Rosalyn LaPier

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In 2013, the University of Montana hired enrolled Blackfeet tribal member Dr. Rosalyn LaPier (b. 1964) into a tenure track position as a professor in the Environmental Studies Program. Rosalyn is the daughter of the late William LaPier, Sr. and Angeline Wall of Browning, Montana. She is the first enrolled Blackfeet tribal member to be hired by the University of Montana for a tenure-track position. "This is a great opportunity," stated Dr. LaPier. "I am excited to help UM recognize traditional ecological knowledge as a part of academic learning. I also hope to be part of the growing process at UM of helping American Indian undergraduate and graduate students to earn degrees such as the environmental studies degree that will be useful to their communities when they return home."[1] Dr. LaPier's research specializes on traditional ecological/environmental knowledge and ethnobotany of Native and Métis peoples; Native American languages; U.S. environmental history and public policy; American Indian activism.

Receiving a bachelor's in physics from Colorado College, a master's in liberal studies from DePaul University, and her doctorate in environmental history at the University of Montana, Rosalyn was appointed to the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency's National Environmental Justice Advisory Council to represent "indigenous organizations" for the years 2013 to 2016.[2] Also serving on the Board of Directors of the National Coalition Building Institute, Rosalyn says she is "interested in community-based initiatives that promote positive community development. As such, I have worked with various organizations both within Montana and nationally. I work with Piegan Institute, a private non-profit on the Blackfeet reservation, that promotes cultural and language preservation. My family has a long history and heritage in Montana. My father is Métis (of mixed French-Canadian and Chippewa heritage) originally from Augusta [Montana] and my mother is Blackfeet originally from Heart Butte [Montana]. I am married and have two college-age daughters, Iko'tsi and Abaki."[3]

In a piece written the summer of 2014 for the EPA's Environmental Justice web-presence, on using traditional ecological knowledge to adapt to climate change, Rosalyn says that:

> *My grandmother, Annie Mad Plume Wall, learned about nature and plants from her grandmother and her great-grandmother. Their knowledge stemmed from an intimate relationship with the environment that was formed over generations of time and through generations of women. Today we call this Traditional Ecological (or in some cases, Environmental) Knowledge, or TEK for short.*
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> *My grandmother taught me her knowledge. However unlike what most people think, it was not an informal activity. Instead it was a formal process of learning. The Amskapi Pikuni, now known as the Blackfeet, believe in a process they call "transferring." The Blackfeet believe that both tangible and intangible items are considered personal property which can be bought and sold. A tipi, which is tangible, or a name, which is intangible, are*

[1] *http://missoulian.com/news/local/native-american-professors-hired-to-tenure-track-jobs-at-um/article_45da87ce-637e-11e2-881b-001a4bcf887a.html*

[2] *http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2013/01/22/native-professors-road-tenure-university-montana-147155.*

[3] *http://www.ncbimissoula.org/about-us/board-of-directors.*

given equal value as property. However, instead of using the words "buy" or "sell," the Blackfeet use the word "transfer."

My grandmother lived to be 97 and I spent the 20 years before her passing learning about Blackfeet plant knowledge and environmental knowledge from her. We did this by traveling across the reservation to different plant ecosystems, alone or with the whole family, and even traveling off the reservation to old Blackfeet gathering sites. I paid her each time she "transferred" her environmental knowledge to me. Towards the end, when she decided my learning was near completion, she announced; "Now you are an old woman like me."

In those 20 years I learned something that she had not intended to teach me. In central Montana and southern Alberta in Canada (the traditional homelands of the Blackfeet), global climate change has impacted the environment that the Blackfeet have relied on for both medicinal plants, used for healing, and edible plants used for subsistence. New research conducted in the Rocky Mountains reflects what we've been learning as each year passed — instead of the short growth cycle in the spring and summer which we were accustomed to, the seasons have lasted longer, plants now grow earlier and live longer and bloom at different times. Plants that once grew at the same time now grow at different times in the seasonal cycle. For some plants these differences are dramatic.

For those who do not spend time outdoors it may be difficult to fully appreciate the change that is occurring. But for those who live off the land, such as farmers, ranchers, and those with subsistence lifestyles, climate change is having a real impact. It impacts the health and well-being of countless Native peoples who rely on gathering plants for both medicinal and edible purposes. More importantly, climate change impacts the spiritual life of Native peoples.

*But we are adapting. The Blackfeet, similar to other tribes, schedule their ceremonial activity according to seasonal cycles. But with the cycles destabilizing, we now need to adjust each year to the volatile weather. For example, the Blackfeet conduct their Thunder-pipe ceremony at the sound of the first thunder which marks the return of rain. At the ceremony, serviceberries (*Amelanchier alnifolia*) are planted to celebrate the renewal of life. Traditionally, first thunder occurred in spring. The first thunder now happens much earlier in the year, sometimes even in the winter when it is unwise to plant in Montana.*

The Blackfeet are now in the process of adapting and evolving to what some environmentalists call a new Earth. The TEK I learned from my grandmother is from the old Earth. However it still has value and the Blackfeet will continue to find new ways of gathering plants, new methods of identifying changes in our weather, and ways to further our traditions. Climate change will continue to affect the Blackfeet's environment, ultimately impacting our lifestyle and spiritual life. But as we learn new TEK practices, we will be able to work better with nature and continue the process of transferring our "new" Traditional Environmental Knowledge to the next generation. [4]

Rosalyn has worked with several national and regional Native non-profits including the Council of Energy Resource Tribes (who protected Native lands and natural resources), Americans for Indian Opportunity (who strengthen emerging Native leaders and governments) and Piegan Institute (who preserve and promote Native languages). Rosalyn has also worked at a Native college for 12 years, both as an Instructor and program director.

Dr. LaPier's Blackfeet name is K-tia-i-tse-kus, or Not Real Beaver Women, the name of her grandmother's grandmother. Her mother is Blackfeet, from Montana and Alberta,

[4] *http://blog.epa.gov/ej/2014/07/using-tek/.*

Canada. Her father is Chippewa Métis. His family moved to Montana 150 years ago from North Dakota/Manitoba. She has relatives in Canada and the U.S.

"Montana is my home. When I see the mountains, prairies and river valleys, I am reminded of the long history of my people and can feel the spirit of my ancestors around me. Most of my family still lives there and will for generations to come. My children need to know their grandmothers, aunts, uncles and cousins, so that they too can know what it is to be Native American. They also need to have that special relationship with the landscape that has shaped the values, language, religion, arts and culture of their ancestors. My children need to remember the things their grandmother tells them, and pass them on to their own grandchildren." [5]

As an enrolled Blackfeet, Dr. LaPier's primary political status identity is Amskapi Pikani (Southern or American Blackfeet), flowing from her maternal family history. As a mixed-descent Aboriginal person, though, she fully self-identifies as Blackfeet/Métis, acknowledging her strong paternal line of Métis heritage.

Rosalyn's Michif (Métis) heritage is traced through the line of Antoine LaPierre (b., c.1813), a Métis buffalo hunter, who brought his family to the Front Range area of Montana in the 1860s during the major diaspora from the eastern Plains occurring during the decline of the bison. While buffalo were still plentiful in Montana, Antoine's children settled permanently and formed the nucleus of several Métis communities. Antoine's son François-Xavier LaPierre (b. 1850) settled at St. Peter's Mission with his wife Mary Rose Swan and her parents James Swan, Jr. and Marie Arcand. For several decades St. Peter's Mission and the Métis community established around it would form the religious, educational, and political base of the central Montana Métis.

> *In the 1870s, many of the [LaPier family] made their homes along Ford Creek, tucked into the mountains 15 miles west of present day Augusta. Most of the Métis community lived in the area between Willow Creek and Ford Creek. By 1880, 29 Métis families lived in the area. Clementine LaPier [married to Sam Forque, aka, Ford], her brother John and his family, her brother Moses and his family, her brother Alec and his family, and her sister Euphrosine [all children of Antoine LaPierre] and her sister's husband Louis Malaterre lived there as well. Because of the large Métis community that lived in the area it was called Breed Creek.*
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> *By 1880, when the community at St. Peter's numbered about 150 people, of whom 118 were Métis, comprised of twenty-seven Métis families related through marriage.*
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> *In April 1883, Louis Riel moved with his wife and young son to St. Peter's Mission and came to live with the James Swan, Jr. family.*
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> *In June 1884 Riel returned to Canada with his family and several Métis men from St. Peter's and Ford Creek. Even though the Métis along the Front Range viewed their move to Montana as permanent they continued to maintain sympathy for and ties with those Métis living in territories they left behind.*
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> *Of the Métis who settled along the Front Range who went with Riel to Manitoba, James Swan's brother John was killed at the battle of Batoche, Francois LaPierre and his brother John participated in the confrontation and John lost an arm in the fighting.*
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> *In 1900 Mary Azure and John LaPier, the grandson of Antoine LaPierre, met and married at Fort Shaw. Both of their families, the Azures and LaPiers, had originally settled at St. Peter's Mission in the 1870's, but the Azures re-settled to Zortman and the*

[5] *http://www.chicagoethnic.org/My-Grandmothers-Grandmother.php*.

LaPiers to Ford Creek near Augusta. John LaPier and Mary Azure's children would be born at Ford Creek and eventually raised in the Dearborn Canyon.
In 1891 Father Damiani, a long time friend of the Métis, moved north to Holy Family Mission which he had recently opened on the Blackfeet Indian reservation along the Two Medicine river. In 1898 the Jesuits discontinued operations at St. Peter's and moved permanently to Holy Family Mission. The Métis did not follow them. The Ursuline sisters, who came to St. Peter's in 1884 continued to run a girl's school at St. Peter's until 1918 when it burned down.
Thus began the decline of the old Métis life ways along the Dearborn. The old-timers continued to carry on traditions, but some were lost with the coming of a new generation. Jack Swan, a tall man who spoke very little English and spoke mostly French and Cree, continued to wear moccasins, a beaded vest and a Red River sash with a tobacco pouch until his death in 1913. Like him, his brother-in-law Francois LaPierre dressed with a sash, tobacco pouch and leggings and drove a Red River cart until he died in 1928. The women as well within this first generation wore the traditional all black dress and shawls of Métis women. But with their passing these visible symbols of Métis culture disappeared. Francois changed his name to Frank LaPier and his wife from Marie to Mary beginning the process of Americanization that the next generation carried on.
Yet despite these changes the core of Métis life ways continued. Though jobs changed, the economy remained subsistence and communal. Though clothing changed, the core values of family and community remained. And some things, such as language and music, were still not lost at all. Arthur Baptiste LaPier, the great-grandson of Antoine LaPierre was born at Ford Creek in 1905 and raised in the Dearborn Canyon. His first languages where French and Cree. He learned the old Métis music and songs from his grandmother Mary Rose (Swan) LaPier and began playing the fiddle when he was twelve. When Art turned 15 in 1920, Frank (formerly Francois) LaPier gave his grandson the fiddle he had brought with him to Montana. It was a fiddle that Francois played at dances at St. Peter's Mission during the 1870's and later at Ford Creek and the Dearborn.
The time period from when Frank LaPier first began to play his fiddle in the Front Range area (around 1870) to the time when he passed on his heritage to his grandson in 1920, marked a time period that saw great change in the way the Métis in Montana lived their lives. Once again the Métis adapted. Their communities endured despite regular shifts in location, and economic and political forces beyond their control. The Métis possessed strong family ties and cultural values that worked in combination to help them keep their communities from deterioration.[6]

This is the family context, both Blackfeet and Métis, within which Rosalyn LaPier was raised. Rosalyn represents the best of the current generation Aboriginal peoples in Montana. She is a great and positive influence on the Native community, students, and the larger Montana society.

Selected Publications:

[6] *From: Rosalyn R. LaPier, "Métis Life Along Montana's Front Range," in, Beyond ... The Shadows of the Rockies: History of the Augusta Area, Augusta MT: Augusta Historical Society, 2007.*

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Rosalyn and her grandmother, Annie Mad Plume Wall