was your favourite thing to do at the Crossing?

I loved going out there in the spring and cleaning the yard and fixing everything because the sand hill cranes are coming home, and the geese, it just sounds so beautiful out there. The frogs are all singing

What is the scariest thing that ever happened to you?

The scariest thing that has ever happened is that somebody, who I won't name because lots of people know them, but myself and two other women stayed at a house one time, a new log cabin that was finished and the man was a psychopath. There was windows all the way around this little cabin. We gave him a ride home and he had a gun, and we were inside, and he went and told us not to leave it and we sat inside for two nights in that cabin. And at night we didn't know if he was outside or where he was. All we knew is that he had a gun, and it was dark outside, there was no curtains, and we were inside with a light and there was no place to get away from him. That was really scary

Tell me about a time you peed your pants laughing.

Louise Halfe's new book, but I didn't really pee my pants but I just about did, cause it's a really funny book. Especially if you're a Cree speaker.

Who wins a fist fight between Pierre Elliot Trudeau and Jimmy Sinclair?

I don't think there would've been a fight. I think because both of them liked to talk and I think they probably would have ended up with a war of words.

You fist fight Margaret Attwood. Who wins?

I'm sure she would win. I can't even imagine having a fist fight with Margaret Attwood

Favourite hockey team?

I haven't watched hockey since Freddy Sasakamoose stopped playing hockey. I would've cheered for his team, because I didn't really know much about hockey. But we were

all related to him so we would cheer as loud as we could. Freddy was my favorite player, then Jimmy Neilson.

Who is your favourite politician?

I liked Pierre Elliot Trudeau. I liked him because he was very witty and really smart in a quirky way. My favorite Indigenous politician was probably Howard Adams, I didn't particularly like him that much but I thought he had a really brilliant political mind.

Favourite book?

My very favorite book was a book I read when I was about 28 or 30, somewhere around there. It was about A Place called Fanshen, a thousand years of history in a Chinese village. It was incredible. It showed how entrenched a culture can be and a people can be and a language can be.

Who is the most formidable woman you have ever met?

Alanis Obomsawin

Winter, spring, summer, or fall?

I love the fall.

Favourite colour?

Black

What makes you maddest?

What makes me the maddest is the way we treat children.

Who is your celebrity crush?

My celebrity crush, I don't think I have one but I love opera. I love Pavarotti's voice

If you could go back to any time in history and have soup and a conversation with anyone, who would it be and why?

I would love to have a conversation with Louis Riel because he had such an amazing life. We don't know anything about his life, we only know that he was hanged and that he was our leader. What we know about him is so superficial when he had such an amazing life, and his interests were so amazing and you look at what was happening in the world when he was alive and what would have shaped his thinking. He was an artist and he studied law, he was such a world citizen and for those things people said he was crazy.

Ever get road rage?

Ya sometimes I do, I hardly drive anymore but I used to roll my window down and ask what's wrong with you guys.

Longest hitch hike?

The longest I have hitch hiked was from Vancouver to Winnipeg when I was about nineteen.

Ever vote twice in a Métis election?

No. I have only ever voted twice in those elections. I was mostly working them. Never really voted. And remember in the last number of years I never had a membership. I just never found it such a big deal.

Favourite vehicle ever?

My favorite vehicle is a Volvo.

Person who you met who was the most awe inspiring?

Buffy Saint Marie, when she first started to sing, I didn't know a whole lot about her.

Most famous person you met ever?

Prince Charles. I didn't bow, but I did say hello.

When is Maria happiest?

When I'm with all my kids and grandkids and we're having dinner together or doing stuff together.

Turing on the TV to watch your favourite show. What is it?

I love really soppy, British historical stuff like "Downton Abbey."

Back in the day you are sitting having a drink and a smoke. What's your poison?

I really liked Jack Daniels and scotch, I could never really afford good scotch, so Jack Daniels was the next best thing. I smoked Du Maurier for years.

Do you ever feel the pressure of being the "Maria Campbell"?

No because I'm not really Maria Campbell, whatever that's supposed to mean. I don't really think about it. I have lots of people come talk to me if I'm out but they're very kind so it's not like I'm a celebrity or anything, I'm treated very respectfully. Even if people are a little over the top, I owe it to them, I wouldn't have what I have if it wasn't for them. We don't get things because we do it. It's because of a whole lot of other people who help and support over the years.

You have been honoured or awarded so many times...which is the most meaningful?

The Order of Gabriel Dumont. It's closest to me, my heritage. Those are my family. Everybody was related and I live in that place, that history is my history. He's my hero of all Hero's, I love Riel, but I don't think of him in the same hero way I think of Gabriel. Gabriel is amazing, he was uneducated in western ways, but he was brilliant. And just the kind of man and leader he was. He didn't try to take leadership away from Riel, he supported and recognized that Riel had what he needed. He gave him the stuff that Riel didn't have. They had a real equal relationship.

What do you foresee for the generation of Indigenous children just being born?

Twenty years from now, they're coming into the world; the world will be different. Their parents are going to be my great-grandchildren's generation, my youngest great grandchild is 5 and the oldest is 13. The five-year-old is so technically savvy, she can fix my computer for me. She's bright, she's smart and fearless. She gets scared but didn't grow up with the kind of fear that I grew up with. I grew up in the generation where that was the boss and if you took him on be prepared to maybe get killed (metaphorically). You just didn't talk like that to people in positions of power. That little girl won't have fear with many things. Her generation won't have to face many things I had to, such as systemic racism, it's still around but not as bad.

How do you do all that you have done? What's the secret?

I don't have a secret, I just work. I haven't done things other people haven't done. Look at what you have done. You have a paper and are involved in all of these things...how do you have time to do it? All of us have done things in different ways I just happen to be lucky. I get all these kinds of awards but I never for one minute ever think I'm getting those awards because I'm wonderful and I've done anything extraordinary because there are other people who have done more. For me I became well known at an earlier time and knowing our society, if you are giving an award, and in this day and age you have to give them to an Indigenous person, and who comes to mind and who might give you the most PR? That's what the world is about. And that sounds really jaded and awful but I would say 70 per cent of that is true. I know from sitting around with people and we hope to do something, we want to get the most high-profile person to draw the people in. Why would you give it to someone that nobody knows? I think all of us work hard, I know people who do more than me, more community things. But with this comes lots of responsibility. I certainly haven't been this great person that did all these wonderful things all of a sudden. I've had a long life and able to accomplish a lot of work.