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**Walking Among Birds of Fire:  
Nehiyaw Beliefs Concerning Death, Mourning, and  
Feasting with the Dead**

by

Morgan G. F. Baillargeon

Dissertation presented  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
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## ABSTRACT

*Walking Among The Birds of Fire: Nehiyaw Beliefs Concerning Death, Mourning and Feasting with the Dead*, investigates two primary questions among the Nehiyaw (Plains Cree) of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Montana with a particular focus on the Nehiyaw at Muskwachees (Hobbema, Alberta), an hour south of Edmonton:

1. In the Nehiyaw world-view, what understanding do people have about their relationship between the living and the dead?
2. To what extent are the Nehiyaw involved in feeding and feasting with the dead?

This thesis examines the various feasts and celebrations, dances and memorial events that take place to feed, feast, and honour the community's deceased friends and family members.

For the Nehiyaw, there is a recognition that although the souls of the deceased belong to another dimension they are still very much part of the living Nehiyaw community, and as a result the deceased are treated as community members. As souls, or spiritual beings, they are believed to be closer to the Creator, and in this state are in a better position to carry the prayers and petitions of the living to the Creator and to bring the Creator's blessings to the community or to family members. At the same time, the

souls of the dead are feared for the malevolent activities they can cause. Consequently, to keep them at a distance, the souls of the dead are fed and feasted with, and invited to dance with the community on numerous celebrations through the year, in some cases on a weekly or daily basis.

For all intents and purposes, the Nehiyaw as a whole are involved in feeding and feasting with the dead on a daily basis. Whether the true population of the Four Bands and Pigeon Lake is 10,000 thousand or 15,000 thousand, the odds alone would suggest that on practically every day of the year someone in the community is feeding the soul of a departed relative. Any given day of the year is likely to be the anniversary date of the relative of some community member. When a feast for the dead takes place it is not only the newly deceased who is fed but all of the community's dead.

An interesting finding through this research has been the consistency between in belief and practice over the past hundred years, which makes a very interesting point about the accuracy and reliability of oral tradition.

**INTRODUCTION:**

**WALKING AMONG THE BIRDS OF FIRE: NEHIYAW BELIEFS  
CONCERNING DEATH, MOURNING AND FEASTING WITH THE DEAD**

In 1999, after completing a short paper on my experiences working as the coordinator of funerals and wakes for the Catholic Church at Muskwachees, Alberta, for a course in Native Studies at the University of St. Paul, I spoke with a good friend, Chief Victor Buffalo from the Samson Reserve. We were speaking of the possibility of my continuing my studies and doing a PhD. Victor thought this an excellent idea but felt I should pick a topic that would be of benefit to a community. He suggested I continue research pertaining to Nehiyaw beliefs about the afterlife, and how funerals have changed over the past twenty-five years. I have followed Victor's advice in examining more closely Nehiyaw beliefs about death and the afterlife.

My personal ties with Muskwachees go back to 1978, when I moved there in search people who could teach me traditional native art. My family is Métis, of Shawnee, Wandat and French ancestry, but there was no one in Windsor who practiced traditional art as I was growing up. I accepted a position with Our Lady of Seven Sorrows Parish, near Hobbema, Alberta, in an area I knew nothing about, and was ambivalent about, in order to carry out my goal of learning traditional art. What I took from my experience of the next three years working and living in Muskwachees is too complicated to ever explain in a brief paragraph and would be better kept for another time. Since 1978 however, I have maintained a very close relationship with hundreds of people I came to know and admire in this community that is so rich in culture, hospitality, kindness and tradition.

After 25 years of working and learning from the friends from Muskwachees that I've made and come to know over the years, I feel inadequate in writing about this topic. I realize that it has taken the people, namely the ceremonialists, a lifetime of searching and asking question themselves to arrive at the stage where they can answer my questions about their beliefs about death and the afterlife. What I am presenting here barely scratches the surface of traditional Nehiyaw or Plains Cree beliefs about life and death, and this thesis does not claim to do any more than that. To go any deeper would require a lifetime commitment to living a traditional Nehiyaw lifestyle and sharing and participating in the everyday life of the people. This of course cannot be done over the four and a half year period that it has taken to research this topic, particularly from more than 3000 kilometers away. To do this topic complete justice requires a lifetime of learning and living the traditional Nehiyaw lifestyle. Pretending to have all of the answers and solutions to questions about Nehiyaw beliefs about life and death would truly be an insult and disservice to the people who have shared their thought and traditions with me over the past several years. This thesis, then, marks the starting point of my journey to understand the Nehiyaw worldview as it pertains to life, death, and the afterlife.

The main questions this thesis investigates are:

1. In the Nehiyaw world-view, what understanding do people have about the relationship between the living and the dead?
2. To what extent are the Nehiyaw involved in feeding and feasting with the dead?

It is important to be clear from the beginning that this is not a theoretical piece of research. The subject of this research could be subjected to an elaborate theoretical process, but that is beyond the scope of this paper and could be dealt with in another research project. The primary focus of this thesis is ethnographic in nature, its emphasis being on the compilation and collection of historic records and the updating of pre-existing material on the Plains Cree through the voices of contemporary Nehiyaw (Plains Cree) speaking on the subject of death rituals, and contemporary Nehiyaw beliefs about the soul or “spirit being”, and the role that this spirit being plays in their lives.

David Mandelbaum carried out the last major piece of ethnographic research to be conducted on the Canadian Cree over seventy years ago. This is very surprising, given the fact that the Nehiyaw are the largest Aboriginal cultural group on the Canadian Plains, numbering almost forty thousand. For both these reasons there is a pressing need to work closely with contemporary Nehiyaw communities to discuss cultural changes and changes in ritual practices that have taken place over the years. As was mentioned earlier, although the primary approach to this research is not theoretical, one of Mary Douglas’ theories, presented in her book **Purity and Danger**, will be examined in light of the ‘transition state’ one experiences upon dying and becoming a “spiritual being” destined for the “Great Land”. Douglas discusses “transition states” (similar to Victor Turner’s ‘liminality’ theory and Arnold Van Gannet’s “rites of passage” theory) as a time of danger, for the individual and the entire community, because the state is indefinable; the individual is not safe as he/she is in neither one state nor the next until they reach the “Great Land”.

This research is very important for two main reasons. It is the first major ethnographic study carried out on the Nehiyaw in Canada in over 70 years. When Mandelbaum did his research he was primarily concerned with documenting the traditional life of the Cree as consultants remembered it prior to the reservation period. This research is also interested in documenting traditional Nehiyaw beliefs, but is interested in presenting traditional Cree beliefs as contemporary Cree live them out. In comparing Mandelbaum's finding with what contemporary Cree are saying, we can see first hand the marvels of oral tradition. Oral tradition works, even in modern times, despite the fact that it faces tremendous competition today! Nehiyaw traditionalists, and some non-traditionalists, are aware of traditional Nehiyaw beliefs and teachings concerning death and the afterlife and the relationship and responsibility the community has in their dealings with the dead. The traditionalists encounter problems in communicating these responsibilities to some individuals within the community. The important issue, however is, that there are individuals in the community who know the teachings and responsibilities of the community. These responsibilities, teachings and traditions are in keeping with what early fur traders, explorers, linguists, and ethnologists observed. Possibly the most important component of this research is the inclusion of the aboriginal voice which addresses each of these teachings, concerns, and traditions and in some cases challenges them.

As is the case for many Indigenous peoples of the Americas, as well as for thousands of non-Indigenous peoples throughout the world, a Nehiyaw individual's life journey is described using the analogy of a circle or, in some cases, the "wheel". For Nehiyaw people, their life cycle is best described using the analogy of the "circle". An

individual is conceived and born; grows into an adolescent; becomes an adult and parent; a grandparent; hopefully lives a long life; eventually dies and moves on to another realm of being Ehhatachakuat (meaning that the spirit has taken on a new dimension – the spirit is changing form) (Buffalo, V., June 27, 2000). For the Nehiyaw, death is not seen as the end of life; the soul moves on and lives a new life as a “spiritual being”. The “spirit” travels to kitchi kiskok, a “Great Land” or a Better Place, and in some respect this new life may be as a mirror image of the life lived as a human being, with the exception that everything is better in this new “land”. The transition from death to the afterlife is a traumatic event for Nehiyaw people, as it is for every culture. However, it is not only the living who are affected by this loss of life. The spirit of the deceased must also survive a four day waiting period or journey before he/she arrives in the “Great Land” or kitchi kiskok. During the four nights following the death of an individual everyone, including the deceased, finds themselves very vulnerable and potentially in great danger. There are rules which must be followed and obeyed by the living in order to assist the deceased on his/her journey and to protect themselves, the children, the unborn, and the vulnerable of the community from being taken by the spirit of the deceased. Until the soul has actually passed over onto kitchi kiskok, the soul is in danger of not reaching his/her destination. The results of such an event are horrifying, not only for the soul, but also for the living who are subject to visits by these wandering spirits.

In her book, *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas states:

Danger lies in the transition state because it is neither one state nor the next, it is indefinable. A person passing from one state to another is dangerous. Danger lies in the transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable. The person who must pass from one to another is himself in danger and emanates

danger to others. The danger is controlled by ritual, which precisely separates him from the old status, segregates him for a time and then publicly declares his entry to his new status. Not only is transition itself dangerous, but also the rituals of segregation are the most dangerous phase of the rites. ...[T]he initiates die to old life and are born to new... During the marginal period, which separates ritual dying and ritual rebirth, the novices in initiation are temporarily outcasts. For the duration of the rite they have no place in society... To have been in the margins is to have been in contact with danger, to have been at a source of power" (1970:96-97).

Although Douglas is speaking about the transitory stages people go through during ritual ceremonies for puberty rights, fasting, or when young men go on vision quests, I believe her theory may somewhat apply to Nehiyaw beliefs regarding death; that is, the transition from a "human being" to a "spirit being", and the journey towards successfully entering the spirit world as a "spiritual being" or the time of Ehhatachakuat. During this transition period the soul of the deceased is in danger as it journeys towards the afterlife, or the Great Land. However, V. Buffalo and Mekwan Awasis, (2004) disagree that the soul is in any type of danger during this transition period.

There seems to be a consistent belief among many Algonquian-speaking peoples, including the Nehiyaw, that the soul has four nights in which to pass into the spirit world. Provided the living carry out the proper rituals and prayers, do not grieve or cry uncontrollably, perform the correct pipe ceremony and feast for the dead, conduct a proper burial, and distribute the personal property of the deceased, the spirit of the deceased will safely reach the Great Land. Should the rituals not be followed correctly, there is the danger that the spirit of the deceased will not be able to enter the Great Land, but will wander the earth and remain a nuisance to the community.

Relatives of the deceased also find themselves in immediate danger following a death. The Nehiyaw believe that the souls of the deceased journeying towards the Great Land are very lonely and afraid to make the journey alone, they have also experienced the suffering of this world and do not want the little ones to see and experience it, so they are eager to take children with them on their journey. *“Because the souls of the departed have seen and experienced the suffering of this world they do not want to see the little ones suffer as they did”* (Rowan, Dec 5, 2000). Therefore children, pregnant women and their unborn, must take precautions to protect themselves from the spirit of the deceased. One manner in which children and pregnant women may protect themselves and their unborn from the dead is by avoiding the wake and funeral and by weighing down the souls of the children by tying a black string around their wrists, ankles or neck. Although unborn children and small children are the most vulnerable, no one is safe until the “Feast for the Dead” has taken place, at which time the soul of the deceased is fed and sent on its way to kitchi kiskok.

Care and respect for the dead does not culminate with the Fourth Day Feast. On the anniversary date of the death of a community member, and in some cases for four consecutive years, a feast is held in honour of the deceased. Sometimes this feast will take the form of a meal in which the deceased and community are fed, or food may be put aside for the dead at the family meal on any occasion. Generally at an anniversary feast for the dead, the eating is followed by a particular dance, such as a Tea Dance, or by a memorial event such as Hand Games, a rodeo, a basketball, and baseball or hockey tournament. All of these events are held to invite the deceased to join the community in eating, singing, dancing or taking part in a sports event or competition (generally an event which the

deceased enjoyed participating in). At the end of the event the deceased is told to leave the event and everyone present is directed likewise. Some individuals profess to feed their relations on a daily basis by simply putting a small portion of food aside for them.

This ethnographic research will examine Nehiyaw beliefs and rituals pertaining to death, mourning, and the feast for the dead. Special attention will be paid to the changes which have come about over the past seventy years in how wakes, funerals, and feasts are conducted and to the traditional Cree memorial dances, the contemporary sports events, and the traditional games that follow the feast for the dead.

This research will focus primarily on the Nehiyaw community at Muskwachees, commonly known as Hobbema, Alberta. Muskwachees is a community situated 100 kilometers south of Edmonton, Alberta and 200 kilometers north of the city of Calgary. Statistics vary greatly on the number of people who live there. Statistics Canada and Indian Affairs place the population around 10,000 but the community believes the population to be closer to 12,000 and as high as 15,000 (Indian and Northern Affairs, 1999; Statistics Canada, 2004). Despite the fact that the Nehiyaw are the largest linguistic Aboriginal group on the Northern Plains, there have surprisingly only been a few people who have conducted ethnographic research on the Nehiyaw in the past hundred years.

The work of Edward S. Curtis, (1928), *The Western Woods Cree*, is likely the earliest piece of work on the Western Cree at the turn of the last century. Curtis' published writings on the Cree are quite brief but he does make mention of burial customs. The monumental work on the Nehiyaw, however, is that of David G. Mandelbaum (1935), *The Plains Cree: An Ethnographic, Historical, and Comparative Study*. Although

Mandelbaum's work is a classic in the study of the Nehiyaw who live primarily in Saskatchewan, his commentary on Nehiyaw burial customs is limited to five or six pages. However, Mandelbaum's unpublished field notes at the American Museum of Natural History did prove to be quite rich on the topic. His primary consultant, Fine Day, was a very respected warrior and prominent leader of a band of Cree in Central Saskatchewan. Mandelbaum made several visits to Hobbema but did little research there, outside of attending a Sundance. He felt that the Hobbema or Muskwachees Cree had already lost too much of their customs due to the community's being too Christianized. Mandelbaum's field notes were the "treasure" one seeks to find when conducting archival research. Another important piece of ethnographic work is that of Vern Dusenberry, *The Montana Cree*, (1962) which focuses on the Chippewa/Cree community at Rocky Boy, Montana. Dusenberry's work is very important and provides a good source of comparison between Canadian traditional belief and the beliefs of American Chippewa/Cree, who are relatives of the Muskwachees Cree. Dusenberry's field notes, which are kept in the Renne Library with the Special Collections at the Montana State University at Bozeman, were another wonderful find.

Alanson Skinner may be the only other ethnologist who did considerable research among the Nehiyaw, particularly on the topic of the Plains Cree Sundance. Skinner's work took place during the early 1900s.

The works of these men on the Nehiyaw are very important given the fact that so little ethnographic work has been done on the largest Aboriginal culture in Western Canada. Since the scattering of the Nehiyaw following the Rebellion of 1885, there are Nehiyaw communities in the provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan,

Manitoba and the North West Territories as well as in the state of Montana. And although there has been a great deal of new material produced on the Nehiyaw since Skinner, Curtis, Mandelbaum, and Dusenberry, there has been no monumental ethnographic research carried out on contemporary beliefs, practices and rituals pertaining to death, wakes, burials, and family and community ceremonies aimed at feeding and celebrating with the dead. Therefore the works of these early pioneers among the Nehiyaw are priceless, given their work's historic setting. In light of this I felt it was important to present the unpublished material collected by Mandelbaum and Dusenberry on Nehiyaw beliefs and practices regarding death and the afterlife. These findings are presented in Chapter 4. I contrast this material in Chapter 4 and contrast this material with the voice of the contemporary Nehiyaw in Chapter 5. Given the large gap in research over the past 70 years on this topic, I felt the contemporary voice had to be heard, not through my paraphrasing but through the voices, experiences, teachings, and explanations of the Nehiyaw themselves.

As was mentioned earlier, archival research was an important part of this project. In addition to the discovery of the Mandelbaum and Dusenberry papers on the Nehiyaw, research took me to the Canadian Museum of Civilization Archives, the National Archives of Canada, the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, the Glenbow Institute Archives, the Provincial Archives of Alberta and Manitoba, the City of St. Boniface Archives, the Manitoba Museum and Archives, American Museum of Natural History, the Montana State University in Bozeman, the Field Museum in Chicago, the Smithsonian Archives in DC, the National Museum of the American Indian Archives in Suitland, MD, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate Archives in Ottawa and Edmonton, as well the United Church

Archives in Manitoba. The gold mines were at the Montana State University in Bozeman with the Dusenberry collection and the American Museum of Natural History Archives in New York City with Mandelbaum's field notes. However, the most valuable experience came from the interviews carried out with the contemporary Nehiyaw of Muskweches between 2000 and 2004, along with the stories I had heard Nehiyaw people speak of in the 25 years of working with and among them in my various capacities as lay parish worker, as an employee at the Panee Memorial Agri-Plex, as a student as a school teacher and as researcher with the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

From 1978 to 1980 I was employed by the Roman Catholic Church in Muskweches as a lay parish worker to coordinate funerals and wakes. During the late 1970s the community averaged two funerals a week. For my part this meant spending at least six days a week attending wakes and or funerals. Over the past 12 years I have had the opportunity to interview numerous Cree ceremonialists and elders on a variety of issues pertaining to Nehiyaw spirituality and beliefs. They have discussed death and the afterlife, the importance of the feasting with the dead, and the various dances that are held to commemorate the dead. I have also consulted the Roman Catholic Church, Free Methodist, Baptist, and United Church Archives at the Provincial Archives of Alberta to examine church records relating to burials and wakes. Interviews with Nehiyaw people at Muskweches, with local funeral directors, RCMP officers, ambulance attendants, retired teachers, social workers and resident Aboriginal people born and raised outside the Muskweches community have also proven to be a valuable experience in understanding Nehiyaw concepts and beliefs about death and the afterlife as well as what "outsiders" have observed after many years of working and living in the community. Victor Buffalo,

who was chief at the time when I began my research, suggested I spend my time with the ceremonialists who did the pipe ceremonies for the dead and conducted the Feast for the Dead ceremonies. Together we selected someone from each of the four reserves at Muskweches who would serve as consultants on the project: the late Gordon Raine, Casey Rowan, the late Marvin Buffalo, and Gordon Lee and Mekwun Awasis. Victor Buffalo would continue assisting in whatever way he could. All of the people from Muskweches with whom I spoke were individuals whom I had known for approximately 25 years. I also felt it was very important to speak with women in the community to get their perspective and learn from their experience. They are the ones who work so hard at keeping the family together during the trying days following a death in the community, and it is they who prepare for the feasts.

Participant observation at funerals and wakes and conducting interviews with Nehiyaw from Muskweches (Hobbema) and neighbouring communities were essential components of this research. As I had attended several hundred wakes and funerals during my two-year employment with Our Lady of Seven Sorrows Church during the late 70s, I felt I had a very good grasp of what took place at funerals and wakes at Muskweches and Pigeon Lake. Had the opportunity presented itself, I initially thought it would be valuable to attend a wake or funeral to see how much change had occurred in the manner in which these services were carried out over the past 25 years.

I experienced a change of heart however, very shortly after beginning this project. I found myself faced with an ethical issue. A few old friends in the community passed away between 2000 and 2004 while I was working in the community. I wanted to attend their wakes to support the families but at the same time I knew I would be observing

changes that might have occurred over the past 25 years. The dilemma was in my not being able to separate attending the service of a friend from pursuing my research interests; by attending the services I would end up observing and making mental notes whether I wanted to or not. To do so would prove insulting to my deceased friends and acquaintances as well as to their families in the long run. Ethically I simply could not bring myself to attend these wakes or funerals. The other option was to accompany someone I knew who was going to a wake or funeral of someone I did not know, but this also seemed to be just as odd a thing to do. In the end I decided to simply ask people to describe for me what changes they had seen come about since the late 1970s in the manner in which wakes and funerals were conducted. The answers were quite consistent in the end: everyone spoke of an enormous increase in cost and the increase in the time it took to conduct the funeral services.

I did have occasion to attend one funeral over the past four and a-half years. The father of my godchild died while I was working in Muskwachees in 2002, and I did feel a responsibility to attend that funeral for the sake of my godchild and his family. I also had the opportunity to attend several Tea Dances and Cemetery Feast, and the Feast for the Dead on the anniversary dates of the deaths of two very good friends, the late Gordon Raine, who was one of the advisors on this research, and the late Colin Buffalo, who was Victor Buffalo's brother.

There was no formal questionnaire that accompanied this research. People were informed of the research topic: namely Nehiyaw beliefs and practices concerning death and the afterlife and the community and family's role in feeding and feasting with the dead. People were asked to speak freely about what they remembered seeing and hearing

about teachings relating to death and the afterlife, to speak on how funerals and wakes had changed over the years, and to speak to traditional Nehiyaw beliefs and teachings about death. These simple directions generally led to people speaking on many topics, which I followed up with more questions. In a few instances where people could not think of what else to speak about, I would bring forward information that others had shared, or heard or believed to be true. This quite often refreshed people's memories and the conversation would flow again.

This thesis will be presented in the following manner: Chapter 1, "The Nehiyaw Community At Muskwachees and Region Lake", is meant to introduce the reader to the Nehiyaw, who they are as well as the focus community at Muskwachees. Chapter 2, "The History of Christian and non-Christian Denominations in Muskwachees", explores the history of the arrival and presence of the various denominations in the community of Hobbema and the surrounding Reserves. Chapter 3, "Nehiyaw Burial Practices and Beliefs 1978-1980", essentially outlines my own personal experience of moving from Southwestern Ontario to Hobbema in 1978, where I worked for the Roman Catholic Church until 1980 as co-coordinator of funerals and wakes. The story recounts my recollections about what I saw and heard first hand regarding Nehiyaw funeral and wakes and beliefs regarding death and the afterlife. Chapter 4, "Nehiyaw Sacred Stories On Death, the Afterlife, and the Journey to the Land of the Dead: The Historic Record Prior to 2000", presents the historic account of what fur traders, explorers, missionaries, anthropologists, and linguists observed and recorded based on first hand experience living and dealing with the Plains Cree. Chapter 5, "21<sup>st</sup> Century Nehiyaw Beliefs on Death, the Afterlife, and the Journey to A Great Land" presents the voices of modern Nehiyaw

people speaking on what they have been taught to believe about death and the afterlife. Chapter 6, “Walking with the Birds of Fire: Aboriginal Beliefs Concerning Spirit Bundles”, examines the belief and practice of Plains communities in general with special attention given to Nehiyaw belief and practice in keeping and caring for “spirit bundles”. Chapter 7, “Memorial Games and Gambling: In Search of Meaning”, explores the tradition of using sport and gambling as a means of inviting the dead to participate in games and competitive activities with the community as a means of bringing blessings and healing to the living. Chapter 8 provides the conclusion to this research.

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **THE NEHIYAW COMMUNITY AT MUSKWACHEES AND PIGEON LAKE**



**SOMEONE DIED IN THIS HOME**

Allen Sapp

Cree

Red Pheasant, Saskatchewan

F49 Allen Sapp Gallery. Used with permission.

**THE NEHIYAW COMMUNITY AT MUSKWACHEES AND PIGEON LAKE****INTRODUCTION**

This chapter introduces the reader to the Nehiyaw community at Muskwachees. It begins with a discussion on the prehistorically and contemporary Plains Cree or Nehiyaw, followed by an overview of the community's economic development, the presence of early missionaries in the community and the importance played by kinship.

The early history of the Plains Cree in Western Canada may best be described as ambiguous and assorted. There is a great deal of disagreement among scholars about who the Plains Cree were historically and whether they migrated westward from Northwestern Ontario and the Great Lakes regions or eastern Manitoba during the late-1600s. In recent years researchers have come to question whether the Cree were not already in the west hundreds of years prior to the late 17th Century. It has become generally accepted by western historians and anthropologists that following the establishment of the Hudson Bay Company in 1670, the Swampy and Woodlands Cree of central Canada migrated west of Ontario or eastern Manitoba in search of furs, as well as to act as middlemen for the Hudson Bay Company (HBC). Many scholars believed that this effort on the part of the Cree was to satisfy their "overpowering hunger<sup>1</sup>" for European trade goods. This may in fact have been the case for some individuals and families; however there seems to be conflicting evidence that suggests that some of the Crees, including members of the group that we now call the Plains Cree, were already west of Lake Winnipeg prior to the establishment of the HBC. One argument that may support this theory refers to an alliance between the Assiniboin during and a group of

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<sup>1</sup> This is certainly not the time and place to enter into a discussion over the consequences and reason for Aboriginal peoples' involvement with the North American fur trade. Several authors have produced excellent work on this topic. For a fresh approach to this question I would suggest Laura Peers, 1994, *The Ojibwa of Western Canada 1780 to 1870*.

Cree who inhabited the Plains in what is now Central/Western Manitoba and Saskatchewan the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The second argument lies in the fact that it is well documented that Plains Cree was the language of trade during the early 1800s in Red River. One may deduce from this that the Plains Cree language would have had to be in place long before it became a language of trade.

A long-standing belief about the Assiniboin is that they separated from the Dakota sometime between the mid- to late-1500s and the early 1600s (Flaherty, 1993: 25), at which time they moved into Southwestern Manitoba and became allies of the Cree. This political maneuver on the part of the Assiniboin was an important strategy, as they would certainly not have wanted to be surrounded by their enemies to the south, namely the Dakota and Lakota, and a potential enemy, the Cree, to the north. The presence of the Assiniboin and Cree in southern Manitoba is known as early as the mid-1600s through the *Jesuit Relations*, the well kept historical records of the Jesuit religious order, a Roman Catholic order that came to North America in 1611 to minister to the French, then later the Aboriginal population. The *Jesuit Relations* do not, however, indicate who these Cree were, whether they were Swampy Cree or people speaking a different dialect.

They [Jesuits] went first to the Micmacs, next to the Montagnais, then to the Algonquins. They followed the wanderers. They made their way into the forests, along the waterways, across the portages and through the woods. By 1745, Gabriel Druillettes had preached to the tribes along the Atlantic coast, Charles Albanel had gone to those along Hudson Bay, while Claude Allouez, Jean-Pierre Aulneau, and Godefroy Coquart, scouring three thousand miles along the Great Lakes and on to the prairies as far as Lake Winnipeg, had made contact with some twenty-three "nations" of differing languages and customs. Most famously, Jacques Marquette had discovered the great waterway that would bring Christianity into the lives of thousands more in the heart of the continent (www.jesuits.ca, 2001).

The archaeological record of the Northern Plains does provide some clues that the Assiniboin may have inhabited the Canadian Plains about three hundred years earlier than

is commonly believed. *“Pottery shards and projectile points in keeping with an Assiniboin style, have been found on the Canadian Plains in sites which may date back to the 1300s. A second set of pottery shards and projectiles associated with the Cree have also been located in sites believed to exist around the year 1200”* (Ives, April 2002). Assuming this information to be correct, it may be safe to conclude that Cree people had reason to be on the Canadian Plains long before the arrival of the HBC. The unanswered question remains; who were these Cree speakers? We may never find clear answers to this question. However, given the knowledge of the language of trade at Red River in the early 1800s and the fate of several Plains Cree and Assiniboin communities during the reservation period, we may be able to infer their identity. One clue as to their identity may be found in the fact that by the early 1800’s the Plains Cree dialect was the language of business in the Red River District for those Métis and Aboriginal people who sought to be associated with the Plains Cree. Peter Erasmus, a Métis interpreter at Treaty 6, comments on the attitude of the Plains Cree towards the Swampy Cree and Ojibwa language:

*“While there was a similarity in some words, and I learned both languages, the Plains Crees would not understand his [Swampy] Cree. Further, the Plains Cree looked down on the Swampy and Sauteaux as an inferior race. They would be intolerant at being addressed in Swampy or Sauteaux words”* (Erasmus, 1999:241).

The impact this had on the Swampy Cree and Great Lakes Sauteaux, who had moved into the Red River district to work for the HBC, meant that if they were to escape being designated to “sitting on the porch” while the Cree and Métis buffalo hunters were out enjoying the hunt, they had little choice but to accommodate to Plains Cree dialect and lifestyle. Essentially, the Plains Cree demanded that anyone wanting to “run with the big dogs” (the buffalo hunters) converse in their dialect.

During the hiatus of the Plains Indian wars, the fur trade and the trade in buffalo hides on the Northern Plains, the Plains Cree and the Assiniboin continued to be allies. During the Canadian Plains Reservation period (late 1870 and early 1880s), several Plains Cree and Assiniboin bands were placed on the same reserve or very near to each other. In cases where these two cultures were placed together such as on the Mosquito Reserve in Saskatchewan, and the Alexander Reserve and the Paul Band in Alberta, the Plains Cree language remained the predominant language.

The question, which still remains to be answered, is who were the Plains Cree and where did they come from?

Most scholars agree that there are three remaining major linguistics subdivisions among the Western Cree which are distinguished by five dialect differences and four geographical ranges (Russell, 1991:3, Mandelbaum, 1979:11-12, Ellis, 1973:12-13, LeClaire and Cardinal, 1998:xi): the Swampy (James Bay and Northern Manitoba), Plains, Rocky (southern Manitoba) and Woodlands or Thickwoods Cree. The Plains and Wood Cree speak the "Y" dialect, the Swampy Cree the "N" dialect, and the Rocky Cree speak the "TH" dialect. A now extinct Athapascan Cree group spoke an "R" dialect (Russell, 1991:3, LeClaire and Cardinal, 1998:XI). Douglas Ellis, however, in *Spoken Cree* (1973:13) claims that all of the Cree in Alberta speak the "Y" dialect.

The most recent Cree dictionary, *Alberta Elder's Cree Dictionary* by Nancy LeClaire and George Cardinal (1999) (Plains and Woodlands Cree speakers), identifies the Northern Cree (Woodlands) as speaking the "TH" dialect, the Plains Cree as speaking the "Y" dialect, and Saskatchewan and Manitoba Cree as "R" dialect. Who better than to identify a dialect than two Cree linguists!

Having lived and taught school on reserves and in Métis communities in central, western and northern Alberta from 1978 to 1989, I can attest to the fact that there are a number of variations within the dialect groups mentioned above. As a case in point, the Plains Cree spoken at Muskwachees is slightly different from that spoken two hours north by the Plains Cree at Alexander Reserve. The Alexander community has been strongly influenced by intermarriage with the Assiniboin from the Duffield and Alexis Reserves, about 50 km away. The Cree spoken at Nose Creek, five hours north of Alexander, has been strongly influenced by the Mohawk who moved into western Alberta (Grand Cache area) during the fur trade period and intermarried with the Cree in that area. The Cree spoken at Jean D'Or Prairie and Lac La Biche is said to be Woodlands Cree, yet they are different in dialect from each other and from the previously mentioned communities. Cree language and customs varies considerably throughout Alberta.

Today, of course, due to the establishment of the reserve system and the dramatic scattering of the Plains Cree and Métis following the 1885 Resistance or "Rebellion", the Plains Cree dialect is found on the Northern Plains in the provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, as well as in the States of Montana and North Dakota; in the Parkland and Woodland regions of Alberta and Saskatchewan; in the Rocky Mountains at Rocky Mountain House, Grand Cache, Horse Lake, and Robb, Alberta; near Fort St. John and Kelly Lake, B.C.; and in the Northwest Territories. Several of these Cree communities speak a combination of Saulteaux-Cree, Assiniboin-Cree, Mohawk-Cree, Chipewyan-Cree and Mechif (a Métis/Cree/Chippewa/Dakota dialect).

It is not difficult to imagine, therefore, that travelers and explorers with the Hudson Bay Company who encountered the Cree, were confused as to who these Cree really were. The major difficulty lies in trying to understand which group of Cree

historic records and journals from missionaries, fur traders, clerks of the HBC, and explorers are referring to when they write about encounters with the Cree. First of all, writers rarely identified, the Cree who they encountered by their linguistic or geographical group. Furthermore, no linguistic data exists for the Plains Cree during the early 1700's, as Russell (1991), points out:

First, there are no linguistic data for the inland areas from the 1700's that could serve to delineate dialect boundaries and locations. Where later data might suggest shifts in such boundaries, it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine if apparent dialect differences in the same locality are a result of shifts of population, changes in dialect, or, simply, errors on the part of various observers. For example, in the York Factory areas, seventeenth century French writers recorded Cree words using /l/ and /r/ forms (Jeremie, 1926:22; La Potherie, 1968:262-264) whereas eighteenth century HBC personnel used /th/ (Graham 1969:207-209; Isham 1949:5-64) and more recent writers use /n/ (Michelson 1936:686; Trudeau 1966:14,16) (Russell, 1991:3).

In his book *The Plains Cree*, Milloy points out that the period between 1790 – 1870 was:

the period the Cree people became a nation of the Plains amid other tribal nations identifying their interests and employing the tools of trade, diplomacy and war to serve them...the full span of relevant history begins not only when the Cree's Woodland ancestors adopted a plains way of life in the 1790's...It was the fur trade, and perhaps the concomitant spread of European disease, which was the key dynamic of the Woodland Cree's migration into the parkland and plains region (1988: xiv).

Milloy's theory is problematic. As noted earlier, Ives (2002) is suggesting that there is evidence that the Cree and Assiniboin were on the Canadian Plains as early as c1200 and 1300. These people were not living off gophers during this time; they were on the plains, where buffalo was plentiful. Cree are believed to have acquired horses by the mid-1700s, and likely became well-established equestrian hunters and warriors within a very short period after acquiring the horse. However, Milloy does point out that a Cree-Blackfoot

alliance began to take shape as early as 1730 (xv) and that by 1690 the Cree and Assiniboin, associated with York Factory had expanded inland and were involved in what was to become a permanent pattern, the exploitation of the Plains area (1988:6).

Saukamoppee, a Cree was living with his family and their band on the Saskatchewan River close to Blackfoot country...He along with 20 Cree volunteered to aid the Blackfoot to war against the Snake (Shoshone) ...reported by Henry Kelsey, 1692 (Milloy, 7)

In having spoken with several linguists, a question that seems nearly impossible to have answered is, "How many years does it take for a dialect change to take effect?" Were the Plains Cree at one time Swampy or Woodlands Cree who had moved onto the Plains as early as 1200? If so, how long did it take for them to develop a distinct dialect? Could the Plains Cree have been living in the Rocky Mountain area and have remained unknown until Kelsey and Alexander Henday's time? Henday was an employee with the Hudson Bay Company. He was the first European to write about the Blackfoot or Gros Ventre in the mid to late 1750s. The fact that a Plains Cree culture was not known to exist prior to the arrival of the HBC in the west does not imply that they did not already exist. Once they were on the Plains there is no reason why they may not have traveled to the Rocky Mountains or to points south. Modern day Blackfoot speak of their traditional trading routes taking them as far south as Mexico (Pard, 2000).

### **TRYING TO IDENTIFY THE NEHIYAW**

There have been five major ethnographies and histories published on the Plains Cree over the past 60 years. The first was produced by David Mendelbaum, in 1940. Mendelbaum's doctoral dissertation, which was later published as *The Plains Cree*, took the form of an ethnographic, historical and comparative study of the Canadian Plains Cree, their allies, neighbors and enemies. In 1962 Verne Dusenberry published a second

major work on the Plains Cree, entitled *Montana Cree: A study in Religious Persistence*. In 1979 Joseph P Dion's (1888-1960) manuscript, *My Tribe The Cree*, published posthumously, relates the history of his people, the Plains Cree, as he heard it and experienced it. In the early 1990's Dale Russell's book *Eighteenth-Century Western Cree and their Neighbours* disputed the established theories on the movement of the Eastern Woodland Cree beyond Lake Winnipeg following the expansion of the HBC. John S. Milloy's (1988) work, *The Plains Cree Trade Diplomacy and War, 1790 - 1870*, examines the relationship and alliances the Plains Cree had with their neighbors in relation to trade and war. Despite the fact that they are not ethnographies, Blair Stonechild and Bill Waiser's book *Loyal til Death: Indians and the North-West Rebellion* (1997), which examines the Plains Indian version of the North-West Rebellion, deserves mention, as does Deanna Christensen's book *Ahtahkakoop* (2000), which tells of the important Cree leader "Starblanket" and provides information on the culture, society and economy of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Plains Cree life.

## **THE HISTORIC NEHIYAW OF MUSKWACHEES**

At the signing of Treaty 6 the Plains Cree community residing near Muskwachees was referred to as the "Tail Creek Cree", after the North West Mounted Police post on nearby Tail Creek. Although the community was recognized as being primarily of Plains Cree origin, it also had people of Woodlands Cree, Métis, Assiniboin and Saulteaux origins who had either married or been adopted into the community. Other individuals or families simply chose to travel with the Tail Creek Cree. Following the establishment of the Samson Reserve, individual families from the above mentioned cultures continued to move into the area, eventually intermarrying with members of the Tail Creek community.

Today the Nehiyaw community at Muskwachees and Pigeon Lake is divided into four communities: Samson Reserve, Ermineskin Reserve, Louis Bull Reserve and Montana Reserve. Pigeon Lake, the traditional hunting and fishing area for the "Four Bands", as they are generally called, is approximately 52 and 80 km, respectively, from the Samson and Ermineskin Reserve town sites. These four reserves or "Four Bands", as they are commonly known surround what was once the town of Hobbema Station.

In the mid-1960's a number of community members of the Muskwachees community longed to return to the days when life was simpler and not as rushed. Chief Robert Smallboy and a community ceremonialist by the name of Lazarus Roan led a group of people to an area at the foot of the Rocky Mountains known as Abraham Plains where they attempted to live off the land. Shortly after their arrival, the community was forced to relocate because the construction of the Abraham Dam. Within the Smallboy encampment was the Makinaw clan. This clan took the opportunity, during the relocation period, to break away from the Smallboy camp and relocate to an area known as Crescent Falls, while the Smallboys moved outside the town of Robb, Alberta. One of the Makinaw's followers, the late Fred Morin (died in the summer of 1980), believed that differences in religious beliefs may have contributed to the split in the "Smallboy" community. According to Mr. Morin, some members of the Makinaw clan were very comfortable worshipping in both the traditional Cree way as well as the Roman Catholic faith, which involved praying with the rosary. The religious leader of the Smallboy camp strongly discouraged such forms of prayer (Morin, 1978). After spending a few years with the Makinaw camp at Crescent Falls, Mr. Morin returned to the Ermineskin Reserve, where he attended and took part in numerous Cree religious ceremonies and would, whenever possible, attend the Catholic Church services.

The "Four Bands", at Muskwachees surround the old town-site of Hobbema Station, now known as Hobbema. At one time Hobbema served as an important railway station and grain station for the reserve. The Elevator Station manager lived in town as did a few merchants and several Métis and non-Native families. Over the past 20 years, the Samson and Ermineskin Bands have purchased most of the real estate in the Hobbema town-site as it become available. Only a few non-Native residents remain in

the old town-site. Today a few homes, and a few convenience stores are all that remain of Hobbema. Residents of the Cree community at Pigeon Lake are enrolled members of one of the Four Bands. There are also community members from the Four Bands who reside at Smallboy's Camp near Robb, Alberta, although this is not reserve land. According to the Department of Indian and Northern Development analysis of the 1998 census and the Statistics Canada March of 2001 census, the total population of the Four Bands, including those living off reserve, is about 10,274. Results from the 2001 census provide statistics for only three of the Reserves as Ermineskin Reserve did not participate in the census. The total population of Muskawchees (Samson, Louis Bull and Montana Reserves) for 2001 is identified as 8,852 (Statistics Canada, 2002). It should be noted however that the 1998 statistics and the 2001 statistics only account for Registered (Treaty) Band members. There are many people living in the community who are not registered band members. Non-registered community members may include spouses, children from other marriages, in-laws, and relatives of Band members. Many community members believe that the Four Bands' true residency population is closer to 15,000 or 16,000. By Alberta standards, communities this large would qualify for city status; however community politics has not allowed for this transition to take place.

## **THE EARLY RESERVATION PERIOD**

There is very little information about the Tail Creek Cree prior to their signing of Treaty 6 in 1876. Harvey Buffalo (Buffalo, 2000), from the Samson Band Archives related the story that the elders in the community believe that Maskapatoon, who lead the Tail Creek Cree prior to his death in 1869 at the hands of two Blackfoot, was a very strong and influential person. He was responsible for arranging for the Reverend George McDougal to establish a Methodist church in central Alberta (Samson Band, 1986:2).

The territory of the Tail Creek Cree prior to the signing of treaty extended from Pigeon Lake, to Gull Lake to Buffalo Lake and to Dried Meat Lake. Following Maskapatoon's death the community became weaker and the leadership suffered.

One version of oral tradition in the Muskwachees community identifies Chief Bobtail as the son of a Cree woman and a former fur trader/ trapper who spoke Cree, French and English. There are several conflicting oral histories in the four communities that relate how Bobtail was chosen by the Treaty Commissioner to sign treaty because he spoke three very important languages. One such tradition relates that Bobtail, who was in fact the brother-in-law of Samson, was the community's leader at the time of the signing of Treaty 6. In any case, in 1877 Bobtail signed an Adhesion to Treaty 6 at Blackfoot Crossing. At that time Bobtail's Band of Tail Creek Cree was given land at what became Hobbema Station. The reserve came to be known as Bobtail Reserve. In 1878 Samson and his followers left Bobtail's Band to form their own band and Samson's Band was created. A year later another of Bobtail's headmen by the name of Tommy Lapotack and 38 followers from Bobtail's Reserve separated and moved to establish their own band near Enoch, situated about 65 km south-west of Edmonton. Another of Bobtail's members by the name of Meminowataw (The Kind One) also left that year along with his group of followers and received annuities as a separate group. Ermineskin and his followers also broke from the Bobtail group. So, in 1879 the Tail Creek Cree had formed five distinct bands, one each under Bobtail, Samson, Ermineskin, Meminowatan, and Enoch. In 1880, one-third of the Ermineskin Band population vacated under the headman Noah Muddy Bull to form their own Band. Three major developments occurred in the organization of the Bobtail Band that year:

- 1) The size of Bobtail's Band population decreased considerably (71 members

took payment with the "north Cree Little Pine" Band at Fort Walsh, Saskatchewan.

2) Meminowataw's (one of Bobtail's two headmen) group merged with the Edmonton stragglers, who lived in the area of the city known today as Millwoods, under brothers Enoch and Tommy Lapotack and remained with them. The Stony Plains Reserve, known as Enoch Reserve, is named after Enoch Lapotack.

3) One third of Ermineskin's band formed their own Band under the leadership of Noah Muddy Bull (Muddy and his followers moved to Pigeon Lake where they resided until they received their own reserve).

| year | Bobtail | Memino-<br>wataw | Tail<br>Creek | Ermine-<br>skin | Samson | Enoch | Louis<br>Bull |
|------|---------|------------------|---------------|-----------------|--------|-------|---------------|
| 1877 | 432     |                  |               |                 |        |       |               |
| 1878 | 349     | 164              | 265           |                 |        |       |               |
| 1879 | 293     | 248              |               | 184             | 191    | 165   |               |
| 1880 | 85      |                  |               | 132             | 163    | 389   | 59            |
| 1881 | 85      |                  |               | 145             | 172    | 414   | 65            |

Population chart for Southern Alberta Plains Cree 1887 to 1881 (DIAND, McGuire, Ermineskin 138, file 1, Tail Cree Indians, document)

On July 8, 1896 the Hobbema Agency was granted, by Order of Council and the Privy Council 2471, the establishment of a fishing station at Pigeon Lake (DIAND, McGuire, Montana Reserve 139, Reserve Lands File).

On June 12, 1909 Montana Band was created:

The Montana Band comprised 150 refugee Indians led by Little Bear from the United States in 1896. Little Bear a son of Big Bear and most of the others had fled from Canada shortly after the Rebellion of 1885. In 1886 these Indians settled on the vacated Bobtail Reserve No. 139. On June 12, 1909 remaining members of the old Bobtail Band surrendered for sale IR No 139, on the condition having been that approximately 10 sq. miles of the reserve be allocated to the Montana Band. This surrender was accepted by O/C PC 1674 on 29 July 1909, and

on Plan T2615 Surveyor McLean showed Montana Band's Reserve to be 6,980.3 acres (DIAND, McGuire, Montana Reserve 139, Reserve Lands File).

Finally on August 24, 1909 Wilfred Laurier acknowledged the surrender made on Aug. 17th, 1909, Louis Bull Band No. 138B creating Louis Bull Band, severed from Ermineskin Reserve, surrendering for sale 5,800 acres including lake beds (DIAND, McGuire, Ermineskin 138, file 2)

## THE MODERN RESERVE

Census records from 1998, 1999, and 2001 provide the following enrollment statistics for each of the four reserves:

|  |      |
|--|------|
| The Samson Reserve is the largest of the four Bands at approximately 13552 hectares. |      |
| Registered Males on own reserve  | 2395 |
| Registered females on own reserve  | 2424 |
| Registered males residing on other reserves  | 77   |
| Registered females residing on other reserves  | 92   |
| Registered male on own crown land  | 0    |
| Registered female on own crown land  | 1    |
| Registered Male on No Band Crown Land  | 3    |
| Registered Female on No Band Crown land  | 2    |
| Registered males residing off reserve  | 433  |
| Registered females residing off reserve  | 462  |
| Total population   | 5889 |

Samson Reserve Population statistics by male and female. (Statistics Canada Edmonton, fax April 17, 2002)

The Ermineskin Reserve is the second largest community at approximately 10295.8 hectares.

|   |      |
|---|------|
| Total males                                   | 1337 |
| Registered Males on reserve                   | 1000 |
| Total females                                 | 1439 |
| Registered females on reserve                 | 1021 |
| Registered males residing on other reserves   | 66   |
| Registered females residing on other reserves | 64   |
| Registered males residing off reserve         | 214  |
| Registered females residing off reserve       | 284  |
| Registered members living on Crown Land       | 127  |
| Total population                              | 2776 |

Ermineskin Reserve Population Statistics by male and female. The Ermineskin Reserve did not take participate in the 2001 statistics. (Statistics Canada census compiled with data taken from DIAND, March 1999)

The Louis Bull Reserve is the third largest reserve at approximately 3388.1 hectares. (Population census 1999)

|   |      |
|---|------|
| Registered Males on own reserve               | 576  |
| Registered Females on own reserve             | 563  |
| Registered Males on other reserves            | 56   |
| Registered females on other reserves          | 91   |
| Registered males residing on own Crown Land   | 5    |
| Registered females residing on own Crown Land | 5    |
| Registered female on no Crown Land            | 1    |
| Registered males residing off reserve         | 103  |
| Registered females residing off reserve       | 140  |
| Total population                              | 1540 |

Louis Bull Reserve Population statistics by male and female. (Statistics Canada Edmonton, fax April 17, 2002)

The Montana Reserve is the smallest of the Four Bands at approximately 2824.8 hectares.

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Registered Males                                | 346 |
| Registered Males on reserve                     | 229 |
| Registered females                              | 346 |
| Registered females on reserve                   | 237 |
| Registered males residing on other reserves     | 29  |
| Registered females residing on other reserves   | 31  |
| Registered males residing off reserve           | 88  |
| Registered females residing off reserve         | 78  |
| Registered members living in other arrangements | 0   |
| Total population                                | 692 |

Montana Reserve Population Statistics by male and female. (Statistics Canada census compiled with data taken from DIAND, March 1999)

## THE CONTEMPORARY MUSKWACHEES NEHIYAW

Although it is important to identify where the Tail Creek Cree at Muskweches came from, the main purpose of this section is to examine who the Plains Cree of Muskweches are today.

It would be a gross misunderstanding to assume that the population of Muskweches is made up exclusively of individuals who came from and have lived in the Bear Hill all their lives. The vast majority of individuals are descended from people who did so; however, there are a number of prominent families in the community who are of Anishnaabe (Ojibwa or Saulteaux), Nakota (Assiniboine/Stoney), Niisitapiikwan (Blackfoot), Woodlands Cree, Dene (including Tsuu T'ina, or Sarcee), and Métis origin. Today, Community members have spouses who are from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities across Canada, the United States, Europe, South America, and Mexico. The Four Bands at Muskweches have truly become international communities. Since the early 1960's, when Band members were no longer required to apply for permits to leave the reserve, many of the Cree at Muskweches have travelled throughout North America and the world. Over the past thirty years modern technology has not only

brought the world to the four Bands but presented the Four Bands to people across the world. The community has its own television and radio station which broadcast as Cree TV and Cree Radio.

For almost forty years the Nehiyaw at Muskwachees have enjoyed the benefits brought about by their land being situated over some of the richest oil fields in Canada. The revenues generated by the oil and gas wells have been both a blessing and a curse. Oil and gas revenues have made it possible for the communities to purchase surrounding lands that had been lost over the years to European expansion. The four communities have also been able to invest in real estate and hundreds of other economic development projects throughout North America. For the most part the quality of life, and community housing have improved since the 1960s, and individuals have been able to invest some of their share of oil and gas revenues into building larger and more adequate homes. Each community enjoys its own sports and recreation facilities and band police or RMCP stationed in the community along with health service facilities, and modern and spacious schools. The four communities are also serviced by a local fire department and ambulance service. The revenues obtained from oil and gas have contributed in some respect to an increase in drug, alcohol, and gambling addiction. Over the past 30 years many programs have been put in place to assist community members in combating these problems, some of which have been very successful. In the early 1970's when the community was approaching the peak of oil and gas royalty payments, the Bands were not allowed by (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada) INAC to invest their resources in education nor economic development. These laws however, have since been changed.

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

In the early 1970s the Louis Bull Reserve led the way in industrial development among the four bands by building the Louis Bull Reserve Drapery (factory). At about the same time the Samson Reserve established a furniture manufacturing company. Although it was always part of the “grand plan” of the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs ( INAC) for Aboriginal communities to become self-sufficient farming and later ranching communities, it was only during the late 1960's and early 1970's that the four communities began establishing successful farm and ranch operations. The Four Bands, as well as the individual bands, built multi-million dollar recreation facilities beginning in the early 1980's. The first of these projects was the Panee Memorial Agriplex, an indoor/outdoor rodeo / multi-purpose complex with a Class B race track facility built by the Ermineskin Band. Samson Band then built the Howard Buffalo Memorial Centre, a multi-use sports-plex. The Montana Band followed by building their own multi-million dollar rodeo arena and feedlot, the Diamond 5 Ranch and Arena. During the early 1970s, all Four Bands began investing in real estate across Canada and the United States. The Louis Bull Band owned several Wendy's fast food franchises for several years during the 1990s.

The Samson and Ermineskin Bands became very aggressive in their economic development ventures in the mid to late 1970's. In 1979 the Ermineskin Band opened the Muskwachees Mall, and in the same year, the Samson Band succeeded in establishing the first Native owned and operated trust company in Canada, Peace Hills Trust, which

opened its first Branch in the Muskawchees Mall in 1979. Today, Peace Hills Trust, Peace Hills Insurance, and PARCAN have branches across Canada.

The Four Bands have had their own police, fire and ambulance departments since the mid to late 1970's. Some of the communities have had their own Tribal Police departments since the early 1980's, while others continue to contract policing services to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Since 2002, only the Louis Bull reserve has had its own police force. A permanent RCMP detachment is situated in the old town site of Hobbema and services the Samson, Ermineskin and Montana Reserves. Each community has new elementary and secondary schools and there is a College which offers undergraduate courses in the community.

Native arts and craft industry has also been a source of revenue for individuals and Band owned operations over the years. The Ermineskin Arts and Crafts has been in operation for over 25 years. Over the years the other three reserves also operated their own arts and crafts operations, some specializing in the popular star quilts and others in moccasins and tipis.

Today numerous businesses can also be found in the community, including Cree T.V., grocery stores, service stations, confectionery stores, restaurants, day care centers, western shops, sports and western wear shops, a Pendleton Blanket store, Aboriginal lawyers' offices, pool halls, laundromats, a stationary store, numerous video stores, private stock breeding operations, horse training facilities, outfitting, guiding, and numerous other private enterprises.

Over the past 30 years each community has built itself a new band office, day care centers, and schools. A few of the communities have also built an elder's center and a

nursing care facility. Samson Reserve is the first community to build a Correctional Centre on the reserve.

## **THE EARLY MISSIONARIES**

The history of Hobbema cannot be discussed without examining the presence of Christian missionaries in the community. The first missionaries to enter the Muskwachees area were Methodists who settled in the area around 1840 and established a mission at Pigeon Lake. In 1881 the Roman Catholic missionaries the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, opened their first mission in Hobbema. The Sisters of the Assumption followed shortly afterwards. In the same year, a second Methodist mission was established on the Samson Reserve by Reverend Glass (Samson Band, 1989). Over the years a number of Christian and non-Christian missions were established: the United Church, the Traditional Catholic Church (the Latin rite), Full Gospel Church, Cowboy Church, Seventh Day Adventist, the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints (Mormons), and Ba'hai, to name the major institutions. There are also factional differences in the community among those who choose to follow traditional Nehiyaw or Cree beliefs, adherents of the Native American Church, and individuals who follow both Christian and traditional beliefs.

## **KINSHIP**

In his brief examination of Plains Cree kinship, Mandelbaum (1940) *The Plains Cree*, Mandelbaum describes the dominant classificatory principle as "cross cousin marriage". He points out that this type of relationship was not commonly practiced. In an interview with A. Littlechild (Feb. 2000), she confirmed that this type of marriage arrangement takes place (she knows of two of her relations who are married under such

circumstances) but that it is very uncommon and frowned upon today. In order for this arrangement or a parallel cousin marriage to take place, the couple must carry with them "medicine protection", as such a close bond is said to be very powerful.

Mandelbaum is silent on the subject of patrilocal vs. matrilocal residence and patrilineal vs. matrilineal descent in speaking of the Plains Cree. In discussions about band leadership over the years, it has been explained to me that families or clans traveled together, following leaders they respected. However individuals or families were free to leave and follow another leader if they wished. It was not uncommon for individuals to break away from the community and start their own band, as was evident in the development of the Bobtail, Samson, Louis Bull, Enoch, Pigeon Lake, Makinaw, and Smallboy communities.

Many kinship traditions were changed among the Plains Cree because of the impact of the Indian Act. A woman automatically became a "registered band member" of her husband's band. If a couple were not able to secure their own home the couple would generally reside with the man's family. However, the impact which oil and gas royalty payments had on families and individuals meant that a couple might choose to live as an unmarried couple and reside in the community that "paid out" the highest monthly oil royalties. In the case of an unmarried couple, the children are registered as band members of the mother's band. During the 1980's some of the Band members at Muskwachees received between \$500 - \$700 a month per person in oil royalty payments, with some communities creating "special pay" days 2 or 3 times a year of up to one thousand dollars. The economic advantage alone was justification enough to abandon any form of traditional protocol as it related to residency.

Same-sex couple relationships are not well accepted by the culture. According to A. Littlechild (Feb 2000), there does not seem to be any kinship terms for these unions, nor is there acceptance of the partner's family members as kin. This does not mean that a same-sex couple's families do not accept the situation and acknowledge the arrangement as a union. Some families do, but generally this is not the case.

Mandelbaum (1979:126) does mention the observance of strict mother-in-law avoidance / father-in-law avoidance by both the husband and wife. A man's sister could not speak to his father-in-law, although she could speak to his mother-in-law. A woman's brother might not speak either to her mother-in-law or to her father-in-law. I observed this form of respect still being practiced among some families in the early 1980's but am unaware whether the practice is carried out today. Victor Buffalo pointed out that today's children are not being taught this aspect of their culture (Buffalo, V., 2004)

One practice that Mandelbaum briefly mentions, that is frequently practiced among the Plains Cree, as well as many Plains cultures, is the adoption of individuals to replace a family member who has died (1979:127). Although I have often heard people say that a particular person was adopted because they resembled the family member who had died, this is not always the case. Sometimes the adopted person had been a close friend of the family, or may have been a close friend of the family member who had died. It is not entirely clear as to the role this person plays within the kinship system. They are certainly "adopted" in the true sense, though not legally. They are regarded as a "son", "brother", "sister", "grandson", "grandparent", "uncle" "aunt" etc. Although some do assist financially in supporting a family sponsored activity, such as a feast or memorial event, it does not seem that they are expected to do this. "I believe the purpose for the adoption is to function as a mutual support system. An old woman that has lost her grandson or granddaughter needs someone to assist her in her old age. The one being

adopted needs a grandparent for spiritual, moral and emotional support (Buffalo, V., 2000).”

I have also concluded that part of the responsibility of the adopted one is to ensure that the one(s) who has (have) adopted them is (are) not forgotten in the afterlife. The souls of the dead require constant attention. Adopting someone to replace a family member who has died is one good way of insuring that he or she, and all of their relations who have passed on before them, are cared for in the afterlife.

## **CONCLUSION**

This chapter has examined the question of who the Plains Nehiyaw people were and who they are today. The focus in this first chapter has been the four main Nehiyaw communities at Muskwachees or Hobbema and at Pigeon Lake, the communities of concern for this thesis. I have examined their history and their beginnings as one community and their separation into four reserves including the communities at Pigeon Lake, Buck Lake, Smallboy’s Camp and Makinaw’s Camp. I have also briefly examined the kinship system in the community.

The following chapter will examine the history of the Christian and non-Christian denominations that have established themselves in Muskwachees, the manner in which they came into the community, their struggle for land and political domination in the communities, and the role they played historically in providing education and religious instruction in the community.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN AND NON-CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS IN MUSKWACHEES**



**Carrying the Casket**

Ken Swan

Plains Cree

ID 306778 Departments of Indian Affairs Collection, Gatineau, Quebec.

Courtesy of The Department of Indian Affairs

## **THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN AND NON-CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS IN MUSKWACHEES**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Chapter 1 defined the Plains Cree. It also introduced the Muskwachees community and explored its history and early settlement as a community that quickly splintered into five distinct communities: the Samson, Ermineskin, Louis Bull and Montana Reserves and Pigeon Lake community.

This chapter will explore the history of the various Christian and non-Christian denominations which have established themselves prior to and at one time or another since the early Reservation Period. An important factor in this chapter is the time and energy missionaries spent fighting amongst each other, arguing over the appropriation of land and the need to “construct” permanent structures, while the Aboriginal people in the community were starving and in desperate need of clothes. It is not within the scope of this thesis to evaluate the dynamics at play within and among Christian denominations at odds with each other. The point is that the Christian churches were a dynamic enough component in the community during the 1980s for the Catholic Church to employ someone full time to co-ordinate funerals and wakes, and to support 13 religious denominations. The Christian churches were fighting a battle to maintain their members as people were moving back and forth between denominations and in some cases joining non-Christian congregations. Obviously the spiritual needs of the community were not being met as people were searching for the denomination which would provide food and clothes as well as spiritual guidance.

The Cree community at Muskwachees is unique in many respects. It is the largest Plains Cree community in the country. By Alberta's standards the community's population is nearing the size required to qualify for city status. The four bands at Muskwachees have seen many lean years particularly during the early reservation years and the "Dirty Thirties". Aboriginal people, men in general, who returned from the Second World War returned home as to face difficult realities: they had fought for a country that did not recognize them as citizens, and because of their Indian status they were not entitled to the land grants that Canadian soldiers received.

Following changes to the Indian Act in 1951, life began to improve for Aboriginal people in Canada but during the early 1960s many Plains communities suffered economically and emotionally, due to their change in status from being wards of the government to becoming full Canadian citizens (see Dickason, 304-314). By 1970 Native people had won the right to drink in public. The new independence allowed them the freedom to move freely throughout the country and to practice their traditional customs and ceremonies without harassment from the police, Indian Agents and missionaries. It also presented them the opportunity to organize politically. But job opportunities were scarce in town. People were very poor for the most part in the 1950s and 60s. With the discovery of oil on reserve land and the distribution of oil royalties, the social fabric of the community began to change rapidly particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, for the Four Band communities particularly in the area of economic, social and political development were concerned. The community's geographic size and

population always made it a magnet for Christian and non-Christian denominations hoping to win converts and save souls. There was a period during the 1980s when thirteen different denominations had churches or meeting halls among the four communities. The Roman Catholic and Methodist churches were very powerful forces in the community and, like the education system, the agenda was to eradicate traditional Cree religion and save the "soul" at the cost of losing "the body". Conversion and baptism were the agenda of the day.

With the arrival of John West, in Red River, West took the approach that to teach English so he could impart the "Word" in his own to his country born children... the founding principles at Red River were to assimilate Indians throughout many part of Canada: schooling, religion, and agriculture. With the missionaries came the policy of "the Bible and the plough" (Miller,1989, 130-131).

To overlook the presence of these various Christian and non-Christian denominations in Muskwachees is to ignore the powerful presence and influence these denominations had on the community. It has only been less than a decade since the Oblates of Mary Immaculate and the Sisters of Providence closed their missions in Muskwachees after more than 123 years and 122 years respectively. The United and Methodist Churches stopped sponsoring ministers to live "on site" shortly after the Catholic Church closed its mission. It has essentially been since this time that the revival of traditional Cree burials has become popular. Many families continue to use the Christian churches, the Catholic church in particular, when a priest is available as they follow Christian philosophy along with their own traditional beliefs. On record, the Roman Catholic denomination still has the largest membership in the community, but without a priest in residence participation has diminished greatly.

The intent of this chapter is not to discuss what each denomination allowed or did not allow to take place at funeral rites in terms of traditional Cree belief and practice. although this will be mentioned briefly at the end of the chapter. The main intention is to examine the history and establishment of the various Christian and non-Christian communities at Muskweches and to point out the struggles each denomination faced, particularly in their dealings with Indian Agents, who quite often suspected scheming on the part of clergy and ministers. Some Band Councilors supported more than one denomination's application to establish themselves on the reserve, particularly if they supplied the community with free meals and clothing for attending services when money was scarce and people in the community were starving. Emphasis will be placed on the largest of the Christian communities, namely the Roman Catholic, Methodist/United Church, and Baptist Churches.

Beginning with the early years of the Reservation Period, namely after 1877, missionaries from the Methodist and Roman Catholic faith were invited by prominent leaders of the Muskweches community, particularly Muskepatoon, to establish missions and provide religious instruction to the Muskweches Cree. Eventually these missionary orders also provided academic education and medical care. Muskweches, like every other Aboriginal community in Canada that had resident Christian denominations with opposing theologies, was subjected to the religious wars to gain souls, religious domination and power. This "war for souls" existed in Muskweches between the Methodist Church, and Roman Catholic Church during the early years of the reservation period. By the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century some 13 new Christian and non-Christian denominations

would battle it out for power and domination, while Cree traditionalists would struggle to retain their integrity and culture without being subjected to ridicule and insults from Christian leaders and their own community members who were rapidly subscribing to the new Christian and non-Christian beliefs and theologies. An ironic shift in ideology seems to have taken place within the community regarding traditional beliefs and practices. During the later 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the Christian churches were the visible enemy of the Plains Cree traditionalists and ceremonialists or “keepers of the faith”, while 21<sup>st</sup> Century conflicts come from within the community itself.

Today there are fewer “outside” religious forces at play in Muskwachees. The larger Christian denominations, namely the Catholic, Methodist and United Church missions, no longer hold the power and control in the community as they once did. There are still some Christian ministers and pastors who work in the community but the involvement of Muskwachees Cree with these Christian Churches has greatly diminished over the years. One might say that traditional Cree spiritual beliefs, practices and ceremonies have made a tremendous come-back in recent times, but that would imply that they had completely disappeared, which of course is not the case. It would be more accurate to say that traditional teachings and ceremonies were carried out in private setting during the years when a more powerful Christian presence was felt in the community. Today there is much less inhibition on the part of community members to freely partake in traditional spiritual ceremonies, events and gatherings.

## THE EARLY RESERVE PERIOD 1876

During the early reserve years, the community at Muskwachees is variously referred to in various documents as the Tail Creek Cree, the Bobtail Cree and the Battle River Cree. There is little information on the Tail Creek Cree prior to the signing of Treaty 6 in 1876.

*Harvey Buffalo from the Samson Band Archives related the story that the elders in the community believe that Maskapaton, who led the Tail Creek Cree prior to his death in 1869, was a very strong and influential person. He was responsible for arranging for the Reverend George McDougall, a Methodist missionary, to establish a church in central Alberta (Samson Band, 1986:2). The territory of the Tail Creek Cree prior to the signing of treaty extended from Pigeon Lake, Gull Lake, Buffalo Lake, and Dried Meat Lake. Following Maskapatoon's death the community became weaker and the leadership suffered (H Buffalo, 2000).*

During the three years in which I lived and worked in Muskwachees, I heard several stories of the early arrival of the Catholic missionaries. Some of the stories were told to me again for clarity. Chief Ermineskin and Bobtail's father, Piche, are said to have been responsible for bringing the Catholic missionaries to the Tail Creek Cree. Piche's relatives are believed to come from Terre Bonne, Quebec, near Montreal. According to Victor Buffalo (Buffalo, V., 2002), Piche was thought to have been a land surveyor who came out west to work on the John Palliser Expedition of 1857 – 1860. Clara Wildcat from the Ermineskin Reserve pointed out that some community people believe him to have been Métis (Wildcat, June 2001).

Breton identified Piche's wife as Magdeline Opitaskewis (Breton, 1962:2). Piche and Magdeline had 4 sons, Alexis Kiskayuw (Bobtail), Jean-Baptiste Okisikowiyon (Ermineskin), Louis, and Joseph-Andrew (Breton, 1962:2). It is reported that Piche sent his sons Kiskayuw (Bobtail) and Okisikowiyon (Ermineskin) to St. Boniface to meet the bishop, who was likely Bishop Provencher, to request that missionaries be sent to Piche's clan. While in St. Boniface, Kiskayuw and Okisikowiyon were said to have received instruction in the Catholic religion. Bishop Provencher promised to send Fr. Thibault to the Plains Cree at Muskawchees by the spring. On June 19, 1842, Thibault arrived in Edmonton. Aided by Gabriel Dumont, who would later become famous for his involvement in the Métis Resistance of 1885 and his membership in Buffalo Bill's Wild West traveling show in the years following the 1885 Métis Resistance, Fr. Thibault found the Piche family near the Battle River, in the vicinity of present day Samson Reserve. (The Battle River runs through the Samson and Montana Reserves but is a tributary of the North Saskatchewan River, which runs through central Alberta and Saskatchewan).

There are conflicting stories from the Four Bands regarding the history of their community. One version runs as follows. Ermineskin and Samson Reserves' oral history maintains that because of his fluency in Cree, French, and English, Kiskayuw was chosen by the Treaty Commission to sign the adhesion to Treaty 6 at Blackfoot Crossing. Many members of the Samson community insist that Kiskayuw was not a Chief. Kiskayuw was, however, the brother-in-law of Samson, who the Samson Band claim was the community's leader at the time of the signing of Treaty 6. The Ermineskin community

dismisses this claim and hold that Kiskayuw or Bobtail was in fact the Chief, as it is unlikely that the Commissioner would have dealt with someone who was not chief and leader of the Muskwachees Cree.

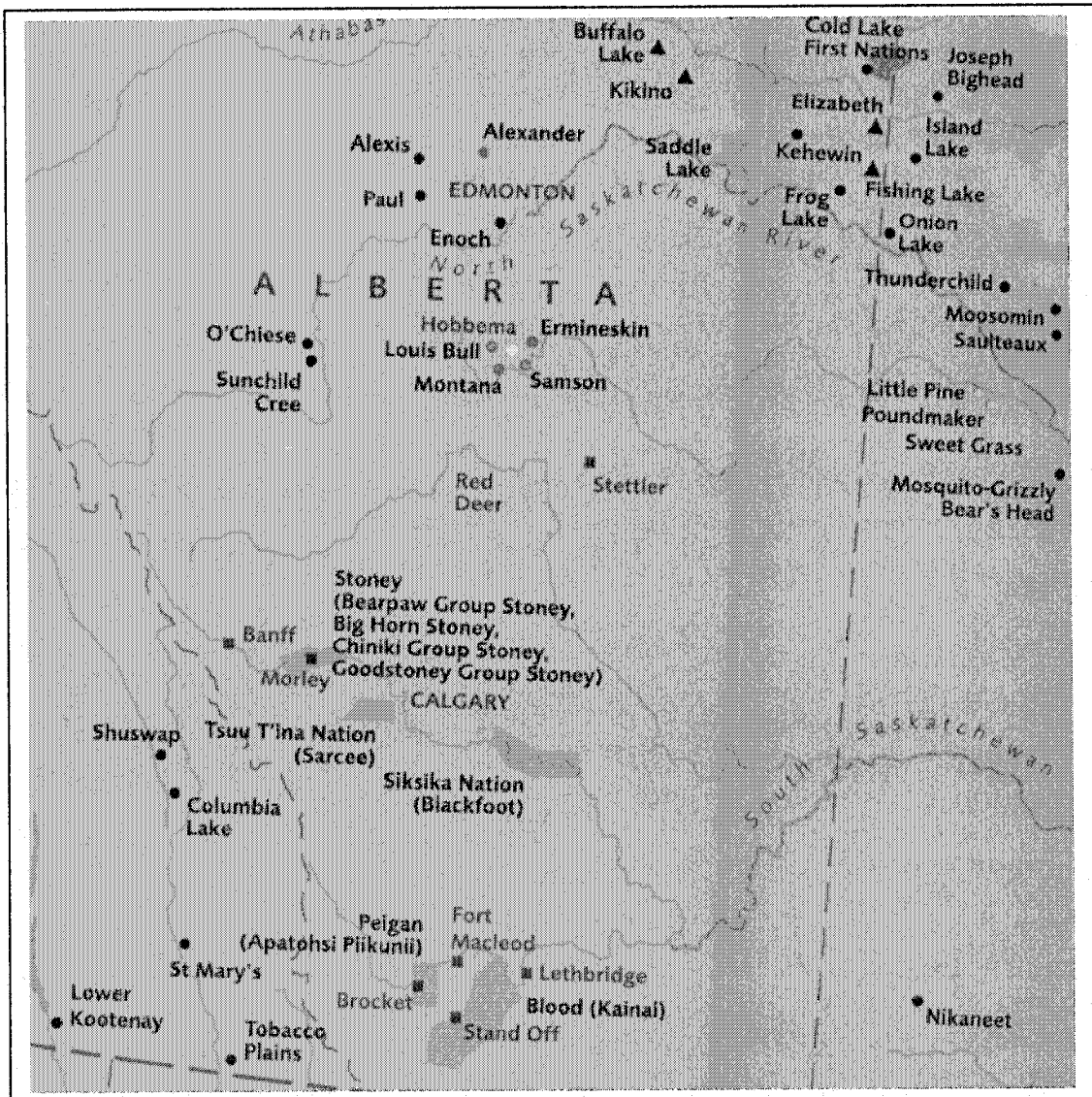
*Ermineskin's (Reserve) oral history points out that the Muskwachees Cree were away hunting when Treaty 6 was signed. The Commissioner invited Bobtail to Blackfoot Crossing the following summer to sign an adhesion in 1877. I don't believe a Federal representative would deal with a Minor Chief when signing a treaty (Wildcat, 2002).*

In any event, it was Kiskayuw (Bobtail) who signed the Adhesion to Treaty 6 at Blackfoot Crossing in 1877. There is no disputing that point. The question is over why he was sent to sign the treaty.

By 1879 the Tail Creek Cree had formed three distinct bands, one each under Samson, Ermineskin, and Enoch. In 1880, one-third of the Ermineskin Band population vacated under the headman Noah Muddy Bull to form their own Band. Bobtail and some of his followers would later take script and surrender the Bobtail Reserve. Three major developments occurred in the organization of the Bobtail Band that year:

1. The size of Bobtail's Band population decreased considerably (71 members took payment with the "North Cree Little Pine" Band at Fort Walsh, Saskatchewan.
2. Meminowataw's (one of Bobtail's two headmen) group merged with Edmonton stragglers under Tommy Lapotack and remained with them (Enoch).
3. One third of Ermineskin's band formed their own Band under the

leadership of Noah Muddy Bull. Muddy Bull and his followers moved to Pigeon Lake where they resided until they received their own reserve, now known as the Louis Bull Reserve (DIAND, McGuire, Ermineskin 138, file 1, Tail Cree Indians, document).



The Four Band Reserves surrounding the village of Hobbema, Alberta. Alexander Poundmaker and Sweetgrass Reserves are also identified. (Map from *Legends of our Times Native Cowboy Life*, Baillargeon and Tepper, 1998:12-13)

In 1877, Bobtail's Band had approximately 432 members. By 1881, their numbers had dropped to 85, with Ermineskin having 145 members, Samson 172 members, Enoch 414 members, and Louis Bull with 65 members (DIAND, McGuire, Ermineskin 138, file 1, Tail Cree Indians, document). On July 8, 1896 the Hobbema Agency was granted, by Order of Council and the Privy Council 2471, the establishment of a fishing station at Pigeon Lake (DIAND, McGuire, Montana Reserve 139, Reserve Lands File). On June 12, 1909, the Montana Band was created. The Montana Band led by Little Bear was made up of about 150 refugee Indians. This band had left the State of Montana, being deported by the United States Government, to Canada in 1896. Little Bear was the son of the famous Plains Ojibwa/Cree leader Big Bear. Big Bear's followers had fled Canada for the United States after the Rebellion or Métis Resistance of 1885. They had found refuge in Great Falls and the hills and mountains of Montana until being rounded up by the United States Army and shipped back to Canada by cattle car. In 1896, Little Bear's people along with Lucky Man's people settled on the former Bobtail Reserve No. 139. *"There were also some members of Bobtail's original band who did not leave but remained in the area. They also moved to the newly formed reserve"* (Wildcat, 2001). On June 12, 1909 remaining members of the old Bobtail Band surrendered for sale Indian Reserve (IR) No 139, on the condition that approximately 10 sq. miles of the reserve be allocated to the Montana Band. This surrender was accepted by O/C PC 1674 on 29 July 1909 and on land T2615 Surveyor McLean showed Montana Band's Reserve to be 6,980.3 acres (DIAND, McGuire, Montana Reserve 139, Reserve Lands File).

## THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH ON THE ERMINESKIN RESERVE

Chief Ermineskin is reported to have had a dream in which he saw a "Blackrobe" pointing his crucifix towards Muskwachees (the Bear Hills). It is because of this dream that he chose the site on which he established his reserve (Breton, 1962:5).

At the request of Chief Bobtail in 1881, Bishop Grandin sent a missionary, Father Bellevaire, to the Tail Creek Cree. Fathers Leduc, Touze, and Bellevaire left St. Albert for the Battle River region and on May 9, 1881, the construction of a permanent dwelling was begun. Father Bellevaire stayed in Hobbema a short while then moved to the Laboucane Camp and Battle River Settlement. However on Nov. 19, 1884, at the request of Chief Bobtail, a permanent Catholic mission was established with Father Scollen and Father Gabillon. Chief Bobtail chose a site in the middle of the reserve where the Catholic church would be built. This, however, was not to be, as the spot where the site had been chosen was soon turned over to Chief Samson's community. The church site was then moved 3 miles onto the Bobtail Reserve (Breton 1962:6-10).

The missionaries in Muskwachees also served the Métis, Cree and Stoney at Pigeon Lake, near Red Deer, and at Buffalo Lake, along with the European Catholic pioneers in the area.

Given the Methodist presence on the Samson Reserve, the Catholic Church was anxious to build a school and in 1887, they did, along with a residence and new chapel.

On August 30, 1894 three nuns joined the RC clergy in Muskwachees to work in the school.

In 1950, a new three-story school was constructed with floors 216 feet long. Nine years later, a sixteen-room pavilion was added. By 1967 there were 630 students at the school and in 1965-66 over 750 (Breton: 28).

Plans for a new, \$89,000 Catholic Church were approved on January 19, 1959. The new church would be built in a hexagonal shape, to resemble a tipi. The church, which soon came to be known as the Tipi Church, could seat 640 people. Father A. Paradis, OMI, was installed as the first parish priest to work out of the new church when it opened in June of 1968. This church would be the site for about 95% of the community's funerals during the late 1970s to mid 1980s.

### **THE BAPTIST CHURCH ON THE MONTANA RESERVE (1946-1948)**

On March 6, 1946, the Reverend Mr. Fred W. Benke, M.D., a missionary, interpreter and bible school teacher from Edmonton, Alberta wrote the Department of Mines and Resources, Indian Affairs branch in Ottawa, through the Indian Agent, Mr. Pugh of Hobbema, Alberta, requesting that the Department "sanction the erection of a mission House or Church on the Bobtail Reserve [Montana Reserve], in Hobbema" (Benke, October 24, 1946). Fred Benke's argument for the establishment of a church was based upon the request of Chief John Bear and his people to Fred Benke: "*It was*

*especially the pagan group of the reserve that requested us to come in and do the mission work*" (Benke, Oct. 24, 1946).

Fred Benke also pointed out in his letter to his superintendent at the ministry headquarters, that The North American Baptist Missionary Society (whose headquarters were in Illinois) had already been working in the community for some time and had noticed tremendous lessening in the people's "backwardness." The letter also indicated that the "Indians" in the reserve had agreed to set land aside for the purpose of the church and to provide the logs with which to build it (Benke, Oct. 24, 1946).

The Superintendent of Reserves and Trust, D. J. Allan, replied to the Reverend Benke through Agent W. P. B. Pugh, and Rev. Benke advised under separate letter of the same.

It has always been the Department's policy to afford every facility for the promulgation of religious instruction among the Indians provided the Indians desire such instruction and the activities of the denomination seeking permission to do missionary work on a reserve do not interfere with any established congregation or other denomination or stir up anything in the nature of rivalry between denominations (Allan, Nov. 20, 1946: 1).

Allan explained that permission would be granted for the North American Baptist Missionary society to build a mission house and conduct services provided the Band council passed a resolution recommending the project (Allan, Nov. 20, 1946:1). Two methods for granting permission to church authorities were discussed. One method was by a surrender of a portion of land by the Band, then, a lease of the land by the

Missionary Society. The second method was by a permit issued by the superintendent General of Indian Affairs whereby the land was used by a religious denomination during the Superintendent General's pleasure. In either case, a full description of the land was required (Allan, Nov. 20, 1946:1). Allan stated the department's preference to issue a permit for the use of the land.

Within 8 weeks, on January 23, 1947, the Baptist church requested to construct a building to facilitate church services, as well as include a school and the land on which on build them. However, the project was delayed until Benke could produce a Band Council Resolution, asking the Minister of Indian Affairs to designate lands to the Baptist Church. The reason why Chief Bear was anxious for this denomination to establish themselves in the community soon became clear:

...there are no other permanent missionaries, neither Catholic nor Protestant who are taking time to minister to the community. Although some of the Catholic priests from the school are visiting the Catholic community on the Montana Reserve on weekends. During this period, there is no bridge across the Battle River, connecting the Montana Reserve and the Samson Reserve. Any missionaries visiting the community would have to enter the reserve via the town of Ponoka, or cross the river during freeze up or when the water levels were low. Considering the main Catholic Mission is at Ermineskin only 12 Km away, and Ponoka mission about 8 Km away, the Baptist missionaries are traveling over 100km, from Edmonton, to minister to the Montana Reserve community. It eventually becomes clear that what Chief Bear wants is for the children on the reserve to learn to read and write English (B. F. Neary, Superintendent of Welfare and Training Jan 27, 1947: 1-3).

On February 11, 1947, the Chief and Principal Men of the Montana Band passed a Band Council Resolution granting the request of the North American Baptist General Missionary Society, Inc to obtain land on the reserve (Montana Band Council Resolution,

Feb. 11,1947). By July of 1947, the Rev. Benke had ordered material for the construction of the mission church and a trailer had been moved onto the reserve out of which two missionary women were work. Within a month, Rev. Benke had also managed to acquire permission from G. H. Gooderham, the Inspector of Indian Agencies, Alberta Inspectorate in Calgary, to recommend to Ottawa that a Mission Hall, living quarters, and Mission House also be approved. On August 27, 1947, the Deputy Minister of Mines and Resources, Inspector Gooderham granted permission to the Baptist missionary Society of Edmonton to build a church. (Inspector Gooderham, Deputy Minister of Mines and Resources, Aug 27, 1947, 4112-2 Baptist: 1). On February 19, 1948, the letter of permission was changed to read "North American Baptist General Missionary Society, Inc" (Deputy Minister of Mines and Resources, H. L. Keenleyside, Feb. 19, 1948:1).

Through a Band Council Resolution dated July 18, 1972 the Montana Band requested that a permit be issued to the Northern Canada Evangical Mission to use the area previously used by the North American Baptist General Mission society for church purposes for a period of five years. It took several months, but by October, the NABGM society agreed that their existing permit be cancelled and a new permit be issued to the NCEM for a period of five years. There had been some discussion at the Band Council level over whether the NABGM had abandoned their church, which led to Council members wanting to void the NABGM permit.

A resolution was put forward on Feb. 8, 1972 to the Montana Band Council pertaining to the transfer of the NABGM Society's permit to operate a church on the Montana Band Reserve to the Northern Canada Evangelical Mission, whose headquarters were in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, for a period of five years. It has been stated that there was no relationship between the two (van de Voort, June 13, 1972). The major issues for discussion over this transfer were the change of land location, whether the two churches were affiliated, and the time limit given to the permit (5 years).

Within three months of the BCR being passed the Band's lawyer Robert Roddick representing Lefstrud, Cunningham, Patrick and Roddick, advised Mr. N. M. McGinnis of the Indian Affairs Department in Edmonton of the Montana's Band's position regarding the transfer of title from one Church society to another and the request for a permit for a new location for the mission. The Band's position was as follows:

a. We do not believe that the consent of the permittee is required in order to cancel this permit. Whenever there is apparent abandoning of facilities it is my opinion that the Band can take whatever steps are necessary to terminate the permit and have the land transferred to the Band.

b. In the present case the Band has not passed a Resolution changing the legal description and will not pass such a Resolution.

c. The Band Council passes the Resolution authorizing this transfer for 5 years. If the five-year provision is not satisfactory to the Churches involved, then it would appear that they have no permit on the reserve at all (Roddick, April 12, 1972:1).

The Band Council Resolution passed July 18, 1972 requested from the Department of Indian Affairs that a permit be issued to the Northern Canada Evangelical Mission to use the area previously used by the North American Baptist General Mission society for

Church purposes for a period of five years. In November of the same year the permit was approved, with conditions that the permit not be transferred or assigned without consent of the Montana Band Council. The contract between the Department of Indian Affairs and the NCEM Society was finally signed on Dec. 21, 1972, (Vergette, Jan. 21, 1972:1-3), and was no doubt a great cause for celebration at the Christmas services which would soon follow.

### **THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH ON THE MONTANA RESERVE (1948)**

Prior to building a permanent structure on the Montana reserve, two Catholic priests served the Catholic community on the Montana Reserve. They were Father Camille Schmidt from 1943-1945, and from 1957-1965, Father Guy Voisin. Both were senior teachers at the Catholic Residential School in Hobbema (Breton, 1962:32). Once the Catholic Church was built it remained in use until 1980, when attendance numbers dropped to six people. Today it sits abandoned and boarded up on an acre of land overlooking the open prairie.

Hot on the heels of the request by the Baptist Church of Edmonton to establish a church, school and community on the Montana Reserve was the Roman Catholic's petition to the Superintendent of the Indian Agency at Hobbema, N. W. Woodsworth. On Monday Jan. 26, 1948 Chief John Bear of the Montana Reserve presented to the Superintendent of Indian Affairs a list of voters who voted in favor of granting a permit

to the Roman Catholic diocese to build a church on the Montana Reserve. There were 16 voters, all of whom voted in favor of granting the permit. (Bear, Monday, Jan. 26, 1948 RG10, vol. 8288, file 774/7-3-8-139 RC). The petition was approved by the Superintendent of Reserves and Trust, at the DIA on March 16, 1948. In April of the same year, the Superintendent requested from Chief John Bear that Council sign a resolution requesting that the department issue a permit for a piece of land for the Catholic Church to build on. A year later, on March 28, 1949, the Chief and Councilmen passed a Band Council Resolution (BCR), "*...leasing one acre of land to the Roman Catholic Episcopal Corporation of Edmonton for the purpose of erecting a church...*" (Woodsworth, March 28, 1949).

In his covering letter to the Director of the Indian Affairs, Woodsworth writes of the Catholic Church,

The Church is ready to proceed with the buildings and have the plans drawn up. Reverend Father Schmidt, informs me that it will not be a large structure as there are not very many R.C. Indian families on this Reserve. Most of the Indians seem to have made up their minds to be Baptists. However, as they are always changing, I am certain that the R.C. Church will perform a service to a sizable section of the community. Indeed, if all the Indians went to church or belonged to churches in Hobbema there would not be nearly enough buildings to accommodate them (Woodsworth, March 30, 1949).

It was not until March 15, 1954, that the Catholic Church was finally granted a permit for the use of one acre of land on the Montana Reserve for the erection of a Church at the rate of \$1.00 a year (Gooderham, March 15, 1954).

## **THE METHODIST CHURCH ON THE SAMSON RESERVE (1940s)**

The relationship between the Catholic Church and the Methodist Church in Muskawchees has been strained since the early establishment of the Reserve. As mentioned earlier, one of the reasons Chief Samson may have separated from the Bobtail Reserve was over religious preferences, Chief Samson preferring the presence of the Methodist missionary the Reverend McDougall, while Bobtail and Ermineskin followers preferred the presence of the Catholic missionaries in their community. The 1940's proved to be no exception. On March 10, 1940, Chief Joe Samson of the Samson Band wrote Dr. Harold W. McGill, MD, Director of Indian Affairs Branch in Ottawa to inform him that he would not support the Catholic Church's request to build a church on the Samson Reserve due to the fact that there were already two Protestant Churches on the Reserve, neither of which the Catholic Church had any respect for. He protested Father Moulin's enthusiasm in trying to convert Protestants, as well as the fact that people who had already been baptized and married as Christians had to be re-baptized and remarried in the Catholic Church. He also accused Father Moulin of buying votes in order to secure the building of his church (Samson, March 10, 1940:1).

Indian Agent Alfred G. B. Lewis, sent a letter to the Inspector of the Indian Agency in Calgary, C Pant Schmidt, on March 11, 1940, submitting the Catholic Church's request for the Samson Band to surrender one acre of land for a Catholic site in order to move their present mission on the new site. Lewis pointed out that the Band had

denied the RC Church's request because some voters had been absent. Of the 142 people eligible to vote 57 people voted, with 41 in favor of a land surrender. Lewis understood that in order for a resolution of this nature to be passed as accepted a vote of 72 was required, given the total number of eligible male voters on the Samson Reserve. Lewis requested of Schmidt to provide direction regarding this matter as Lewis felt that the Catholic members of the Samson Band had a right to a church (Lewis, March 11, 1940).

As a follow-up to the March 7<sup>th</sup> meeting, the Samson community met again to discuss the Catholic Church's request. Present were Father Moulin, OMI (Oblate of Mary Immaculate); Reverend Mr. Law from the United Church and Chief Samson. Chief Samson, whose father, Chief Joseph Samson Sr., had invited the Reverend John McDougall to establish a Methodist Church in the community shortly after the Samson Band severed itself from the Bobtail Reserve, pointed out to those present that Fr. Lacombe and Reverend John McDougall managed to respect each other's congregation, and that the Catholic Church would have to respect the Protestant population of the Samson Reserve and not pressure them to convert. The Reverend Mr. Law supported Chief Samson in his request (Lewis, March 17, 1940:1).

In November of 1940, Father Moulin again raised the issue for land on the Samson Reserve for his church (Moulin, Nov. 25, 1940). Within a few weeks Father Moulin was informed that his land description did not meet the Department of Indian Affairs' criteria and was requested to provide a more accurate land description, which he did (MacInnes, Dec. 4, 1940). On January 23, 1941, the community of Samson Band gathered to vote for the surrender of half-an-acre of land for the purpose of building a Catholic Church. Of the 151 eligible male voting members of the community, 101 exercised their right to vote. Ninety-six people voted in favor of the surrender and five voted against. (Lewis, Feb. 12, 1941). On February 19, 1941, the Samson Band officially surrendered a-half-

acre of land for the use of church or mission purposes. (McGill, Feb. 17, 1941:1-2). Within a month's time, on March 18, Minister McGill granted the Roman Catholic Church of Hobbema permission to build a church or mission and use the land for as long as was needed for church or mission purposes (McGill, March 18, 1941).

May 21, 1941 marked one of the largest celebrations Hobbema had had in years. The Roman Catholic Community celebrated the opening of their new 200 capacity church on the Samson Reserve along with Archbishop J. H. Macdonald of Edmonton, the Reverend P. Moulin, Reverend J. Holland and L. Couture of Edmonton. Over 1,800 people attended the celebration (Edmonton Journal, May 21, 1942).

The establishment of the Catholic Church on the Samson Reserve did not mark the end to the rivalry between the Protestant and Catholic factions on the reserve. Within a year and a half, Director McGill had received a formal letter of complaint about the activities of Father Moulin. Samson Band Councilor Fred Littlepoplar, on behalf of the Protestant population of Hobbema, protested the behaviour of the Catholic Priest.

...persistent action of the Roman Catholic Priests on the Hobbema Reserves trying to persuade the Protestant people to turn over to the Catholic Church....

We Protestants would like to be left to our own Church and we do not try to convert Roman Catholics to the United Church. We wish that some arrangement or agreement could be made by which each Church would be left to its own people or each individual allowed to decide which Church he or she would like to belong to.

Could the Department make some such ruling to govern the Churches in this respect (Littlepoplar, Aug. 19, 1943).

Whether such a ruling was issued is unknown. However it is important to note that the animosity between the Protestant and Catholic on the Samson Reserve continued, with the major issues of contention being over the rebaptism and remarriage of Protestants marrying into the Roman Catholic Church. Someone who was not baptized in the Catholic Church could not have a mass or be buried through the Catholic Church.

### **THE FREE METHODIST CHURCH ON THE SAMSON RESERVE (1963)**

There is no evidence of communication between the Samson community and the American branch of the Free Methodist Church, to account or the establishment of the Free Methodist mission on the Samson Reserve. The United Church of Canada was already present in the community at this time. However, there is clear evidence that the General Missionary Board of the Free Methodist Church of North America made application to the Economic Development Division of the Hobbema Agency for a permit for the use of land on the Samson Reserve on January 9<sup>th</sup>, 1963. Forty-seven Samson Band members signed a petition requesting the presence of the Free Methodist Church (Kirby, June 8, 1962). On July 1, 1962, the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration recognized the Band Council Resolution of June 7, 1962 recommended the approval of the above mentioned application and authorized the use and occupancy for church purposes and residence of the pastor, of 2 acres of land forming part of the Samson Reserve.

The permit was signed by Free Methodist Church representatives Byron S. Lamson, General Secretary and Alfred Hill, Treasurer General Missionaries Board of the State of Indiana, in the County of Kosciusko, and the Acting Director of Indian Affairs, Ottawa (Ibid., July 1, 1962:3).

Interestingly Mr. I. F. Kirby, the Indian Superintendent for Alberta, was not pleased with the department's decision and wrote to the Regional Supervisor for Alberta voicing his concerns over the approval for the presence of the Free Methodist Church on the Reserve. He stated:

It appears to me that the Indians are just looking for another church minister who will reside on the reserve and provide a source of free taxi service. I know that this new group runs a taxi service and because the older established churches do not run this free service there is great rejoicing that someone wishes to come to the reserve who will provide this service. The comment made by several council members was that the Denominations are not working hard enough for the Indians and this group was. I am quite sure that the free transportation and other promises are the underlying reasons for the backing of this additional church. Many of the names on the petition were also on one a few years ago when the request was made for the Montana Baptist Church and also the school at that reserve. Unfortunately the majority of the group who signed this petition are those who jump from Church to Church as the spirit moves them but in the case of the person's religion I do not want to get caught in the middle and I feel this must be decided by Branch policy.

I do not feel that it is my position to rule on this matter but I cannot see that another Church will be of long term use to the Indians (Kirby, June 15, 1962).

When I inquired in the Samson community during my visit in 2000 about the Free Methodist Church, people with whom I spoke had no memory of there ever having been a such a church in the community. There is no further communication in the Indian Affairs

file on the Free Methodist Church to indicate how long they remained in the community. There seems to be no evidence that the church was ever built.

## **THE BAPTIST CHURCH ON THE LOUIS BULL RESERVE**

The first Band Council Resolution to approve a request by the Baptist Church for the construction of a church on the Louis Bull Reserve appears to have taken place on August 12, 1948, under Chief Francis Bull, Councilmen Alex Shortneck and Narcisse Brown, who granted permission to the Baptist Church to erect a church on the Louis Bull Reserve directly west of the graveyard. H.W. Woodsworth, Superintendent approved the resolution (Woodsworth, Aug 12, 1948). However, by 1970 the Baptist Church missionaries had pulled out of the community primarily due to not being able to staff the mission. “The Baptist Church closed its mission on the Louis Bull Reserve in 1970 primarily because they could not get missionaries to work in the community” (Arnold, L., 2001).

The Northern Canada Evangelical (all official documents use this spelling) Mission, which had its headquarters in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, applied to the Louis Bull Band Council on January 8, 1974 and received approval through Band Council Resolution 1973/74-744-072-7 which recommended approval for the NCEM's application (Indian and Northern Development, January 8, 1974:1). The unusual character of the permit was its limitation, which was only for a three-year period,

commencing January 1, 1973 and ending on December 31, 1975, "without any further notice to its termination" (Ibid).

On June 12, 1973 the original permit was revoked on the grounds that the chosen site was incorrect, and a new permit was issued to the Northern Canada Evangelical Mission Society for the use of 1 acre of land in LSD 10, of the NE ¼ of S23, T45, R 25, W4M, for a 3 year period (Louis Bull BCR, June 12, 1973). Chief Peter Bull, Louis Rain, Jonathan Bull, Dan Deschamps and Victor Bull signed the Band Council Resolution. The changes to this permit would now correspond with the original permit issued to the American Baptist General Missionary society on August 29, 1949, and approved by Acting Deputy Minister of Mines and Resources, C W Jackson (Jackson, Aug. 29, 1949).

There seems to be no real indication as to why the Louis Bull Band would have only allowed the Northern Canada Evangelical Mission Society a permit for a three-year period. A Mr. Will Dunlop, an employee of the Departmental Lands Administration office, seems to have been a bit annoyed with the paperwork involved for only a three year period, and wrote, "However it is not clear to me why the Band needs God now only for 3 years..." (Dunlop, Nov. 26, 1973).

After pastor Jim Stauford left the community in the early 1980s, the mission was closed. The Louis Bull Band demolished the old church and built a new church with a full basement. The new church belongs to the Louis Bull Band and not to any

denomination. Since 1993 the Christian community at Louis Bull is a non-denominational one. Community people and people from Westaskiwin, volunteer their services to run a Sunday school, a snack program for the children and for the adults in attendance. This group also cleans the church whenever needed. Sam Bilsky leads the Sunday service. On occasion Reinhold Fast, a former missionary in the community, leads the services. On other occasions the Pentecostal pastor from Wetaskiwin, Hubert Rosenke, leads the community in prayer on Sunday mornings. Nobody is paid for his or her work; everyone working with the church does so as a volunteer, including the wake and the funeral services.

### **THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH ON THE LOUIS BULL RESERVE**

The Catholic Church was quite slow in keeping up to the Baptist Church presence on the Louis Bull Reserve, possibly because the community had left the Ermineskin Band over religious preferences. The Catholic Church's lack of presence on the Reserve may also have been due to the location of the Reserve, which is approximately 12 –14 km from the Oblate Father's headquarters on the Ermineskin Reserve. The same is true of the Montana Reserve. However, in keeping with their missionary spirit, the Catholic Church made application to the Louis Bull Band for land on the Reserve on which to build a church. On February 22, 1954 the Band council of Louis Bull Reserve passed a resolution to approve one acre of land to be set-aside for the Catholic Church. Within 5 months, on July 8, 1955, L. L. Brown, the Superintendent of Reserves and Trusts, approved the Roman Catholic Church's request to obtain an acre of land on the Louis

Bull Reserve for the purpose of erecting a church. The location NW of S 33, T 43, R 24, W4M was for the use of the Roman Catholic Episcopal Association (Brown, July 8, 1955). The Catholic Church on the Louis Bull Reserve remained in use until 1980 when attendance numbers dwindled down to five or six people. Today the building stands decrepit and boarded up.

### **THE TRADITIONAL CATHOLIC CHURCH (LATIN RITE) IN HOBHEMA**

The Traditional Catholic Church (Latin Rite) had a very short-lived history in the town-site of Hobbema. One of the local non-Native residents, Jack Kramer, who resided in the old Hobbema Station town-site, arranged to bring one of Bishop Lefeuvre's followers into the community to conduct a Traditional Catholic Latin Service during the priest's regular monthly visits to Edmonton, Calgary and Rocky Mountain House. There were approximately 30 followers in the Traditional Catholic Church; however only 3 were Cree from the community. This monthly gathering lasted about a year, during which time a Traditional Catholic Church was built in Rocky Mountain House, where the Kramer family eventually moved. Other followers from Hobbema then began attending Catholic (Greek or Ukranian) Orthodox Churches in the area (Stoiko, July 2000). This essentially marked the end of the Traditional Catholic Church in Hobbema.

### **THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE (THE FULL GOSPEL)**

During the 1950s the Church of the Nazarene also had a presence on the Samson

Reserve (Buffalo, V., Sept. 10, 2000). The history of the Full Gospel Church on the Samson Reserve and in the Hobbema town-site has a long and complicated history that still requires more research. The total membership of the three churches is approximately 110 people. People belonging to this congregation come from various backgrounds, primarily Methodist, Presbyterian and United Church, although there are several former Roman Catholic members as well. Factions exist among the three churches, primarily over what appears to be an issue of leadership. Two of the Full Gospel Church Ministers are Native and the third is non-Native. The Full Gospel Church began ministering to the community during the early 1970's and most of the members have been with the Church since its inception. For a short time one of the communities called itself the Cowboy Church, as it was ministered by a cowboy and catered to cowboys. The church held its own funerals, but discouraged traditional Cree traditional practices.

### **THE BA'HAI FAITH**

“With the assistance of Ba’hai believers from Edmonton, the Ba’hai faith had a small following on the Reserves in Hobbema during the 1960s, and possibly as early as the 1950s” (Anderson, S., 2001). In 1972 a Ba’hai by the name of Maxine Fraser began visiting the Samson Reserve where she had made many friends through her involvement with the Foster Parent program. She and several Aboriginal Ba’hai youth became very involved in further promoting the Ba’hai faith on the reserve during the 1970s. In order to establish a local Spiritual Assembly, members must be 21 years old, and there must be a minimum of 9 adult believers. Sharon Anderson remembers two Spiritual Assemblies

in Hobbema, one on the Samson and possibly one on the Ermineskin Reserve. The adult believers also have their family members attend the gatherings. Ray Anderson estimates that at its peak there were about 30 people belonging to the Ba'hai faith in Hobbema, only five or six of whom were Cree. Today there is only one Ba'hai living in Hobbema, and he is non-Native (Anderson, R., July 2000).

### **THE SEVENTH DAY ADVENTIST**

Thirty minutes from Hobbema, near the town of Lacombe, is the Seventh-day Adventist community college. Quick access to the reserves at Muskwachees has also led to an involvement and presence of its members in the community. The congregation operated private schools west of the Samson Reserve and north of Wetaskiwin (Buffalo, V., 2004). A number of community people from the Four Bands have joined the Seventh Day Adventist Church as well, but in very small numbers.

### **THE ALLIANCE CHURCH**

Within the past three or 4 years the Alliance Church has built a church on the edge of the reserve, on land which used to belong to the Lewis family, a non-Native family. I have not investigated this congregation as I was not able to meet with the minister nor any of it's congregation. However, the church building is large enough to

seat over 100 people, making it the second or third largest church building in the four communities.

## **THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF THE LATTER DAY SAINTS – THE MORMONS**

The 1970's saw the introduction of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints (Mormons) to the city of Wetaskiwin and the Muskwachees area about 15 km north of the Reserve. The LDS community has been sending missionaries to minister to the Cree since about 1976. Today Claude Saddleback is the local (Muskwachees) elder for the Church. There are approximately 165 members within the Four Bands at Muskwachees who are registered with the Church but only 40 people or so who come out to the Sunday services. According to Soosay, in order for a LDS church to be built on the reserve, there would have to be an increase in participation of at least 100 people. Of course this is conditional on one of the Bands giving up land to the church. There are approximately 25 to 30 people who attend the Wetaskiwin church on a regular basis. The LDS church's aim is to get every family sealed in the Temple. Tobacco is very important to Native people. To be baptized in the LDS faith one has to abstain from tobacco, alcohol, and anything that is addictive. (Soosay, June 2000)

Most of those baptized in the faith from Muskwachees are youth. A few of the community's youth have served in the Mormon Missions. Several are still active in the church. Two families, the Soosays and the Saddlebacks have had their marriage sealed in

the past two years. These two families are the first from Muskwachees to have had their marriages sealed in the Temple at Salt Lake City.

The Mormons had a strong presence in the community before the United States relaxed their draft laws. Young Mormon elders came to Canada to avoid the military draft. Several of them worked on the reserves surrounding Hobbema (Buffalo, V., 2004).

In 1975 Bud Iverson and his wife moved to the area to minister to the Hobbema Mormon community. Prior to the building of the new LDS church at Wetaskiwin in 1978, people met upstairs at the Co-op building. Between 1975 and 1978 the Memorial Center in Wetaskiwin was used as a gathering place. The funerals are held on the reserve so a minister would come out to the Reserve or a local representative would do the funeral.

## **THE CHURCHES AND FUNERALS**

In the early years of Reserve life, when Church and State were determined to wipe out all forms of Traditional ritual and belief, traditional Cree ceremonies, feasts and dances for the dead were strongly discouraged and following the enactment of the Potlatch Law (1885 to 1951) these ceremonies and gatherings became prohibited. From the very early years up to the early 1990s, the Roman Catholic Church and the Methodist and later United Church ministered to and conducted the largest number of funerals in the community with the Catholic Church having the largest proportion. During the late 1970s the Catholic Church buried, on average, two people a week. Today this is not the case, as many people are being buried the traditional way without church ministers being

present. The following chapter will deal more specifically with the funeral and wake process and the role of the Church in providing the funeral service to the Catholic community. On various occasions in the past 26 years, I did have the opportunity to attend wakes and the burial rites led by the minister of one of the other Christian denominations. Other than lead the prayer service at the wake, the church or graveyard there seemed to be very little involvement on the part of any of the churches.

In having recently asked members of various denominations within the community whether the various Christian churches discourage traditional belief and feasts and dances from taking place in the course of feeding and feasting with the dead, most of the people interviewed said there was no involvement or interference on the part of Christian churches nor the Ba'hai community with traditional Cree practice. The one exception may have come from the Full Gospel Church, where no form of traditional Cree spirituality or ceremonialism is encouraged (Potts, Walter and Betty, 2000). Once the Christian services are over at the wake and at the cemetery the Cree community carries out its traditional prayers, pipe ceremonies, feasts and dances to honour and ask blessings of the dead.

I have had discussions with several Oblate priests over the years and many have been very knowledgeable about the Aboriginal cultures they ministered to. Three Oblate priests who had spent over 20 years working among the Plains Cree however astonished me. I had asked about their knowledge of the Feast for the Dead and other traditional ceremonies pertaining to death and was very surprised to learn that they did not know such ceremonies took place! This confirms that many ceremonies were carried out for

years without missionary knowledge. As a result these feasting with the dead ceremonies should have remained fairly intact in “content”, but not necessarily in “form”, over the years, as modern ceremonialists would come forward and introduce changes. The impact of these developments will be presented by Casey Rowan in Chapter 5. During the 1970s until the mid-1980s, a Cree-Métis priest, Andy Boyer, was stationed at Muskwachees. He and the Sisters of the Assumption, essentially the Pastoral team, would very often attend the community Feast for the Dead and some of the memorial dances.

## **CONCLUSION**

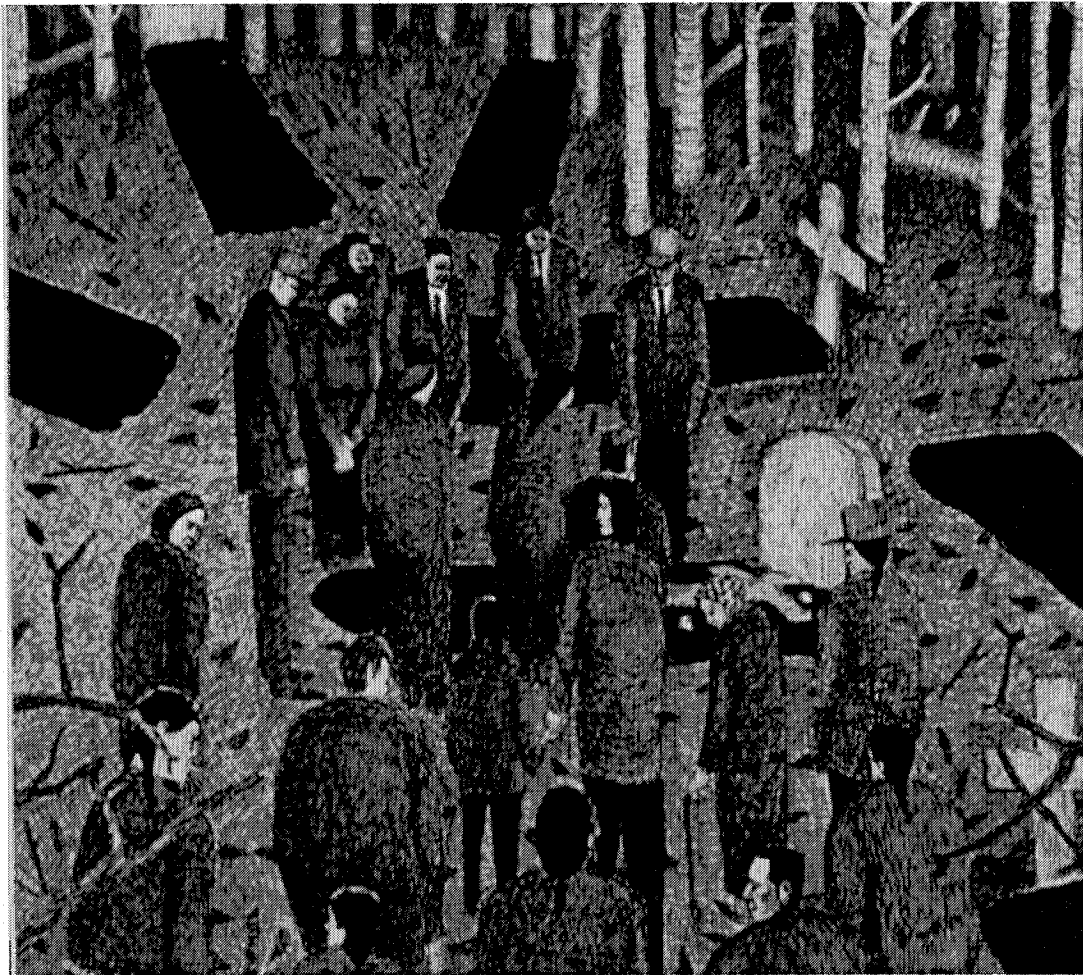
This chapter presented a history of the Christian Churches in the town of Hobbema as well as on the Four Reserves and extended communities surrounding the town site. The movement of various people from the Christian and non-Christian denominations into the community from the late 1870s to the present has been extensive. And although it is implied that the request for missionaries has sometimes come from the Cree themselves, I have difficulty believing there was not some coercion taking place on the part of missionaries – someone to encourage Band members to come forward with a petition to present to Chief and Council. The struggles and issues with the Christian churches are clearly issues of land ownership and an emphasis on building structures while community members were in desperate need of food and clothing. Although the spiritual “Christian” needs of the community may have suffered during the various movements to support any Christian denomination that showed interest in the community

and made promises of food, clothing, education, taxi service and spiritual support, the fact remains people were often in dire need of the “basics”: food, shelter, and clothing. According to numerous people I’ve spoken with over the years, Christianity was a means of achieving those basic needs.

This chapter also spoke very briefly about the involvement of the Christian and non-Christian denominations in the community’s affairs as they relate to the funeral wake, prayer service and graveside service. The following chapter will present my experiences approximately 25 years ago, when I worked in the community of Muskwachees. As a lay person working with Our Lady Of Seven Sorrows Catholic Parish co-coordinating funerals and wakes for the community, I observed the manner in which wakes, funerals, and the feast for the dead were carried out during the late 1970s.

## **Chapter 3**

### **NEHIYAW BURIAL PRACTICES AND BELIEFS 1978-1980**



**THE FUNERAL**

Ken Swan

Plains Cree

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Courtesy of the Department of Indian Affairs.

**PLAINS CREE BURIAL PRACTICES AND BELIEFS 1978-1980****INTRODUCTION**

In the previous chapter we examined the history of the establishment of Christianity in the Muskwachees communities, and the various Christian denominations battle for souls. It was also mentioned that from 1885 to 1951 the Potlatch Law prohibited community members to practice the prayers, feasts, dances, and ceremonies required to feed and feast with the dead. Christian missionary assisted the Federal Government in enforcing these laws. It is now well known that many of these activities went underground and were carried out in secret, and following the 1951 amendments to the Indian Act, which recognized Indian people as Canadian Citizens and allowed them to leave their reservations at will, people began to feel more comfortable carrying out these important ceremonies and activities to honour and feast with the dead.

This chapter presents Nehiyaw wake and funeral practices as they were witnessed by the author between the years 1978-1980 on the four Reserves in Muskwachees and in Mameo Beach. In this chapter I will also introduce Nehiyaw beliefs regarding death and the afterlife on the basis of information told to me during the course of my work and frequent visits to Muskwachees over the past twenty-five years, as well as in recent interviews with Nehiyaw consultants from Muskwachees. Chapters 4 and 5 will go further in depth in speaking on these beliefs and practices.

## **FROM SOUTHWESTERN ONTARIO TO MUSKWACHEES – August 1978**

Upon the completion of my BA in Religious Studies and Canadian Literature in 1978, I found employment with the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI), a Roman Catholic religious order in Edmonton, Alberta. Father Joseph Regnier, the Provincial for the OMI of the Oblate Province of Alberta-Saskatchewan, offered me a position on the Pastoral Team at Our Lady of Seven Sorrows Church on the Ermineskin Reserve, Alberta, as a coordinator of funerals and wakes. In 1978, Hobbema was a mixed non-Native, Cree, and Métis hamlet with a population of approximately 60 people. In the late 1970's the population of the registered members of Muskawchees, including the communities of Samson, Ermineskin, Louis Bull, Montana, and those living at Small Boys Camp, Mackinaw's Camp, Buck Lake and Pigeon Lake, was estimated to be 8,000 people. Today there is no one living at the Makinaw's Camp,

### **THE WORKING ENVIRONMENT**

In August of 1978, the pastoral team at Our Lady of Seven Sorrows Roman Catholic Church consisted of four Sisters belonging to the religious order the Sisters of the Assumption, two Oblate priests, five lay workers from the Ermineskin and Samson Reserves and myself. All of the Sisters were former teachers in the Hobbema Residential, and later, Day School. By this time three of the Sisters had retired from

teaching. One Sister was of French ancestry from Quebec, one of Breton ancestry from Saskatchewan, one of Ukrainian ancestry from Alberta, and the second youngest of the group, the Superior of the house on the Ermineskin Reserve, was a Métis, of Mohawk-French ancestry from Quebec. She worked directly with the Pastor offering counseling advice to members of the Cree community, courses in baptism preparation, catechism and confirmation preparation and home visitations; she also assisted with conducting prayer services at wakes and funerals and played the church organ on Sunday and for funeral services. Her commitment to the community was extraordinary. The eldest of the Sisters was the bookkeeper for the order. She also prepared one of the meals for the parish team as well as the sisters six days a week, assisted in visiting the sick at the hospital or at home, and assisted with funerals and conducting the wake services. The second eldest Sister tended a large garden, the produce of which helped feed the parish team throughout the year. Her duties also included doing all of the cleaning and laundry for the church, rectory and convent. Due to her twelve-hour workday she seldom visited people in the community. The youngest of the Sisters taught at the high school on the Ermineskin Reserve and prepared dinner for the parish team. By 1979 this Sister was in the process of leaving her religious community, and she left Muskwachees the following spring.

The Assistant Pastor who arrived in early September stayed only five months while recovering from a heart attack, leaving the community in February of 1979. He was of French ancestry from Alberta, and returned to St. Albert, Alberta, where he resumed his duties as Pastor. Prior to coming to Muskwachees he had spent several years working with a Blackfoot community on the Blood Reserve in Southern Alberta. The

Pastor was Métis, of French and Cree ancestry, from Saskatchewan. He spoke French and English fluently and had a very good working knowledge of the Cree language. He had been in Muskwachees for 6 years when I arrived. After spending about 13 years in the community, he eventually left Muskwachees when he was assigned to the Order's Provincial House in Edmonton. Today he works with the Oblate Order in Ottawa. His duties while in Muskwachees were similar to those of most other parish priests; saying mass, administering the sacraments, visiting the sick in the hospitals, counseling, and assisting with funeral and wakes when possible.

All of the lay workers were Cree and all spoke Cree fluently. Four of the five were women ranging in age from their late 40's into their early 60's. Three of the women were widowed. Only one of the five was employed; the others freely offered their time and energy. All five assisted in visiting the sick at the hospitals, leading the wake services, and conducted the funeral services. The middle-aged gentleman assisted primarily with the wake services and with the funeral services. Whenever he attended a funeral, he played his drum and sang a traditional "Going Home" song for the deceased. Victor Buffalo explained that when a child is born someone immediately comes to the house and talks to the spirit of the child and welcomes it. In the same manner when someone dies the spirit is spoken to and sent home.

My responsibilities at the parish were primarily to co-ordinate wakes and funeral for the Catholic Church in Muskwachees but I also assisted with Baptism preparation, home and hospital visitations and organizing workshops on "Death and Dying". When I

arrived in 1978 there were three Catholic Churches on the Reserves and one in Pigeon Lake. Within two years only one church remained open, the largest of the four – Our Lady of Seven Sorrows on the Ermineskin Reserve. Today it is the only Catholic Church in the community. The Oblates of Mary Immaculate and the Sisters of the Assumption closed their mission on the Ermineskin Reserve in 1995 after ministering to the community for over 100 years. Today, the Diocese of Edmonton administers the Roman Catholic parish on the Ermineskin Reserve which serves the Muskwacheese communities.

The position of assistant coordinator of wakes and funerals for a country parish puzzled me. In my own cultural context, wakes took place at funeral homes. It was surprising to discover that wakes were held in private homes on the reserve and that the wake in Muskwachees generally lasted four nights.

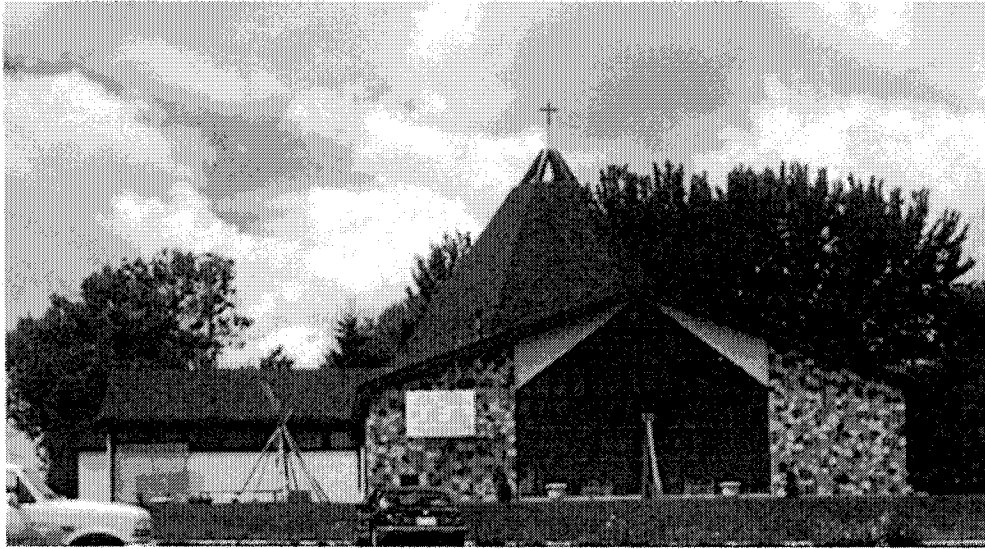
Within 3 days of my arrival in Muskwachees I was initiated into my new job. A young man had been shot in a drive-by-shooting on the Samson Reserve. Needless to say I felt tremendous anxiety over what would be expected of me. As this was the Assistant Pastor's first wake I decided to accompany him.

We arrived at the young man's home around 19:00 where we found a small gathering of people, primarily immediate family members. The funeral home was about an hour late in delivering the body to the home. The casket was brought through the front door and placed in the living room along the south wall. After the undertaker left the

yard, the family removed the body from the casket and proceeded to change the deceased's clothes, place a pair of new moccasins on his feet and comb and braid his hair.



The Roman Catholic Church on the Montana Reserve. Today the church still stands but it is boarded up. Photo by Colin Levangie, OMI, mid-1970s.



Our Lady of Seven Sorrows Church, Ermineskin Reserve.  
Photo by Morgan Baillargeon, July 2000

(This was the only time I ever witnessed the body being arranged at home. Over the next three years I would attend approximately 400 wakes and 200 funerals). After the body was returned to the casket, relatives and close friends approached the body and kissed the deceased on the forehead or cheek. Some simply placed their hands on his forehead. After a few months it would become clear to me why this touch was so important. There is no word for “good-bye” in the Cree language and it is very rare to hear a Cree speaker use the phrase even in speaking English. People simply say, “until the next time, or until we meet again”. The act of touching the deceased seems to relay this message of “Until we meet again”.

After the body arrived at the home we stayed for about one half hour, saying prayers and taking part in singing hymns that would later become very familiar. We both

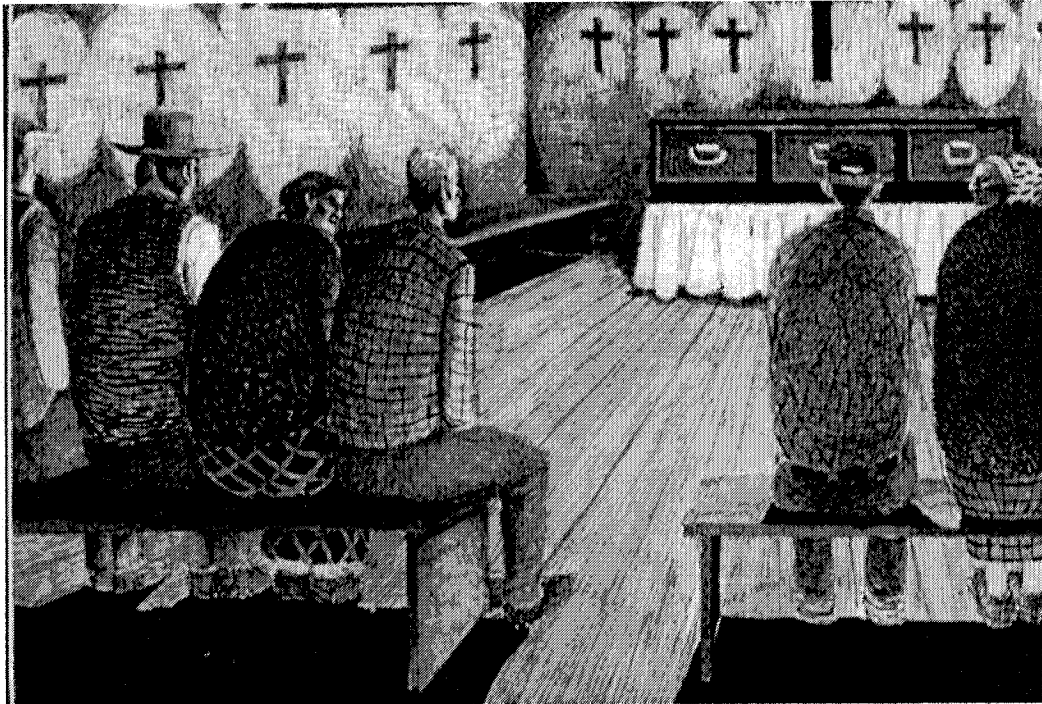
experienced culture shock that first night at a Cree wake, but given the heavy workload we encountered we recovered fairly quickly. The day after the funeral the Parish priest, a Métis from Duck Lake, Saskatchewan, invited me to accompany him to Batoche and Duck Lake, where a family wedding was to take place. During that trip I learned a great deal about the history, traditions and culture of the Plains Cree and Métis of Alberta-Saskatchewan. Over the next few months I began asking many questions of the people with whom I was working. Hearing and learning about Plains Cree culture and tradition was crucial to my understanding about Plains Cree beliefs about life, death, and the afterlife.

### **WAKES AND FUNERALS AT MUSKWACHEES**

Over the course of three years living in Muskwahees, I would come to spend five or six days each week attending a wake or funeral. On average, the Catholic Church had two funerals a week. On one occasion, in 1979 there were seven deaths in one week, and on another occasion five. The usual working week required spending approximately four to six nights attending wakes and at least two days a week attending funerals. In many instances arrangements could be made for a member of the parish team - one of the Sisters, one of the lay ministers, or one of the priests to lead the wake. This team arrangement allowed me to have one or two evenings free a week. Quite often, even when I was not leading the wake, I went along for the company and to visit. Despite the mournful events accompanying a death, wakes are meant to provide support to the grieving family. They also serve as social occasions, where mourners visit with relatives

and visitors and renew old friendships. Given the social aspect of the wakes, it did not take long to come to know many people, some of whom were regulars at wakes, attending all of the wakes in the community as so many people are related. "It is also believed that if you attend a wake you will obtain life" (Buffalo, V., 2004). There were numerous people in the four communities who were not financially well off and for several of these people the wakes were a social occasion where they could be assured of a meal and hot drink, cigarettes, and some company. Despite the somber occasion, funerals were social gatherings and there was always someone there to tell stories about the deceased or humorous stories in order to get the mourners laughing. Some of the stories were about misadventures or legendary Cree characters. It sometimes appeared as though story telling at wakes became a competition to see who could tell the best whopper. Victor Buffalo commented, "The ability to tell stories is no longer there. Long ago, the elders use to talk and tell stories all night. Not the one-liners of today. I think it was a ceremony – they didn't just talk" (Buffalo, V., 2004). In the summertime men would often gather outside to talk about politics, farming, rodeo, and life in general while women did the same inside the house. Sometimes the children would be outside playing games or riding bicycles or horses.

As soon as it was known that someone had died, a family member would bring tobacco to a particular individual in the community would agree to take on the responsibility of tending the sacred fire. Once this man was notified he would build a fire immediately at the place where the wake would be held and tend this sacred fire for three or four days, until the morning of the burial. The fire was important to the deceased, as it



**The Wake**, Ken Swan, Plains Cree. ID 306776 Department of Indian Affairs Collection, Gatineau, Québec. Courtesy Department of Indian Affairs.

was his/her sacred fire. On the day of the funeral, the soup that would be served at the feast would sometimes be cooked on this fire at sunrise. At sunrise a pipe carrier would conduct a ceremony for the soul of the deceased so that it might begin its journey to *gamiwasik* or *Kitchi Kisokok*, a better place (Rowan, Dec. 5, 2000; Buffalo, V., Dec. 5, 2000; Johnson, D., Dec. 5, 2000).

While family members waited for the body to be brought to the home, parents and grandparents tied black string around the wrists, ankles and sometimes necks of children. This tradition was meant to weigh children down so that the soul of the dead could not

carry the children away with them to the afterlife (Buffalo, V., 1998; Rowan, 1999). According to Marvin Buffalo, this practice was carried out because it is believed that the dead are very lonely and afraid of traveling to the afterlife alone. There is also a feeling that the dead do not want to see the young ones suffer in this life. They want to take someone with them and children are very easy targets. Children are not strong enough to resist the invitation of a grandparent, parent, brother or sister. It is the responsibility of the parents and grandparents to look out for their interests (Buffalo, Marvin, July 2000).

There did not seem to be any particular time when the body would be brought to the home. It seemed that the time of the delivery depended on how busy the undertaker was, as the body could arrive at someone's home in the morning, mid-afternoon or evening. Generally it was the immediate family and very close friends who were at the home to greet the deceased. After the casket was opened, Pendleton wool blankets or Hudson Bay blankets were draped over the lower end of the casket. Family members and friends were very emotional at this time and people immediately lined up to pay their respects to the deceased. If the body arrived at the house in the evening elderly people would discourage people from being too emotional and from crying out loud. It was important that people not allow their tears to fall on the body as it was believed that tears falling on the corpse would prevent the soul from going to a "better place" (Buffalo, V., 1998). A soul, which family members refuse to "let go", might be encouraged to linger around the home and community, and take others with it to the afterlife.

After everyone in the house had paid their respects to the deceased, kerchiefs were placed over the face of the deceased. The number of kerchiefs varied from one to four or five. Several people told me that the number of kerchiefs was not important as long as there was one. The intention behind the covering of the face was to show respect towards the deceased, so that people would not stare at their face. Staring at someone is not only considered to be rude conduct, but the behavior may be interpreted as trying to gain control over someone.

After the family and close friends have paid their respect to the dead, a family member would offer all the visitors one or two cigarettes while another offered tea and coffee. It was considered polite to accept cigarettes even if you did not smoke. You could later give the cigarettes to someone who smoked and ask them to pray for the family or the deceased, or "you could put the cigarette in the fire outside or put the cigarette in the feast dish during the feast" (Buffalo, V., Dec. 5, 2000). Smokers generally lit a cigarette immediately and prayed while smoking. This gesture implied that they were smoking with the deceased.

In the evening after supper, the minister, priest, sister or lay ministers would gather at the home of the deceased to read scripture, sing sacred songs, recite personal prayers and, if it was a Catholic who had passed away, recite the rosary. In most instances the clergyman or layman would say a few words of encouragement for those present. It was not unusual to find a priest, a few sisters, Catholic lay ministers and three or four ministers at a wake. All took their turn to pray and say a few words. Although there was

a sense of community support taking place on the part of the ministers and Catholic church representatives through their presence, I always found this gathering of ministers unusual, but it did not seem to bother the family. In some cases it was the family who invited all of the ministers, "to be on the safe side".

In other instances family members or friends who belonged to other Christian denominations invited their minister to say a prayer or a few words at the wake. In the late 1970's it was not unusual for a Cree elder to get up and speak. Quite often the elders were very stern in their speech. Sometimes they would speak of the negative effects of gambling, bingo, drugs and alcohol, and inappropriate conduct. Sometimes elders would encourage people to return to a traditional way of life, or a Christian way of life, and to show more respect for each other. Other times they would reprimand people for their bad behavior. "Often the elders would use this time to tell sacred Cree stories. For some people it was the only time they would hear these stories" (Buffalo, V., Dec. 5, 2000).

On one occasion while I kept vigil all night with a family an elder led a pipe ceremony at about 2:00 am. The men in the room were asked by the ceremonialist to join him in forming a circle. He prayed with his pipe and the oskapeos would pass the pipe to the other men present. The women sat on the floor or in chairs directly behind the men. This prayer ceremony lasted about one and one-half hours. The only explanation that was given was that the old man was praying for the deceased. Following the pipe service people were fed sandwiches and tea.

During the years 1978 to 1980 I can only think of one instance when a body was buried before the fourth day following the death. The people of Hobbema have a definite preference for having the burial after four nights. I was given several explanations for this: One was that it takes the soul four days to reach the land of the dead. A second preference has to do with a belief in the plurality of souls. Some people believe that each person possesses 4 souls. When a person dies each of the souls leaves the body. If they have not returned to the body by the fourth day, it is safe to bury the corpse. Verne Dusenberry came across similar beliefs in his work among the Montana Cree. A consultant of his from Rocky Mountain House, Alberta said that the Plains Cree refer to themselves as *Niheyawak*, which means four bodies, but the Cree believed they had only one soul (Dusenberry, 1962:103). However Dusenberry does point out evidence that can be found in the stories people tell that the Plains Cree believe in the plurality of souls (Dusenberry, 1962:103). Another explanation for the four-evening wait was that previous to embalming, some people who were thought dead, but were not, would revive during the wake. In recent years, several elders told me they were not aware of this later belief among the Plains Cree (Buffalo, Marvin, 2000; Buffalo, V., 1999; Kootenay, N., 2000; Rain, G., 2000; Rowan, 2000). Rowan stated that the journey took about half a day to reach the other side once the soul had left.

Another explanation to why wakes were held for four nights dates back to the days when there were no funeral homes in the area and bodies were not embalmed. As the body could no longer be placed in a tree scaffold, waiting four days would insure the

person was dead before burying them. In tree burials if a person was not dead, but unconscious they could possibly free themselves from their burial scaffold.

On the day of the funeral prayers were said at the house for the deceased before the undertaker arrived to take the body to the church or graveyard. For the most part, the body left the house through the front door, the same way it came in. On one occasion the casket was taken out of the house through the living room windows, and on another occasion it was taken out of the house through the back door. On both occasions the explanation given for not taking the body through the front door was that the dead couldn't pass through the same door or path used by the living. By taking the casket out the window, which would later be sealed, the spirit would not be able to find its way back into the home. This practice may have been the norm when the Plains Cree lived in tipis. Of course tipis being mobile homes would move to a different location. Ms. Beeso, one of Dusenberry's consultants confirms this practice among the Rocky Boy Cree:

*The body was taken out of the back or the side of the lodge, not through the door. When the body was being removed from the lodge, the spirit thus addressed, To, Go straight ahead. Do not take anyone with you. Do not look back, and when you reach your destination, talk for us. Tell the young man not to trouble us, not to come and take anyone away (Dusenberry:(Beeso):Box:File 6:11).*

Six pallbearers carry the coffin and in the late 1970's they were often relatives or good friends of the deceased. They generally wore black ribbons on their right arm. On occasion honorary pallbearers were chosen. They would follow behind the pallbearers and also wore black armbands.

During winter months, when the ground was frozen, a fire was built over the gravesite to thaw the ground. A backhoe was commonly used to dig graves in the winter and the grave was dug early in the morning on the day of the funeral. In milder weather



On rare occasions a horse drawn wagon was used in Hobbema to carry the coffin from the home to the Church, then on to the cemetery. Tilly Walker took this photograph at her brother, Melvin Walker's funeral. Mandaree, North Dakota on the Fort Berthold Reservation 1993.

the grave was dug the day of the funeral, sometimes by hand but more often with a backhoe. In the event that an infant who had not been baptized or a non-practicing Catholic had died, the funeral procession would leave the home and go directly to the cemetery. In some instances the body of a non-practicing Catholic or an infant was brought to the church for a funeral service but not a funeral mass. In this case it was not

always the Priest who presided at the funeral service but sometimes one of the sisters or myself. In these situations one of the elders was asked to pray in Cree and speak either at the church or at the grave. If the male lay leader from the Catholic Church was present he would often play his drum and sing a “going home” song. Generally people who knew this song would join in the singing.

In the event that a practicing Catholic died, there was always a funeral mass in one of the four Catholic mission churches at either Montana Reserve, Louis Bull Reserve, Pigeon Lake, or Ermineskin Reserve, depending where the burial was to be held. When a mass was said the priest would conduct the burial service as well. There were often elders or political leaders who would speak at the gravesite and in most cases Cree songs would be sung there as well.

Following the funeral rite, prayers, singing and speeches, family members would take a handful of dirt and throw it onto the coffin. This practice may have come from the Christian concept: “from dust you came and to dust you shall return”. The pallbearer would follow, as would everyone present. The pallbearers, working two at a time would then begin filling in the grave. When the grave was filled wreaths were placed on it. Family members were generally the first to leave the gravesite. It was not very common to see people linger at the gravesite, as people were encouraged to go home. The Ermineskin Cemetery had two grounds keepers (one of which was Mary Stoney’s late husband Albert who is spoken of in Chapter 5), and they generally watched to make sure everyone left the cemetery after a funeral. Quite often, however, people who attended the

funeral would visit the graves of their family members. One elder recently voiced a concern (summer of 2000) over seeing people today stay behind alone after the burial and weep at the gravesite for hours, with some spending the entire night at the gravesite. This behavior is perceived as shocking and not permissible, as it will prevent the soul of the deceased from traveling to the afterlife. When the funeral service is over an elder will say, "Go! Leave! Do not look back!" (Buffalo, V., Dec. 5, 2000).

If the burial took place after the fourth night following the death, people attending the funeral would make their way to the place where the Feast for the Dead was to be held. I have not heard of the Feast for the Dead ever taking place before the burial, but it may occur. "The feast is generally held at the place where the wake is held. It is not good to move the body around from one wake location to another" (Buffalo, V., Dec. 5, 2000). The location for the feast depended on how well known the person was and how many people attended the funeral, as well as on the weather. I have attended several feasts, that were held outside.

Female relatives and friends of the deceased would begin preparing food the morning of the feast. The most important food at the feast was soup (Buffalo, V. 1999; Rowan, 1999; Raine, G. 2000). The main soup served at the feast was generally cooked over the deceased's sacred fire (Buffalo, V., Dec. 5, 2000). The kind of soup was not important. The first soup is generally called "*Kanika-no-tamaka*" – "the one that leads" or "it walks ahead" (Buffalo, V., Dec. 5, 2000). Locally, it is also called "Mulligan Soup", and is made of boiled meat (moose, deer, elk or beef), rice, dried fruit (prunes,

apples, apricots, raisins) and fresh or frozen berries. I have been to some feasts for the dead in Cree communities north of Hobbema where four soups were served: the “Mulligan Soup”, a rice and raisin soup, moose nose soup, and a berry soup. Another important feast food was a dish of grease, sugar and berries, usually Saskatoon berries or blueberries. Before any food is eaten the dish of grease must first be consumed. “As the elder is praying, the grease and berry dish is given to the *oskapeosik* or “the pipe carrier, or helpers” first, then to the elder. The elder will pass the dish around until all of the grease is gone before anyone can eat the soup. The other foods served at a feast are generally food liked by the deceased” (Buffalo, V., Dec.5, 2000). they might include dried or cooked wild meat, crushed and fried chokecherries, bannock (fried or oven baked bread made of grease, flour, baking powder, salt, and water), hot tea, berries, cooked and fresh fruit, hardboiled eggs, cakes, cookies, and candies.

The food was placed together on blankets or tarps in the middle of the floor. At the Feast for the Dead there was generally one man who presided over the ceremony; today there are sometimes four men presiding. The elder(s) sit facing south. The main elder would have his pipe in front of him as well as a pouch of tobacco, a pipe tamper, a tobacco cutting board, a blade of sweetgrass, a small frying pan to hold burning embers, burning embers, and matches. Before the pipe was lit, the pipe bowl, stem, tobacco package, and tamper are smudged. Then the bowl is filled with tobacco. “After the pipe was lit it was passed over the sweetgrass smudge four times towards the south then straight up. The Pipe man, who acted as a master of ceremonies, directed the *okapeosik* “servers” to begin serving food to each other first, then the pipe carrier. “Once the

oskapeosik have been served, and the pipe carrier, then the rest of the people were served” (Buffalo, V., Dec. 5, 2000).

When everyone had been served soup the rest of the food was then served to everyone. Once the dish of grease, saskatoons berries and sugar had been passed around to be eaten from by all present, the main soup had been served, and the prayers were finished people could begin eating. After eating some of the soup, other foods could then be eaten. It was imperative that all of the food at the feast be served and that nothing remain. For this reason, everyone came prepared and brought plastic containers, buckets, and bags to carry home extra food. This food had been blessed and must therefore be eaten within a few days. It was not to be fed to the dogs. A few people have told me that if feast leftovers cannot be eaten the food should be placed in a clean spot or at the gravesite. Bringing food home to those who could not make it to the feast is also very common. In this way blessings are brought home to others.

As the food was distributed, a small bowl was filled with food for the soul of the deceased. Before the ceremonialist lit his pipe he held the pipe up to each of the four directions calling upon all of the spirits of the community’s ancestors to join their descendants in their feast. Casey Rowan explained to me that when the ceremonialist has finished praying he places his small finger on the bottom of the pipe bowl and touches the ground with the pipe; however, it is his small finger that is actually touching the ground. At this point the spirits have joined in the feast and are ready to eat. At the end of the ceremony the elder will pray again with his pipe. When he has finished praying he again

touches the ground with his pipe. This time the pipe bowl touches the ground and at this point the spirits are sent on their way and the Feast for the Dead is officially over (Rowan: 2000). The small bowl of food is taken outside and placed in a clean place where spirits will come to eat the food. Of course wild animals will also eat the food, but



Elder Edward Buffalo, praying with his pipe during a feast on the Samson Reserve. Note the blanket on which the food has been laid out, the braids of sweetgrass and cans of tobacco near the elder's feet, and the pails of soup at the bottom of the photograph. Photo by Fr. Colin Levangie, OMI, mid-1970s.

this is not considered problematic. Instead of simply putting the bowl of food out, some families burn the food for the spirits. Gordon Rain informed me that it was an Ojibwa tradition to burn the bowl of food for the dead, but that the Plains Cree should not burn the dead's food (Rain: 1994).

On the anniversary date of a family member's death the immediate family will hold another "Feast for the Dead". Sometimes this will take the form of a "Giveaway Dance", a "Tea Dance", or a feast like the one described above. For the next three years the family will remember their deceased family member privately. Some families may however vow to put up a feast for four years. The decision is of a personal nature and there are no hard rules. In subsequent years they will be remembered in the summer during the community "Feast for the Dead", which is held at the cemetery. For those who are members of the Catholic Church, the Catholic community's dead will again be remembered on Nov. 2, All Souls Day, although there is not a "Feast for the Dead" at this time. On All Souls Day the Priest and community's congregation visit the cemetery, where prayers for the dead are said.

Shortly after the funeral the family of the deceased will give away all of the belongings of the deceased. It is believed that the souls of the dead will miss their belongings and return for them. In 1980, the son of close friends, who were in their mid-forties, died at the age of 19. A few days after the funeral I dropped by to visit my friends and before leaving the house I was given a framed print of a western scene that had hung in their son's bedroom. They had already given most of their son's belongings away and hoped that this would help keep them from thinking of him too much. There was a need to let his spirit go so that he might complete his journey to the other world. Crying for him and thinking of him too much would only keep him behind, and this would not be good for him nor his family members. Dusenberry's research also supports this belief (Dusenberry, 1998:100).

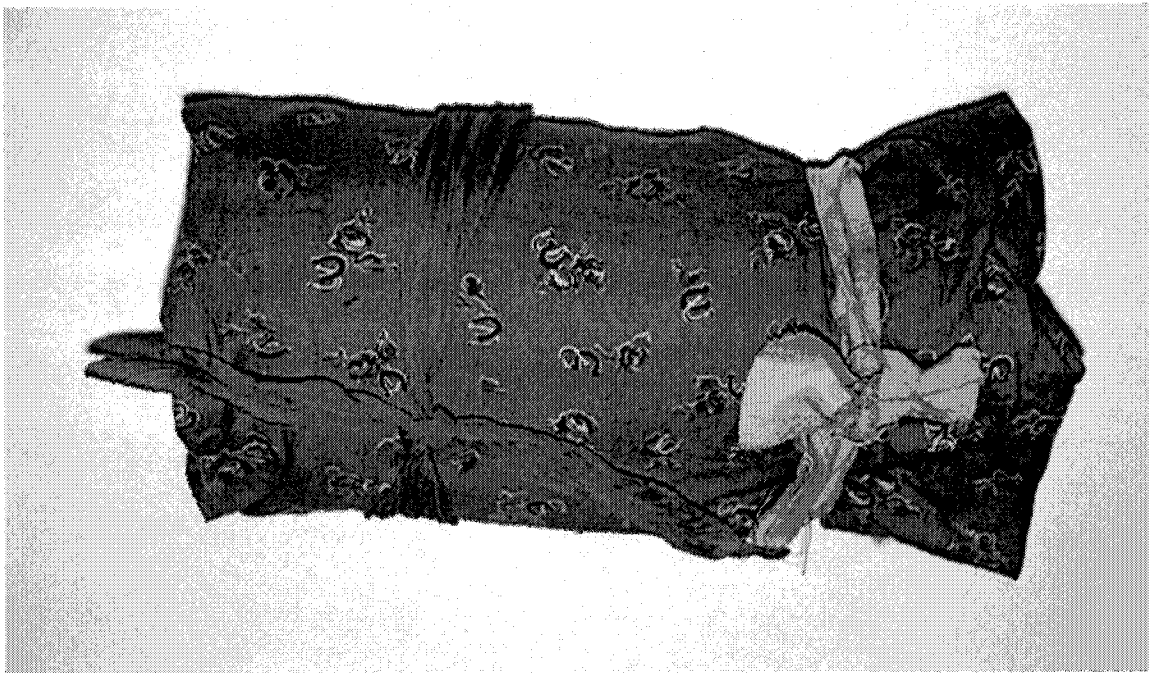
## **THE BURIAL**

According to Victor Buffalo, Marvin Buffalo, the late Gordon Rain, and Casey Rowan, the cemeteries in Hobbema are oriented in such a way that the dead are buried with their head to the north so that they may face south, the direction to which the dead travel. Some Christian traditions orient the body so the feet face towards the east.

## **THE CEMETERIES**

There are approximately seven or eight cemeteries in the five Muskwachees communities, including the two at Pigeon Lake, and another on private land. For the most part the deceased are buried with their head facing north and feet facing south. However, in the Ermineskin cemetery people are buried with their heads orientated towards the north and south and southeast. For the majority, simple white crosses with black tips function as grave markers, with the deceased's birth date and date of death. In rare instances, granite headstones are used. In the Ermineskin and Louis Bull cemetery several graves have bent willow staves adorned with eagle feather, ribbon, and in some cases sweetgrass. Many of the graves are barren as though relatives have forgotten their dead. Several graves have candles, small statues, rosaries, small shrubs, or plastic flowers. Graves with either fresh or plastic flowers are very rare. In a recent interview Casey Rowan mentioned that it was never a tradition for the Plains Cree to place flowers on the graves of their dead (Rowan, Dec. 5, 2000). It was very common in the 1970's to

find the remains of small huts or houses built over the grave, but today there is little sign of this practice. In the Ermineskin Cemetery there are only two small huts, both fairly recent and belonging to infants. There is a small hole on the south side through which items may be placed.



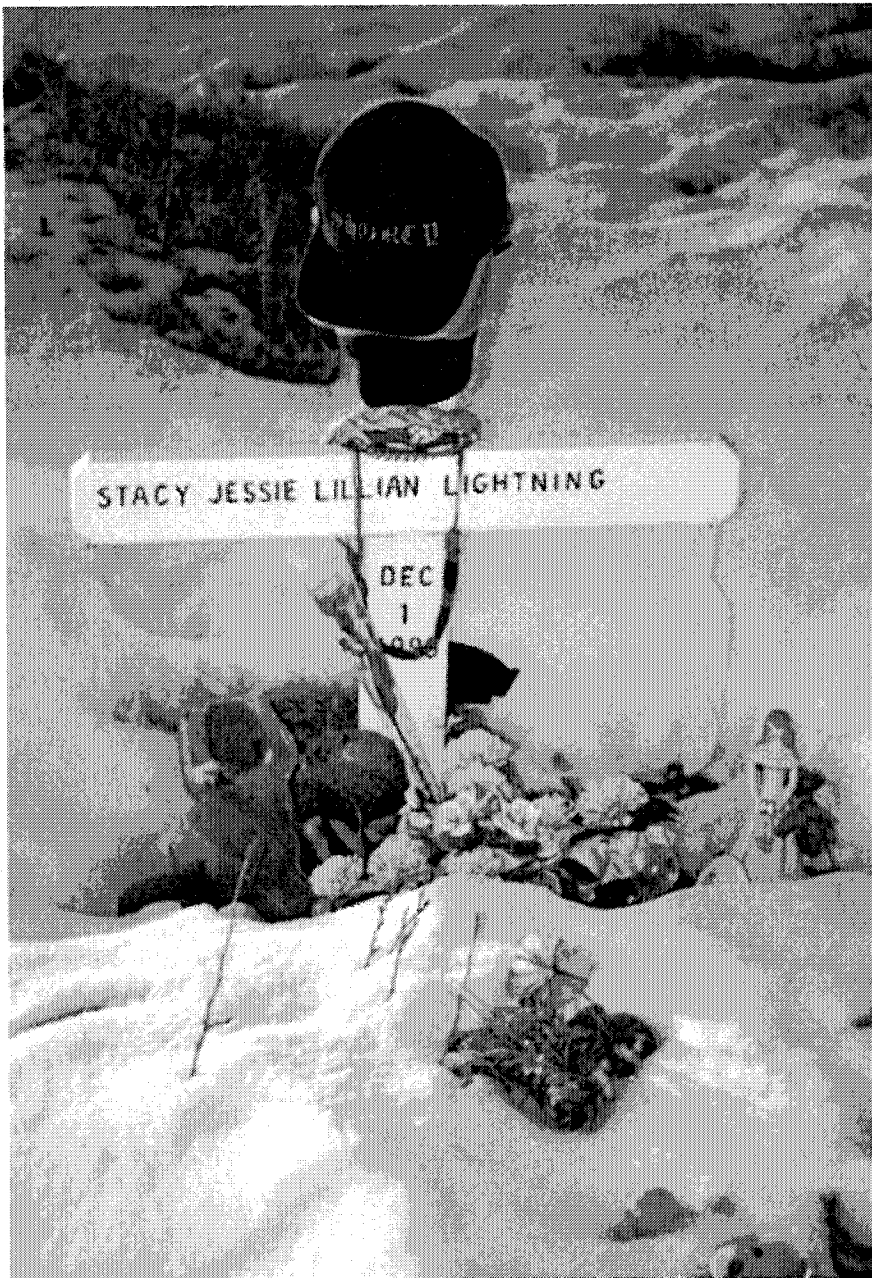
This Nehiyaw “Spirit Bundle” contains personal belongings of deceased relatives such as socks, a purse, a child’s vest, and hair from deceased relatives. The previous owner deposited the bundle with the Provincial Museum of Alberta in Edmonton, because she did not know how to care for it. Provincial Museum of Alberta collection. Photo by Morgan Baillargeon, Dec. 13, 2000.



The Ermineskin Reserve Cemetery. Photo by Morgan Baillargeon, 2A, Dec. 5, 2000.



Willow staff with eagle feathers and ribbon, tin can for sage or sweetgrass.  
Photo by Morgan Baillargeon, Dec. 5, 2000.



At this gravesite one can see a beaded necklace and several items left by friends. Photo by Morgan Baillargeon, Dec 5, 2000.



These gravestones in the Ermineskin Cemetery are located on the south side of the plot. Headstones such as these are quite rare as most grave markers are simple white or white and black crosses. Photo by Morgan Baillargeon, Dec. 5, 2000



This image was taking facing north in the Ermineskin Cemetery. These two “spirit houses” which belong to children are the only two in this cemetery. If you look closely you can see there is a small hole cut into the end of the houses which face towards the south. Photo by Morgan Baillargeon, Dec. 5, 2000.

## MEMORIAL GAMES, EVENTS AND DANCES

There is a well established tradition in Muskwachees for Memorial games and special events to take place on the anniversary date of a person's death. Quite often the event will be one in which the deceased enjoyed taking part. The event may take the form of a sports game or tournament such as a memorial rodeo, basketball tournament, hockey tournament, volleyball tournament, curling tournament, or golf tournament. Occasionally the event will be a traditional or modern gambling game or event such as a



Memorial Pow-wow honouring the community's Veterans, Remembrance Day 1978, at the Ermineskin Reserve School. Photo by Morgan Baillargeon, private collection, 1978.

Hand Game Tournament, Bingo or Memorial Pow-wow. The event may also take the form of a Tea Dance or Give-Away Dance. These events may last one day or take place over a weekend. Whatever the event, it is generally very costly to the family, as family members of the deceased put up most of the prize money and trophies, although close friends will also help with the expenses or prizes. The intention of the event is to remember a deceased family member and to celebrate an activity that the deceased enjoyed. Sometimes the anniversary date will be used as an occasion to raise funds for a charity or organization that the deceased supported. The social gathering may also be used to raise money for the widow/widower or children of the deceased.

I asked several people whether memorial games and special events and dances have a longstanding tradition within the community or are a recent event. The people with whom I spoke were not certain of their history.

Alice Littlechild mentioned that many people in the community attend bingos and will spend hours at the casino during the three days of wake. She found this practice unusual and was unsure of the reason for this behavior (Littlechild, A., Dec. 5, 2000). Professor Earl Waugh, from the University of Alberta, pointed out to me that during the wake period, people are looking for a sign that the deceased's soul has reached the place beyond. One of these "signs" is that good fortune has been bestowed on a close friend or relative of the deceased. For this reason gambling becomes an important activity during a wake or shortly after the burial of a family member (Dec. 5, 2000). Professor Waugh's theory is a very interesting one that requires further investigation as memorial activities

have been taking place in Muskwachees for many years now and the history of these events is vague.

Chapter 7 will address in greater depth the topic of gambling and sports events among Plains Cree communities in general and the role they play as memorial events in celebrating and feasting with the dead.



The hand game or stick game is a competitive gambling game where one team hides two sets of bone dice, one of which has a black stripe. One member of the opposite team must guess which hand has the black dice. To distract the guesser from concentrating the team hiding the dice play the drum and sing sacred songs. If the guessing team guesses correctly their team captures a counting stick. When all of the counting sticks are won the game is over. Note the money on the ground at the foot of the drummer sitting on the ground (left), with the pink shirt and orange and white cap. At a memorial hand game event thousands of dollars may be put up as prize money. Photo by Morgan Baillargeon, Muskwachees 1979.

## CONCLUSION

As the Cree community at Muskwachees has become so large over the past 30 years, and because there are so many funerals throughout the course of the year, it is impossible for the entire community to attend the funeral and wake service for everyone who dies. As many people work outside the community or for various service industries in the community, and because band offices now operate as businesses it is impossible for people to take the day off work every time there is a funeral. Yet hundreds of people are affected almost weekly and in some cases a few times a week, by the death or Feast for the Dead, or a dance held in honour of a family member or friend.

The wake service and funeral rite among the Plains Cree in the late 1970s and early 1980's were similar in form to that of other Christian wake services and funerals in rural Alberta. A priest or minister would lead a prayer service the evening before the funeral, and on the day of the funeral a service would take place at a church as well as at the gravesite. Where the Cree of Muskwachees differed is in the intimacy and holistic manner in which they approached death. They refused to allow their dead to be "laid out" at the funeral home in either of the two neighboring towns. Death is part of one's life cycle. The body and soul of the dead require special attention that could not be provided in town. In practical terms death is viewed as another dimension to which we cross over. The soul of the departed continues to be a part of the community and is treated as such. In Plains Cree culture death is not avoided, denied or put off, to be "dealt with" by another culture. Given that there is no concept of hell in Plains Cree belief death is not

feared. Everyone knows that they will make the same journey to *gami-wa-sik*; a beautiful place.

This chapter was a reflection on experiences, teachings, and observations experienced during my two years of employment at Our Lady Of Seven Sorrows Church in Muskawchees and a third year of living and working with the Nehiyaw community there. Another 24 years of involvement with the community would eventually be added to those first few years of experience in learning about Nehiyaw culture, concepts and beliefs about life and death and the afterlife.

Chapter 4 will begin with an examination of Plains Cree belief about death, the afterlife, and the journey to *gami-wa-sik* as told by elders and story-tellers and recorded by early linguists. Secondly this chapter will focus on observations made by fur traders, Hudson Bay Company staff, missionaries and explorers on Plains Cree burial practices and beliefs. Finally and most importantly this chapter examines the data collected by early ethnologists and anthropologists who worked among the Plains Cree during the turn of the last Century, the 1930s and the 1950s, concerning the belief and practices of the Plains Cree as they relate to death and the afterlife.

## **Chapter 4**

**NEHIYAW (MYTH)OLOGY ON DEATH, THE AFTERLIFE, AND THE  
JOURNEY TO THE LAND OF THE DEAD: THE HISTORIC RECORD PRIOR  
TO 2000**



**SOMEONE DIED HERE**

Allen Sapp

Cree

J918 Allen Sapp Gallery, North Battleford, Saskatchewan

Used with permission

**NEHIYAW (MYTH)OLOGY ON DEATH, THE AFTERLIFE, AND THE JOURNEY TO THE LAND OF THE DEAD: THE HISTORIC RECORD PRIOR TO 2000****INTRODUCTION**

The previous chapter presented the Cree wake and funeral as I experienced it some twenty five years ago from 1978 to 1980 as a lay person working for Our Lady of Seven Sorrows Roman Catholic Parish situated on the Ermineskin Reserve. The material was presented from the point of view of one who knew very little about the culture and traditions of the Plains Cree, very much from the point of view of a participant in the process who asked many questions and often received general and vague answers. After being involved in the process for several years answers became more detailed and the process of dealing with death, burial and the afterlife began to make more sense. And after 27 years of visiting Hobbema, I am still learning. I asked one of my advisors why it took so many years for him to share some of his stories and knowledge. He responded, "Now, I trust you and what you will do with this material I'm sharing with you. It's important to get it correct" (Mekwun Awasis, 2003).

This chapter will address in greater detail the rituals and belief systems of the Plains Cree as they relate to death, dying and the afterlife. The focus for this section will be the historic record prior to the year 2000.

Published material on Plains Cree mythology concerning death, the afterlife and the journey to the land of the dead is very sparse. It is important to present what is available, however, what has been identified as mythology, meant to explain the reason

why the Cree bury their dead, is not interpreted as such by contemporary Cree ceremonialists from the Muskwachees communities.

This section will focus on the documentary record explaining the ritual of death and belief systems and rituals associated with death prior to 2000. This record consists of the commentary of explorers, Hudson Bay Company staff and the primary consultants of early ethnologists and linguists Alanson Skinner, David Mandelbaum, Leonard Bloomfield and Vernon Dusenberry, as well as descendants of Mandelbaum's main consultant, Fine Day. What is of particular interest in the following two chapters is reading the oral accounts of traditional Cree beliefs pertaining to death and the afterlife, in a manner by which stories, beliefs and traditions have been passed on for thousands of years. Currently this method of "passing down knowledge" is undergoing tremendous challenges because of the indifference of the current generation and a feeling that "things which are now written down and cannot be read cannot be true".

We see evidence of contradictions in burial practices presented by the Aboriginal voice and as reported by Sims, Brownlee, and Curtis. Differences exist but many similarities exist as well as can be clearly seen through the historic record of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the early recordings of Curtis, Mandelbaum, Dusenberry and the contemporary voice which is reassuring in the understanding that oral tradition works.

### The End of the World (White River Sioux)

*Somewhere at a place where the prairie and the Maka Sicha, the Badlands, meet, there is a hidden cave. Not for a long, long time has anyone been able to find it. Even now, with so many highways, cars, and tourists, no one has discovered this cave.*

*In it lives a woman so old that her face looks like a shrivelled-up walnut. She is dressed in rawhide [hide], the way people used to be before the white man came. She has been sitting there for a thousand years or more, working on a blanket strip for her buffalo robe. She is making the strip out of dyed porcupine quills, the way our ancestors did before white traders brought glass beads to this turtle continent. Resting beside her, licking his paws, watching her all the time is Shunka Sapa, a huge black dog. His eyes never wander from the old woman, whose teeth are worn flat, worn down to little stumps, she has used them to flatten so many porcupine quills.*

*A few steps from where the old woman sits working on her blanket strip, a huge fire is kept going. She lit this fire a thousand or more years ago and kept it alive ever since. Over the fire hangs a big earthen pot, the kind some Indian peoples used to make before the white man came with his kettles or iron. Inside the big pot, wojapi is boiling and bubbling. Wojapi is berry soup, good and sweet and red. That soup has been boiling in the pot for a long time, ever since the fire was lit.*

*Every now and then the old woman gets up to stir the wojapi in the huge earthen pot. She is so old and feeble that it takes her a while to get up and hobble over to the fire. The moment her back is turned, the huge black dog starts pulling the porcupine quills out of her blanket strip. This way she never makes any progress, and her quill work remains forever unfinished. The Sioux people used to say that if the old woman ever finishes her blanket strip, then at the very moment that she threads the last porcupine quill to complete the design, the world will come to an end.*

Told by Jenny Leading Cloud at White River, South Dakota, 1967, and recorded

by Richard Erdoes.

Although this sacred story is not a Plains Cree story it speaks to similar Plains stories that allude to the end of time, something that seems to be accepted as inevitable. The dog and the old woman are integral characters in this universe. They each have their roles in life. Their duty is to work towards maintaining order in the universe so as to sustain life. They are partners in their roles: human and animal. They co-exist and complement each other. Without the companionship of each other, the world as we know it would cease to exist. The old woman's role is to move forward and complete her quilled robe, thus bringing about the end of the world. The dog's role is to keep the universe in check, thus keeping mankind safe.

In preparation for studying Plains Cree spirituality and beliefs regarding death and the afterlife, it is important to examine Plains Cree mythology regarding concepts of death and the afterlife, views and beliefs regarding the soul, the journey to the afterlife, the land of the dead, burial practices, and the feast and celebrations with the dead.

Anyone familiar with North American Aboriginal cultures is aware of the hundreds of sacred stories that exist concerning every aspect of daily and spiritual life. Most of these stories are often directed towards children, as teaching tools about acceptable behavior and protocol, but the family members and the community in general also hear them during the winter months, when the "plant beings" and most of nature is at rest. The primary purposes of these stories are to explain religious, ceremonial, and daily life events, and phenomena, as well as to act as behaviour

modification tools for children and adults alike. Given this knowledge, there was an expectation on my part that sacred stories would exist that explain Plains Cree concepts of the soul, beliefs about the afterlife, the journey to the afterlife, human interaction with beings which inhabit or guard the land of the dead, and burial customs. Numerous stories along these themes do exist for many Plains and Great Lakes cultures (see Bierhorst, 1967; Clark, 1961, 1966; Cooper, 1998; Harden, 1992; Lopez, 1977; Ray: 1971; Trafzer; 1996 Williams 1991). For the Plains Cree, however, recordings on these themes are few and far between. They are virtually non-existent in printed form with the exception of the few presented here. The Plains Cree consultants on this research project were not aware of sacred stories pertaining to death. There are, however, several recorded stories about death and the afterlife found among other Algonquian cultures, particularly among the Ojibwa and Menominee, and Algonquian proper. The greatest of these sacred stories are likely those reported from the Midewiwin or Grand Medicine Lodge through the work of Hoffman (1891) and Schoolcraft in Williams, (1991).

In 1930 Leonard Bloomfield collected the following sacred story on the theme of Cree burial from among the Sweetgrass Cree [Plains Cree] in Saskatchewan. One of these sacred stories as told by Louis Moosomin explains “Why The Dead are Buried.”

*The old men were placed here on earth by the powers in this wise [original text]: they were pitied and befriended by every kind of thing, by as many things as are seen, and by the things that are invisible. They dreamt of every kind of thing. Even the bears taught them things. That is why the oldtime people had Manitou power.*

*Now I shall tell a sacred story.*

*Once upon a time, long ago, a certain man had one child, and it seems that he dearly loved him and took good care of him. Then at one*

time, as his wife was working out of doors, suddenly they lost their child. They could not make out how they had lost track of him. They were greatly distressed at having lost their child. The little boy had been their first child and their only one. They did not know how they had lost him. Having made inquiry everywhere in vain, at last they gave him up.

Now I shall tell of the child, how he managed to stay alive. He came to some place or other; it appears that a bear had stolen the child. Soon he went about with the bear in summer-time.

Then at one time the man said, "Perhaps after all my son is alive!" he would always say.

Every now and then he would dream that he saw his son.

Then in winter-time the bear would take care of the child. As often as anywhere men performed their worship, at once the bear knew it. He knew even when a pipe was filled for him.

This was what he must have said always to the child: "Grandchild, again I am being invited," he must have said.

So in this way the child stayed alive. In time he looked up on the bear, his companion, as a human person.

Then finally, when the latter had brought him up through many years and he was near to manhood, the bear said to him. "Now you have almost grown up. Son now you will go outside," he must have told him; "your father, this coming spring, when the last of the snow is about to melt away, then your father will kill me," he must have told him;

"Then at once do you go outside. 'And so it is you, my father!' do you then say to him, as soon as you see him; 'My father, for four nights let people not see me, women at least. You and my mother, too, I shall not see. If women see me, I shall sink into the earth. Try to do this,' you will say to your father when you see him," spoke that bear.

"Tomorrow your father will come," the bear must have said; "But he will kill me," he must have told the lad; "As soon as he arrives and has killed me, then do you go outside," he must have said.

Then truly the old man, for his part, as he came that way on the hunt, found the bear where it was staying.

"Truly I have found a bear he must have said".

Accordingly, he went to kill it. There he took a long stick and prodded the hole that was in the ground. Truly, the bear came forth. Then accordingly, he killed it. As soon as the bear had been killed, that youth leaped out from the hole.

"And so this is my father!" he must have cried.

Then, "What do you mean, youth?"

"It is I, father!" he must have said; "Because the bear stole me from you, is why you lost me," the youth must have said.

When he said this then the old man must have said, "At last I see my son!"

"Father, there is only this, that you must carry me on your back," said the youth.

*So the old man took his son on his back and carried him.*

*"And until we get there, only four times you are to stop and rest," said the youth to his father.*

*So whenever the old man wearied under this burden, he rested, with his load on his back. The latter was very heavy, the more so, as the old man had tied the strap round his head, so glad was he to see his son. Then far off to one side he set up a tipi.*

*"For four nights people are not to see me," he said.*

*So the old man went about borrowing unused tent-coverings and four unused tent-poles. \*\*\*\*\* [in original text] In a way to cause wonder then the old man guarded his son, away from the camp; for he had told him to guard him for four nights.*

*When he had guarded him for exactly three days and nights, as he slept, suddenly, "Father, and so you are nevermore to see me!" called the youth.*

*Already his head was but a short way above the earth, into which he was sinking.*

*Then once more, "And so then, it appears that never again shall a mortal man come back to life!" said that youth: "Under that ground man shall be laid, away, as the generations go on!" said the youth, speaking for the last time.*

*But as for the woman, she never again saw her son, who in this wise [original text] now had died.*

*That is one sacred story.*

(Bloomfield, 1993:255-256)

To briefly comment on this story; when I inquired among Cree elders and ceremonialists Gordon Raine, Mekwun Awasis, of the Louis Bull Reserve and Gordon Lee of the Ermineskin Reserve whether they were familiar with this story. Although they had heard the story they said they had never heard in a way that was meant to explain the reason "why the Cree bury their dead". According to their understanding about traditional burial practices, the Cree did not bury their dead but placed them in tree scaffolds. My own interpretation of this story and Mekwun Awasis agrees, is that the story may have been used on the Sweetgrass Reserve to justify the need for the Cree to begin burying their dead following the influenza and smallpox epidemics on the Plains during the mid-1800s. Following their establishments on Reserves after 1873,

there was tremendous pressure from missionaries and government for the Cree to bury their dead and abandon scaffold burials (Raine, 2000)

Edward Ahenakew, a Plains Cree from Saskatchewan, wrote extensively of the Cree during the 1920s. In 1923 he recorded many sacred stories from Chief Thunderchild of Saskatchewan. *The First Man* is one such story.

*This is a great moment," my father said, and it was from him that I learned the story of Pointed Arrow, that has been told by our Old Men since ancient times.*

*Pointed Arrow was the earliest man, and it was he who gave to us the legends of the time when man was trying to prevail over the animals and could speak with them. Earth had been destroyed, and it was after that time that Pointed Arrow lived.*

*He was inventive, and his name was given to him because he made the bow and arrow. He made knives too, from the ribs of the buffalo, and hide-scrapers from the leg bones. He made pots from clay, and bowls and baskets from the birch-bark, stitched with the pliable roots of the spruce. He made awls from the sharp strong tendons of moose, and he chipped and shaped stones for many uses.*

*Pointed Arrow spoke to men of the power of love, and of immortality; through dreams he told of another man who would come to teach them. The one spoken of by Pointed Arrow did come, and when he in turn was old, he said, "Do not be sad at my death. When I die, put my body on a high scaffold in the trees." It was wintertime, and they wrapped his body in buffalo robes, and did as he had asked. In the late spring, he came once more to his people in their camp. ("This is sacred," my father used to say.)*

*Now when this man came again, he told the people, "I am not coming to live with you. I am sent to tell you that the spirit of man lives always. Use love, and work out your own future. Do what is right."*

*All this he taught through the sun Dance so that generations that came after might learn things that are good. (Ahenakew, 1995:45)*

Throughout the Americas there are sacred stories of journeys to the land of the dead by human beings sometimes through dreams, during near death experiences, during times of fasting or on a medicine man's journey to the land of the dead to bring a departed loved one back to earth. This latter form of travel to the land of the dead is a

common occurrence in sacred stories of Indigenous peoples throughout the world, including North America. Ake Hultkrantz has collected a number of these sacred stories in his book *The North American Indian Orpheus Tradition* (1957). In keeping with the Orpheus tradition human beings journey to the land of the dead in order to negotiate the safe return of a deceased loved one. Generally, the traveler is a man, who confronts the keeper of the land of the dead (an elderly person in the form of a supernatural being) and enters into a competition for the release of the soul of the loved one (quite often a woman, and generally a wife). Should the petitioner win the competition he or she is allowed to bring back the deceased with the provision of the strict observance of rules set out by the keeper of the land of the dead. In most cases the one released from the land of the dead does not arrive back home safely, or if he or she does, the rules and taboos concerning, "you must never...", are broken and the retrieved soul instantly returns to the land of the dead. Although Hultkrantz has collected numerous examples of such sacred stories among most Algonkian cultures, such as the Blackfoot, the Gros Ventre, Arapaho, Shawnee, Fox, Ojibwa, Montagnais, Malecite, and MicMac (Hultkrantz, 1957:31-32) there is no mention of an Algonquian proper, nor a Cree, version of this story. When I inquired in the community about a Cree version of the classic Orpheus style story none of the dozen traditionalists I spoke with could recall such a story. Nor was I been able to uncover a Cree version of the Orpheus style story. More inquiries need to be made to find whether an Orpheus story exists among the Plains Cree. To uncover such a story would be a significant find as this story refers to the human soul, it introduces gambling competitions between the

keeper of the souls and the land of the dead and human beings. The story also provides the listener with a description of the afterlife and the existence of the soul after death.

## **NEHIYAW BURIALS**

In November of 2003, during a conversation with Manitoba archaeologists, Leigh Syms and Kevin Brownlee, they explained that the archaeological record points towards a tradition that dates back at least 400 years, of Cree burying their dead in graves that were quite shallow, three to four feet deep, with only inches of dirt covering the planks that covered the graves. This is confirmed by field reports of burial sites at Pukaawakan Bay (Brownlee, 2001a), Early Morning Rapids and Wuskawatim Falls (Brownlee, 2001b). In the case of the burial of a woman at Nagami Bay, however, a cairn of rocks covered the grave (Brownlee and Syms, 1999:9). One body at this site, was buried on its back; the other bodies were placed in a prone position, with feet occasionally facing south. Brownlee observed that in most cases the feet appeared to be oriented towards the source of water – whether a river or lake. In some instances the face of the individual was looking eastward and in other instances westward (Brownlee, 1999:12; 2001:12).

In most instances grave goods included a personal pipe and flint and steel, and in one case only, two large rocks, one at the head of the grave, the other at the foot of the grave on top of the boards shielding the body. In the Nagami Bay burial, the woman was buried with several bundles of tool kits. In yet another burial site (report not

published yet), one body was wrapped in a birch bark blanket sewn closed with spruce root, with a half moon crescent shaped symbol with scalloped edging sewn into the bottom right corner of the bark blanket [which in my opinion may have represented a sun figure]. Other graves Brownlee uncovered had traces of birch bark sheets lining the burial pit. However, several of the graves had board planks positioned over the head at the Pukatawakan Site (Brownlee, 2001:11), and crosswise at the Wuskwatim Site (Brownlee, 2001:37), possibly so that when the grave was filled in dirt would not fall directly on the face of the deceased.

Casey Rowan (June 20, 2002), has pointed out a growing concern in the Muskwechees communities over the current practice of people throwing a handful of dirt onto the casket following the service... the act of throwing dirt on anyone's face is quite an insulting act, according to Rowan. The men who shovel the dirt to fill in the grave are often very careful to pile the dirt onto the centre and foot of the casket and allow the pile of dirt to naturally fall over and cover the head of the grave as a result of gravity. Isabelle Fine Day of the Sweetgrass Reserve, however, pointed out that the act of throwing a hand full of dirt onto the grave was an act of assisting the body to quickly return to the earth (Fine Day, I., 2003).

In the Brownlee findings there was an unusual bundle burial associated with the Wuskwatim burial. A birch bark bundle, positioned between the two graves, contained what appeared to be simply organic material, but the community interpreted this to be possibly associated with child birth (Brownlee: Summery. 2001:35-37).

In his article on the Reverend George Barnley and the James Bay Cree, John S. Long, quoting from Barnley's journal of 1840, points out that in the very early 1700s some of the Cree of James Bay were adapting burial practices of the Hudson Bay company. As a case in point, the wife of an important Cree trading captain was buried in a solemn ceremony at Moose Factory (Long, 1986:320). Despite the adaptation of some forms of Hudson Bay burial practices, Barnley points out, in his June 5, 1840 journal entry, that the Cree maintained their own customs even into the mid-nineteenth century by "planting poles, decorated with ribbon and pieces of tobacco, in the ground to mark a burial site" (ibid., 320). This custom continues today on the Four Bands at Muskwachees, as will be discussed later.

Long also quotes Barnley as observing:

An Indian does not expect much success during the year after a relative dies, & manifests reluctance to take possession of his property. It was believed that the deceased could communicate with the living, and could influence their hunting for better or worse. Ghosts could make trouble, even attempting to take people with them. If someone became too morose over a death, mental breakdown could result (Long, 320).

Richard Preston emphasizes in Long (1985), this point by commenting on the impact of the death of a family member:

.... One really sees the empirical consequences of a death – how your hunting goes, whether you are depressed – how this mysterious process works out... The idea that animals somehow know how they are treated after death carries over to human-people too. The idea that animals can react carries over too... As we have to respect the death of animals and show that respect through hanging the bones, we have to respect people by making sure that they are buried well and promptly (Long: 1985:320).

In his research among the Plains Cree, Edward S. Curtis also mentions burial practices and beliefs that are quite similar to Mandelbaum's report, except that what is obviously missing is any mention of grave burial:

The Woods Cree disposed of their dead in trees, on scaffolds, and under piles of logs; the Plains bands on scaffolds or, according to Mackenzie, in graves lined with branches. A corpse was arrayed in the finest clothing, the face was blackened, and a lock of hair was removed. Tightly wrapped with the skins and robe, the body was lashed in a tree, or on an elevated platform, or under a quantity of logs, and covered with a rawhide. The head was directed northward. Packets of food and tobacco were still deposited at Cree graves. In case of necessity tobacco or tea may be "borrowed" from such places without offense, but is must be repaid at the first opportunity. A dead man's possessions were distributed among the people, but dogs and horses were not slain and the tipi was neither burned nor abandoned. Even today, however, a night is not permitted to intervene between a funeral and removal to a new camp-site. The shorn lock of hair, wrapped in skin or cloth with a bit of tobacco, is exposed on a post at the rear of the tipi; it is preserved for an indefinite period, and in time by the addition of new packets this family memento of the departed becomes a sizable bundle. ...Adult mourners cut their hair, wear old clothing, and refrain from washing the face. Formerly they pierced the thighs and arms with knives, blackened the face, and avoided the use of leggings. The period of mourning continues about a year. Relatives of the dead sometimes visit the place of burial, clear the ground, and sit down to smoke with the departed, addressing him as if he were actually present (Curtis, 1928:76-77).

I will not suggest there are contradictions in whether or not the Nehiyaw buried their dead... there is certainly enough evidence to prove that they did both. Certainly by the reservation period there was enough missionary influence to encourage the burial of the dead, and for the most part the Cree were infact burying their dead. With the outbreak of small-pox and influenza it was certainly healthier and easier to bury the

dead in graves as hundreds and in some cases thousands of people died during these outbreaks.

A thought does come to mind, however, regarding tree burials. This has to do with how the Nehiyaw treated the bones of dead animals after the hunt. In hunting it was extremely important to appease the spirit of the deceased animal. There was tremendous respect shown the animal so as not to alienate its spirit, so that the spirit of the animal would not hold a grudge towards human beings and disappear completely from the area (Martin, 1999:32-24). Rogers, in *The Quest for Food and Furs: The Mistassini Cree, 1953-1954*, makes the same observations (Rogers, 1973:12-15), stating that the Mistassini Cree placed the skull of animals in trees facing towards the east or southeast and that water direction played no part in the orientation of this placement.

It is possible that this tradition of hanging the body and bones of the deceased follows the same tradition of honouring animal bones after the hunt or when trapping. In a world where human spirits, plant spirits and animal spirits all shared the same cosmos, all had power and spirits and could interact with each other, it is possible that hanging human bones was the correct method of respect for the human body. The burial was preceded with a ceremony, blessing, and prayers to send the soul of the deceased to the land of the dead where life was easier and pleasant. Offerings of sweetgrass, tobacco, and food were made to the deceased and instructions were given to go forward to the land of the dead and not look back. One cannot take lightly how

much fear people had of the dead and how prevalent fear of ghosts and the dead still is today in many Cree families. There is an understanding and acceptance that the dead are not of “this world” anymore despite the fact that they are still part of it. They are different; they are no longer bound by the limitations of human beings. When the dead are around they are lonesome and there is tremendous concern that they will take the soul of a living person with them. Not all souls make it to the other side... depending on the type of life they have led or whether they received a proper burial, some linger and wander aimlessly, pestering the living.

In his book *Cree Narrative Expressing the Personal Meanings of Events* Richard J. Preston points out that a person who has starved to death will assist the person who buried him in improving that person’s hunting luck...

He was thinking about burying his brother. He was thinking that if he had starved and his brother had buried him, that he would bring luck to them in hunting, for burying him. When an Indian who had starved was buried, he gave luck in hunting to the Indian who buried him, as if he was pleased that he was buried. This is why the man is thinking that he probably would kill meat since he buried his brother.

...Since he buried his brother, this was the first time he checked the nets and hooks. He killed a very large pike on one of the hooks.... He had a feast with the large pike. He threw a piece in the fire for his brother who he had buried, hoping that he would bring hunting luck to him.

The next morning, he killed a lot of fish. Then the man started to kill a lot of meat. Before he buried his brother, he was unable to kill meat. He was having a difficult time like his brother. He started to kill meat every day. (Repeated.) He was able to help his brother’s wife and children survive. The man had five children. There were a total of eleven children (Preston, 2002:225-226).

Beeso, a Cree from Rocky Boy, Montana, describes a very different scene pertaining to the dressing of the deceased and removal of the body from the home, based on his experience of living in a mixed Cree/Chippewa/Métis community. He relates the following:

*When a person died all the clothing, utensils, etc were taken out of the lodge. The body was taken out of the back or the side of the lodge, not through the door. When the body was being removed from the lodge, the spirit was thus addressed, "Go, Go straight ahead. Do not take anyone with you. Do not look back, and when you reach your destination, talk for us. Tell that young man not to trouble us, not to come and take anyone away."*

*Originally the body was dressed and buried immediately after death occurred. Now it is kept overnight; it is dressed in its best clothes and together with weapons, utensils, tobacco, food, etc. it is placed in a shallow grave, lined with boughs and covered with rocks to protect it from coyotes and other animals and birds. Sometimes a lodge of some kind covered it. Sometimes they used a scaffold, as did the Sioux, Crows and others. The knees are drawn up and the body placed in a reclining posture. Two or three days after, a dead feast is held. The spirit of the person dying in the winter did not leave the vicinity where he died until spring.*

*The near relatives of the deceased gave away all their property, the lodge with all its furnishings, clothing, utensils, etc. Their tribesman, however, contributed to their needs, one giving a lodge, another a blanket and so on until they were as comfortably fixed as before (Dusenberry with Beeso 12/23/59, MSU Bozeman)*

Mr. Favel, a Cree, also from Rocky Boy, Montana relates a similar story but brings out an interesting role that the children play through whipping the body of the deceased with willow switches in order to prevent the soul of the departed from taking children with him or her as they travel to the land of the dead...

*When a man dies, he is dressed up as if he is going to a dance. He has his beaded outfit and all of his best clothes on. The people pray that*

*the man will go straight south and not look back and not take anyone else along. With the body is the pipe and some sweetgrass all wrapped up. Some food is usually placed there too.*

*The children in the camp are given a little willow switch and they are made to hit the dead so that they will go away and not bother the living. Often times a piece of buckskin is tied around the legs and the wrists of the children at night so that the soul won't follow the soul of the dead. Another taboo at this time is that one should not cry at night.*

*As soon as a person dies, all of his clothes and personal things are given away at once.*

*A person is not supposed to look back after he is returning from a burial. Men should not get too tired as they dig a grave or else they will always be tired. (Dusenberry with Mr. Favel 12/23/59 MSU Bozeman)*

In Chapter 5 modern Nehiyaw burial will be addressed. However, to speak to Pre-European Nehiyaw burials, modern day elders and ceremonialist all agree on the notion that the Nehiyaw never buried their dead prior to the Reservation Period. They insist that the tree burial was the usual form of burial (Casey Rowan, 2002; Mekwun Awasis, 2002, 2003; Victor Buffalo, 2002; Lyndan Tootoosis, 2003). In the spring of 2003, Lyndan Tootoosis led a visit to one of the traditional burial grounds on the Sweetgrass Reserve, which was a thickly wooded area along the Battle River where large, overgrown poplar or cottonwood and willow trees lined the river. This was only one of numerous sites where the community laid its dead to rest on planks in the branches of the trees. The last tree burial in the community was Strikes Him On The Back [1930s]. (Fine Day, I., 2003).

Mandelbaum however mentions several types of burial practices among the Plains Cree, the most common one being a grave burial:

*Dug about five feet deep with the bottom lined with a robe. Two horizontal slots were cut in the long side of the grave about a foot below the surface. After the corpse was placed in the grave, sections of*

tipi poles were tightly fitted into the slots. A robe was placed over the poles and a rawhide pegged down over the excavation. Earth was heaped over the rawhide (Mandelbaum, 1979:150).

This type of deep burial may have taken place following the Canadian Plains reservation period after 1873-78. As Brownlee and Syms pointed out, very early burial were very shallow with only a few inches of dirt covering the graves, or these people may have been killed during a battle and quickly buried so animals would not get to the body.

Mandelbaum also mentions chambers being built between two trees in which case a wooden coffin-like structure was built with notched logs, along with platform burial in the forks of large trees. The tree burials he describes as winter burials. They would be used to avoid building a large fire over the spot where the burial would take place in order to thaw the ground. There were also tipi burials in which the deceased would be laid to rest inside a tipi with all of his or her belongs. The tipi would be sewn closed, and the camp would break and move to a new location. Sometimes a person's tipi would be erected over his or her grave, and left to deteriorate. On very rare occasions, people were buried in a standing position.

According to Isabelle Fine Day, "Babies were placed in a moss bag, but it wasn't laced up, so the baby could move freely to where they were going" (Fine Day, I., Mar 9, 2003).

## THE FEAST FOR THE DEAD

The Feast for the Dead most commonly took place either on the fourth day following the death or immediately following the burial. Feasts for the Dead also took place on the anniversary date of the death or once a year at the cemetery. There were other ceremonies which acknowledged the dead and to which they were invited; these ceremonies included the Goose Dance, the Tea Dance, the Chicken Dance, the Round Dance and the Give Away Dance. The dead could also be fed at home before a family meal, or if a family member dreamt of a deceased relative he or she would put up a feast for the deceased. The dead could also be fed at the feast following a sweat, a puberty rite ceremony, or a fast. The dead were constantly remembered. In Muskwachees, a community of approximately 10 -15,000 people, a feast for the dead, formal or informal, is likely taking place in somebody's home on the reserve every day of the year.



The willows along the Battle River on the Sweetgrass Reserve in Saskatchewan, where the last tree burials took place.



The willows on the Battle River on the Sweetgrass Reserve, where Strikes Him On The Back was buried in the early 1930s.

The following is an account of the feast for the dead ceremony related to Mandelbaum by Fine Day, who led the ceremony in 1935.

*...The ceremony should have been yesterday, four nights after she [John Fine Day's mother-in-law] died.*

*First I asked him [the creator] to see the stem. "This is the stem you have given us to use whatever there is use for it" Then I lit the pipe and pointed it to kiceay sin. I told him – this woman is going to reach you. Be watching for her to get there. Let your osk [oskapeus] get ready to put this person in.*

*Then I pointed up to the star I asked him not to let this person who is leaving this world look behind but to go straight on. Then I point to tcahkcapeatayohkan. I ask him to tell the departed spirit ec.pwehtcahkwt "Going Spirit" where to go in the right way. Because tcah.[tcahkcapeatayohkan] is to look after her and direct her after the feast is over.*

*I pointed to tc [tcahkcapeatayohkan] sister notoyo and ask the same thing of her. "Tell the spirit where to go and how to act." After Not. talks to her the spirit does not wander about with a mind. Then I point to the ground and ask tc p. to go with her. Then I passed the pipe to John.*

*Then I held up the pail of food. This food is for the heavenly oskapeus to take so that the friends of the spirit who are waiting for her can have a good time. If there is no grub they say that the newly arrived spirit is not much good. There was a little of each kind of food in that pail.*

*When I raised the pail I said "Kiu. look at this – then kiceayisin. This is the food for the spirit that is going to reach you to take along. May she go straight to you. Tell your osk [oskapeus] to come and get the food for her so that she won't reach her destination empty handed.*

*Then I raised the pail to kicenapew ciu and asked her not to let the spirit look back but to go straight on where she is wanted, not to look back at their children or grandchildren. Next to tcahk. "Take care of the spirit as she wanders around." Next to notoyo. "to talk to the next tc tcipaiyucina. "Take the spirit where she is wanted. That's your work." Then I put a little food in the fire shovel on which the sweet grass was burning. That meant the food that the osk. [oskapeus] was to take along with them.*

*Then I took the cup of tea and held it up in the same way. Then I pray to kiu, to take care of us. All the children around to grow up to be old men and women, take care of old people. Take care of white man (me) [Mandelbaum] so he may make friends here and get what he is after, and reach home safely. When I finished talking the food was*

served around beginning with Pooyak on his left. Before they eat I ask that all those that eat the food do so for their health. May everybody be spared again to see another year. All start to eat. They took food out to others that didn't attend the feast so that when they eat it they may have good health.

When all finished eating I took my pipe and pointed it to tcipaiy [the deceased person]. "tc. It's your work to take the spirit where she must go so that she may reach there safely. Oks.get ready to take the food for the spirit that is leaving." I pointed the pipe around in a circle. When I drop the pipe, tc., osk. And spirit go off together. The same amount of food is brought up as there was at the feast. When they get up there, they start to dance (Mandelbaum and Fine Day, July 17-25, 1935: AMNH Box 2 Folder 1:17-19).

On another occasion Fine Day presents a completely different set of rules when praying at the Feast for the Dead. The reason for this may be a different type of ceremony honouring the dead:

When I took stem at feast I pointed first up to our father. Then swung stem around to moon, to kiceagisiginu, "Old Person". That is where the ahtak go. Then back to center again to Our Father. Then to the north where there is no sun, there is another manito there tcahkapew atagohkan (Mandelbaum and Fine Day, July 17-25, 1935 AMNH Box 2 Folder 1:46).

...Yes I have heard of a road to the land of the dead. In my dreams I followed the road to the land of the dead. In my dreams I followed the road where the ahtcihk go. I came to a big lake. There was a springy board over it. I was running on that board. I can hear a drum beating and the board goes up and down to the beat of the drum. After I crossed the lake I was running but dancing too, as though my steps are to the beat of the drum. I saw the sweet grass plant that has berries (of which you showed me a picture). They were blowing down the way I was dancing.

At last I reached the place where they were dancing. I didn't know where the door was. I came up to the side of the wasagamecimowik (which should be n. [north] and south). I lifted up the leather and crawled in. I joined the dance. They all, men, women, and children shouted, "Fine Day has arrived." When I danced around to where I had entered, they all sat down.

I sat down and looked around to see how it was built. I see something hanging from one of the poles. It seemed to be the skull of a

man. I wondered what it was but after I looked at it a while I saw legs and arms but I didn't see any body. I thought, "I'll grab it and run away."

The drums started to beat and the songs sang again. All stand up and dance. It was high enough to get by jumping. I thought that must be kiceayicin. I join the dance and circle around. When I reach the place where I had entered I looked around for my knife. I couldn't find it. I dance around again. When I got near enough I grab the head and break the string it was tied with. They all shout "Fineday took it away from us." They didn't say what it was.

I went back at full speed where I came from. When I reached the lake I ran across the board but I didn't feel it spring. I looked behind and saw somebody close behind me. I ran as fast as I could and saw some trees being blown down. When I reached them I jumped over the then hid under them.

The one that was behind me jumped over too. He stood looking ahead and couldn't see me. He searched but couldn't find me. Sometimes he would come near and say, "This is the last place where I saw him." Sometimes he almost touched me. I can hear his hand. Every now and then he would run up to the tree and jump over. "That's the way he did." I couldn't see who he was talking to, I only saw him. "It is a pity for us that he took that thing." They didn't say what that thing was. "O it is a pity, a pity. Fineday took that thing from us." The man stood there looking around for a while. "I guess we can't find him. We had better go back."

After I didn't hear anything I crawled out. I bet it for home, again. I looked back every once in a while – there was nobody behind me. Then I woke up. It was daylight. I put my hand under my left arm to feel for the skull. I didn't find anything. This is not the real truth – it was only a dream. It is a long time ago since I had that dream.

... I forgot one part. Many years after I took that skull, I saw it again in my dream. It spoke to me "you will take the eye teeth. That is what I was giving you." I know that is the skull I grabbed. This is still my dream. When that tooth was give to me he told me - "After this I will talk with you." Later on I can hear whistling close by my ear. I didn't understand what it meant at first but at last I did. I didn't take the tooth but he whistled close by and told me what is going to happen in a short time.

When I was left alone I hauled lots of wood. We didn't have a stove then. I made a big fire expecting the women and children. All at once I herd, "he's all alone." I recognized the voice of a man I knew, manikonowew "First to Shout." He was first to come in. Others followed him. They made fun of me. They said all kinds of things. I was scared and kept looking at the fire – I didn't look to see who was there. I sat until my fire was just beginning to go out. All at once "I guess we have got to go out now they are coming." They went out.

When the men and women came in they told me that they are going to have another dance. I said that I would go with them this time. I didn't want to be left home alone. At night I had to do some work and I couldn't go. They all went again. "Here he is alone again." I hear them shout. Man. [manikonowew] was the first to jump in again. Then I was scared. I made a big fire. I sat looking at it and didn't dare to turn around. They say all sorts of things and made fun of me. Pity me. I'll get up a dance for you at the first fall of the snow. I'll make a wewahtahogan\hk "Joined together Tipi" (wasagamec\muwin) (round Dance) and you will have a dance." There was silence for a little while. I didn't hear anything. Then they went out one by one. This is not a dream (sic). I saw that myself. This is nothing but truth. I didn't see them for I didn't dare look around. But I hear them talk. As soon as I promised they left one by one. I didn't hear them go but I heard the door. After that they didn't bother me.

In the summer when the berries began to ripen my mother and my wife helped me get a lot. That fall I have everything ready. I am just waiting for the snow to fall. I move down to where we are now. After I moved it snowed a little but not much. I've got to fulfill my promise. I had everything ready. My mother went around to borrow some pails to cook in and a few women came in to help with the cooking. We had all kinds of berries and lots of mitcimapiu soup. I invited mask watik "Hand Stick" and mahihk anuwayan "Wolf Skin". They used to make this dance. They showed me how to act. They said, "This is not the only dance you will make in the future." They were the two headmen.

That's where my dream came from and how I come to make this dance. In the round dance the pipes are pointed pretty nearly the same as at the feast. Sometimes when a person dies they do not make a feast but promise to make a round dance.

Four drums were used in that dance. As soon as Wolf Skin started to sing you can hear somebody whistling close above his head. While he was singing they stopped beating the drums. He said "Everybody get up. They are dancing between you." When he said that it was the ahtcak dancing between the people. I don't know if he saw them.

The first four singers passed the drums on. Each man sings a song until all finish. When there are no more singers they hand the drum to Fineday and three men help me. In the dream I heard a song while I was crossing the lake. When I joined the dance there I learned other songs. I used those songs in the dance I gave. I sang four times and after I did the people went out. I was the last to sing.

When I used to sleep with my grandson Archie, that thing used to whistle right over my head. Archie used to cover his head. When he left to go to Duck Lake School I never heard it any more. I couldn't say if Archie took it from me. I never heard it since. I never ask him if he still hears it.

*After I had my dream, I watched now, the man whose voice I had heard. I forgot to tell you that the spirits bothered me for five nights. But I couldn't say if he was with them for four or five nights. If it was five nights, he was to live only five more years. He did die five years later.*

*I have told all that I know about this. It is half dreams and half truth (Mandelbaum interviewing Fine Day June 27 – July 2, 1935, AMNH, Folder 2 Box 1:17-19; 22-24).*

Mrs. Isabelle Fine Day from the Sweetgrass Reserve discusses the Feast For The Dead and points out that:

*the feast for the dead was always held on the fourth day, there is not always three days of wake. A feast is always held on the anniversary date. The soup for the dead on the Sweetgrass Reserve is made of berries and meat thickened with wild turnip flour. Blood soup is the best type of soup to offer the grandfathers... that's what they like. Food is put aside in a dish and is placed in the bush. When you take food into the sweat lodge, the dish of food that comes out for the spirits is placed in the fire though (Fine Day, I., Mar 9, 2003).*

## **THE CEMETERY FEAST FOR THE DEAD**

Fine Day briefly described the Cemetery Feast for the Dead to Mandelbaum in the following interview:

*Long ago not many people used to die, just one or two every year. When we would pitch camp near a grave, one of the relatives of the dead person would go and fix the grave. After it is done he comes back and cooks a lot of food and invites people to the feast. It has been that way for a long time. Fixing the grave is (the feast) called nahinukewin, "Fixing a Tipi in Proper Order." There is no special way of fixing a grave. You just clean it up and pile dirt on top where the grave has caved in.*

*Since reserve times our graves are together, not scattered all over. So once a year we clean the graves together, whenever we have time. If the weather is bad we put it off for another day. We have a feed – its meaning is that we are having a meal with the spirits*

(Mandelbaum with Fine Day interpreted by Solomon: Sept. 10, 1934, AMNH Box 3 Folder 1:88).

On another occasion Fine Day discusses other types of feast to which the dead are invited and where they are honoured and fed; in this case on the occasion of a hunter killing the first ducks of the season.

*O yes, occasionally when a man killed the first ducks he would make a feast for the departed spirits. It would take five or six ducks to make a feast. There has got to be a pipe. They fill the pipe. Before they light it they ask kicem [kicemento] to see the stem. Then they put some duck meat on a plate. Then light the pipe and point it south for ahtcak departed spirit. Then point it straight upward – then point it twice to the north and then down to the ground.*

*Straight up is for assini, "Stone"; to north for tcahkapewatayohkan, "Touching atay" and his sister notogwewatayohkan, "Old Woman Atay". Then they point south they name the one that keeps the departed spirits, kiceayican, "Old Man". When they point to the ground it is for tcepaiyuicini, "Ghost stone".*

*First the pipe is pointed. Then the plate is held up in the same directions.*

*Then the Osh [oskapeos] serve around the food. The people don't eat yet. Then the old man asks that everything be well and that they be no sickness around. Then he says, "you can eat." He doesn't call on the names of the departed at all. There is no special name for this – just a feast (Mandelbaum with Fine Day: June 25, 1935, AMNH Box 1 Folder 1:45).*

## THE SOUL

Judeo-Christian beliefs have been powerful forces in Aboriginal communities across North America since the arrival of Europeans to the Continent. One of the beliefs of Christian philosophy is the concept that human beings possess only one soul. However such beliefs have not always been the norm among Aboriginal communities. Nor has the belief that only human beings possess a soul. According to many sources,

(Jones, W. 1906:146; Jenness, 1932:279; Kinietz, 1947:165) a vast majority of Aboriginal communities and Indigenous people believed in human's possessing several souls; from two to as many as seven, however two and four being common beliefs. Fine Day implies in the following account the Cree belief in a duality of souls and also tells of the ceremonies to perform when one is fearful of dying, when one is lost and needs to know something he calls on the dead to help.

*Man-to the creator makes all these things. I don't name him very often when I start to talk but his right name is Kice-manpto. Since a long time ago he has a place up there, a home. He is among every child and ever woman and every man. Even in our hearts. That's the way I know him.*

*The atayohkauuk are all the spirits: the pawa-guu is your own dream spirit – your personal dream guardian.*

*When I offer a pipe before I go to sleep, I sleep and somebody comes to invite me some place. My body is still there but my ahtca-hk goes. This lives not in the body but right along the back of the neck and head. When you are scared or something is going to happen you feel him telling you to watch out.*

*My pawa-guu leads me into a big tipi around which many atayohkauuk are sitting. Some of them give me songs – some tell me how to make a Sun Dance - how to point the pipe. These are my pawa-gunuk.*

*The first person the creator made was askiwiyiu "Earth Person" the first woman was ota-watas "Carrier". He told them that he was going to stay with them for a long long time. He made the man and woman after he made everything else. He stayed with them a long long time. They raised a big family. When there got to be a lot of people the next thing he gave to the Indians was the Sun Dance. He said that it was to be done in two days. But he then saw that there would be too much to do for two days so he split it up into other dances. They are Pihtwauwikamik – smoking tipi; manipanika-muwikamik – Night singing Tipi; or also called wasakamecimuwikamik – Round Dancing or nayahtcigau. Wihtigohkanikamik – Cannibal Tipi; muskwacimu-ikamik – Bear Dance Tipi. Next comes the bundle Ceremony...kamitohkwiskwe-pita-guu, "Giving a Bundle."*

*The Creator made the atagohkau and told the people that they would appear to the old men, and would tell them what names to give the children.*

*Then He said, "Where I go now you will never see me, but I will always be with you." You will see the atagohkau only at night – not during the day. Young children will see them often – while they are clean*

– and to them the atagohkau will give power. I give you everything you need to live – berries, etc. I put all those things handy for you.

But I also leave something for you to be afraid of. Something whereby you will be hurt. It will be thus forever.”

.... He also said, “The Sun Dance – the one that will be honest and do it correctly will deserve a part of my name and will be called kiceinu, “Eternal.”

“When you are afraid of your life ending, you can promise one of the things I showed you and I will be right there listening. But you must first name that which you are promising.”

Then he turned around to the whole bunch of atagohkau and told them. “There will be an extra tipi made for you when somebody wants to know something. And when you are called, you must all go.”

The name of that tipi is kotac-tciticikiwikamik, “Trying to shake tipi” or kosa-pahtcigau, “Looking Around.” I can make this tipi and do it but my mother stopped me from doing it because some Indians believe that the one who goes in and “looks around” is trying to kill somebody. ...

When Man-to doesn’t want the Indians to know anything, he will take away the atagohkau. But as long as they are there we will always have them.

In my kindness to men-to I am telling you this. It is no mistake or sin that we are doing this last. But when you make any history of this – please it would be best to put it first (Mandelbaum, with Fine Day, AMNH Sept 10, 1934, Box 3 Folder 1:88-92).

Mandelbaum adds to Fine Day’s account and compares other Algonquian cultural beliefs.

Prominent in the mortuary rites of the Plains Cree is an invocation to the spirit of the deceased to depart quickly and not to linger about the camp. Should the spirit look back in its journey, one of its relatives will die. The Eastern Cree also are fearful lest the departing spirit take a relative along. .... The Menomini tell of two souls. One lingers about the grave after death. The other, called tcebbai (cf Plains Cree tcipai), travels to the land of the dead. The lingering spirit is feared. Skinner notes that he came upon this belief in two souls among the Plains Cree. My data would bear him out, save that the two are rather manifestations of the same soul. That is, the soul that remains on earth is called tcipai; when it ascends, it is ahtca-k. (Mandelbaum, 1979:303)

Isabelle Fine Day remembered that as a child they were made to lay on the floor of the house and not look out at the passing body during the funeral procession: “*If you watch them going by the person who died will watch you and take your soul away and you’re going to die soon*”. (Fine Day, I., Mar 9, 2003).

## PREVENTIONS

Ruth Gardipee, from Rocky Boy, Montana shared her memories and teachings about the soul, ghosts and ways of preventing ghosts from visiting the home:

*A ghost is a soul. A ghost roams around four nights after a person dies before it leaves.*

*Ghosts dance at the dances, too. None can see them out they are there. That is why when the dance ends, someone always announces that this at the end, “We’re going home”. It is the same way with the kids. As the parents dress each one and gets it ready to leave, they tell the child that they are going home. If one doesn’t do that, the ghost is likely to take the soul away.*

*You can’t leave lard outside at night because if you do the ghosts will come and you will hear you or they will whistle at you. You don’t whistle at night because that is their language. If a person is brave enough, he can take lard outside at night when the Northern lights are playing. Then if you’ll whistle, the ghosts will come right up to you and will set you crazy.*

*You never leave any food uncovered at night. Fats especially are bad but even water must be covered because the ghosts will come if the food is there. They like to play in open buckets of water and sprinkle it on the fire or stove. If you put a little charcoal in the water, it will repel the ghosts.*

*Ghosts are dressed as they were when they died. They don’t touch the ground as they walk but keep about one foot above the ground. They can walk through logs or wall of a house. As soon as the sun goes down, one can’t eat outside. Sometimes a ghost can follow a person and you can*

*hear it but you can't see it. Dogs and horses can see ghosts but humans can't.* (Dusenberry with Ruth Gardipee (12/29/59) MSU Bozeman Box 6 File 11).

The Cree word for the Northern Lights is tcipay-uk “ghosts”. Here Fine Day introduces the idea that the spirit of the deceased is not restricted to the land of the dead. There is a sense here in his remarks that the souls of the dead are free to wander and dance if they so please.

*The Indians believe that these are the spirits of the dead dancing in the sky. But the white men say it is only the shadow of the ocean. I believe the white man too, for they have aeroplanes and they can go up at the sky and look at these things. But I believe the old Indians too who say it is the spirits of the dead dancing. For sometimes when there is a fresh fall of snow you can sometimes see a huge footprint – a solitary one. Who can make it but the ghosts...* (Mandelbaum with Fine Day, AMNH Box 3 Folder 1).

## SPIRITS

Fine Day attempts to explain the concept of spirits atayahkan and ahtocak, which seems to be confusing to Fine Day himself. He points out his lack of knowledge concerning where the ahtcatk goes after we die. He also explains that the dead are fed at feasts because they bring blessings.

*We call all the spirits manitowok or atayohkanuk. So we call angels we see in pictures and the face in the moon.*

*I never heard tell of how the ahtcak was created. I don't understand the difference between ahtcak and atayohkan. We know that kicenamito lives forever. The ahtcak goes and lives with kicemanito.*

*When you are about to be born kicemanito gives you an ahtcak in the womb. When you are born the ahtcak is with you right along. But nobody knows where it is. The ahtcak directs our minds. When it is weak and doesn't help a person enough – this is what we call a crazy man. When ahtcak leaves you – you are dead. Every creeping thing has an ahtcak. Where it goes after it leaves a man or beast I don't know (Mandelbaum with Fine Day, July 17, 1935. AMNH Box 1 Folder 5: V 1-2).*

*After a person dies the spirit wanders around for four nights [days] aimlessly before it knows where to go. The feast on the fourth night is the last feed for the spirit and then it goes (Mandelbaum with Fine Day, AMNH June 25, 1935, AMNH Box 1 Folder 1:5-6)*

*It seldom happens that an ahtcak appears. An old couple may die. They love their children and especially their grandchildren – for the Cree love their grandchildren even more than their own children (sic). They come back to the earth to guard them. In that case, when a spirit descends to earth, no print or anything is offered. They cook a meal and offer it up in thanks for the departed with sweet grass smudge and a pipe. The man that puts up the wasegamecim never has a departed spirit for an atay. Any man that has dead relatives may put up a feast..... No I never heard of a powerful medicine man appearing after his death as an atay. He might come in a vision but prints are never offered to them.*

*...they offer the food because they love the ahtcah and because they want their blessings. They ask the departed to offer up prayers to the higher deity for them. Those that make the feast do it not only for their own but for the good of all. I think that the ahtcah are higher up than the atayohkan. Those people who have seen it in vision claim that the good haunted man's spirit lives higher up than those who led a bad life. So it is with the atay. Good ones are higher up than the evil ones. This is known because some people die and go up. But is time for them yet and they are sent back to earth. Atay.. maskihkiw manito and metew manito are the same. For them dogs are killed and eaten. People are given medicinal plants in a vision by them (Mandelbaum interview with Fine Day, AMNH Box 1 Folder 6:VI 2-3).*

## THE DANCES

The Ghost Dance of course is the most obvious of the dances dedicated to dancing with the dead. Its name is not to be confused with the popular Ghost Dance religious

movement, which swept the Plains during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. This particular Plains Cree Dance is properly called *Anisksimok* in Muskwachees, meaning “Following The Other”. The Sweetgrass Cree word for this dance is *Nanapawnikamowikamik* according to Fine Day, Mandelbaum’s consultants. Isabelle Fine Day calls it Wasakamesema or Round Dance (Fine Day, I., March 2002). While Mandelbaum, on the other hand, records it as tci *paicimuwin* (Mandelbaum, AMNH, Box 3 Folder 2:26).

Mekwun Awasis, from Muskwachees, points out that spirits came to their ancestors and directed them how to create the bundles, which are carried in the dance. Although men or women can care for the “spirit bundles”, women generally care for the bundles as they are at the house more regularly than men. There is a spiritual reason for keeping and caring for the bundles and the sacred bundles protect their keepers.

When the bundle is added to, generally after a ceremony is over and between the moons, the first one whose hair or personal belongings is in the bundle must be named in the course of the ceremony, then those who followed. When adding the hair of a deceased person to the bundle the new hair cannot be touched. It is handled with ribbon, and an old man adds the hair to the bundle. Bundles are hung on the wall at night and put down during the day. Some bundles are kept in beaded hide bags, and others are wrapped in cloth.

There is also a tremendous responsibility in keeping a bundle, in that they cannot be left alone and unattended in the home. When the bundle is brought to a feast it is placed at the front and it has to be acknowledged. The ceremony itself takes in the early fall (Mekwun Awasis, Mar 11, 2003). Rowan pointed out that each of these

ceremonies has its own songs as you are praying to different entities at each ceremony (Rowan, May 11, 2004).

Leigh Micklin, a Cree-Métis from Montana, remembered attending the dances as a young man and describes the dance in a very different way than what has been described so far. He relates the following:

*The Crees call it the Ghost Dance when they bring in the spirits that have gone, the people that have gone to the other side, they sing these songs and bring these spirits in to enjoy dancing with their people.*

*They used to tell us don't crowd to see the dance, go single file. You have a white sheet over you or something white over your head, something like a white form, the way of the spirit form, the white form, cloudy-like. That's what they put over our heads and we danced single file around this dance, arbor, maybe they have four teepees together, almost like the Yakima's long house, it's a big long dancing area, that we dance in. They told us don't touch each other when you are dancing because that spirit will be dancing between you and the person ahead of you. So that's what they used to do.*

*Four people are putting up that ghost dance and they sit over there and usually the lodge is facing the South. Their backs are toward the North and they are facing South. They usually do it at night; they don't do it during the day (Micklin, 1941-1942).*

Raining Bird and Tom Gardipee from Rocky Boy, Montana had another name for the Cree Ghost Dance...its meaning is translated as Jumping Dance. "*The Cree name for the ghost dance is swas-kuts si-mun Jumping Dance*" (Dusenberry interview with Tom Gardipee 8/31/60 MSU Bozeman, Box 6 File 11).

*Ghost Dance: The name of this dance is a mistake. It should be called "jumping Dance". Bundles are taken with the people to the dance. There is always a big feast. The spirits of the dead come back to tell the people here about the way of life after death and how those who are living must follow the directions and teachings of the Creator and not to forget them or else it will be bad (Dusenberry interview with Raining Bird 8/26/60 MSU Bozeman Box 6 File 1).*

• GHOST DANCE

In another spot Mandelbaum recorded Fine Day describing a Ghost Dance or Night Singing Tipi and Give Away Dance ceremonies, as the dance generally takes place inside a lodge structure. However, I attended one in early November inside a school gym in 1986 on the Alexander Reserve, where they call their ghost dance a "Soup Dance".

*The first people here were taught how to make bundles for the dead (one's hair) and the bundles talked. Tc [the creator] changed that so the bundles don't talk but understand what the people are saying. Then I pointed to the ground, to askiaw/tow/skwew, Earth Manito woman, then to the stone asinaper/n [assinapewin] in the ground. Then I pointed twice to the fire. Fire said he would serve the people all the time. You point to the fire twice when you are about to eat.*

*...No, we do not point to notogwew. You also point to the one who died, who is where kiceagisinu is. Before he pointed out Kin., he talked to the ahtak [achak] and ....the grub they are giving.*

*The stem is pointed in the same way for the Night Round Dance. Only put tobacco in that bundle to-day (?)*

*In mourning the hair is cut short. Before you can comb it, a person must come and comb your hair for you. Long ago, when you lost someone you loved, you scratched your arms and legs with a knife. You would not put leggings on for a year (Mandelbaum with Fine Day, Aug 23 – Sept 3, 1935, AMNH Box2 File 2 page X-1).*

*When a person died – they make a feast, which is provisions for him. When all is over kiceyucayin looks after the spirit now and the sun as well.*

*There is a ceremony called "Night Singing Tipi", nanapawnikamowikamik, that is inviting all the spirits to come and have a feast with human beings. We will have one on the 6<sup>th</sup> of July.*

*I had a dream of that tipi. Only they don't circle round. I won't sing those songs now because I am afraid of the spirits. Nowadays this dance is called wasagame cimuwinn [wasakam simuwinn].*

*In the ----- feast, after the pipe is lit they name the departed and say here is a smoke for you.*

*The work of tcahkapawatayonhkan is to keep the spirit in the bundle (?). He is now looking after the spirit of that woman who died.*

*When a lock of hair is taken from the corpse and put in the nayah tcigan (bundle), tcah. Tells the ahtcak to be in that bundle and whenever there is a feast you will be there to eat.*

*That old lady who died is still around. She will be until after the feast. Then "Old Woman At." Will tell her not to look back but to go straight on to where she is wanted. When the feast is over, noto, will tell tchip. to take the spirit to where it should go. There are oskapeus there to open the door to the spirit to enter.*

*When the stem is pointed up it may be the stone above not in heaven. His job is to tell the departed spirit not to look back, not to try and coax his friends to go with him. That is what was shown to me. If a spirit should look back, one of his relatives is bound to die.*

*They go to oskaskos.wask: "Green Grass World:. Everything is always green there. It is never night, always day. There is only enjoyment there. Men, women and children all go to the same place. It is a big city (settlement). Long ago people that were dead came alive and told of this place. [For full story see page 48+ box 1 Folder 1] (Mandelbaum and Fine Day June 23-27, 1935 Box 1 Folder 1:47-48).*

#### • GIVE AWAY DANCE

The origin and description of the Give Away Dance, Mahtahitowin is described by Fine Day. This is another feast where one may seek blessings.

*Kin. gave us this dance. He is always the first to be asked for luck. Not many atag. are asked to come here, just one pretty nearly all the time. We invite Pakahkos, an atag. Out north. He is just skin and bones but is like a person. He floats in the air. He is the leader and also kipaguk kanakatikogakik [kanakatoskeow], "Those who have left us". Just like that girl who left us here yesterday. They invite this stone there also, asini, also the green mistigok, pakahkwatik [green poplar]. They put a stick there and stand it up. That is like the pak.*

*Here Koutciginak [akatchikana] said, we should always give the atag. a smoke before we talk about them. I have promised to give piheowsimuwin, "Prairie chicken dance". Not many here have seen it. The Prairie chickens are the leaders there and show the people how to make that dance. We point to those that have left us and invite them in there too.*

*This stone is the greatest servant on earth for the people. He talks to the atag. And to the kn. for the people. He is an atag. himself. He has three names tchipaigusini [kawpehewasini], muskwacini, bear sonte, asini. The stone interprets for the people.*

*Just men dance in the Prairie Chicken Dance* (Mandelbaum and Fine Day, July 17-25, 1935, AMNH Box 2 Folder 1:25-26, 46).

## CONCLUSION

Although one would expect to find numerous sacred stories on beliefs about death and the afterlife from the largest cultural group on the Northern Plains there are surprisingly few documented Plains Cree sacred stories dealing with death, burial and the afterlife. This area is in dire need of more research. The current generation at Muskawchees is certainly not aware of such sacred stories.

There is also very little literature on Cree rituals pertaining to death, burial, feeding the dead and feasting with the dead. Fortunately, due to the work of explorers, Hudson Bay company employees, early linguists and anthropologists some record does exist, particularly during the 1930s through to the 1950s. What is strikingly obvious in these accounts is that similar belief systems do exist among Montana, Alberta and Saskatchewan Cree, although, the terminology for ceremonies, dances, the keeper of the land of the dead and main personage of certain ceremonies appears to vary greatly. This may be due to regional dialects or influence of neighbouring cultures, such as the Anishnaabe (Ojibwa/Saulteaux/Chippewa), and Nakota (Stony) people. More research certainly has to be carried on in this area.

Some obvious conclusions which can be drawn from this research is the ancient relationship which exists between the Cree and the realm of the dead – a fear which propels families and the community to satisfy the needs of the dead to be feasted, and remain in contact with the living resulting in prayers, petitions, feeding and feasting,

and celebrating being directed towards the dead. There is a recognition that the dead, aside from being somewhat of a burden on the living, may be of tremendous assistance and blessing to the living. There is a symbiotic relationship between the living and the dead; the souls of the dead need to be fed but they can also be mischievous. The living, require blessings and good luck, feed the souls of the dead in hopes of receiving those blessings.

Within this chapter is also a discussion on one of the most important ceremonies involving the deceased, that is the "Ghost Dance". Although I have provided descriptions of the ceremony as described by Fine Day, people in Hobbema and on the Alexander Reserve are very reluctant to discuss either the dance or the use and importance of the spirit bundles. Two individuals were comfortable sharing with me what they knew about the ceremony and bundles but asked that I not write about what they told me. Therefore I am respecting their request concerning their information.

The following chapter is one of the most important chapters in this research as it presents contemporary views about death and the afterlife as expressed by the Cree at Muskwachees as well as some of the traditionalists from the Poundmaker and Sweet Grass Reserves. In this chapter we discover that despite the 200 years of contact with Europeans, missionaries, and government impositions, traditional Plains Cree belief systems regarding death and the afterlife and the need for family and community to feed and feast with the dead are still intact and that this knowledge and these traditions have been passed on through the use of oral history.

What is strikingly obviously is despite increased European contact, influence of the space age and a multiplicity of data on everything from space travel to disease and access to the world via the internet, the Pan Indian movement, and a materialist world that surrounds them, traditional Plains Cree belief system concerning death and the afterlife carries on. The current challenge to the traditional ceremonialists is to maintain these traditional belief systems and ensure that they are passed on.

## **CHAPTER 5**

**21st CENTURY**

**NEHIYAW BELIEFS ON DEATH, THE AFTERLIFE,  
AND THE JOURNEY TO A GREAT LAND**



**FEAST AT LITTLE PINE CEMETARY**

Allen Sapp

Cree

BA 360 Allen Sapp Gallery, North Battleford, Saskatchewan

Used with permission

## **21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY NEHIYAW BELIEFS ON DEATH, THE AFTERLIFE, AND THE JOURNEY TO A GREAT LAND**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the previous chapter, Plains Cree mythology regarding concepts of death and the afterlife, views and beliefs regarding the soul, the journey to the afterlife, the land of the dead, historic accounts of Cree burial practices, the feast, memorial events and celebrations with the dead were examined primarily from a historical perspective. These accounts were presented primarily through observations and writings of missionaries and fur traders, and through the work of early ethnologist such as Edward Curtis, David Mandelbaum, Leonard Bloomfield, and Vern Dusenberry.

This chapter will mirror the previous one in that it will follow the same themes, namely: Plains Cree perspectives on burial, the feast for the dead, the Cemetery Feast for the Dead, the notion of the soul, the notion of spirits and the various dances which the Plains Cree perform in order to remember and celebrate with their dead. Where they differ is that in Chapter 5 we hear the “voice of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Nehiyaw” express his and her understanding of the oral tradition: the Nehiyaw belief system, ceremonies, dances, and celebrations based on what has been handed down to them through oral tradition and personal teachings.

The material for this chapter was collected through interviews I conducted between 2000 and 2003. These interviews and transcriptions are a part of the Canadian Museum of Civilization Archival collection, in Gatineau, Quebec. The voice of both men and women are represented in this chapter. All the participants are over the age of 45 years with the eldest person being over 70 years old. The men who were involved in this project were, or still are, ceremonialists who conduct(ed) the various feasts and

ceremonies associated with the dead on the four reserves in Muskwachees, Alberta as well as the community at Pigeon Lake. Three consultants are from Saskatchewan, from the Sweetgrass Reserve and Poundmaker's Reserve, where David Mandelbaum conducted his research in the early 1930s. One of the consultants was born and raised on the Kehewin Reserve in north central Alberta but married into the Ermineskin Band at Muskwachees over 30 years ago. I have known all of the consultants from Muskwachees for approximately 25 years.

Many of the belief systems, procedures, and ceremonies mentioned in the previous chapter have remained the same over the years, up to the present. However, there have been numerous changes in Plains Cree people's personal and spiritual, as well as economic and political, lives that have come about since European contact. What will be apparent in this chapter are the frustrations voiced by several of the traditionalists over the way ceremonies and customs have changed over the past twenty to fifty years. The traditionalists and ceremonialists have voiced their discontent with the manner in which some community members are presenting themselves as legitimate ceremonialists but insist on ignoring Plains Cree protocol in conducting their ceremonies. As a result the traditionalists and ceremonialists voice a deep concern over movements in the community towards Pan-Indianness and the introduction and implementation of "non-Cree" belief systems and methods of performing very important ceremonies and dances associated with feasts where the dead are invited to participate. The impact of ceremonies being performed incorrectly generally means that the souls of the dead are not being returned to the land of the dead properly, leaving the community vulnerable to

death and injury. In some cases the traditionalists were so frustrated over the refusal of modern day ceremonialists to follow Cree protocol that some withdrew from the community and stopped teaching and conducting ceremonies except for their immediate family.

One of my intentions in conducting research on Plains Cree beliefs regarding death and the afterlife was to learn how much Cree tradition had been maintained over the past 130 years since the reserve period began. The main intention however was to hear contemporary Plains Cree people relate the teachings they heard from their parents and elders and voice their beliefs about the real issues surrounding death and the afterlife. In preparing this chapter it made sense to me to allow this space to be utilized to hear those beliefs first hand, rather than try to paraphrase what people have said. All of the people who took part in this consultation project are individuals who attended residential school and were exposed to Christian theology as well as their traditional Cree beliefs. In some cases Christian influence is obvious through the use of Christian prayers, the funeral masses, the rosary, Christian burials, and hymns have become a part of everyday Plains Cree life from as far back as before the reservation period. In some instances it is evident that the two philosophies, the Christian and Traditional Plains Cree have become intertwined. In other instances they are very distinct yet, somewhat amazingly similar in ways. This research however focuses on Traditional Plains Cree beliefs and traditions as they existed before the reservation period and how it manifests itself today. This section will begin with the major issues of concern by traditionalists who fear the quick erosion of "traditional belief and protocol".

## ISSUES OF CONCERN

The major issue of concern for most people who discussed modern day funerals in Cree communities was the lack of respect people in general show towards the deceased, the presence of children at wakes and the lack of control parents exercise over the behaviour of children who attend the wakes. This leads to a lack of respect for the deceased and those people present, including the souls of the departed, who come to the feasts and dances given in their honour.

*That's one thing the elders never allowed was for the children to go where there were remains like in a wake. That's one thing I always try to stress. That it's no place for children. Even the relative's children weren't allowed to go there just elders were there. I think with respect to the deceased, that's why they done that. A lot of times I find children go into the casket and see, and even touch the remains. And that was not allowed. There was a lot of respect for the deceased people a long time ago. That's why, even when they had a feast for the deceased. Even those things now days have changed so much, you know. The kids just lay around showing no respect for what's happening there. A long time ago the elder women never use to allow the kids to run around at feasts, even stepping over people. That was a "no no" for anybody, especially the women are not suppose to step over the man. That's how much respect they're supposed to have for the men (Semaganis, March 19, 2003, CMC AV 2004-1:1).*

There were a number of consultants who voiced concern over the fact that women were joining in and singing traditional "going home" songs at funerals which, according to Cree protocol, should only be sung by men.

*That (women singing traditional Cree songs at funerals) was never done. And elderly women in the past have always stopped that from happening. That is a man's duty to do that for the deceased. And they do it for the women for the respect. Women aren't supposed to sing at those things!*

*The woman's role is basically preparing the body of the deceased, making food preparation and all that. The men's role is to sing the songs*

*for them. I know at Christian burials they always have women sing the gospel (hymns), but traditionally men sang those songs, because those songs are theirs. And only certain songs are utilized. You don't just pick up any song. Now they're singing Pow-wow songs, they're not using the old ceremonial songs. (p3)*

*There's a lack of feeling and sensitivity; respect is gone. People will pick up a song here and they bring it back, and utilize it whether it's for a ceremony, they change the beat on it. A few chords and the lyrics or whatever. It's sad! Like us, we're using songs that are over 500 years old yet ahhh, yet even older than that. It's not hard to make up a song in just a few minutes eh and put that in a ceremony. There's a reason how those songs follow one another. There are rules why these songs are there! There's a story behind it and everything and why that song.*

*It's a scary thought when you sit down and think of it. And you look outside and there is no culture. And I guess the only culture is esthetic now. Basically that's what it is. People that do practice traditional ways who are trying to maintain whatever that's there have gone underground again. (p4)*

*Where traditionally it is proper to have the Ekweaskino or "the last one" pipe ceremony at sunrise where the body is resting, before the body leave for the burial, many people are having the pipe ceremony at the gravesite. But there is a special ceremony that's done. But today, like I said, they're using a pipe ceremony they use for a sweat, it's not the pipe ceremony for their journey, their final journey!! There is a pipe ceremony for the final journey! (Rowan, December 5, 2000, CMC AV 2001-11:7).*

There has also been quite a change over the years in the number of people required to perform the feast for the dead. The increase in the number of ceremonialists officiating at ceremonies certainly annoyed one elder. Marvin Buffalo had this to say:

*Well with our ceremonies everything is changing all the time. The reason for that is because everything is so political now. It's all politics involved. For instance we have four men sitting over there (four pipe men sitting up front where the ceremonialists sit) now. But before when I was young going to feasts there was just the one that did the pipe and did everything he sat alone and done it. And as far as the grease (the bowl of grease, sugar and berries) is concerned it was the Pipeman that did that. That was done. But things go so political they got to have four now. And a lot of times in most cases you don't need the two (Pipeman number 3 and 4), they just sit there as a piece of furniture. ... But before there was just that one old man that did the whole thing. That presided in the whole thing. For example at the Catholic church when you go to church on Sunday you don't see four priests standing up there. Just one. That's the way it was with our ceremonies. There was just the one to preside in the*

*whole thing. But with politics and all that stuff getting mixed up and all these different ceremonies and cultural events why you now see that's the way it's done now. People take for granted that that's the way it should be. But it's really not. It just started happening about 30 or 20 years ago. Not that long ago. The only time you have four old men sitting there, was at a Sundance. Not the actual Sundance itself but those singsongs before, once a month and all those things. ...But now it's gone into Tea Dances and ordinary regular feasts. ...People have the idea that that's the way it has to be. That's the way I say somebody is misleading somebody. It is not necessary to do that (Buffalo, Marvin, July 5, 2000, CMC AV 2001-3:9)*

*Now they're prolonging the service. They're competing as to who has the longest service now days. Some of them are going up to 7:00 (pm). They start at 10:00 and they end up at 7:00 in the evening. It's getting totally ridiculous. Because you get to the burial site, they sing the songs and they all leave. You're not supposed to stay there and prolong the situation because it is harder on the people, the immediate family that is grieving. What they are doing is actually hurting these people, physically, mentally in their grieving process.*

*We just had a funeral here recently nobody was even aware of it. An individual was found in his house he had been deceased for two weeks. Took it in, the morgue done the things for the deceased and everything it was buried the same day. Nobody was at the funeral there was no wake. He had already been gone two weeks. It (the casket) was sealed and everything. That shows me that the family that buried him knew about their culture (Rowan, December 5, 2000, CMC AV 2001-11:8).*

## **THE FIRE: ISKOTAO**

A sacred fire is built immediately at the home of the deceased, or community hall where the wake would be held, upon hearing that someone has died. This sacred fire is called the iskotao.

*The fire is lit and it is allowed to die by itself after four days. Even that a lot of people don't know the meaning of it. It is his or her own fire going. (p6)*

*It is kept for four days, until the deceased is put away. The four days counts from the day the individual is dead four days from then. Where the deceased is being arranged, where the wake is going to be. Yeah, the fire is always there. A lot of people don't understand iskotao, which is your fire, your home fire. When people move they take the ashes or the coals from their fire when they move to a new house, they make a*

*little fire pit and they make a new fire. Traditionalists always do this. If you go out camping in the mountains you make a fire. You take those coals and you bring them home back to your home fire. Cause if you leave it out there the spirit of your fire is way down there, there's no spirit in your home. So whoever's fire when that fire goes out he or she is taking their fire home. And to me that goes back maybe thousands of years ago. And I have an understanding that without fire there is no life. I don't know if it's pre-historic, I don't know how it originated but that's just common sense to me. Without heat there is no life. So that's why on the fourth day that fire always goes with the home fire. (p6)*

*Their home fire: iskotao. It's like when you're going on a trip too. Say you go to the mountains or wherever individuals, the traditionalists will go out and they'll call their spirit name. "We're going home now". Cause if they leave it there, if they leave their fire, their spirit it's there, it's not home, there's just the shell. They call them to go home, especially when it's a real distant trip ah, for hundreds of miles they'll do that. But that little thing's (a piece of coal from the fire) always kept, even just a little piece, it's always taken back. I don't know how many people still practice it but we still do it today (Rowan, December 5, 2000, CMC AV 2001-11:7).*

#### **THE PIPE CEREMONY: THE MORNING AFTER THE FOURTH NIGHT – ETAS-SCONKAWIN**

The etas-sconkawin is the name of the pipe ceremony, that is held on the morning of the burial before the body leaves the home, as the rays of sun rise above the horizon. According to Casey Rowan etas-sconkawin is translated to mean, "*it's finished or it's the last one*" (Rowan, December 5, 2000, CMC AV 2001-11:7)

The pipe ceremony, which is conducted by a non-family member, along with the singing, on the fourth day (on the day of the burial, in many cases) is meant not only to guide the soul of the deceased to the other side, but also to heal the ones who are left behind. Mekwun Awasis explains:

*That part of the ceremony is a good part of the ceremony; it's the most important part of the ceremony. The actual singing is important. If the person doing that ceremony knows the right pipe direction there is that ceremony where these 4 are asked to come for the spirit to guide them. To bring that healing process, a kind of a message from the person that's leaving, that's going to his grandfather, grandmother, dad's or mother's, brothers, aunts and uncles. It's to insure, to make sure, that that spirit doesn't ask for or take someone along (a child or another community member).... So that's what it really means to help to heal the ones that are left here. That's what the person that's doing the ceremony asks that to bring those along and make sure he takes away the pain that they're having (Mekwun Awasis, February 25, 2002, CMC AV 2004-3:2).*

## MUSKWACHEES BURIALS

There are several ancient traditions which must be carried out in the community at the time of someone's death. Men and women each had their designated roles to play, and one did not interfere with the other's role.

*When a person dies they, the family, usually the women in the family, they would take the body and wash it from head to toe. Wash the hair; wash the body with sweet grass water. And then they would dress that body in the best clothes that person had, and one of the old women would make him new moccasins. That was very important for that person to have new moccasins eh, because it was a new trail that they were following, and they would need new moccasins that would be able to take them on their journey to the other side. But he also used to say that they would never actually leave you eh. And when you talked of a person you would always do it with respect, in a way to show that you weren't calling them back, you weren't talking about them in a (bad way, but) in a way to like ask for guidance or ask for direction on something. (p1)*

*As long as I can remember, the funerals I've been to that's common practice. And then the (church) candles, the eternal flame: people, they light the flame right away. But also, we have a tradition of a fire outside. And usually it's to the south of wherever the wake is. That's, well foremost for the coals, to do the smudging of food and like to take the*

*coals inside. But also it was seen as a beacon, like in case that spirit came back in those four days. They wouldn't get lost in the night; they would see them people there. That fire was never left alone, there was always somebody, there's always somebody by that fire, keeping it going but also keeping it company. The same way the body, it's never left alone, it's, there's always, there's always people in there (Tootoosis, 2002, CMC AV 2004-2:6).*

Mary Stoney remembers the community doing everything for funerals in the past.

Today the Band assists with expenses for the funeral , the feast and feeding guests.

*The men built the coffins out of boards and the women decorate it with black cloth on the outside and something with a pattern on the inside. The women also made a nice pillow. The men also dug the graves, lowered the casket into the grave with ropes and filled in the hole by hand. The women would also do all of the cooking for the visitors and the feasts and provide support to the family. (p5) In the event of a child dying a small casket was made and covered in white cloth. There was rarely a wake for a child; the body was usually buried the same day (Stoney, August 14, 2001, CMC AV 2004-5:7).*

When her father died Alice Littlechild recalls the men nailing a wooden cross to her father's cardboard and garment casket. When her mother died in the late 1990s, the men put a rosary and sweetgrass on the casket. The veils over the face and blankets on the casket are both new, and have been done only in recent years. (Littlechild, A., Dec 9, 2000. CMC E2004-1:11, 12).

Several people mentioned that the tradition of having flowers sent to the home and brought to the cemetery was quite recent. Many of the elders disagreed with the practice and voiced strong feelings against the use of flowers as they were believed to "weigh down" the spirit. In place of the flowers ceremonialists encouraged the use of willow staffs.

A lot of people didn't like to have flowers on the grave, they believed that you were just holding them (the spirit) down, but the soul is strong. When the person dies the soul is gone already, it's just a body. My husband used to say it's not normal to have flowers and he wouldn't have them on his grave" (Stoney, August 14, 2001, CMC AV 2004-5:23).

Mekwun Awasis related stories from people who had died, been brought back to life, and told of having seen the land of the dead or communicated with spirits from the land of the dead. Others had dreams about the land of the dead. Some of the messages they brought back to the Cree about the afterlife were in relation to people walking alongside the grave and throwing a handful of dirt on to the casket as well as the use of willow staffs in place of flowers at the gravesite. Mekwun Awasis explains:

*They didn't like that fact that people were throwing dirt. Some spirit came and told him that it was disrespectful. You go back to dust first to the way we were created. So why throw earth to earth? The spirit told him. And another part! He said, "those flowers, that you bought at the store, you put it on top. It's like the earth it holds you down and you can't leave because the natural law, universal law they're all related", and he told him that as well. See that's why you have some of those staffs, that's the right way, plain and simple. natural; you have willow. We came from a natural environment. The staff and feathers represent what they used to put on those scaffolds. You carry that on. It's part of what we used to live, to live with it. And to put it in real true perspective. It's to honour that person. Their ancestral ways to keep that tradition alive to let them know instead of those flowers. And some will put rocks all around. In one case, we painted the staff blue. His name was Horsechild. We put rocks there and honoured that spirit. You honour the family. (p3,4)*

Another area of concern from the land of the dead was the need for the deceased to wear moccasins to make their journey. The dead are taking a new journey, and require a brand new pair of moccasins to walk in the sacred land. Some people who were "ghost bundle keepers" were given instruction by the deceased to pass messages on to the people

to dress properly in preparation for their journey, and a woman in particular was given medicine as a protection for the journey.

*This old lady in her last few days when she was sick... she was having these visions or dreams where she gets to this gate, and there's a man coming down, with a bundle of wood and stops her and tells her what's he's seen. Then she goes to another level. This man, went to a wake (on earth), and told us everything. "We see you're not wearing moccasins... you need to go back. And tell the people" ...so after, he instructs her and gives her protection. And she brought it back with her. She had two different protections. Her old man had passed away a long time ago. She met this man in a setting where the spirit showed her why you need to do certain things. All those men are praying all those old men had pipes and were smoking their pipe. (p5)*

*... When we worship with our sweetgrass and pipe you not only ask for good things and a good life... but you also ask for your spirit (soul) to live a good life. So that it doesn't get lost and you don't get wayward. You ask for certain meditations or different ways of customary practices or ceremonies... there are different ceremonies. ...Before, it either comes to you in dreams where some spirit comes to you and says our creator's name first, then you know that it comes from another kind. And if you still ignore it, it comes to you a third time it's not normal. You can't ignore it. But it's here that we pay. Their children and grand children are lined up like this (one after another). That's what they say; they're lined up like this. If you do something or make a bad way for someone it will either come to you or come to them. That's how they're lined up (Mekwun Awasis, February 25, 2002, CMC AV 2004-3:6).*

*When burying the dead: ...The traditionalists all know which way to face, the head is towards the north and your feet south. All traditionalists know that. And some of them will request that they be put that way... The ones that face east, maybe they're Catholics I don't know (Rowan, December 5, 2000, CMC AV 2001-11:13).*

*In the past before European contact or even after European contact especially in the Plains Cree culture Europeans had been in our country roughly, now, about 160 years. Right up to the 1890s or 1920s there was still deaths that the funerals were practiced as they had in the past where a deceased, even with adults, they would have one night wake, and they buried the individual. When I say buried, some piled rocks on them, it depended on the location they're in at the time. If it was an open*

prairie, it would usually be by a river or a creek where they would bundle up the deceased and put him in the branches, away from coyotes, wolves, rodents or whatever. ...But the reason for making shallow graves especially in sand and putting them in trees is that a lot of times people they thought they were dead would come back. They thought they were mortally wounded and there was no heartbeat. That is one of the reasons they put them out of the way and in branches so nothing would bother them. Because there was a slight chance maybe they would come back to life. Because there are cases where people would have come back but they say it's probably due because they weren't really dead. It was assumed they were deceased. But that was one of the reasons the tradition to be put in willow branches by rivers or very shallow graves.... And a lot of elders did not believe in burials in the ground, especially those four to six feet deep.... Because people were buried where they died in the past. They didn't take the body home to be buried. If they were on a trip they buried them across this country. ...They would leave certain markers. They just did the traditional thing. They took a piece of hair and brought it home. They had to tell how he or she passed away. If there was an accident on the trail. If the deceased died there, that's where they put him away. ...And all their belonging would be distributed among the people. To be utilized amongst family. It's called in our language akaspota; it's a way of keeping their memory with them. (p2,6)

When there was a death in the family, before any church denomination had any input or before they ever interfered with our traditional ways of life. When there was a death in the family or extended family or within the confines of the community itself, if death was by accident or warfare or sickness, to this day, a lot of us still believe this. The spirit automatically goes to a good place. There is no evil place or in-between. They went directly to the afterlife, what many people tend to term today as the happy hunting ground. There is a different word for it in Cree.

When an adult passed away, the women took care of the deceased. Dressed him up, cleansed him, washed him, and they dressed him prepared him. In a wake, a wake never lasted more than two nights, basically it was for one night and they buried the deceased for one day. In a lot of cases during a move, if they were moving from one place to the other for the seasons, if there was a death. After they prepared him they would bury him the same day because life had to keep on going. They disbursed the individuals belongings amongst themselves and whatever he liked they left with him. But anything that was useful for survival they retained. But personal belongings like his pipe, a medicine pouch, feathers he earned, something he earned from his accomplishments, he or she, they left with him. His or hers personal affects, the ones he cherished the most were usually left with him, but if he favoured a son, a grandson, a

*daughter, or a brother, his most cherished gift was sometimes given to them.*

*...This was the same for women, but basically all the household entities belong to the women. Those were dispersed to the oldest daughters or the daughters-in-line. If she had children that were not yet married they retained the household, the girls did. Until they were the age of marrying. All threads, if it was a tipi or whatever. To this day there are some families that still practice this the house and everything in it is theirs and it goes to their daughters and their sons. Whoever they favoured, or whoever should get it the family decides. The male of the household does not have anything. None of it is his, just his clothes, just his personal effects, is more like it. The women herself if she cherished something sometimes a favourite daughter would get it or whoever was competent enough to keep the lifeline going for survival sake. The other thing too when there was a person deceased in the family, they used to take a personal effect and put it into a ghost bundle. That is either hair, if it's a child it could be their first pair of moccasins, which sometimes are very small, it could be a little shirt, a little necklace or a bead from a necklace, it could be anything. A very small object was taken. But mainly the hair in all adults was taken (Rowan, June 26, 2000, CMC AV 2002-17, 18:2)*

The majority of people I interviewed agreed that there was no appointed person who prepared the body for burial. Essentially someone from among the group of people who are at the home when the body arrives will be asked or will volunteer to assist with the body. In the old days this would involve cleaning the body. Today this means re-dressing the body or combing the hair or braiding the hair properly.

*The mourning would be for one night, or whatever, two nights, and usually the women, the mother or the daughter or the wife, if it was a male, would cut their hair in the sign of mourning. And if it was in battle or on a trip whoever was traveling at the time prepared the deceased for the afterlife. If it was in battle, and if they could get the deceased out and he died from his wounds they in tern would prepare the body in the best way they could on the trail and usually they would cover them with rocks but him in trees or in willows and the same when they're in an encampment. In the encampment in the same way they would utilize what was at hand. They would bury them in the ground in shallow graves if it was sandy soil they covered them in sand, if it was rocky soil they put rocks over them. It was just recently after European contact when they*

*had contact with Oblates, when diseases were rampant that they started burying them. And when new laws came in back in the 1900s when new laws were brought up that they started burying them in coffins. That's new today. Because by law they're required to do that. But basically in the past they were usually wrapped up in robes in whatever was available and if he was well to do they used the best robes that were his and try to wrap him up, depending on the individual. And if they didn't have anything other family or other people out of respect would give something for the deceased to be wrapped as a gift, so he would travel to the afterlife with whatever he had. Most people when they passed away, like I said, even today, some people still do it. They put little bags they put a little pipe in there with tobacco. Some of them put a knife with kinik-kinik and they put a little pemmican with dried berries. And also usually in the past they've always put on a deceased, a new pair of moccasins. A brand new pair of moccasins. Today I've even witnessed where, especially in our family where the women, as soon as there is a deceased, will start sewing a pair of moccasins and have them finished by the same evening and before the body is brought home, they already have the moccasins. In the past prior to European contact the same was still practiced and our family still maintains that today. Whereby other families they'll go buy them. It's more convenient, because a lot of people have lost the traditions where they can make their own moccasins. There are not too many people who have that skill anymore. ...At Smallboy's camp they would move the arms on the side. They were flat, straight, and wrapped. Even the head was covered with a hood. The last burials I seen that took place in our family that's the way they were done. That would be in the early 70s, that's the last time I ever seen that practice (Casey Rowan, June 26, 2000, CMC AV 2002-17,18: 3,4).*

In contemporary times it is very common to see one to several layers of neckerchiefs cover the face of the deceased. Many people attribute this tradition to showing “respect for the dead” so that mourners do not look upon the face of the deceased. However Rowan explains that this is a recent tradition. In the past the entire body was wrapped in a blanket and placed in a coffin that way. When bodies came to the reserve in coffins very often there was not a viewing. The coffins were sealed so there was no need, nor use of neckerchiefs.

*From what I can recall from the elders said, death is not an item that native people readily talk about. But in the male society the discussions do take place. We were told to be always prepared for death and what it was. Because there is an afterlife. And we probably, the ones that were informed about death, have been able to accept it more so than the people who haven't been informed about it. The veiling of the deceased. Even I question it. Because I don't see anything on it, because in the past these were non-existent. (Casey Rowan, June 26, 2000, CMC AV 2002-17, 18:5).*

## **CHILDREN**

A child's death was generally treated differently from that of an adult as children were regarded as pure and going directly to the Great Land.

*When a child passes on, we the Plains Cree say she's pure and her spirit goes straight to the Great Spirit. On the day he or she is deceased, a child, in most cases they're buried the same day. ...If they spend the night at the hospital or at the morgue they are buried the day they're brought home and a small prayer said over them, and a song sung for them. And just the immediate family attends. There is no wake: it is rare. And from what my grandfather had told me, and other grandfathers and grandmothers told me that's the way it used to be. And that's the way they try to maintain (Casey Rowan, June 26, 2000, CMC AV 2002-17,18:1).*

## **PROTECTION FOR THE LIVING**

There were several forms of protection people could employ to keep the souls of the dead from bothering them: the use of names, Otayokan, as spiritual helpers, black string and charcoal.

*In name giving among the Cree it is done in ceremony, however small it (the ceremony) is. A child is given an Indian name, a spiritual name as you say. They get a protector. Because a child is pure from the day of birth right until they're about 12 years old. Until they reach*

*puberty, they're innocent of everything. Then when they start using their child, like their talent, they become indulgent teenagers. They start indulging in things that they shouldn't eat. Then they have to have a name for protection (p10).*

*A name is not a soul it is a spirit helper. When a person dies the "name/ spirit helper" continues to exist in so much as they are used by others, multiple people may use them. If nobody is using them as helpers they do not work anymore, they've done their job. (p11)*

*Many people are not aware that they should make offerings to their spiritual helper, they have to offer them a dish of fruit or berries or whatever.... You thank him, let him know that everything is ok, and if something isn't going right you give him an offering so that things change for you. It's not on a daily basis but you don't forget (Rowan, December 5, 2000, CMC AV 2001-11:12).*

*And at the passing of this deceased, all young children, on their left wrist, depending on which family it is or right wrist, there is a little cord tied around them and that's usually black and if they don't have black cords they use thread. A black thread, and if they do not have a black thread they usually run a white thread through charcoal. And tie that on their wrists. At any passing of an individual. This is done with all the children. The reason why it's done, especially when an adult passes away, sometimes they say the spirits of that individual linger and they might take the spirit of the child along with them (Rowan, June 26, 2000, CMC AV 2002-17,18:1).*

For some individuals seeing their deceased relatives appear to them in a dream or waking vision is calming. For others it is a frightening experience. Alice Littlechild tells of preventative measures her mother would take to ward away spirits.

*I think my mom was really afraid of spirits. And what my mom did she got some India Ink and sheds make tiny little cross on the doorway, just in the center on the very top of that and on the windows, she'd make little crosses where there would be entrances. And she would walk around outside and she would spray holy water, and she would also spray holy water inside. When somebody would die she would say, "Kiya Apasapeh", Don't look back, just go! Either at the gravesite or after they had died she'd say. "Kiya Apasapeh", Don't look back. And I remember when we had moved to Saskatchewan and we bought a house out there and my mom was very sad we had moved over there. And I told her we're*

*moving back to Alberta but we're moving to Calgary. And she said, "And when you leave that place", she said, "either take a rock and throw it over your shoulder and tell the children and all of you, don't look back don't even look back at the town, nothing just leave it". (Littlechild, A., Dec 9, 2000, CMC E2004-1:9).*

## THE NORTHERN LIGHTS

The northern lights are said to be the souls of the dead who have come out to dance.

*People used to say the northern lights smell like sulfur or something. We were told when they're out not to look at them. And when you're walking on the road or something you're supposed to walk and look down and not look at them because they'll take you out. You're not supposed to whistle at them. They'll come after you (Mekwun Awasis, Feb 25, 2002, CMC AV 2004-3:1).*

## THE WAKE

Mary Stoney remembers the wakes lasting only one night in years past; *it is just in recent years that the wakes are lasting two to three nights (p9).*

*A wake is exhausting, and a lot of work too, plus you got to cook. And us, we made soup, we cooked a roast, potatoes, you know. At least for dinnertime, and then in the evenings we made soup and sandwiches. And for the ones that are going to be staying up late, after midnight, we made something for them too and then we made soup again. It's a lot of work and it's a lot of spending money too. Yeah. I like to treat, if I can do that, I like to treat the people like who are supporting us. I like to show them how we are grateful (Stoney, August 14, 2001, CMC AV 2004-5:12).*

Alice Littlechild recalls growing up in her small community at Kehewin. When someone died everyone would go down to the wake and home of the deceased to give

support to the family. She remembers going to wakes even as a child and recalls how fearful it was.

*It was quite common in both Kehewin and Muskwachees to see storytellers attend the wakes to make people laugh. Wakes would really pull the community together. (p4) Food was also a very important part of the wake... our family would make soup and salad for the guests. (p5) In Kehewin we didn't have a lot of sweetgrass burning. No, this is something really different now. And ah we didn't have the drumming and singing, never. When my grandfather died it was all story telling at the wake and they would have these old hymns and it was really important to have the priest and he'd come to say the rosary and tell more stories. I find now that tradition is more contemporary you don't have story telling anymore, you have a lot of gossip about what's happening at the office and you know. And I find now people go to the bingo. People who are at the wake they will make a comment like, it's an accepted fact, we'll have more people after the bingo. It's accepted as a part of life. And they have their guitars now and they sing real upbeat songs (Littlechild, A., Dec 9, 2000. CMC E2004-1:10).*

*I have no idea when the tradition of having a wake, two nights, three nights whatever was started. As I recall even when my father was deceased the wake was only two nights. This new tradition. The only thing I know about, is when the deceased on the day, we count it four days and we have our feast for the deceased (Rowan, June 26, 2000, CMC AV-2002-17,18:6).*

Today the wake will last two to three nights with the funeral usually held on the fourth day. Funerals do not take place on Sunday, however, the wake may be a few days longer or shorter. Mary Stoney points out that years ago the wake was only one night and many people would stay the night to support the family. Today very few people stay up late as they did years ago (Stoney, Aug 14, 2001, CMC Av 2004-5:5).

## THE FEAST FOR THE DEAD

The Feast for the Dead generally takes place after four night following the death.

*After I lost my husband and my, my daughter, you know, uh, I didn't have a feast for my daughter after four nights. They always said, you should have a feast after four nights, I did with my husband, and the first year, my daughter died the same year. I just put them together after one year, and after that, I can't afford to do this every year. I'll just do it on the fourth year but it's not going to be a big thing, just a small one. (p11)*

*My dad used to say, you don't hold a big feast like that, you know, you can, you can pray over it, anything. Like if you have some culture food, like, you know Indian food, you can lift it up, and say a prayer in honour for this, or for the dead. You can do that any day, any time, he used to say. He doesn't have to hold a big feast (Stoney, August 14, 2001, CMC AV 2004-5:10).*

*My mother used to tell us even us you can sit at the table, put some food on your plate and like saying grace. White people have to say grace before eating. The food is there everybody sits down and before anybody takes a bite you say grace. It's as simple as that. You don't have to have a rocket scientist doing that. Anybody can do it at anytime. That's what my mother used to tell us. There is just enough, there is no fancy prayer or nothing. You just take a moment to remember. That's all it's as simple as that (Buffalo, Marvin, July 5, 2000, CMC AV 2001-3:8).*

*The feast for the dead took place the day before my brother was buried, on the fourth day. They probably had the pipe ceremony the day before he was buried. Yeah. And there was a big feast there again. There was a lot of smoked meats and you know very very traditional. But the next day when he was buried, he was buried in the morning and by about 1 or 2 everybody gathered in the hall in Saddle Lake and you just had a table, a long table. After the funeral they had a really fancy spread. Each table had paper plates and all the food was already in there, like turkey and mash potatoes, stuffing, salads, and corn and they just had that right at the table and it was wrapped in Saran Wrap and they had a cup of tea or whatever coffee. So that's how I saw that, and that was you know my brother Benny (p5,6.) After my mom died, I tried to cook all her*

*favourite meals because I don't know how to do it the old ways so I would just say mom this is for you where ever you are. (P7) I guess that would be an invitation for the spirits to come. And I recall my mom saying that every time she cooked this one dish, and she said, I always, always present it to this spirit who has gone, and she named that person from Kehewin, because she said I know that he was not always a kind person. So I think she did it out of fear that this person was not going to be very kind to her if she didn't offer it. And also when my auntie died, and she was kind of stingy. She didn't like to share anything you know. She was not a giving person. And when she died, my cousins came to try to give my mom her sewing basket and my mom refused it. She didn't want to take it because she thought that Auntie was not a giving a very generous person, that she [mom] thought that her spirit would come and bother us (Littlechild, A., Dec. 9, 2000. CMC E2004-1:8).*

## **THE CEMETERY FEAST FOR THE DEAD**

The feast for the dead is intended to remember all those in the community who have died, but especially those who no longer have family members to feast and feed them on a regular basis. Again, the main intent is to ask for prayers for good health and good luck for the community. Each of the four reserves has a specific Sunday during the summer for which they feed and feast with the dead at the various cemeteries in the community.

*Yeah it's (the Cemetery Feast for the Dead) always done. There's a person that's appointed in the community, well my grandfather used to... he was the gate for the feast, and then, as he was getting old, he passed it on to John Buffalo, and he, he was responsible that for many years and now it's Bernard Buffalo. With that, it's (the knowledge of setting the date for the feast) is passed on but I really don't know how they arrive at setting the day, date. I know usually it's around the, the second week of June, even before the summer is here. I don't know (Lee, Dec 6, 2000, CMC AV 2001-6:6).*

*The Cemetery Feast... it's traditional. It's usually kept on that one day alone, one day has to be set aside and that's the time people come together for the annual feast. But then again, as I was saying politics get*

*into everywhere. Now these dates have been changed now. For instance, this Riverside here, Riverside Cemetery, how it was set out was the feast was supposed to be in the first Sunday of June every year. That was the time that was set up for it and it was made into law, spiritual law, and divine law. And people kept that. And then somebody came along, ...he changed the date, since he was in charge now of the whole feast, he put it off one week. And that's the way it's been. He's gone today eh, and he has suffered a lot due to the fact that he had broken that natural law. They say when you violate the divine law it deals with you, that's what's happened to him. It's very important when you set out to have a feast or whatever on a certain date and certain place, that's when it's held, because even before you announce the date in this world, you're just making up your mind, already these people in the happy hunting grounds they know already what you're thinking. They know when to come there and that's when they're going to be there, no other time. So it's important to have that feast on the day and the time that you said and the place. That's where you have it because these people have known about it a long, long way beforehand and they were coming. So when you have it on that time, then it's successful because the people who have gone before us are there to partake in the whole thing, the feast. But if you change the date, or if you have it somewhere else it become meaningless, there's nothing there. Because you have set the date here and the place and that's where they came and since you changed, it nobody's there and they have to go back empty handed.*

*One of the biggest consequences of (not feeding the dead on the allotted day) that I know of that can happen is that, chances are you have anticipated some blessings, and good luck and health and all these different things that you want, and these are the people that can bring them, God blesses us with these blessing and these are the people when they came and eat, they bring these to us. And after they've eaten they leave them with us and that's the blessing we have. But then again if you miss that, and have it elsewhere, there's nothing there. I imagine that would be the biggest consequence*

(Buffalo, Marvin, July 5, 2000, CMC AV 2001-3)

## **THE SOUL AND THE JOURNEY TO KAGIASKAIKI, THE GREAT LAND**

The spirit or soul of the dead is called atcha.

*Not everybody makes it to that Happier Place, you have to have a ticket to get on the express but if you didn't live your life the way you should you go on the milk run with stops here and there. It's a long long time before you get to point "B" from point "A". It takes longer. And*

*these people who have committed sins like that then they can't leave this world. They are part of this world and then they're not over there so they're stuck someplace in between. And that's where they roam for the rest of their days until judgment day. Elders used to tell me there is going to be a judgment day for everybody. Indian people as well. God is going to judge his people and these people who never got over there yet, these are the people that's going to be judged then. If they are forgiven they are going to go in if not they are lost forever. Not only do Indian people believe that but that's how they know to believe in that (Buffalo, Marvin, July 5, 2000 CMC AV 2001-3:2).*

*The core of the elders say the soul resides in the right center of your heart, where your kindness and love and humbleness, and where your sympathy comes from. That part is meant to help you understand more so for myself...I always explain when you're travelling sometimes you lose this spirit. That's why some of these people get into kind of trouble they get into terrible predicaments, they forget their spirits, they let their spirits wonder, and that's why they get into trouble (Mekwun Awasis, February 25, 2002 AV-2004-3:6).*

*Being the Plains Cree and being called Nehiyaw this is new to me of the Cree having four spirits or four bodied people. It's just recent in the past 15 – 20 years that I've heard this thing. I've never heard elders mention that in the past. ...We the traditionalists believe we only have one spirit. We're not four bodied spirits. It's impossible! (Rowan, June 26, 2000, CMC AV-2002-17,18:6).*

*My grandfather would say, "You only need enough food for a day's trip or half a day's trip". And he would usually pack it for you, on your journey. Anyone who got there, the pipe that you did carry, or if they weren't given a drawn pipe they were given tobacco to smoke with the people they got there, to share with. It's to a different space, where everybody is happy. From my understanding of what they used to say they're all camped in a valley, near a river and everything was plentiful. There is no needs no wants, everybody got along. All people were mixed, and everybody spoke the same language. ... Everything was there, there were no needs or wants if you wanted berries they were there, if you wanted to eat deer, fish, buffalo whatever it was all there. It was never cold, it was never too hot. You never needed new clothes, you never had old clothes. ...You were as you left this life but nobody was crippled, nobody was sick. If they were crippled when they left they didn't have those limbs or whatever. People didn't have scars. You could tell it was your grandmother, your grandfather, you mother or father, your brother, your sister. It's just a big family that everybody enjoyed, nobody complained. It's a place where you went at the age you were. And that's*

*the way you stayed forever, in a healthy way.... However you are not there with the Supreme Being or Creator you're just there with family.*

*I'm not too sure but from what I've heard certain elders say and basically, the word they were saying in Cree was the Milky Way. And that's where everybody goes. And they watch the people from out there. And in the wintertime or in the spring or in the fall they come down and dance. That's the northern lights. And by watching the northern lights dance, they give messages (Rowan, June 26, 2000, CMC AV-2002-17,18:10).*

There appears to be a constant battle between the living and the souls of the dead over a struggle to make sure that the souls of the dead leave the souls of the living alone, particularly the souls of children and the unborn.

...We do not allow children to go to wakes or pay their last respect to the deceased. That is recent now where they bring children in to pay their last respects because we feel a child shouldn't see that because they're just starting life. They shouldn't experience those things, and the other thing about a child; we want a child to remember an individual in happier times. Not that so they have those nightmares. They are playing with a child's emotions when they make them go pay their respects. Because it is our way of dealing with grief, for the child not going up to the deceased. Because it is a very emotional thing, and a child should not be brought to that point because it might effect he or she in the future in their life. It's best that you remember the individual when they were happy. To see somebody in that position is very sad, they look at people and they're crying, their emotions are already mixed as it is. They don't really know what death is. Because we tell them that this is forever. That they went into the big sleep -- that they left ( P9) ...I'm not too sure but from what I've heard certain elders say and basically it took me years before I realized it, the word they were saying in Cree was the Milky Way. And that's where everybody goes. And they watch the people from out there. And in the wintertime or in the spring or in the fall they come down and dance. That's the northern lights. And by watching the northern lights dance, they give messages (Rowan, June 26, 2000, CMC AV-2002-17,18:7,8).

A number of people relayed stories of seeing the dead in their homes or looking through the house window. *A number of people who were dying also talked about seeing their deceased relatives appear to them while they were awake or in their dreams. Some people even had*

*experiences where they could smell their relatives' perfume around them, or smell their favourite chewing gum (Littlechild, Alice, Dec 2000. CMC E004-1:8,9).*

## WARRIORS

Even in modern times, the souls of warriors who died in battle and mothers who died giving birth went straight to the Great Place. A Feast for the Dead was not necessary for these people.

*I'll speak on the warriors and people who died in war, even the World Wars, as recent as Vietnam or whatever. People who belong to the warrior societies, when they go into battle if they got shot, or arrows or bombs or whatever it is today. ...It was a great honour for an individual to die on the battlefield, he was given his life and his, we call it achak, his spirit, went straight to the afterlife without looking back or anything. So whatever did happen to his body at that time that did not mean anything. If it was mutilated, like I said people have fallen on the side all over this country on the side of the trails, sometimes they were alone. They just died there and that's where they lay and they left for the spirit world. And if the war party did come back after they lost someone, there was mourning for the loss of a loved one, husband, brother, or whatever. He was so honoured in a circle, when they had a ceremony his name was brought up that he died with honours. That he didn't lose his life running away from the enemy, he lost it honourably but it's also sad, mourning, to lose the male of a family because he's the sole supporter of the family (Rowan, June 26, 2000, CMC AV-2002-17,18:12,13).*

*There are those for example people that died in war defending their, their people, they go, they go directly (to heaven). ...Those are for example, they say a mother that dies while giving birth, they go to, to heaven. ...Oh babies too that die at birth, babies, they go straight, straight to heaven" (Lee, December 2000, CMC AV 2001-7:5,6).*

## PUNISHMENT IN THE AFTERLIFE

Although there is no concept of hell in Plains Cree world view it is possible for people to be punished for their wickedness; the punishment may not be directed towards them but towards their family or the unborn generations.

*Our people never believed in hell. A lot of the hell is here. You create it yourself. Those things that hold you back on your spiritual journey, like what I was saying there's, vices, I guess you would call them, while you are on this earth, that you're just overpowered by, you know. Like today people they're addicted to gambling, real addicted. There's some that are really addicted to drinking or drugs; that becomes their life, nothing else matters, it's their life. ... All the legends about Wisaketchak (who is the Messenger), that's what Wisaketchak tells us, nobody gets away with anything in this world. You, you hear Wisaketchak, all his stories, he always ends up at the end that he's the loser. And that's the lesson that Wisaketchak taught to the people, you don't get away with anything in this world. You might think, you might, people might think, you know. ...No, nobody gets away with anything, that's, that's the belief. Those are what the elders say, is if you suffer, all the things that you've done wrong, those things that hold people down when they leave this earth, they (go) with it, those are forgiven (Lee, December 2000, CMC AV 2001-7:4,5).*

*There is no concept of hell in Cree teachings. Punishment for evil deeds is believed to be dispersed in this life or is passed on to one's relatives or descendants. The traditionalists believe, well I believe, people chose their own life, how they want to live. ...The rapists were usually given to the women they done with him whatever way they wanted killed him. That is a means of satisfying the need of the damage that was done to the individual. Either they were killed, rapist were killed. It's pretty hard to say in those days between a murder and what was self-defense. Because a verbal, in today's standards, in today's society it's pretty hard to understand somebody killing someone in those days. But in most cases it was justifiable. And the wakes were conducted the same way. If it was a rapist he was probably fixed, his body put in a blanket and his body put to rest the same day. And for those kinds of individuals they were non-existent from that day on. They weren't even remembered.*

*Usually the families pay the price and penalties for the injustices you have done to other people. In the long run do not abuse your fellow human being, physically, mentally or verbally because it might not affect your family today but Cree have a good memory it might affect your great*

*grandchildren. They always pay in the end. And it's justifiable if they go back four generations. People can't understand or conceptualize that idea that four generations down that somebody is going to pay a penalty. They don't know what is going on and why it happened, even though it happened four generations ago (Rowan, June 26, 2000, CMC AV 2002-17,18:11,12).*

## SUICIDE

Suicide is not an acceptable option for meeting death among the Plains Cree.

Gordon Lee explained traditional Cree belief about the suffering that one must go through in the afterlife for those who have taken their own life. Lee explains:

*One day in our measurement of time equals 1 year in eternity. One year in our measurement equals 365 years in eternity. If one is meant to live until they are 80 years old and they take their life at the age of 20, they have to wait that 60 years X 365 years or (21,900 years) in eternity time before they can enter that happy place we go to when we died. That's a long time!! (Lee, Dec 2000, CMC AV 2001-7:6,7).*

Suicides, in this view, cannot take part in a community feast and celebration put up in honour of the dead until they have made up their time.

*The ones that are committing suicide, lead a life that shouldn't be, kind of life, so they get suspended. I think the closest I would come to is, purgatory. You come in a state where everything is dark and you can't see, you can't see the Creator, but you get suspended there, so you pray for them, you pray for those people. And then you give them food. And if they are in heaven, then that's more reason why you should be praying to them to speak for you. That's what the elders say. You know, you've been here, you know our troubles, you've been through this, you know, you perform all these ceremonies when you were here. You understand our problems, "Please ask the Creator..." you know that's how we pray. I mean, don't we do that in the Catholic Church? (Buffalo, Victor, July 12, 2001, CMC AV 2002-24:4).*

While having a conversation about the high student suicide rate on the reserve with an urban Ojibwa mother of three who had lived and worked in Muskawchees for

many years, two of her children who were listening to the conversation joined in. The two high school girls pointed out that the most common suicides seemed to be among classmates who had recently broken up with a boy friend or girl friend. They also mentioned that for some classmates suicide became a contest to see who was the most popular, which was determined by the number of classmates and friends who would show up at the funeral. Conversation at school would often center around, "Did you see how many people attended so and so's funeral" and "I wonder how many people would show up at mine"? They found this attitude absurd and sickening, of course, but did not see any solution to the problem. Constable Myles Hall, a non-Native policeman working on the four reserves at Muskwachees, spoke of some interesting observations he had made when responding to suicide calls. In the vast majority of the calls received the caller was very upset and quite emotional. However Constable Hall was disturbed by the calls where family members at the scene were apparently not upset at all at finding a suicide victim.

*I've had many instances where family members will call us up and say that somebody is hanging in their basement. And it's very nonchalant. It's almost like it's expected. And you go there, and you, you know, you can find people hanging by different means, ropes or cords or whatever. I wouldn't say every time definitely not every time, but, definitively on, certain occasion where, there's very little concern. Or, it's almost like they're expecting this to happen.... I don't know why, maybe they feel that that person's soul has moved on, or whether they feel that, that's not the end of that person, or what I don't, I don't know. But, I'm amazed at how often I run into a situation where whoever has called us, and it's usually a family member, they're not really terribly shaken up about the whole thing (p2).*

*When there's a suicide or murder investigation, there has been an elders and, and some of our higher ups, the Inspector, and Staff Sergeant and the people involved in the investigation, they all had a smudge in the office upstairs where a whole lot of discussion takes place (p7).*

*And, and one time, I recall, they were waving grass, it was smoking, and they were waving it around and walking around the house*

*with it, while the body was being removed (Hall, March 22, 2003, CMC AV 2004-4:8).*

## CRYING

There are specific times when crying is not discouraged at Cree wakes, ie. the time just prior to sunrise as well as during the daytime. However, crying during the evening is discouraged. It is during this time that people tell stories, quite often funny ones to discourage crying and encourage laughter and remembering the good times with the deceased.

*The reason for them not crying is because he doesn't want to leave for fear of leaving his loved ones. Basically that's one of the reasons why they say do not cry or weep because you will detain him from going to a better place. It's best that he leave now. He cut the bonds, the strings, because there is nothing you, nor anybody else can do for him now. He's gone and he's gone (Rowan, June 26, 2000, CMC AV 2002-17,18:9).*

## SPIRITS AND THE SOUL

When I traveled throughout northern, central and western Canada, I often heard stories about the Northern Lights from the Cree and Ojibwa, about their belief that the Northern Lights were the souls of the dead. Marvin Buffalo and Mekwun Awasis explain the Cree belief about the Wolftrail or Mahekunmaskunow and the connection to Tchekata.

*Yes it is common belief that whenever you see the northern lights that's the (souls of) people that have gone before us and they are dancing out there now. The only thing I can't figure it out and I can never, I can*

*never understand is, it is always said that when our people died, the soul goes straight south pretty well, that's the direction that they go, well how come these northern lights come up from the north? And I could never understand that. But it is common belief that that's who those people are. But that's the only thing I can't understand – why?? You would think they would be coming up from the west or south after all that's where we went to, you would think so. How come they come up from the north? I could never understand that. I haven't found an answer for that (Buffalo; Marvin, July 5, 2000, CMC AV 2001-3:7).*

*That's (from Orion's belt) where they (the Northern Lights) come out. And those stars, the name in Cree is Tchekata, that's what they call them. The morning star is called wapanatak, and the other (evening star) one is called tipskawatak but it's the same (star). One old man said it's the same star. And there are other stars over here that align up they're called the three chiefs (Orion's Belt). There is one star up there that's a boy leading a dog star. Then the Milky Way. There's one other star. Two other stars that's the most interesting of all. It's part of the creation - a legend. That's how the mountains became. That's how the rivers became. There are four of them. They had a tipi and that's when the man of that tipi dwelling knocked the tripod down. He changed into a star and went this way. This one was the woman of the tipi. She too changed into a star. The saying of the old people is that one star is chasing the other. It's getting closer and when it catches up that's when everything is going to start all over again. Our mother earth is going to nurture and cleans herself and life. All the ones who have gone on before us are going to come back to life. That's what they're doing, those two stars... I don't know the name of the first or second star. ... That's where Wisaketchak (the trickster, the messenger) came to be eh. He was adopted by that couple (who were in the tipi and became stars). Them too they were orphans. It was two brothers, something happened. That's how those mountains became – it was from that from the star. It was from the creation.*

*The three chiefs, 'Okimaw uchukoos', right here on earth if you're a hunter if you get lost. ...You have to know the universe and the stars. And it's through legends and stories. If you look over here, there are three stars that align up. You look at them... that means they're lined up east and west. So you never get lost at night. ...They're called the Three Chiefs- Okimaw Wakan. And they're the Chiefs of all the other stars... that's why they're called Okimaw Wakan. And that Milky Way is Mahikan meskanow – Wolf Trail. The other tribes have that same belief system (Mekwun Awasis, February 25, 2002, CMC AV 2004-3:1,2).*

*The one thing I remember being told was never to mention that (deceased) person's name. Instead if we were going to mention that*

*person's name we would say Kakitah – the “person that used to be”, (or “the late...”)* (Littlechild, A., Dec 9, 2000, CMC E2004-1:6).

*The spirits that travel there is a big distinction, the spirits that protect us be it day or night they're totally different. Then the spirits of the dead which are ahcahk they're two separate distinction. Ghosts are spirits of people. When they depart their spirits are moving through dwelling or communities they are leaving. ...They haven't left yet. When people start having these feelings, these sensations in their homes you will hear in the community something close or there's an accident and someone is leaving. I don't know how to explain it but it always comes through* (Rowan, June 26, 2000, CMC AV 2002-17,18:15).

Sometimes there are spirits that simply are lost and have not made it to the other side. These spirits will sometimes bother human beings. Mary Stoney's late husband Albert was the caretaker at the cemetery for many years. Sometimes these wayward spirits would bother him at the shop on the cemetery grounds.

*He would say, 'Just leave me alone, go away where you want to go!' and that would send them away, 'up and out'! He would hang a rosary and holy pictures in his shop and sprinkle holy water as well"* (Stoney, August 14, 2001, CMC AV 2004-5:16)

*These are actual people that have no place to go. They have no way, they never enter into, go to, directly to the happy hunting grounds, so they're stuck around here until Judgment Day. They're always going to be around, and there are lots of them. That's why people are, young people are told not to go out at night, not to travel around, because these people they, they back and forth and they, on the roofs, and at each crossroads that's where they gather, so many of them at each cross roads at night. And these young people go to these crossroads, they get into an accident. The police call it an accident, we call it an accident, but when you really think about it, "was it really an accident, or did these, these people have something to do with it? Like I said, that's why they uh, tie uh (tie a string to a child's wrist), children at funeral time, when somebody dies it's to keep them intact, but I think they're getting these young people now in this way. That's why, uh there are so many people that die, and then they influence them, they're traveling on the road at night, and all these beings are on the road, that has some influence on you, on you and in your mind. And then you decide to go and hang yourself, maybe for no reason. See what these things do, you think, they all make sense.*

*...See when there's a feast, the feast is very holy, it's a sacred circle, it's powerful, I know that, I've seen it. That's what it is, powerful, holy, sacred circle, that's what it is. And these people that, that can't leave (those who are stuck in this dimension and have not made it to "the better place"), that have no place to go, they can't go near that place (the feast for the dead) because it's holy, they don't have the right. They had that right once, but they missed it, they messed it up, so now they don't have the right, so they can't go near, they can't interfere with these feasts and ceremonies. They can't even go near them, but they can only, they can only watch from a distance, they can listen, but that's all they, they can't go near them, they don't have the right. And that's the way it's going to be, you know, until Judgment Day, and God judges them. If they're forgiven then they're allowed in, if not, I don't know where they go. That's the way it is. (p3)*

*What we have is, uh, is just a basic idea that uh, times are, the time is near now, that's all we can, that's all we know. And as far as that, knowing something about that, I don't know anything. The only thing I know is uh, just before Wisaketchak left the Indian people here, when he was about to leave, he said, "On the last day I'll be back." Same thing with Jesus over there after he's been, uh, crucified and all that, when he went back into heaven, when the angels brought him back to heaven he told his disciples I will be back, and when I'm back, that's when the world is going to end, so, that's all I know (Buffalo, Marvin, July 6, 2000 part 3, CMC AV 2002-13:4).*

## **CALLING UPON THE SOULS OF THE DECEASED**

It is a rare occasion, but in certain circumstances, it is possible to call upon the dead for assistance.

*The only time you call on the deceased is if something very drastic happens. And at that point in time the only time you call on the deceased is if at one point in his or her life he told you in his life time if you ever need help talk to me and maybe I'll sooth your mind. People usually do it on their own and sometimes they are given something to do it with. It's something that you really talk about (Rowan, June 26, 2000, CMC AV 2002-17,18:16).*

## THE SINGING

There are no funeral songs *per se* in Plains Cree. However, there are Going Home

Songs which can be sung for the dead.

*So, when the elders or, the drummers sing, they're singing, for the individual's soul, or the spirit, to go back. Go back! That's what they say, they're going back. They're going to go back and see their parents, see their mother, to see their father, see the Creator. That's what they sing (Buffalo, V., July 13 part 2, CMC AV 2002-25:15). When a child is born someone comes to the house to speak to the child's spirit and welcome it. When you die, the elder and drummer send the soul back home (Buffalo, V., 2004).*

## THE FEAST FOR THE DEAD – EHWEMETSOOK (TO EAT WITH THE DEAD)

The Feast for the Dead takes place on the fourth day following the death. It is preceded by a pipe ceremony at sunrise on the day of the burial.

*A deceased person is called tchipai, their spirit is called athayocan. (p18) When you invite them (the souls of the dead), they, they come and pray for you when you invite them. You don't invite them for nothing, they come and pray for you, they come and bless you, and, they pray for you, for your good fortune and good, good health. Good everything, good luck. They come and pray for you and they take it back to wherever, their happy hunting grounds. And uh, they are sitting next to the Creator, and they go take the message back (p10).*

*All of the dead, as many, as many deceased people as there are, are invited. All of the relatives, as many, as many, not only the four elders that have passed on, that were called, it has to be four elders that have to be called. Plus the one that's just passed away. In total 5 are called but all the deceased of the community come.*

*And when you smudge the food too, and that number one is the beef lard that you put in there with, you know, mixed with berries and sugar. That has to be number one. You know with, with the deceased*

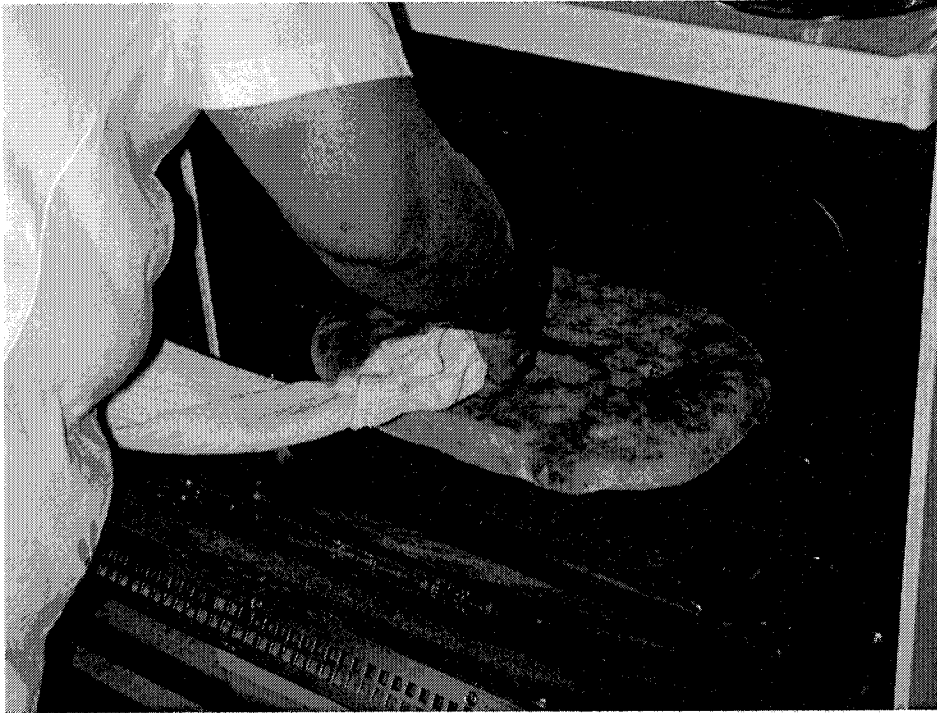
*person that you show it to, along with the Creator. That has to be first. And with, and with the other stuff too, and that you smudge. The deceased persons, the deceased people that's sitting around you eat first, before you do. Yeah. The soup, the tea, and the bannock. They say the four things. All those extras, like cookies and fruit and, I guess that's up to the other people that put that on there, for other people to eat, but the main things is the lard, soup, tea and bannock. Yeah, (lard) berries and sugar. I try to make that ahead of time, ah, because when other people have feasts they come and ask me, "Oh, we need that beef lard". Some, some people come and ask for me, and from me and uh like I have it in a freezer and I prepare it at home and when I make it, you know, I smudge first, I smudge my hands. And before I put that, you know, I uh, I defrost, I melt the lard, and I'll smudge the bowl (and pot) first and put that lard in there, berries and sugar. And I put the fridge, you know, to go hard (p12,13).*

*Protocol while at the feast for women is that as women, what they know, and um, you know in feasts, you know women have their dishes in front here that I see a lot. These younger women would step over the dishes, their bowls, and cup and spoon, whatever you have, and they're not allowed to, like you uh, I don't know how you called it, like you disinfect and, uh, it's not right anyway. Because the, the dead people are sitting beside you that you don't see, like you're stepping over them and stepping over the dishes. Getting your feast food, and I see a lot of people step over their food. But you're not supposed to; it's not right (Buffalo, Marylis, July 09, 2003, CMC AV 2004-9:14).*

## PREPARING THE FOOD FOR THE FEAST OF THE DEAD

**PREARING BANNOCK:** Bannock is made from flour, baking powder, salt, oil and raisins.





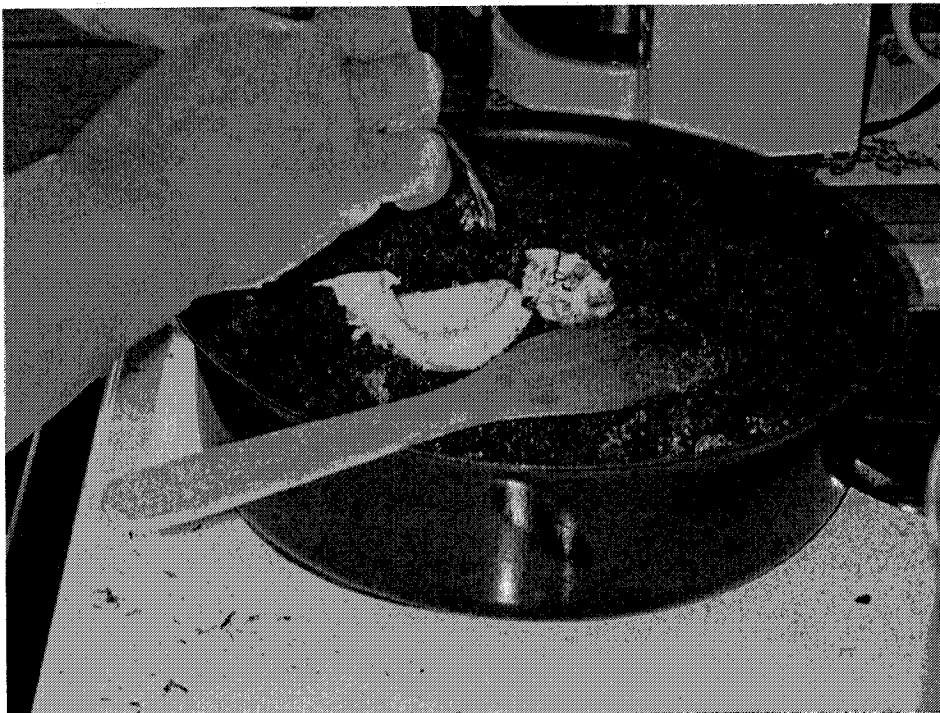
Rema Buffalo and her daughter Heather allowed me to photograph them (as long as their faces did not show) as they prepared the first anniversary memorial feast for Rema's late brother, Gordon Raine (Muskwa), who was one of the community advisors on my research. I assisted by pulverizing the dry meat, used in making the pemmican. None of the food can be tasted in the preparation for a feast for the dead. There is no salt or spices added to the food only sugar and lard or berries for flavour. Traditional Nehiyaw food is always cooked for the feasts, the most important being the main soup, tea, grease with berries and sugar, and bannock. The deceased's favourite dish is also prepared and served at this feast. Occasionally pizza or Italian food will be served at the feast. There are no secrets to this food preparation. This is traditional food that was commonly eaten as recently as 20 years ago. Many families still eat the soups and bannock and wild meat on a regular basis.

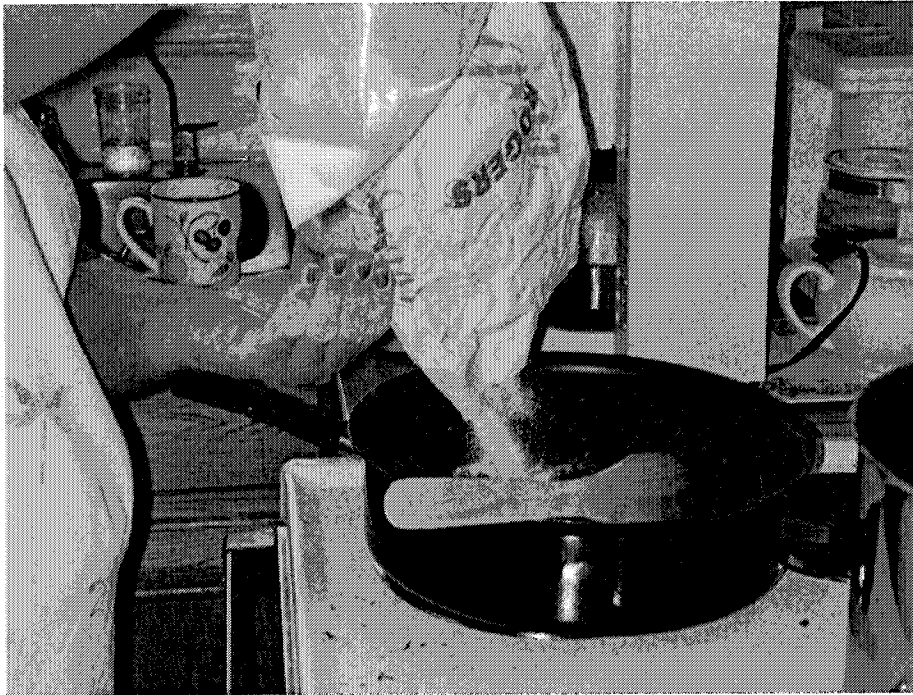
I am grateful to Rema and Heather for allowing me to assist and to document the food preparation.

**PREPARING PEMMICAN:** This pemmican is made with smoked moosemeat, lard, sugar and Saskatoon berries.



The smoked dried meat is pulverized into a powder then mixed with Saskatoon berries, lard and sugar.





**ROASTED DEER**



## THE SOUPS



The dry fruit soup made with apples, plums, prunes, dates, raisins, apricot.



The saskatoon berry and lard soup.

## DREAMING OF THE DEAD

The late Fred Morin from Muskawchees once informed me, 24 years ago, that for the Plains Cree, dreaming of the dead was a sign that your friends or relatives were hungry and that then they are asking you to put on a feast to feed them. Marvin Buffalo agrees that this can be the case.

*My dad, my mother, ever since they died, no, no one has ever had dreams about them, you know, (unintelligible) and all that stuff. We do dream about them, but they're always in a happy place, they're always in a, in a Chicken Lodge or a Sweating Lodge, or a Sun Dance Lodge, you know, things like that, anyway we dream of them, they're never hungry. So that means we know, that they've made it over there and uh, they're eating good.*

*Yeah, but then again, you know, when you think about it, what's really the use? Putting up a, I mean, you know, they're hungry and they go to these feasts that are put up by people because that's what the elders to pray there with the food and they say, "All those that have died come and eat with us. Everybody" (Buffalo, Marvin, December 8, 2000, CMC AV 2001-10:11).*

## THE DANCES FOR THE DEAD

The purpose of the dances associated with the feasting with the dead is primarily to pray for the healing of the living. They are also intended to bring good health and fortune to those who attend as well as to the community in general. The dances in which the souls of the dead are invited to partake include the Tea Dance eskipekahk, the Chicken Dance Pihewsimo (pihew being a pheasant), the Goose niskaksimo or Ghost Dance, The Soup Dance (on the Alexander Reserve) and the Give Away Dance, and the

feast for the dead ehwemetsook. The atmosphere at these dances should be one of happiness and celebration. The souls of the deceased are present at these events and the atmosphere is meant to be joyous. They have come to take part in the celebrations and dance alongside or in-between those present. Everyone is encouraged to dance and take part in the event as to do otherwise will only make the souls of those present sad causing them to cry.

*“At these dances and feasts we pray for good health, and for our children, and, and that’s our offering” (Lee, Dec. 2000, CMC AV 2001-7:2).*

*You, make that, the deceased person dance along with you. Like the oval shape like uh, tepee, like this lodge with two fires and in single file you dance around the single files. And the past, all people, your family members are dancing along with you. In between us, and then um, if you don’t dance or sat there in one place ...if you don’t participate, the deceased person is sitting beside you, you know, with their head down and they’re crying. They want you to dance. They want you to be happy and if you don’t dance with them you know, they’re sad. And if you ever say, want to have a feast like, whenever, in the near future, and if you don’t do it, the deceased people come down here and if you don’t do it, they go back sad. Yeah. They go back sad. And if you put a later date, apparently the deceased people don’t come. And, and the feast part wouldn’t be as good (Buffalo, Marylis, July 09, 2003, CMC AV 2004-9:8).*

*For every deceased person after the time of death from the day of the death counting in four days there is always a feast in his or her or in the case of a child’s honour. And it’s done for four years in a row. And that is the only feast for that individual for the four years. That’s Plains Cree. It’s the only way I know we do it. The only other ceremony we do is kansiksimok a lot of people say it’s a goose dance but it isn’t, kansiksimok is the dance of the deceased we call nihyatscana. I guess it is the ghost dance.*

*Because the ceremony is basically for the past deceased people for generations. The bundle that’s retained by my family is probably 300 years old I cannot be sure of the exact but its been handed from the oldest each time to the oldest in the next generation. And it’s another way of keeping your genealogy in order of all family members deceased in the past. It goes from generation to generation that is how we keep our family trees together.*

*There are particular songs used at each ceremony at this when they leave at the funeral they'll sing a song... it's called ikeawe kekikewiamot, it's the going home song, loosely translated into English. But at the ghost dances there are other songs they utilize especially for the dead. To be in good spirits, they're happy songs, but in the end they sing that going home song again for them to leave. But basically it's the same song that's used and people in certain families have their own songs for the deceased but they're basically the same. And they gotta be utilized only in that ceremony you cannot use these songs for instance at a Pow-wow or at a Give-Away or at a Sundance. They're used for that purpose for that ceremony only (Rowan, June 26, 2000, CMC AV-2002-17,18:14, 15).*

- **THE TEA DANCE**

*The Tea Dance is the main one, where you literally dance with the spirits, that's what it is in Cree, it means uh, "Keysquaypetah", which means to be euphoric. To be alive to be, a spirit you know? That's what it means. I don't know where that word Tea Dance came from, but doesn't make sense. Maybe it's because they drink tea. (laughs.) But that's the word in Cree, "Keys-quaypetah", it means to be charismatic, people go in a, a frenzy, or, they go in a zone. You become euphoric, like that. ...You join with the spirits. You believe the spirits are allowed to come out, so they can share and be joined with us for a while. You're only allowed to stay with us for a few hours. That's what we believe. You pray to them to come and you pray to them to go.*

*So at these round dances they invite the spirits to come and join in the dance. There's a proper way of doing it, a proper prayer and a proper prayer, to send them back properly. But a lot of people are saying they(the ceremonialists) don't send the spirits back properly. So, that's why there's a lot of people you hear who are suffering, there's so many deaths. We believe the spirits take you with them you know. So there are quite a few of them (dances) but the Tea Dance is the main one. And when the elders pray, they always pray to four spirits. Every time there's a pipe, they pray to the four spirits, they pray to the Creator, then they pray to the server. I call him the server "Oaskapeos", the great worker, the server. That's the one when you give me the tobacco, that's basically what you do to the "Oaskapeos". When the elder prays, he presents the pipe or he presents the food. He says, "I'm showing you this", or "This is the pipe you gave us. I'm showing it to you. Please bless it, if my words are wrong, this pipe will correct it for me, it will lead, you know", that's how he prays. And if you watch the elder, he presents the pipe, but they don't light it. Then he takes it down and then he lights it eh, now he presents that pipe to "Oaskapeos", here it is. Here's the pipe. That's protocol eh? You give it to them, you give to "Oaskapeos", not to the*

*Creator, but "Oaskapeos". And then you make your prayers. There, and then to the four spirits, the four directions, and then um, then sometimes, most of the times, they ask the elders to come and to come and join at the pipe. It's always four, the four grandfathers. And then the women have their own pipe eh.*

*No, you don't pray for the deceased, uh you are asking them to pray, to intercede, for you, because now they're closer to God eh? Same with the animal. Animals are the most perfect, anything you see they're perfect. That's why I respect the animal eh. Because God made them that way, and they're perfect, they don't have the ability to go up or down, it's only man that has that ability to make choices. You know sometimes man makes the wrong choice so man has the ability to go up or to come, go away from the Creator. The creation is the perfect manifestation of what the Creator is, so they're pleasing to God. They're pleasing to the Creator, so that's why we pray to the God's creations so that, they in turn will intercede for us, see? Like the eagle spirit, the spirit of the eagle, you pray to it you know, because you're closer to the Creator, God gave you this gift, please pray for me, intercede on our behalf. The wind spirit, because that's how I pray. I pray to the wind spirit, and it gives life, the birth of life, you know clean the earth with your wind. The sun is the perfect light, there's nothing better than light. The sun is the most perfect light, so that's why we pray. Without the sun everything die. That's why we call the sun the father. And the earth, grows when the sun is there, that's why we call it Mother Earth, the sun fertilizes Mother Earth. Yeah, all kinds of ceremonies. I couldn't begin to tell you, you'd have to ask someone who knows more about these things than I do (Buffalo, Victor, July 12, 2001, CMC AV 2002-24:1.2).*

- **(ON THE OCCASION OF A BIRTHDAY)**

*You make the offering to your relations that have gone to the spirit world. It's an offering because, you're happy that your child is having a birthday, not that long (meaning the feast does not have to last that long). You offer them the food and you ask them to pray for you and to pray for that child and pray for you. Their prayers are stronger than ours, more powerful (Lee, Ermineskin Reserve Dec. 2000, CMC AV 2001-6:4).*

- **THE CHICKEN DANCE AND THE MEDICINE LODGE**

*At the Chicken Dance, you're praying for life. That's what they always pray for, is life and the abilities to sustain life. And that's by, having children. That's what they pray for. For life and the ability to raise children (Buffalo, Victor, July 12, 2001, CMC AV 2002-24:3).*

*I know when I was younger, in the um, in the Chicken Lodge they always had dog, they always cooked one dog and that was given to the dancers and I was one of them, and the drummers and then the old men that sat over there and some of the old ladies, not everybody had it. You got to either have some certain to do with the laws to uh be given that, it's only a little piece. It's always tender, very tender; it tastes good, something like beef, tasted good. I've eaten it quite a few times in the Chicken Lodge, but my grandmother used to have a Medicine Lodge here, she had an annual Medicine Lodge. It was a lodge where she, uh, brought all of her different medicines and she was uh, mixing the ingredients and people come to, what ever uh kind of medicine you wanted or what ever ailment. She, she uh, mixed up them, and make it right there for you. That was a Medicine Lodge. And then she would have a feast and then she always had a dog, she always cooked a dog, usually a young puppy. But that was years ago in my young days I'd seen that. It doesn't exist anymore. What happened was, the reason for that, why that was done, is uh, years and years ago before the white man ever came here, people had this uh, process that's the way they did it, but what they had was a bear. They killed and cooked a bear, but now a days, here there's no, you don't see any uh, bears running around. So in exchange, in exchange for bear that's why they used dogs, just to represent bear. That's the, the purpose of that dog, but the Indian Agents got a hold of that and, and they, they considered it too barbaric and they uh, they uh, wouldn't allow anybody to do that anymore. So it's not done anymore (Buffalo, Marvin, July 6, 2000, CMC AV 2002-13:7).*

- **THE GIVE-AWAY DANCE**

*When we have these Give Away ceremonies, or uh, just about every ceremony there's a give away. What you're buying is life, good health. We pray for good health, if you have good health, you can do things, you can take care of yourself, if you have good health. That's, that's all that matters. You can have a, a billion dollars, if you don't have good health, what good is it? And the old people knew that. And that's what we've lost, almost (Lee, Dec. 2000 CMC AV2001-7:8).*

- **THE ROUND DANCE**

*Well families, like sometimes the families they'll get together, like the Tootoosis family might get together and make a plan for one in November, you know. We'll put together a Tea Dance or Round Dance or something, some kind of like, a dance to honour all of our relatives who've*

*passed away, you know. And like at the Round Dance, that's where they'll come and they'll bring pictures of the, of the dearly departed, and walk around and they'll have stories and they'll, you know, they'll have like the Round Dance and maybe they'll, well, more than likely there'll be a giveaway for people who've come a long way, they'll give them gifts for coming. They do that here too. That's something that the, it's, it's not exactly um, something that has to be done. It's, it's a voluntary thing, and it's a family thing. Some people will not participate at all (Totoosis, 2002, CMC AV 2004-2).*

## CONCLUSION

The intention of this chapter was to provide first hand, for the first time in over 70 years, contemporary traditional thoughts concerning Plains Cree beliefs about death and the afterlife from “primary source” perspectives. There seems to be a definite concern by Plains Cree traditionalists about the erosion of Plains Cree practice and belief in favour of a Pan-Indian movement and the incorporation of anything “Indian” in ceremonies associated with wakes, funerals, and feasts. These issues are very upsetting to the traditional ceremonialists, whose reaction has been one of withdrawal from the community, rather than fighting and arguing with people who were not raised in the traditional way and have no interest in learning the proper protocol and traditions. Despite these concerns it seems obvious when comparing observations made by traders, missionaries, Mandelbaum’s consultants, and modern Cree that oral traditions, teachings, and knowledge have been preserving the foundation of traditional Cree beliefs. And that is exciting to see.

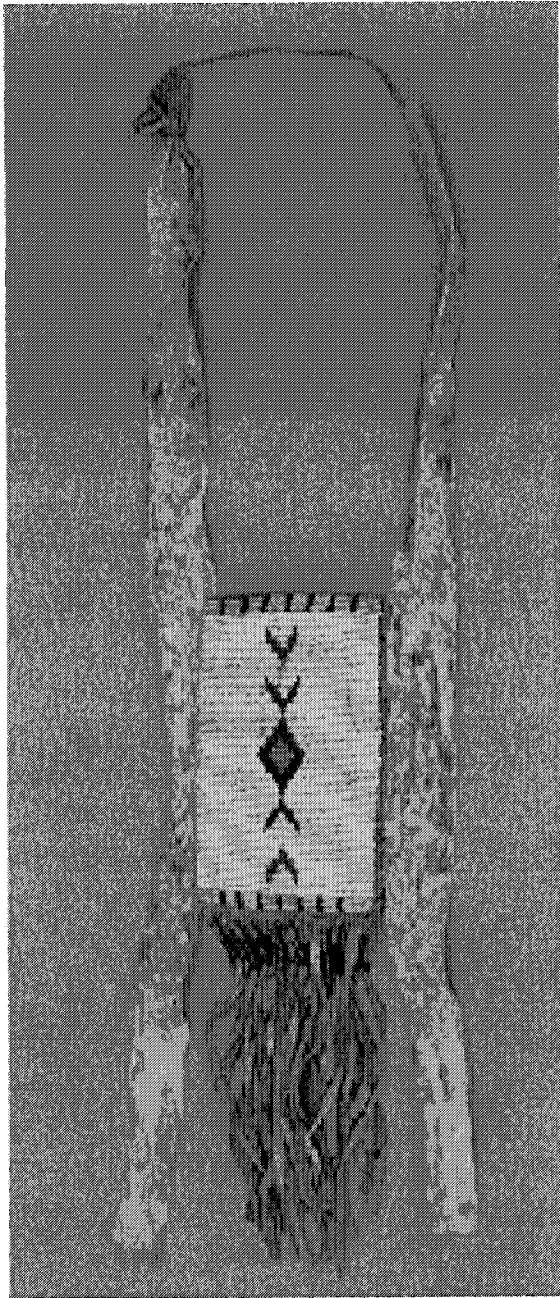
The main issues presented in this chapter centre around the fact that for the Plains Cree, beliefs of heaven or hell do not exist. The belief is that the person, through their

soul, moves into a new dimension upon death. However, they continue to be an important part of the community. With a few exceptions, all souls go to a better or Great Place when a person dies. The exception is the souls of those who committed suicide and the wayward souls, a condition which may have been created by not performing a pipe ceremony or feast properly or because they were not sent back to the land of the dead properly following a feast. These souls simply linger between both dimensions. They stand outside the circle at the feasts for the dead and cannot eat nor join in the dances. It took me years to realize that the purposes for the feast and dances given in honour of the dead were not so much to pray for the dead, but to ask the dead to pray for and intercede for the living! All of the above mentioned ceremonies are meant to ask the dead to bring the community members and family members blessings from the Creator, blessings of good health, good fortune and good luck. Given this emphasis there is still a definite fear of the dead in their ability to take innocent and vulnerable community members with them to the land of the dead. Precautions must be taken to protect these community members, particularly following the death of a close relative.

In the next chapter I will examine Plains peoples' beliefs and practices concerning the keeping of "spirit bundles", which contain personal items belonging to the dead, particularly a lock of hair, and communicating with the souls of deceased relatives as a means of attaining blessings for themselves, the family and community. The focus will be on Algonkian speaking cultures as well as Siouan cultures and the manner in which they feast and celebrate with their dead and the tradition of "releasing the soul" at appointed times.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **WALKING WITH THE BIRDS OF FIRE ABORIGINAL BELIEFS CONCERNING SPIRIT BUNDLES**



**SPIRIT BUNDLE**

Stoney/Assiniboin

CMC V-C-183 Canadian Museum of Civilization

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**THE SONG OF THE STARS**

*We are the stars which sing;  
We sing with our light;  
We are the birds of fire;  
We fly over the sky.  
Our light is a voice;  
We make a road for spirits,  
For the spirits to pass over.  
Among us we are three hunters  
Who chase a bear;  
There was a time  
When they were not hunting.  
We look down on the mountains.  
This is the Song of the Stars.*

*Collected by Charles G. Leland in 1882 among  
the Passamoquoddy of New Brunswick*

*(Columbo, 1983:28)*

## **WALKING WITH THE BIRDS OF FIRE: ABORIGINAL BELIEFS CONCERNING SPIRIT BUNDLES**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the previous chapter the contemporary Cree traditionalists and elders speak of their beliefs, teachings, and practices relating to funerals, wakes, death and the afterlife. There are elements of Christianity woven into some of these beliefs along with many non-Christian beliefs. One of the important messages presented in the previous chapter is that oral tradition and teachings have survived colonization. This does not mean that there are no concerns for the future. Cree traditionalists are frustrated with the struggle to pass on oral tradition and teachings to a generation that is totally absorbed in new technology and exposed to a life style never imagined by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike.

Although each Aboriginal culture in North America had numerous beliefs about the afterlife there were certain beliefs that were common throughout the Americas. Particular beliefs are shared by a number of cultures who are, in some cases, culturally unrelated and may be found thousands of kilometers apart across the continent, while other similarities are found in different cultures who live in close proximity to each other and certainly had contact with each other, through war or trade. Several shared the same hunting and trade routes. Numerous Plains and Great Lakes Aboriginal cultures shared four basic beliefs about death: 1. There was no notion of a hell or eternal punishment. 2. The afterlife was believed to be a pleasant or "better place" for those whose family followed a prescribed "feast for the dead". 3. One could communicate with the dead

through certain feasts, dances or ceremonies. 4. The dead were required to be fed tobacco and ceremonial food to aid them on their journey to the afterlife on the anniversary of their death, sometimes upon dreaming of the dead, or at prescribed times of the year.

Those spirits that did not reach the other side required assistance to “pass over”. This assistance may have taken the form of a feast for the dead, a dice game in which the deceased was invited to take part in order to influence the outcome of the game, a sport game, such as lacrosse, or a particular dance.

One tradition practiced in pre-contact times as well as today by several Plains and Great Lakes Aboriginal cultures is that of “soul keeping”. This chapter will examine the tradition of “soul keeping” among the Blackfoot, Dakota, Menominee and Cree as an attempt to commune with, control, or care for the soul of the dead. This relates specifically to ceremonies mentioned in Chapters 4 and 5 pertaining to the Ghost Dance or Soup Dance.

In an interview with Allan Pard (summer of 2000), a Northern Piikunii (Peigan) Holy-man, about Blackfoot burial practices, Pard mentioned that Blackfoot medicine men had the ability to make the dead into a spirit slave by obtaining a tooth of a deceased person. By doing so, medicine men could control the spirit of the deceased and request that they carry out certain tasks for them, such as traveling to seek out lost items or collecting information on enemies or individuals. When questioned further about the

practice, Pard had little more to say, as our discussion was moving into the “dark side” of Blackfoot ceremonialism. Although I was familiar with the practice of “soul keeping” among the Cree, it had not occurred to me at the time that other cultures may have had similar “soul keeping” practices until I came across references to similar practices among the Dakota, Lakota, Assiniboin, Menominee, Fox, Ojibwa, Winnebago and Iowa. Although the intentions behind these practices appear to be somewhat different, there are a number of practices that are amazingly similar.

### **THE DAKOTA AND LAKOTA**

Hassrick (1964:38) mentions in *The Lakota Life and Customs of a Warrior Society* that some parents who had lost a child were particularly anxious to own a “ghost bundle”, which contained a lock of hair of their deceased child. The act of owning such a bundle brought honor and respect on the couple from the community because the commitment to own such a bundle was very demanding to the couple and their family. Robert Hall, in *An Archaeology of the Soul: North American Belief and Ritual*, in an interview with Black Elk, a Lakota Holy man points out that, although bundles were eventually kept for anyone, “*Soul Keeping was more often done in mourning for a child than for a grown person. Black Elk says that at first only the souls of a few of the great leaders were kept and later the practice was extended to the souls of all good people*” (Hall, 1997:26). Frances Densmore (1918:78) and Robert Hall (1997:26), confirm Hassrick’s findings about the personal responsibilities involved, as well as the community’s respect for the couple’s demanding obligation. The three authors agree that

the details of the Dakota and Lakota ceremony are very similar. During the process of the ceremony of both cultures, the deceased is brought back to life in the form of the 'spirit bundle'. Densmore explains:

The body of the boy was placed on a scaffold, and his best horse was killed beneath it. Before this was done the father decided to keep the boy's spirit and so announced to the tribe. He requested a man whose record was without blemish to cut a lock of the boy's hair to be put in the spirit bundle. The man came at his request and before going near the body of the boy he purified his hands and also his knife with the smoke of sweet grass. When he was about to cut the hair he made three motions as if to do so and then cut it with the fourth motion. [This same motion is used by the Blackfoot when cutting tobacco for a ceremony, a hide to make lacing to tie the Sundance poles, or to transfer sacred material]. The lock was cut over one eye. When the hair had been cut it was wrapped in red cloth. If desired, some article which had been worn next to the body of the child could be used instead of a lock of hair...

After wrapping this selected article in red cloth the proposed spirit-keeper took the little packet in his arms as if it were the body of a child and rode around the camp circle, lamenting the child's death. This was his announcement to the tribe that he had taken upon himself the responsibilities of a spirit-keeper (*wana'gi yuha'pi*) and wished to be considered as such. Afterwards a decorated case was brought, and in this was placed the packet containing the hair, also sweet grass and the shed hair of the buffalo [this ceremony is said to have been given to the Dakota and Lakota by the White Buffalo Calf Woman, who instructed the people how to perform the ceremony]. This case was wrapped in red cloth. The spirit-keeper or his friend selected the straightest pole they could find, pine being preferred for the purpose. This pole was erected outside his door, and the spirit bundle was tied on it. The bundle was supposed to stay there four days and nights before being taken down. During these four days a special wrapping (*wi'caske*) of soft-tanned hide was made for it, and feasts were given to those who had kept spirits. At the end of four days the bundle was taken down by men who had kept spirits and was placed in its wrapping...With it was placed articles intended as gifts to those who took part in the ceremony. Small articles were placed in a decorated case and large articles, as pieces of red cloth, were folded smoothly.

After the spirit bundle was complete they prepared three stakes, painted red and decorated with quill work, also decorated thongs with which to fasten the bundle in place...The tripod was about 6 steps from this tipi, which was known as *wana'gi ti'pi* or "spirit lodge" (Densmore, 1918:77-79).

Densmore goes on to explain that inside the tipi an altar is prepared for the spirit bundle, where incense tongs and a smudge is kept. The parents of the child must maintain a quiet atmosphere in the household out of respect for the “ghost bundle” they are keeping. Every day the keepers must paint their faces with red earth paint [as would a Blackfoot bundle keeper and his family]. Although Densmore reports that the time for keeping a bundle could vary from several months to a year or longer, Hall and Hassrick only mention a year, until the anniversary date of the spirit’s death. Given the responsibilities and restrictions a family would be expected to undertake it is plausible that the commitment could be for a shorter time, although there certainly seems to be a preference among all other Plains and Great Lakes cultures to keep such a bundle until the anniversary date of the death. The act of releasing the spirit was called the *waki’caga* in Lakota, meaning “the act of completing the undertaking” (Densmore, 1918:81).

Densmore (1918:81) mentions that during the year the spirit bundle keeper attended numerous ceremonies throughout the community where he received expensive gifts. The bundle keeper reciprocated by inviting these hosts to the feast when the spirit was released. The costly gifts received for attending ceremonies were used when the bundle keeper would hold his soul-releasing feast. They were added to others that the keeper, his family, and relatives made and bought throughout the year to distribute at his releasing ceremony.

As the day for the soul releasing ceremony approached, a man who had once kept the spirit of a relative was chosen to prepare the “spirit post” or *wana’gi gele’pi*.

Densmore (80) mentions that the post is carved from a piece of cottonwood, meant to represent the spirit of the one held in the bundle. On it a face was carved and painted. Sometimes the post was decorated with beads and feathers. Clothes and moccasins were also made. Hall (1997:28) makes the point that the spirit post was dressed in the clothes owned by the deceased. Hassrick (1964:303-304) confirms that a spirit post is made but in his experience, a piece of hide is painted to represent the spirit of the deceased, along with, in the case of a male, any appropriate war rank stripes. This painted hide is placed on top of a cottonwood pole. In both accounts, when the post was finished being prepared the ceremony could begin. The bundle containing the spirit of the deceased was placed next to the carved post in the Densmore account and in front of the post in the Hassrick account. During the course of the ceremony food is offered to the post by the *itan'cans* (former ghost bundle keepers) as though it were a human being. During the feeding of the posts orphans could come forward in the name of the deceased and asked to be fed and cared for. Densmore points out that such requests were never denied.

After the post was fed the feast for those present took place. Sweetgrass was burnt and a pipe ceremony took place in the manner taught to the Lakota by the White Buffalo Calf Woman. This is the reason a white buffalo robe was also used in the lodge during the ceremony. Following the pipe ceremony the spirit bundle was opened and the soul released – to travel the Milky Way road, to join the “birds of fire” as the Passamoquoddy would say.

He did not take all the wrapping from a spirit bundle at once. He removed a portion and then made a brief discourse, doing this in such a manner that there were four acts of unwrapping, the last one occurring about an hour before sunset. Then he unfolded the last wrapping and let

the spirit of my child depart. The lock of hair, or other objects which formed the nucleus of the spirit bundle, was kept by the family, and the itan'can kept such articles from the bundle as he desired, the remainder being distributed among the people in the lodge (Densmore, 1918:83 quoting Weasel Bear).

Densmore (1918:83) mentions that the couple that kept the ghost bundle then distributed all of their personal belongings including their tipi. Hassrick (1964:304-305) says, on the other hand, that a buffalo robe was placed outside the lodge after the feast and gifts were placed on the robe. After everyone was gathered outside all were invited to help themselves to the gifts. Hassrick makes no mention of the couple becoming destitute.

Both Densmore (1918:84) and Hassrick (1964:305) point out that the family generally honored individuals or societies who had assisted with the "spirit bundle" during the course of the year. These people were given special gifts and publicly honored for their assistance. If it was a society that assisted, they might be given the buffalo robe and an eagle feather war bonnet to be distributed among them.

In Densmore's account, the parents of the deceased were now destitute after giving away all of their possessions to begin a new life. Friends and relatives came around to provide them with a tipi or home, some clothes and utensils.

Hessrick adds that the pole representing the spirit child was left standing for some time. People who passed by the pole, might clean around the pole; they are generally fed

by the family for doing so. Eventually the “spirit keeper” would bury the pole representing the deceased (1964:84).

## THE MENOMINEE

A substantial amount of Robert Hall’s research (1997) centers on the Menominee, an Algonquian speaking people who live primarily in the Great Lakes region of the United States and Canada. In *An Archaeology of the Soul*, Hall points out that traditional Menominees practice keeping a “death bundle” for deceased relatives, containing a lock of hair that is referred to as the soul or spirit. In the Menominee tradition the bundle is generally buried following a memorial service (1997:28).

The Menominee tradition of keeping “death bundles” can be traced to an early creation story. In it the culture hero, a half human named Ma’nabus [the Trickster], is given the Medicine Lodge ceremony by the Powers Above and the Powers Beneath in compensation for the death of his brother Onapaxtao, or Muhwase, the Little Wolf. The myth of the Medicine Lodge is a very long story, but due to the limitations of this thesis I will provide a ‘Readers Digest’ version of the account.

While on earth Ma’nabus killed and drove off many evil beings that terrorized the earth’s inhabitants. Out of revenge evil beings from the Below World conspired to drown Ma’nabus’ younger brother Onapaxtao as he attempted to cross a frozen lake. When Ma’nabus heard of his brother’s death he vowed to destroy the Powers Beneath

beings. Fearful of Ma'nabus, the Powers Beneath appealed to the Powers of the Above World to assist them in appeasing Ma'nabus. Together the Above and Below World Powers gave Ma'nabus a great gift – they restored his little brother to life and gave Ma'nabus the Medicine Lodge. However, as Onapaxtao had been dead for 4 days he smelled putrid and his flesh was falling from his bones. He smelled so badly that Ma'nabus could not stand being in his presence. Ma'nabus sent Onapaxtao back to the Land of the Dead to govern that realm. The Medicine Lodge ceremony provided the means by which the dead could be released from the land of the dead to partake in fasting, dancing and singing with their human relations.

Therefore, as you well know, when one of our fellow brethren of the Medicine Lodge dies, he goes to Napaxtao[!]. When he has remained there a year, we, the survivors, raise up some one of the same age and sex to take his place. At that time the soul of the dead man is called back temporarily from the other world, and enters the body of the candidate. When our memorial services and the initiation of the new brother are over, the soul of the dead man is dismissed in order to return to Onapaxtao. After this, the clothing of the dead man, hitherto up to this day, kept wrapped around a lock of the dead man's hair to form the Death Bundle, becomes the property of the new brother, who has been dressed in it during the ceremony, and the lock of hair that it contained is buried in the earth... Then, when a man had been dead for six or eight moons, his body was dug from the earth, and the bones stripped and cleaned, or even burned, and the bones or their ashes were kept wrapped in the death bundle until the time appointed, and then deposited in a mound of earth made of the same size and shape as the ground plan of the Mitawi'komin, the Medicine Lodge Building. This was a monument to the dead, and a sign that he had trodden the path that all the brethren and fellows had walked before him (Hall, 29).

In searching for further meaning to the Menominee practice of calling forth the dead, Hall examines early archaeological evidence in the Great Lakes area and the writings of the Jesuit Father, Paul Le Jeune, who discussed Huron and Algonquian

cultures that kept bone bundle burials. Father Le Jeune spoke with a ship Captain who had spent some time living among the Huron, and questioned him about referring to the bones of the dead as *Atsiken*. Le Jeune explains:

...I gathered from his conversation that many think we have two souls, both of them being divisible and material, and yet both reasonable; the one separates itself from the body at death, yet remains in the Cemetery until the feast of the Dead, - after which it either changes into a Turtledove, or, according to the most common belief it goes away at once to the village of souls. The other is, as it were, bound to the body, and informs, so to speak, the corpse; it remains in the ditch of the dead after the feast, and never leaves it, unless some one bears it again as a child. He pointed out to me, as a proof of this metempsychosis, the perfect resemblance some have to persons deceased. A fine Philosophy, indeed. Such as it is, it shows why they call the bones of the dead, *Atsiken*, "the souls" (Hall, 30, quoting Jesuit Relations 10:287, 1896-1901. Edited by Reuben Gold Thwaites. Cleveland: Burrows Brothers).

Hall's research leads him to further investigate the Mound Burial archaeological excavations of Will McKern in eastern Wisconsin (1935 and 1936) Lloyd Wilford in Koochiching County, Minnesota (1933), and James Stoltman in 1973, also in Koochiching County. All three sites are in pre-reservation and contemporary reservation Menominee territory. The three archaeologists discovered secondary burials in the mounds consisting of a skull, mandible and long bones. What puzzled these archaeologists was that the skull and bones in the bundle burials had all been drilled. James Stoltman suggested in 1973, "What was motivating such practices could have been a cosmology that demanded the release of the soul or spirit from certain bones after death or that encouraged survivors to partake of the flesh of the deceased to ensure or enhance their own powers" (Hall, 1997:30, quoting Stoltman, 1973. *New perspectives on*

*Cahokia: Views from the periphery*. Monographs in World Archaeology 2. Madison, Wis.: Prehistory Press).

There may in fact be some truth to part of what Stoltman is suggesting. Alanson Skinner pointed out in his 1913 research on Menominee bundles that the Menominee, an Algonkian speaking culture like the Cree, believed that every human had two souls. “One soul called ‘a shade across’ resided in the head and was the intellect; after death it becomes a grave-ghost. The other is the real soul, tchebai, which has its seat in the heart and at death betakes itself to the realm of the dead” (Skinner, 1913:85). Like Le Jeune and Skinner, Ake Hultkrantz (1953:79), in his monumental research on North American Indian concepts of the soul, supports the suggestion of this belief among the Menominee. Hultkrantz’s work points to a very widespread belief in a duality of souls across North America, and particularly among Great Lakes Algonquian and Siouan speaking cultures. Hultkrantz reveals that there is a belief among some Great Lakes cultures that humans have as many as 4 souls: one which resides with the bones after death, another which leaves the body during illness, another which leaves the body during dream time and a fourth which travels to the land of the dead after death.

What Hall is suggesting through McKern, Wilford and Smith’s research is that just prior to the Reservation period many Great Lakes cultures may have begun to replace “bone drilling” soul releasing practice and “bone bundle” burial ceremonies with the more current practice of keeping hair locks or a personal item from the deceased in a “spirit or ghost bundle”. Such a move would certainly draw less attention from

missionaries and Indian Agents who were always anxious to stomp out any form of pagan rituals and beliefs. Hall discovered that in contemporary times among the Lakota, “flags are placed on the casket of Army men caskets. The flag taken from the casket before the burial, folded and handed to the parents, sibling or relative, has come to represent the Soul Bundle. The flag is kept for a year and on the anniversary of the death the flag is flown for the day – symbolizing the release of the soul” (Hall, 1997:31).

### **THE NEHIYAW: CREE**

In 1987 my grandmother, who was living in Tecumseh, Ontario, had suffered a stroke and as a result was very ill. At the time I was teaching on the Alexander Reserve one hundred kilometers north of Edmonton, Alberta. In the community lived an elderly Holy man named Henry who was so ill he was no longer able to sponsor the community’s Sundance. I met him on a number of occasions through his daughter, who was the Cree language and cultural instructor at the school. I had heard on a number of occasions from people in the community how powerful a healer Henry was.

Over the course of two years I had spoken to a few people who had been healed while attending Henry’s ceremonies. Upon hearing of my grandmother’s stroke I asked Henry’s daughter if we could visit her father, as I wanted to talk to him about my concern for my Grandmother. The next day my friend informed me that her father would see me but that I had to bring with me a white eagle feather and four colored ribbons – any color except black, with me.

I found these objects and together we went to visit her father. I explained to Henry about my Grandmother's illness and after doing so he took the white eagle feather, and attached the four ribbons to the quill of the feather. He then took the feather into his hands and began to pray. He prayed continuously for about 20 minutes, and during this time seemed to go into a trance. He was clearly not with us anymore. When he had finished praying he told me that he had traveled on the wings of the eagle and had visited my Grandmother. He reported her condition and said that she would recover but would never be quite the same as before. He gave me specific instructions to send her the feather, and directions for her to say a particular prayer, four times a day, while holding the feather next to her heart; which she did and later recovered as Henry foretold. I was also instructed to buy four pieces of print (colored cotton cloth 2 meters in length) the same colors as the ribbons I had chosen, and a pouch of tobacco. I was also expected to attend the "100 willow sweat" he was sponsoring. I would not be taking part in the sweat but I should stay for the duration of the ceremony. Following the sweat, I was also directed to attend the "Soup Dance", which Henry was also sponsoring. Although the dance generally took place inside a large tipi because of the early fall, and cold weather, the ceremony took place inside the school gym. I was told to bring my own teacup, bowl, and utensils.

### **THE SOUP DANCE WITH THE SPIRIT BUNDLES**

The day of the ceremony, I arrived at the school around 17:00 h. There were already about one hundred people at the school. There was little activity as people were

standing outside the school gym waiting for the ceremonialists to arrive from Hobbema. Henry Paul was one of four men who would be leading the ceremony. The other three were coming in from Buck Lake. One of the men, Raven, was Henry's son-in-law, and the other men went by the name Saddleback. When the ceremonialists arrived the crowd had increased to about four hundred people. Everyone went to their vehicle to get their bags with their cup, plate and utensils. When all were gathered a few of the men lit a large fire in an oil drum. When the fire was lit people were asked to bring out their "bundles", which generally contained a braid or lock of hair of a deceased relative or a personal item which had belonged to the deceased. One of the ceremonialist's helpers had been responsible for traveling throughout the community to tell people who owned "spirit or ghost bundles" of their deceased relatives that they must attend the "Soup Dance" being given in honor of their relatives. People with other types of bundles [the use for which was never explained to me] were also informed that they must attend. One of the ceremonialists then stepped forward and asked those who had bundles to stand in a semi-circle behind him, to the north. The main ceremonialist faced south and began to pray calling forth the Spirits of the South. He then turned to face the west and called the Spirits of the West. Turning to face the north he called upon the Spirits of the North, and then facing east called the Spirits of the East. He also called upon the Spirits of the Above World and Below World. Once all the spirits were gathered he called upon the spirits of the "Spirit Bundles" to come forward. When he finished praying, the drummers led the procession into the gym, followed by the ceremonialists who were carrying their bundles. The individuals who had care of the family Spirit Bundles followed. Everyone then followed behind and danced around the gym four times. The bundle carriers then

formed an oval and the ceremonialists stood facing the south. The community members took their places along the wall of the gym. When the singing had finished the bundles were placed on their tripod stands, which were already set up behind them. Sweetgrass was burned on the coals collected from the sacred fire outside, and the pipe stem and bowl were cleansed in the smoke. A pipe ceremony followed with more prayers and songs.

Four pails of four different types of soup were laid out in the center of the gym, one soup made of moose nose and berries, another of Saskatoon berries, another of white rice, raisins, boiled chunks of moose and dried fruit, and a fourth of dried fruit. A large area of the floor was also heaping with food – a variety of cooked and dried wild meat, bannock, potatoes, hard boiled eggs, pastry, fruit, canned goods, dried fish, candies and “junk food”. *Oaskapeos* or “altar servers” or “servants” or “pipe carriers”, as they are called in English, distributed the rice soup first. When the Pipeman finished his prayers everyone ate their soup. As people were eating the *oaskapeos* distributed the other three soups then the rest of the food. A bowl went around the room in which people placed a bit of food from their dish into the bowl. This bowl of food would later be placed outside, in a clean place for the souls of the dead and any spirits present to eat from. People ate for about half an hour. When the ceremonialists finished eating they moved into the part of the ceremony that had a tremendous resemblance to the Catholic mass. After the ceremonialists were finished praying everyone in attendance began lining up in front of the main ceremonialist to receive a piece of baked bannock, broken off from a single large loaf. Afterwards, people lined up in front of one of the “servers” to drink tea

from a common cup, and then return to their place. Through the form of the feast for the dead itself we were already eating with the spirits present; however sharing bannock and “muskikiwapoy” or medicine water (tea) with the deceased seemed to be the important component at the ceremony. This part of the ceremony lasted almost an hour. Following this, at appointed times during the evening, men who had vowed to dance with the bundles got up to dance in single file, one behind the other a meter or so apart so the spirits present could dance among them. At times, all of the men caring for bundles got up to dance with their bundles. For the most part only the men with bundles danced. Sometimes family members would join their family bundle in dance, and occasionally the entire assembly would dance. I was not informed about the circumstances, but people just seemed to know when it was time for everyone to dance. At the end of the ceremony a going home song was sung to indicate the end and to send the spirits back to the land of the dead. The ceremonialists and those with bundles walked outside and released the spirits from the ceremony sending them back to the south, west, north and east, Upper World, and Below World. The sacred fire was then allowed to burn out, and the assembly went home. The ceremony finished around 2:30 in the morning.

Although a few people were crying during the ceremony, for the most part, people seemed to be serious or solemn yet quite happy. Most of the school children were also in attendance.

The purpose of the ceremony, I was told, was to feast with the community's dead and to pray for healing or blessings for particular families or individuals named during the sweat ceremony earlier in the day.

Having lived and worked among the Woodlands Cree in Northern Alberta I had learned of two other ceremonies which were directed at feasting with the dead. One of the ceremonies was the "Tea Dance"; the other ceremony was called the *wikokewin*. Roger Vandersteene, an Oblate missionary among the Little Red River Cree in Northern Alberta between 1946-1976, describes the *wikokewin* ceremony he attended in 1954.

There must be 250 people in this tent; I have never seen so many Indians gathered at one place before. The sacred fire sits right in front of me. Beyond the fire stands a thin manitokkan (totem pole) [or spirit pole?], decorated with rings and ribbons... Behind the manitokkan, I see a series of four fires. Four young men are designated as ritual accessory bearers; they are to bring them at the right time and maintain the fires...It is touching to see how the old men mutually refresh their memories of those dead for many long years. They enumerate names; they quote deeds done by so and so. This is not idle gossip, but a ceremonial remembrance. It is crucial that no one be forgotten. To recall the name of the dead is to invite the dead to take part in the feast...When each one has been served [food and soup], Ayamihewasow gets up, takes his bowl, and goes to stand facing the sacred fire before the manitokkan. He raises the bowl as a sign of sacrifice and murmurs a formula...Then he threw the sacrifice into the fire and went to sit in his place. A second man does likewise. And the others follow until each has made his offering to the tchipayak (the ancestor spirits).

The servers lit the wikkimasigan, a kind of tinder. ...The sacrifice ended, they incense the fire, the pipes, dolls, and small medicine bundles. They make the round of the tent, finally bringing the incense to rest in front of the fire. This is the post where the tchipayak [ghosts] are said to reside.

A procession of young dancing men holding high the sacred dolls passes in front of the fire...These ritual dolls represent the spirits of the dead; they constitute reliquaries stuffed with locks of hair taken from the ancestors. Some of the dolls are at least a hundred years old.

After nine turns carried out extremely slowly, the dolls are set down near the fire, in the place of honor. The pipes are then lit and presented to the old men...As the pipes finish their rounds, they are set down at the foot of the dolls.

It is almost midnight when all the ceremonies are finished, but no one worries about the late hour. The servers then begin to distribute the food...but nobody begins to eat until the last person has been served.

When everyone has put away his leftovers, a procession is organized...If the aurora borealis, with its splendour, its hallucinating movements and its ghostliness rejoices the heart of the Indians, it is because it assures them that the deceased are present. The dead open the dance, these are their movements, their cadences, their rhythms. For in Cree the aurora borealis is designated as tchipayak e nimitutwaw, that is, dancing ancestor spirits...people then come back into the tent and begin to dance...Ayamihewasow gets up, and surrounded by the other old men stands before the fire facing the manitokkan. Everyone sits down and the three directors rock to the sound of the drum and leap forward towards the fire...Again several paces forward, then backwards. They chant and they pray; thank you for the blessings of the year gone by. Help us in the months that are ahead! Spare us from your malevolent ministrations! Refrain from making our lives unbearable!

...The pale copper-colored sun caressed the walls of the tent. At its appearance, we were at the end (Waugh, 1996:50-55).

Waugh interprets Vandersteene's understanding of the Cree concept of the afterlife as a parallel world to this one, more extensive, but intimately related to this world.

In short, nobody really died in traditional Cree culture, they just walked through to the other side, where they roamed about as if protected by a one-way glass. The key to communication with the people on the other side is the mind; through the mind, one can fix an individual who has passed into the other side into an image, and this image become the connector with the spirit. Memory is a central feature in this process (Waugh, 1996:259).

Waugh also interprets Vandersteene's understanding of the importance of eating at the feast as subordinated to the true meaning of the feast,

to the affirmation of community solidarity with those beyond, while the drumming, dancing and offering to the spirits were ultimately constructed to put the spirit world in debt to the living and thus curry their

favour to continue to provide for the community's needs (Waugh, 1996:284).

In speaking of the designation of the wikokewin as "sacrifice", Waugh understands Vandersteene to say that the wikokewin's claim is that "the ritual must overcome a fundamental tension, the feeling of separateness from the ancestral spirits that were the source of the community's survival in both worlds...There is a primordial chasm between the living and the dead; the rite must integrate two incompatible realms of existence" (Waugh, 1996:285)

It is interesting to note that the "Granddaddy" of Cree ethnology, David Mandelbaum (1979), makes no mention of the *wikokewin* ceremony in his major work, *The Plains Cree: An Ethnographic, Historical and Comparative Study*. Verne Dusenberry in *The Montana Cree: A Study in Religious Persistence* (1962), does make mention of the ceremony in light of the research done by Fred Pesse in 1912, in his unpublished paper called *The Cree Indians*. Pesse, who called the ceremony the *che-pa* or *se-mo-wen*, reported:

When a person died, a lock of the hair was cut off and placed with tobacco and sweetgrass and made into a bundle, a foot or fifteen inches long and wrapped in a skin or cloth. As others died, the bundle was added to. Each year a piece of skin or cloth was added to the wrapping. In the course of time these bundles became quite large. They were tied at the ends, and hung up in the lodge. Once a year a Ghost Dance was held either in the spring or fall. Each family would bring its bundle, which was called Ne-ya-che-kwa, which implied that it was always carried along. Each family bringing a bundle was supposed to bring a kettle of soup or some other contribution to the feast. On the first round, the dancers made the circle holding up the bundles, which are then hung up in the rear of the dance lodge. Then the dance is continued and concluded with a feast (Dusenberry, 135, from the unpublished manuscript of F.E. Pesse: 55).

In a personal interview with Raining Bird, a Plains Cree from the Rocky Boy Reservation in Montana, Dusenberry learned that:

the essence of the dance lies in the communication with the dead. At the big feast, which is the integral part of the ceremony, the spirits of the dead return and tell the participants about the way of life after death. These spirits also warn people to follow the teachings of the Creator else dire results will follow. Sometimes only the feast is held (Dusenberry: *ibid*).

Except for the above accounts from my own observations and participation at Alexander Reserve, and from Waugh, Pessa, and Dusenberry, there appear to be no other sources that refer to the Cree Ghost Dance. There appears to be consistency in what has been observed and revealed; that the purpose of the ghost dance is to feed and feast with the dead for the purpose of obtaining instruction and teachings from the dead, and to seek their blessings. The dead also have the ability to carry petitions of the living to the creator.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

From the material just examined it is clear that unrelated peoples, such as the Siouan and Algonquian speaking cultures, as well as related Algonquian speaking cultures [Menominee, Blackfoot, and Cree], separated at times by thousands of kilometers share similar beliefs and practices regarding the keeping and releasing of souls. As was mentioned earlier, this practice of "soul keeping" is not restricted to the

above mentioned cultures but was practiced by almost every Great Lakes and Plains cultures as well as by a number of South American cultures, in slightly different manners and for sometimes slightly different purposes.

Traits shared by the cultures under discussion include the keeping of hair or in its absence, a personal item belonging to the deceased, a releasing feast, and the giving away of property. Over the years I have heard many Cree cultural instructors tell students in my classrooms that their hair was very sacred. Children were instructed to keep their hairbrushes clean and burn the fallen hair from their brushes so that others would not take their hair in order to use “bad medicine” against them. The practice of guarding one’s hair clippings, body parts, nail clippings, body fluids, afterbirth, umbilical cord, and feces was a widespread practice followed by many North American Indigenous peoples (Baillargeon, 1991). Some Cree elders also told the students that their ‘hair’ was their power. In this light, the use of hair to hold back someone’s soul seems quite appropriate.

The discovery by McKern, Wilford and Smith, in Menominee country in Minnesota, of bone bundle burials containing drilled bones provides an interesting find given the belief in soul dualism by numerous Aboriginal cultures, as pointed out by Hultkrantz (1953). According to Paul Lennox, a retired salvage archaeologist from the Ontario Ministry of Transportation, drilled bone bundle burials are commonly found in Iroquoian, Huronian, and Algonquian sites in Southwestern Ontario (Lennox, May 3, 2001). The interpretation Lennox offered was the same as that provided by Stoltman (Hall, 30).

The red cloth used by the Lakota and Dakota for the outer wrapping of the spirit bundle, as described by Densmore (1918:77-79), provides further physical proof of the sacred nature of the ghost bundles. The Dakota and Lakota have long reserved the color red to mark sacred material. All sacred Dakota, Lakota and Nakota, and Ojibwa objects at the Canadian Museum of Civilization have been wrapped in red cloth by the ceremonialists who have identified them as sacred. This color is not used exclusively by the Siouan people to designate something or someone sacred, but by a large number of Plains and Great Lakes Aboriginal cultures. The color red signifies life-blood, sacrifice, and power. I believe Densmore intentionally points out the use of red cloth as an outer wrapping for the bundle. Coincidentally, the Cree bundle pictured in Image 1 is also wrapped in red cloth. Pessa (55) does not provide any details about the color of the hides used by the Huron to wrap their bundles. However, prior to the introduction of trade cloth, sacred objects, including robes, were painted with red ochre (red iron oxide) by numerous cultures throughout America.

The description of the bundles proves interesting, as there seems to be no prescribed size. The bundle illustrated in Image 1 is an example of a Nehiyaw “spirit bundle” held by the Provincial Museum of Alberta. The bundle has multiple wrappings and contains only one human hair lock and several personal items such as a small purse, a sock, a child’s vest, and bonnet, to name a few of the items. This bundle is large, about 40 cm in diameter and 45 cm in length. A woman who was given charge of the bundle but felt she did not know how to care for the bundle deposited it at the Museum. The Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, Quebec, has in their possession two such

bundles and several smaller bundles of the Nakota type. In March of 2004, a Cree ceremonialist from the Louis Bull Reserve did a short pipe ceremony, then added a new wrapping of cloth to the bundles before they were placed in the storage space for sacred objects.

The outer container for most of the “spirit bundles” containing human hair in the Canadian Museum of Civilization Plains collection from the Stoney or Assiniboin or Nakota, another Siouan culture, are made from the corner tabs of a pad saddle (see image 2, 3, and 4). In Image 5, the pad saddle tabs are clearly visible. As these pad saddles are no longer being used, contemporary Stoney/Assiniboin ceremonialists do not have an explanation for the preferred use of saddle tabs. From years of researching pad saddle construction, I have come to learn that the porcupine quillwork or beaded designs worked into the saddles and saddle ornaments generally represented the owner’s medicine, which was meant to protect both the horse and the rider from injury. The Stoney/Assiniboin “spirit bags” have long leather or ribbon straps in order to facilitate wearing the bag around the neck. These bags are said to have been carried or worn by the “spirit bundle” keeper. As relatives died their hair was added to the bag, and once a year the family gave a “feast” in honor of their deceased relatives.

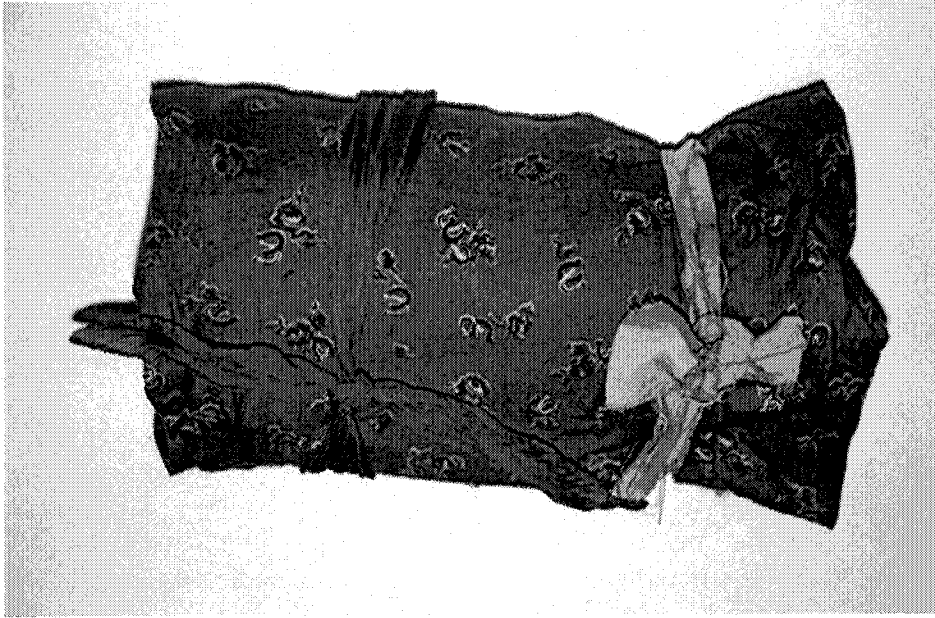


Image 1

This Nehiyaw "Spirit Bundle" contains personal belongings of deceased relatives such as socks, a purse, a child's vest, and hair from deceased relatives. The previous owner deposited the bundle with the Provincial Museum of Alberta in Edmonton, because she did not know how to care for the bundle. Provincial Museum of Alberta collection. Photo by Morgan Baillargeon, Dec. 13, 2000.

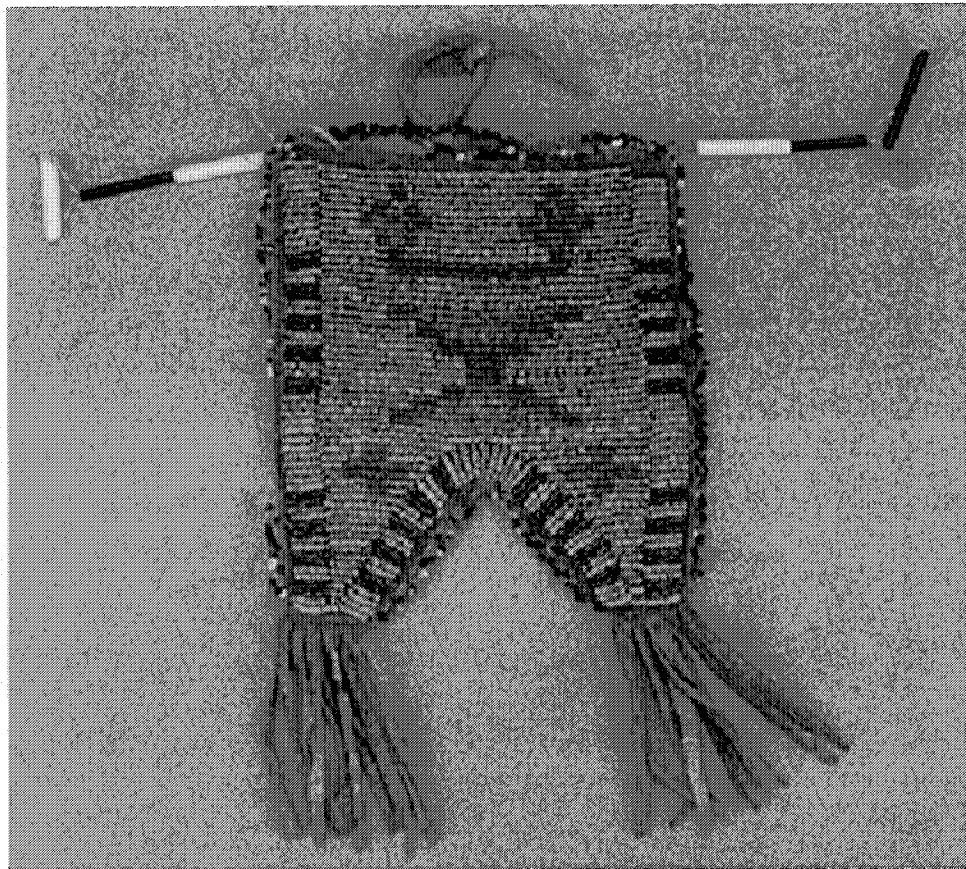


Image 2 Stoney/Assiniboin “spirit bundle”, made from the tab off a pad Saddle. Laid out this way the bundle has the form of a human body with legs and arms. Canadian Museum of Civilization collection CMC V-C-182.

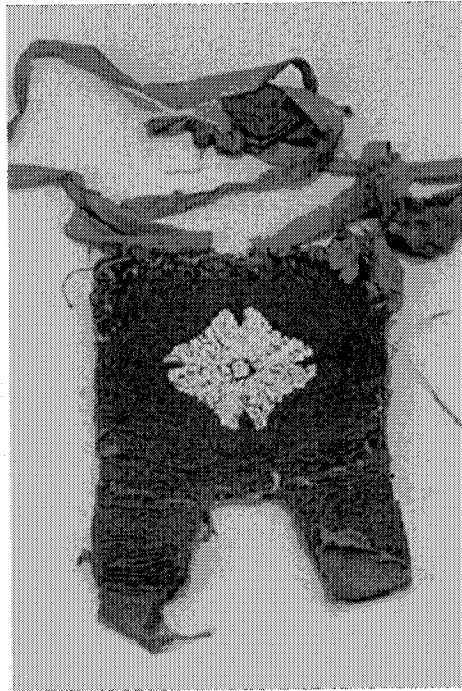


Image 3  
Stoney/Assiniboin "spirit bundle", front.  
Canadian Museum of Civilization collection CMC V-C-31



Image 4  
Stoney/Assiniboin "spirit bundle", back.  
Canadian Museum of Civilization collection CMC V-C-31.

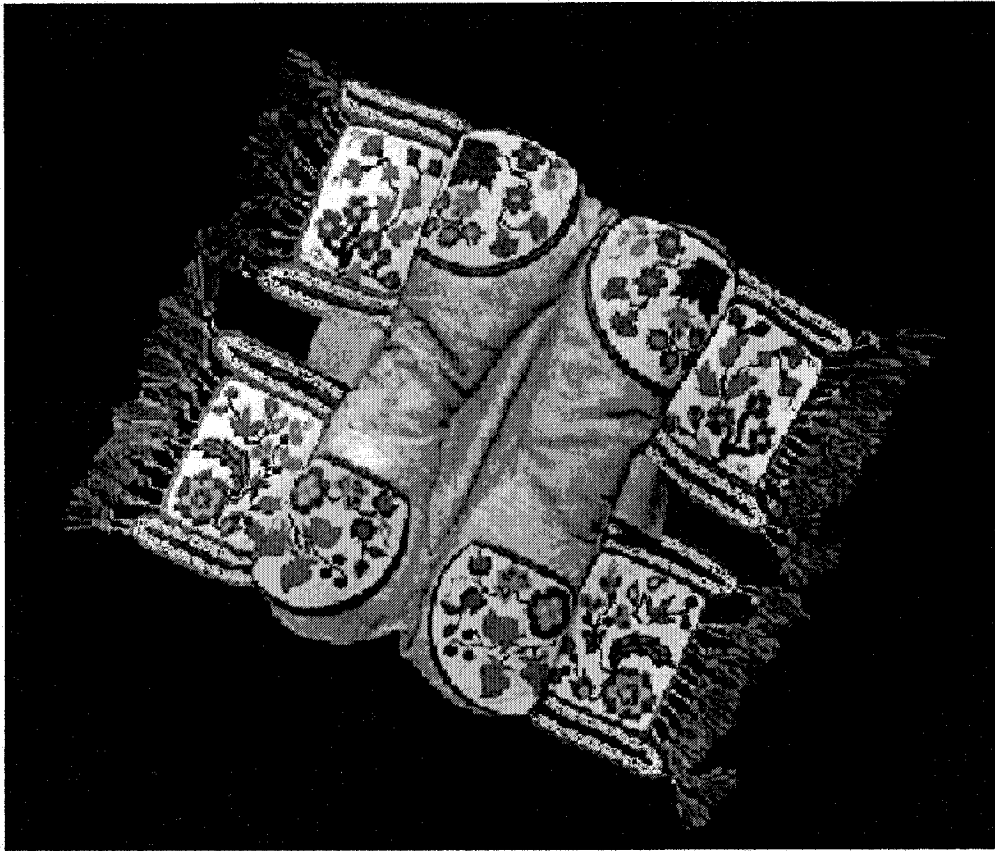


Image 5 Dakota/Lakota pad saddle. Note that the front taps are identical to each other, and the back tabs are identical to each other but that the front and back tabs are different. This is always the case on pad saddle ornamentation. In order to disguise their riding medicines from missionaries, many Aboriginal people changed from geometric designs to floral. Missionaries thought they had succeeded in eliminating non-Christian or “pagan” beliefs. What the missionaries did not realize was that the colors used in creating the sacred designs were as important as the designs. By using floral designs some Aboriginal people could boldly display their sacred colors and in some cases the plant that was their medicine. Canadian Museum of Civilization collection CMC V-E-148

Densmore emphasizes how important it was for the bundle keeper to maintain a quiet atmosphere in the home for the period in which the bundle is kept. We also learn of the many taboos and protocol associated in keeping such a bundle. This is not uncommon behavior for any individual keeping a bundle of any kind. The entire family

must make tremendous sacrifices in their behavior, lifestyle and eating habits in order to be respectful of the spirits' presence. Allan Pard has pointed out a number of times over the years that it is very important not to disturb the spirits of the bundles, that as bundle keepers they must move slowly and not make loud noises while in the presence of the bundles as the spirits frighten very easily and become very upset. He often stresses that one does not want to get those spirits upset with you. The question to be posed then is, "Why would a family voluntarily put themselves through this ordeal?" I will examine this issue shortly.

During the period of being with the 'spirit' there is a concerted effort to begin to accumulate material goods, which will be given away at the releasing ceremony and feast. Again this practice is perfectly in keeping with most memorial feasts in the Great Lakes, on the Plains or on the Northwest Coast. The cost involved in sponsoring such a feast is generally financially devastating to the family. Again, the question raised is, "Why would a family place itself in this predicament?"

Given the available information, it appears to be of no benefit to the spirit of the deceased to be kept from making its journey to the spirit world. The journey is simply being prolonged through the practice of keeping spirit bundles. There seems to be no validity to arguing that the spirit requires tobacco and food on a regular basis until the time comes to release the soul. Although the spirit may desire these things, it cannot be used as an argument to prevent the soul from traveling to the other world, as any member of the family can feed the spirit of the deceased many times a day if they desire. The

spirit does not need to be trapped to do so. There are a number of ways to feed the spirits; one may simply take portions of the food they have prepared for themselves and place the portion aside to be deposited in a clean place for the spirit to eat. Another way of feeding the dead is to simply raise one's plate of food and offer a prayer to the dead to come and eat and then leave. Every time a man smokes his pipe he can offer smoke to any deceased relative or friend. It is clear that there is another motive besides grief for holding back the soul of the dead from making its journey. Pard (2000) pointed out that the souls of the dead could be used as slaves, to gather information, spy on enemies or be a spirit helper for a living person. Waugh suggests that by feeding, dancing and singing for the dead, they become indebted to the living, and in exchange the dead will carry out the prayer requests by the individual or community.

From what has just been discussed it is clear that the spirit bundle keepers take on tremendous responsibility in keeping and caring for these bundles. Although I have pointed out that some believe there are political and economic gains to be made by keeping spirit bundles the Cree rationale for keeping such bundles seems to be located in acknowledging the fact that the dead are a part of the community who are included in community events and festivities. There is also a very clear understanding that the souls of the dead may carry one's request for blessings and healing to the creator, and carry blessings back with them when the spirits are invited back to the community. Community members who attend the feast and ceremonies go with their petitions and seek good fortune, good luck and blessings.

The vast majority of consultants with whom I spoke with were not very open about discussing their involvement or knowledge of the ghost bundles. Some did provide me with basic information but asked that I not discuss specifics about what they shared. The Plains Cree definitely do have and keep spirit bundles and dance and feast with them on at least a yearly basis. This chapter discusses the use and treatment of these bundles but other Plains cultures to bring out the similarities of the practice of feeding and feasting with the spirit bundles. Hopefully at some other time, someone within the community will be able to provide enlightenment on the ceremony and practice of keeping, feeding and feasting with these very special bundles. In this chapter, the Plains tradition and ceremony associated with keeping “spirit bundles” of a deceased relative in order to honour the dead and as a means of asking blessings of the dead was examined. We have also seen more evidence that the dead are very much a part of the living community. As Vandersteene and Waugh observed, the dead exist as community members – they merely exist in a different dimension. Victor Buffalo stated this quite clearly in Chapter 5. Because of their nature and closeness to the Creator they are capable of carrying messages to him and bringing back with them his blessing at the ceremonies for the dead.

This next chapter deals with another form of feasting and celebrating with the dead through the tradition of sports events and memorial games. This Chapter will enforce again the notion that the dead are “alive” and very much a part of the community. Sports and gambling events are another means of involving the dead in the community and provide them another venue to bring blessings to the sick or needy.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **MEMORIAL GAMES AND GAMBLING IN SEARCH OF MEANING**



**LOOKING AT MY GRANDMOTHER'S GRAVE FROM THE OTHER SIDE**

Allen Sapp

Plains Cree

2000.05.022 Allen Sapp Gallery, North Battleford, Saskatchewan

Used with permission

**MEMORIAL GAMES AND GAMBLING  
IN SEARCH OF MEANING****INTRODUCTION**

The previous Chapter examined the Plains tradition of keeping “spirit bundles” and the releasing of souls as a means of obtaining blessings from the Creator through departed relatives. This Chapter will examine the role traditional and contemporary games and traditional forms of gambling play in feasting and celebrating with the dead.

Aboriginal people throughout the Americas have participated in sports and gambling activities for thousands of years. Although the nature of their involvement in both these activities has changed drastically since European arrival, there are many families and communities who have maintained the initial spirit and intent of communal sports and gambling events. This chapter will examine the roles gambling and sport activities play in the lives of Aboriginal communities in the Eastern Woodlands and Great Plains regions of North America in order to explain the possible role these activities may play in the live of the Plains Cree. Very little has been written on sports, games and gambling activities enjoyed by the Plains Cree when compared to the extensive literature that exists on competitive events such as lacrosse for example, and its function within Iroquoian, Menominee, Sac and Fox or Ojibwa society. This paper will examine the literature on the Plains Cree and attempt to place Plains Cree notions of games, sports and gambling within a social context of the greater Algonquian community in both Canada and the United States, as well as within the context of other Plains

Aboriginal communities with which the Plains Cree have been in contact with other the past several hundred years.

Michael Salter (1972) points out in his thesis *Games In Ritual*, that games among North American Aboriginal people were used as rites in four basic but different types of rituals: ceremonies associated with death, sickness, the weather, and fertility (1972: iii). This paper will focus on sports and gambling in relation to two of the four types of rituals namely, ceremonies associated with death and sickness.

No other major research on the Plains Cree describes games associated with sport and gambling in such detail as do the works of Stewart Culin (1975, originally published in 1903) and David G. Mandelbaum's *The Plains Cree: An Ethnographic, Historical, and Comparative Study* (1979). Culin's research on games began in 1891 and lasted until 1905. Mandelbaum conducted his research among the Saskatchewan Cree in 1935. There has been no other ethnographic research to date that examines, in such depth and detail, the history of Plains Cree games as do these two pieces of work. Although Mandelbaum seems to have added to Culin's earlier work, he relies heavily on Culin's research to support his own. And although Culin and Mandelbaum's work is very important, both are dated by today's standards. Culin's research is over 110 years old and Mandelbaum's seventy years old. Still their research provides the best detailed description of the type of traditional games the Plains Cree took part in as well as how the game was played. Culin places his general research on games into a social context Mandelbaum, unfortunately, does not. For that matter, neither has anyone else to date.

Culin's conclusions, regarding the social and religious context of games, is expressed in the following:

My first conclusions as to the interrelation and common origin of Indian games were based upon a comparative study of the stick-dice game, published in the report of the United States National Museum for 1896. I was then, in default of other data, inclined to view the question from its objective side and to explain the manifold interrelationships of the dice games as due chiefly to the progressive modifications for the implements employed. This explanation, however failed to account for the manifest relations which I afterward discovered between the dice game and most of the other games, as well as those which exist between the gaming implements and many ceremonial appliances, and I was led to the conclusion that behind both ceremonies and games there existed some widespread myth from which both derived their impulse.

References to games are of common occurrence in the origin myths of various tribes. They usually consist of a description of a series of contests in which the demiurge, the first man, the culture hero overcomes some opponent, a foe of the human race, by exercise of superior cunning, skill or magic. Comparison of these myths not only reveals their practical unity, but disclose the primal gamblers as those curious children, the divine Twins, the miraculous offspring of the Sun, who are the principal personages in many Indian mythologies. They live in the east and in the west: they rule night and day, winter and summer. They are the morning and evening stars. Their virgin mother, who appears also as their sister and their wife, is constantly spoken of as their grandmother, and[as] is the Moon or the Earth, the Spider Woman, the embodiment of the feminine principle in nature. Always contending, they are the original patrons of play, and their games are the games now played by men (Culins, 1975:32).

Culin's conclusion, "that behind both ceremonies and games there existed a widespread myth from which both derived their impulse," is an observation that I have also made from attending numerous Cree and Blackfoot ceremonies. The ceremony, in most cases, is the reenactment of the origin myth.

There are other researchers who mention Plains Cree competitive events and gambling games. Verne Dusenberry's research on the Montana Cree (1962) *The Montana Cree: A Study in Religious Persistence* is another extremely important ethnography on the Plains Cree, particularly in regards to their spiritual and cultural beliefs. Dusenberry

mentions a particular “hand game” or “feather game” employed by the Montana Cree for spiritual purposes, ceremonies intended to heal the sick. There are approximately three minor, yet significant, publications on the Plains Cree that make mention of games and gambling and these are the works of Joseph F. Dion (1979), *My Tribe The Cree*; Peter Erasmus (1999), *Buffalo Days and Nights*; and Edward Ahenakew (1995), *Voices of the Plains Cree*.

Culin’s research on games began in 1891 while he was assisting an ailing colleague, Frank Hamilton Cushing, who was preparing an exhibition on American Indian Games for the Smithsonian Museum in Washington. Culin’s interest in American Aboriginal games persisted and in 1898 he published his first volume on North American Indian Games. He continued researching the subject until 1905. Fortunately for Culin, he had the support and assistance of several ethnologists from the Field Columbia Museum who collected specimens and information on games while conducting their own fieldwork. Culin identifies the following Plains Cree games and activities played prior to 1903: stick dice or *chedkakwanuc*, dashing down the dice sticks (1975:68), bone dice or *pahkasahkamac* or striking ground with wood bowl to shake up the bones (1975:69), double ball or *puseekowwahnuk* or kicking game. Culin says this game is a gambling game played by women. This game is also known among the Cree as playing handball, despite the fact that the ball is neither kicked as indicated earlier, nor is the ball touched with the hands (1975:648, 652-653). Hand game is another game, known in Plains Cree as *meecheecheemetowaywin*, *gainshwashkwak*, or *mcihiche ustwatookwuk*, meaning they gamble from the hand and they bet (1975:270, 273, 316). Hidden ball was called

*muskinsinastahtowin* meaning concealing an object in a moccasin (1975:342). The game Culin refers to as “racket” is actually a Northern Plains version of a lacrosse game (1975:573). The Saskatchewan Cree from Coxby have a ring and pin game which they call *tapan whan* meaning stringing the bone cups, while the Assiniboia Cree of Saskatchewan call the game *napahwhan* (1975:528, 535-536). The Assiniboia Crees have a snow-dart game, which Culin refers to as a snow-snake, called *puckitseeman* or *shooceeman* (1975:403-404). A game played by both men and women, *Ahkitaskoomnahmahtowinah* describes the games of counting sticks or as Culin refers to them, “stick game” (1975:230). A winter game played by barefoot boys on the ice is a game played with wooden spinning tops (1975:734).

Mandelbaum, who was born in 1911 and died in 1987, conducted his fieldwork in 1935 among the Saskatchewan Plains Cree. In his ethnography he provided detailed descriptions of a number of games played by men, women, children and men and women. He identifies the following as games played by men: striking the bow *pakama-pekihtcicikwaniw*, shooting arrows *e-pimutahkwatahk*, rolling game *tihtipintowan*, hoop game *e-tcihtcepintcoeciik*, hand game *mitcihtcihk* or double stick *kanicwackwahk*, bone game *oskanihk* or *micika-tcikanihk*, shaking game *pakecewiakan*, stake game *itcimatwahto-k*, sliding game *tcoskumina-n*, moccasin game *maskicinetowewin*. Games played by men and women include: the stick dropping game *itcikhkwe-hk*, stick striking game or Culin’s “stick game” known as *tipaskwo-namatowin*, playing with a ball (a shinny game called *epa-pa-towihk*), tossing the ball *ekwackwackwintowehk*, and stringing the bone cups *tapa whan*. Boys’ games included bouncing the stick game *Kwaskweco-*

*cimewin*, sliding stick *cocimewin*, and gliding sticks. Women's games included the testicle game also known by Culin as double ball *opwe-piticiweqehk*, and shooting women's arrows *epimatikanatahk* (1979:127-137).

Dusenberry, who lived from 1906 to 1966, identifies the "hand game" or "feather game" played by the Montana Cree as a spiritual game that came about to replace the Sundance (1962:181). Between 1882 and 1951 the United States Government forbade the performance of the Sun Dance by all Aboriginal communities. This hand game or "feather game" was still being played during the 1960's as a means of praying for the sick despite the fact that it was no longer illegal to take part in the Sundance.

Dion, 1888-1960, was a disenfranchised Plains Cree [Dion, who was from Kehewin, Alberta, lost his status due to his higher education. It was the Department of Indian Affairs policy at the time that an "Indian" as defined by the Indian Act, how obtained a higher education would lose his/her Indian Status and become a Canadian Citizen. As a result Dion later came to identify himself as Métis]. He taught school in Cree and Métis schools in Central Alberta and was also a political leader and spokesman for his tribe. Dion identifies the following Cree games played in his community of Kehiwin, Alberta: foot racing, the hoop game, a game resembling "hide the button" [probably the moccasin game], bowl and pebble, wrestling on foot or on horseback, women's stick dice, "dare" games, and horse races (1979:10-14).

Erasmus, 1833-1931, was a Métis a buffalo hunter, mission worker, teacher, and trader who worked throughout Western Canada. He also worked as a guide and interpreter on the Palliser expedition, and as an interpreter at the signing of Treaty No. 6. Erasmus identifies, in his book *Buffalo Days and Nights*, dog train racing as a sport the Cree, Métis and Hudson Bay Company employees took part in (1999:43-45), particularly at Fort Edmonton. From his description of a particular Christmas dog train race that took place at Fort Edmonton, it is clear this activity was an event that was well known and commonly practiced by both First Nations, Métis and European Hudson Bay company employees.

Edward Ahenakew, 1885-1961, was also a Plains Cree from the Sandy Lake Reserve in Saskatchewan. He was a writer and ordained minister in the Anglican Church. In his writings, Ahenakew discusses a form of war game in which warriors taunted and brazenly exposed themselves to the open fire of their enemy, daring their enemy to kill or injure them. These same “dares” were generally reciprocated by the other side (1995:26-27). This description would fall into the same category as the “dare” game described by Dion, whereby anyone can dare another to do anything. To fail to follow through on the dare would be womanly. Although Ahenakew refers to this dare game as a war game, it will not be considered, for the purpose of this paper, in the same manner as games of chance and competitive events. The intent of these war games, if one can really call it that, is more in keeping with proving one’s fearlessness as a warrior.

Although all of the authors provide a detailed description of each activity only Dusenberry provides an explanation of the origin of the game he describes and why it is played. Culin only provides a broad description of the origin of games, but none specific to the Plains Cree. Dusenberry provides a brief explanation as to the spiritual value of the game, which is to assist in the healing of the sick. Most gambling games and competitive events have an origin story and an explanation as to why they are played. For some reason, possibly space, the origins of the games and events are not addressed. Oddly enough, none of these authors discusses the reasons for playing the game, whether for the love of the sport or the love of gambling nor for the purpose of praying for the recovery of the sick [with the exception of Dusenberry], nor as a memorial event for the dead. This lack of explanation, particularly on the part of Culin and Mandelbaum who provide such a detailed description of the game, but also by Dion and Ahenakew who could easily, given their Cree ancestry, explain the origin and significance of the games is difficult to understand. In recent years some important research has come out on the North-east Coast, the Great Lakes, the Eastern Woodlands and Plains region pertaining to the origins of Aboriginal games. These works by people such as Alika Webber, *The Rod and the Circle* (1984), Thomas Vennum Jr., *American Indian Lacrosse Little Brother of War* (1994), and Joseph Oxendine, *American Indian Sports Heritage* (1988), examine the origins of gambling, games of chance, competitions and dance. They explain why these events take place particularly in light of their relationship to life and death, illness, the weather, and the success of crops. Ultimately the mythology and history assist in explaining that gambling has been a preoccupation for Aboriginal people for thousands of years. The archaeological record also confirms the use of gaming dice

hundreds of years ago. “We find circular gaming dice which we believe are made of pottery shards in sites that predate European arrival. Generally one side of the dice is smooth and the other side scratched or incised in the same patterns we find on pottery rims. We believe they were used in playing dice games” (Pilon, 2001).

Contact with Europeans as well as the residential school experience in North America exposed Aboriginal people to a host of new game, sport, and competitions, all with new rules and intents. Oddly enough neither Mandelbaum, Dion, Ahenakew, nor Dusenberry mention any involvement of Plains Cree in running, horse racing or rodeo events, nor in the type of sports events introduced by residential schools, namely, hockey, basketball, football, volleyball, swimming, lacrosse, track and field, to name a few. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century involvement in these events have become extremely important to the Cree as residential schools contributed directly to their participation in sports tournaments of every sort throughout North America. Since the mid 1970’s Aboriginal people across the continent have also become increasingly involved in the North American Indigenous Games.

An examination of the major works of Plains Cree sacred stories or mythology, the works of Robert A. Brightman, *Acaohkiwina and Acimowina: Traditional Narratives of the Rock Cree Indians* (1989), Eleanore Brass, *Medicine Boy and Other Cree Tales* (1979), Leonard Bloomfield, *Sacred Stories of the Sweet Grass Cree* (1930), Leonard Bloomfield, *Plains Cree Texts* (1934). Carl Ray, *Sacred Legends of the Sandy Lake Cree* (1971), Edward Ahenakew, *Voices of the Plains Cree*, (1995), and Ella

Elizabeth Clark, *Indian Legends of Canada* (1960), produced only one story that related to one of the Plains Cree games mentioned above. Leonard Bloomfield, 1887-1949, records one sacred story that explains the story of the snow-dart in his book *Sweetgrass Cree* (1930:69-83). In the sacred story of Snow-Dart, as told by Adam Sakewew, a Cree elder from the Sweetgrass Reserve in Saskatchewan, we learn that the legendary hero Snow-dart and his friend are out playing snow-dart and find themselves being led deeper into the forest while in pursuit of their last dart. A snowstorm falls upon them and the boys find themselves caught in the storm. They quickly build an emergency shelter from the logs around them and in the morning Snow-dart sings a sacred songs and orders the snow-darts to fetch food. At the end of the day the snow-darts are called back and they return bloody. Shortly afterwards the animals they have killed fly back to the shelter and drop themselves at the door. Eventually the boys are discovered and to protect their interests competitions take place in which the culture hero triumphs. The myth, with its sacred songs and competitions, is clearly associated with winter, hunger, and overcoming one's adversaries – namely starvation. It is not a sacred story associated with illness, death or the afterlife as this paper is attempting to uncover. It is truly unfortunate that to date this may be the only Plains Cree sacred story associated with the “historical myth” of a gambling game or competition.

In the chart below, Salter has identified a number of cultures who play some of the same sports and games during the wake, burial, feast for the dead, and memorial events as the Plains Cree.

Vennum also identifies the Fox and Menominee as cultures who played lacrosse during funerals and memorial ceremonies. Within four years following someone's death an adoption feast is held and the adoptee plays ball in place of the deceased, "*to insure that the deceased's soul is not transformed into an owl and be condemned to life on earth*" (Vennum, 1994:35)

| Event     | Huron             | Iroquois                          | Quapaw     | Deleware        | Shawnee        | Choctaw     |
|-----------|-------------------|-----------------------------------|------------|-----------------|----------------|-------------|
| Archery   | Feast of the Dead |                                   |            |                 |                |             |
| Bowl game |                   | pre-burial wake<br>Feast for dead |            | Pre-burial wake | Feast for dead |             |
| Dice Game |                   | Pre-burial wake                   |            |                 |                |             |
| Footrace  |                   |                                   | Burial     |                 |                |             |
| Lacrosse  |                   |                                   |            |                 |                |             |
| Moccasin  |                   | Pre-burial<br>Memorial            | Pre-burial | Pre-burial      |                | Post burial |

Mortuary games and ceremonies in the Eastern Culture Areas (Salter, 1972:52)

Alika Webber states that the Wahpeton and Sisseton Dakota gambled during their wakes to assist the departed in reaching the other side:

a journey that is in essence, another form of transition and initiation, one that is also fraught with danger" (1984:21).

She also adds, "Near relatives take charge of the deceased person's belongings, and at a stated time, usually at the first feast held over the bundle containing the lock of hair, they are divided into small piles to give everyone present an opportunity to win. One person is selected to represent the ghost, and he plays against the others who are not expected to stake anything on the result, but simply invited to take part in the ceremony, which is usually held in the lodge of the dead person...The

player are called one at a time to play against the representative of the dead person. If the invited player succeeds in beating the ghost, he takes one of the piles of goods (Webber, 18).

Webber also sheds some light on the symbolism portrayed in the Beothuck gambling dice, through her interpretation that the center represents the entrance into the other world:

Games, as I have tried to demonstrate in my discussion of the Beothuck, are themselves blueprints or maps of a spirit voyage. The gaming implements, including some that represent shields, have an important function in these games. I should like to recall here that the gaming board which, like a shield, is often round, represents the ancestral figure – sometimes it represents the ancestral figure of an animal shape. Most important the player must complete a circuit of this figure. The players regard the completion of this circuit as the ultimate goal: in achieving it, the sound of the gambler reaches the other world and the First Ancestor... In my paper on the Beothuck dice, I noted that the center of the gaming board – often marked by a cross is the area in which and from which ascent or descent takes place... (Webber,145)

Joseph Oxendine, a Lumbee from North Carolina says of Aboriginal sports:

*Indian sports was intimately related to ritual and ceremony. In addition to the pure joy involved in participation, sport was used as a means by which the Indians communicated with a higher spirit, seeking blessings on their individual or community welfare. Such communication related to healing, climate, celebration, seeking success in upcoming events, or other matters of individual or community importance (Oxendine, 1988:32).*

Oxendine also adds that:

*“The religious significance of sport enhanced its status in the lives of Indians. The spiritual connection along with the inherent value of sport itself, insured that it would be more than frivolous activity. Victory in sport brought the highest favor of the gods and held evil spirits in abeyance. Adversity in the form of sickness, drought, sterility, or other misfortunes would not follow in the wake of victory. Therefore, participants entered into the sport with a high level of commitment. Sometimes the game was focused towards a specific goal, such as the bringing of rain in a time of draught, celebrating the success in hunting or*

*in battle, healing the sick, or encouraging fertility for one or more persons” (1988:6)*

Literature pertaining to Aboriginal sports and competitive events seems to indicate that although sport and gambling were enjoyed for the mere enjoyment of the event and for the opportunity to improve one’s economic state by acquiring “toys”, food or material goods, there is overwhelming evidence which suggests that men and women took part in competitive events for several reasons: out of a need to re-enact the original myth from whence the game developed, for blessings as a form of prayer to heal the sick or to fulfill some other human need, or to appease the creator or particular spirits. There is also overwhelming evidence that people took part in these activities to assist the dead in passing over to the other world or to honor those who have passed on. Salter claims that participants contested to: *“honour the deceased, to honour the successors of the deceased, unify the dead, promote tribal unity, comfort the bereaved, distribute personal possessions of the deceased, distribute gifts bestowed on the deceased, and to divine the future”* (Salter, 1972:51). Thomas Vennum Jr. in *American Indian Lacrosse Little Brother of War* (1994) concurs with Salter, as does Alike Webber in *The Rod and Circle* (1984). *“Lacrosse was always played on religious days...the Coyuga played it in midwinter to honor the Thunders... Lacrosse was also played as part of funeral and memorial ceremonies. Among the Fox the game is followed by an adoption ceremony to insure the deceased will not return”* (Vennum, 1994:35).

Having worked in Plains Cree communities since 1978 I have been aware that memorial games, whether in the form of rodeo, horse races, baseball, hockey, hand

games, Pow-wows or round-dances, have been an important component of Plains Cree life for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. To date I have uncovered little information based on “community memory” as to when the memorial games began; they simply have been around for many generations.

One form of gambling yet to be mentioned is Plains Cree participation in bingos and casinos. Christian Church groups introduced bingo games in North America as a popular form of fundraiser. Bingos of course are found in both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal communities throughout North America. As a game of chance, ‘Bingo’ became extremely popular in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. Most Aboriginal communities in Canada live well below the poverty line. Because of the concept of easy cash presented by the lure of “Jackpot Bingos” and casinos, Aboriginal participation in these activities in recent years has risen to new heights. Many Aboriginal people joke about the addiction of some of their community members to these forms of entertainment. Sometimes the negative social impact of “gambling” and bingo is addressed in a joking manner in order to draw people’s attention to the addictive nature of bingo. Regardless of the social impact of the game, in recent years it is not uncommon to hear of families sponsoring a “memorial bingo” for a family member who loved the game.

In a conversation with Victor Buffalo, the former Chief of the Samson Reserve, on memorial games Mr. Buffalo mentioned:

*Usually the family sponsoring the event, be it a memorial rodeo, baseball game or hockey tournament, would have a private feast at sunrise on the day of the event. At this feast the deceased would be fed and told that an event would be taking place in his or her honour and that he or she was invited to take part in the event. Usually the food that is served at the event is food that the deceased enjoyed eating and the event is one the deceased enjoyed taking part in (Buffalo, V., April 15, 2001).*

What is being suggested here is that the deceased are being called from the land of the dead to take part in an activity with human beings. As a rule when the spirits of the dead visit the land of the living there is a danger that these spirits could take someone back with them. For this reason it is important that the deceased be told to return to the land of the dead following the memorial event. This would be very much in keeping with the tradition followed at the end of the Ghost Dance or Spirit Dance or Tea Dance practiced by the Plains Cree. In 1998 I took part in such a ceremony on the Alexander Reserve, a Cree/Stoney community one hour northwest of Edmonton, Alberta. Before the ceremony began all of the community's "spirit bundles" [those bundles containing the hair or personal belongings of a family's deceased relatives] were called to the ceremony. Following the blessing of the sacred fire, the spirits of the deceased were called forward to take part in the dance held in their honour. At the conclusion of the ceremony the spirits were told to leave the sacred gathering and return to their homes in the "Great Place".

The sacred fire was allowed to burn out. As is practiced in the Spirit Dance or Ghost Dance ceremony, spirits of the deceased attending memorial events given in their honour must be told to leave at the conclusion of the event to return to the land of the dead. Over the years I have had the opportunity to attend several memorial events, particularly memorial rodeos. To sponsor such an event is extremely costly as there is

generally prize money in the form of trophies, saddles, buckles or a combination of the three. In most instances the family will also provide food for the participants, generally a BBQ. Sometimes people who have traveled a long distance to attend the event, or people who have assisted in organizing or sponsoring the event are given special gifts, or personal items that once belonged to the deceased. A family may sponsor one memorial event on the anniversary date of the deceased or they may decide to sponsor a memorial event for four consecutive years. In some instances the memorial event is an annual event. In the case where only one large public event is held, the family may have a private feast at the home for the next three years. The Plains Cree practice of a memorial sports event or traditional games contrasts quite dramatically with Iroquoian beliefs about calling back the dead as pointed out by Kanatakta Beauvais:

*We never call back our dead for a sports event or remember them in an anniversary sports event. We mourn for our dead for 10 days following their death. On the 10<sup>th</sup> day the clan members from the other side of the longhouse come to the home of those who have been mourning to pray for them. During the prayers someone combs the hair of the mourners and they are told that their mourning period is over. The only time we would call back our dead is twice a year, in the spring and in the fall, when we have our feast for the dead. At this time we enter the Longhouse at sunrise and do not leave until nightfall. Only the women dance during the ceremony and when they do so they leave twice as much space between each other then they normally do, in order to make room for the deceased to dance. At the end of the ceremony the spirits of the deceased are sent back to the spirit world. But we have no memorial games for our deceased (Beauvais, 2001).*

## CONCLUSION

The accumulated evidence shows that the Plains Cree have been active in pursuing a number of games, gambling activities and competitions in general, prior to and following the arrival of Europeans. These games include hand games or stick games, bone dice games and stick dice games, foot ball games, hand ball games, shinny games, a form of lacrosse, and a snow-dart game.

Although there is little information to date in reference to the Plains Cree as to the purpose of these games whether to assist in a curing ceremony, to insure that the spirit of a deceased has reached the “other side”, or to be played as a memorial event on the anniversary of someone’s death, there is ample evidence that for other cultures throughout North America these are precisely one of the reasons why these games are played. I would argue that the Cree did not live out on the Plains in a bubble, isolated from everyone else. In fact, the Cree were one of the cultures who have made their presence known throughout the continent.

As a result of the fur trade and due to the dispersal of people following the involvement of some Plains Cree in the Métis Resistance of 1885, Plains Cree people are now found in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, the Northwest Territories, Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota and Minnesota, and Mexico. Given their breadth of contact with other First Nations cultures I believe it is highly probable that the Plains Cree played these games and gambling activities for the same reasons as cultures on the Northeast Coast, in the Eastern Woodlands, the Great Lakes,

and the Great Plains. The Plains Cree took part in these events for the intention of healing the sick and helping the dead in their travels to the afterlife, and for blessings for themselves and the community. As we have seen in contemporary times, the Plains Cree sponsor memorial games in the form of rodeo, hockey, baseball, basketball, volleyball, and Bingos to honor a deceased relative on the anniversary of his or her death. The feast for the dead, which precedes the sport or gambling event, suggests that memorial events may have had a place in Plains Cree culture prior to European arrival and colonization.

Unfortunately, many of the games listed above in which the Plains Cree took part have all but disappeared. Those games which have survived include the various hand games, the stick dice and moccasin game. Although, over a period of 27 years of working with the Plains Cree, I have never seen nor heard of any of these games being played for the purpose of assisting the dead to reach the “Land of the Dead” or to heal the sick, it is possible that in some communities these games are still being used for this purpose. In an interview with Faith Bad Bear, a Crow Holy Woman, she mentioned that she once attended a ceremony in a Cree community in Alberta about 10 years ago with her uncle where Cree women were playing the stick dice game to determine whether a woman had been cursed with “bad medicine”. Only women played the game. She was told that the more women played the game the stronger they would be to “see” the aura of evil surrounding the sick person, if in fact that person had been cursed. In this particular situation no aura was detected (Bad Bear, 2000). A Cree woman living on the Ermineskin Reserve referred to the stick dice as “makes you go crazy” game. The game could be quite dangerous to play, as she explained, “Some people called upon the dead to

play the game and if one was not experienced at playing this game and had not the right protection the spirits would cause one to go mad” (Littlechild, A., 2000).

There are concerted efforts to introduce traditional games into the North American Indigenous Games. Willie Littlechild from Hobbema stresses their importance:

*The strongest component of the games is the cultural component. That's the strongest component to the games, that's the key to the success to the Indigenous Games is that element right there. Because you can go to any tournament really if you want. You don't have to go to the Indigenous Games to go to a tournament. But what's the difference? The key to our success is the ceremonies and the prayers that the elders do leading up to the games. It's off camera, people don't know about it but it's a very strong component of the games to follow our own protocol, our culture and our traditions leading up to the games. For example, when we had the games in Edmonton we had a run from a sacred site in Wyoming where the traditional ceremonies were done. And then we had runners run from Wyoming to Edmonton with the opening ceremony's bundle and torch. We had a torch run like in the Olympics, but it's a bundle. It's a traditional bundle that the athletes run with because it has to travel on the ground. And they run, it's a relay but they run from the previous site to the next site. So, the interesting run with Victoria is that they had to travel by water so they had to paddle from British Columbia to Victoria in the water. And that brought in a very traditional element with the water peoples. To be able to transport that bundle from the runners onto the canoes and be able to paddle into Victoria. So it was able to revive our way of life when we do that. So those are the significant keys to the success of the games that are not really known about. They're not really talked about or written about but it's the key in my view anyway, the key element to their success. So, it is different to come to the games. Like I said you can go to any tournament and you will see competitions and so on but when you come to the Indigenous games it's definitely different. I think the singing and the dancing is the other component to the games that's very different. There is competitive dancing but there is also social dancing taking place in the games that people can participate in, whether it's the dancing that they can dance or whether it's joining in the singing. It's another element that's different. They're different, it's true, they're different. The spirit is so good” (Littlechild, W. 2001).*

In this interview with Willie Littlechild, it is obvious that he is not speaking directly about memorial events or games. However he does make the point that what makes the North American Indigenous Games distinctive is the cultural and spiritual component. He mentions in the course of the interview that the elders gather to pray before the games begin and each day during the games. For those who are not familiar with Cree prayer ceremonies, Littlechild is saying that the elders conduct a “pipe ceremony” before, during and after the games. During a pipe ceremony the good spirits of the four directions are called upon, as are the spirits of the sky world, the earth dwellers world and the below world.

Dusenberry makes this point quite clear when he speaks of the conversation between Manitou speaking with First Man, the guardian of the Land of the Dead, *“If, in the future, you wish to make any connection with me, these are the things to be used (pipe, stem, and tobacco). And they must be used in this order; First, upward, in memory of your Creator; next, to the spirits of the four directions; and lastly, down to Mother Earth”* (Dusenberry, 1962:66).

I have yet to hear of a Plains Cree ceremony or feast in which the deceased are not remembered and fed food and or tobacco. If a pipe ceremony is taking place throughout the North American Indigenous Games, the dead are likely being called upon for their support, assistance, and blessings during the games. This is in keeping though with what has already been said about Plains Cree feasts and pipe ceremonies.

In closing, I consider it possible that traditional Plains Cree forms of gambling, sports and competitive events were used, as they were among most Aboriginal cultures throughout North America, as a tool to cure the sick, assist the dead on their journey to the "Great Land", and as a means of obtaining blessings. It is also possible that memorial events were also held prior to European settlement as small ceremonies intended to feed the dead and invite them to take part in the event planned in their honor. These seem to exist and still be utilized today.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION: Walking Among Birds of Fire:  
Plains Cree Beliefs Concerning Death, Mourning, and  
Feasting With The Dead

## Conclusion

### **Walking Among Birds of Fire: Plains Cree Beliefs Concerning Death, Mourning, and Feasting With The Dead**

I have been examining traditional Plains Cree or Nehiyaw belief systems pertaining to beliefs about life and death, feeding, caring and feasting with the dead primarily through the eyes of one very large industrious Nehiyaw community situated between two vibrant cities, Edmonton to the North and Calgary to the south. The people of Muskwachees have seen the world with the help of the revenues obtained from plentiful oil and gas resources. The vast majority of the people from Muskwachees have traveled extensively throughout the prairie country of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Montana, the Dakotas, through the mountainous country of British Columbia, Washington State, the deserts of the Southwest and the north country through work, involvement in various sports events, traditional games, or simply to visit relatives and friends. Many people from the community have also traveled the world through work involvement in various committees, or merely out of a curiosity to see, learn and experience from other cultures, as any other Canadian would do. Through their contact with other Aboriginal cultures the people of Muskwachees have seen and experienced how other Aboriginal communities deal with death; how they conduct their wake services, how they bury their dead, how they feast, pray and celebrate with their dead. The Nehiyaw have also been greatly influenced indirectly by European Christian missionaries for almost 160 years, and most directly, since the reserve period of the late 1870s. Christianity is part of the fabric which makes up the community at Muskwachees. It is not unusual to see praying

the rosary, singing Christian hymns, and reciting Christian prayers at the wake and church service and at the funeral. Many funerals are also presided over by a minister or priest. However, having said that, there are a number of funerals today that do not have a Christian chaplain present. Despite the Christian component, which may be present at the wake or funeral, there is generally an accompanying Traditional Nehiyaw component that also takes place. This has been the focus of this thesis.

Chapter 1, “The Nehiyaw Community At Muskwachees and Pigeon Lake”, introduced the Nehiyaw or Plains Cree, as well as the community at Muskwachees. Chapter 2, “The History of Christian and non-Christian Denominations in Muskwachees”, presented the history of the arrival and presence of the various denominations in Muskwachees and Pigeon Lake.. Chapter 3, “Nehiyaw Burial Practices and Beliefs 1978- 1980”, outlined my own personal experience living in Muskwachees between 1978 and 1980 while employed by Our Lady of Seven Sorrows Roman Catholic Church in the capacity as co-coordinator of funerals and wakes, then as the Assistant Program Director at the Panee Memorial Agri-Plex. The story tells of my recollections and experiences regarding Nehiyaw funerals and wakes and beliefs regarding death and the afterlife. Chapter 4, “Nehiyaw Sacred Stories On Death, the Afterlife, and the Journey to the Land of the Dead: The Historic Record Prior To 2000”, presented the observations of fur traders, explorers, missionaries, anthropologists, and linguists on the basis of their first hand experience living and dealing with the “Plains Cree”. Chapter 5, “21<sup>st</sup> Century Nehiyaw Beliefs on Death, the Afterlife, and the

Journey to A Great Land”, presented the voice of modern Nehiyaw people and what they have been taught and continue to believe about death and the afterlife. Chapter 6, “Walking with the Birds of Fire: Aboriginal Beliefs Concerning Spirit Bundles”, examined the belief and practice of Plains communities in general, with special attention given to Nehiyaw belief and practice in keeping and caring for “spirit bundles”. Chapter 7, “Memorial Games and Gambling: In Search of Meaning”, explored the tradition of using sport and gambling as means of inviting the dead to participate in games and competitive activities with the community as a means of bringing blessings and healing to the living.

As a number of people have pointed out (Buffalo, Marilys; Buffalo Marvin; Buffalo, V.; Rowan; Littlechild, A.; Semaganis) there have been many changes over the years, and the Nehiyaw have been influenced by many different cultures they have encountered along with television, popular culture, and particularly the Pan Indian movement. As Casey Rowan pointed out, there are many people in the community who were not raised in a traditional life style but find themselves at the crossroad in their life of being elderly people and wanting to help, despite the fact that they do not all have the traditional background to do so. There are also many young people in the community who are discovering their Indian identity through contact with non-Cree cultures, and believe it possible to create or invent new ceremonies and new traditions. In reality, this kind of *mélange* has been occurring to cultures throughout the world since the beginning of time. So this exchange of culture, tradition and knowledge is not something new for the Plains Nehiyaw. To the traditionalists’ great disappointment, there are many

instances where ceremonies are not being properly conducted particularly in relation to death and feasts for the dead. New traditions and ceremonies and beliefs are being put forward as “Cree” when, in fact, they are not.

The two questions put forward in this thesis were:

1. *What understanding do the Nehiyaw have about the relationship between the living and the dead?*
2. *To what extent are the Nehiyaw involved in feeding and feasting with the dead?*

The answer to the first question appears to be that for the Nehiyaw, there is an acknowledgement that the souls of the deceased belong to another dimension but are very much part of the community. There is a definite distinction between the living and the souls of the dead, but the dead are a part of the Nehiyaw community, and they are treated as such. As souls, or spiritual beings, they are believed to be closer to the creator, and in this state are in a better position to carry the prayers and petitions of the living to the creator and to bring his blessings to the community or to family members. At the same time, the souls of the dead are feared for the malevolent activities they can cause: consequently to keep them at a distance, the souls of the dead are fed and feasted with, and invited to dance with the community on numerous celebrations through the year, in some cases on a weekly and daily basis.

The second question, the Nehiyaw as a whole or as the community at Muskwachees, are involved in feeding and feasting with the dead for all intents and

purposes, on a daily basis. Whether the true population of the four reserves and Pigeon Lake is 10,000 thousand or 15,000 thousand, the odds alone would suggest that on practically every day of the year someone in the community is feeding the dead. Every day is likely to be the anniversary date of the relative of someone in the community. During the late 1970s the Catholic Church, alone, averaged 2 funerals a week in the community. That meant a minimum of two community Feasts for the Dead a week. To make the point again, when a feast for the dead takes place it is not only the newly deceased who is fed but all of the community's dead. The number of deaths in the community seem to have declined somewhat over the years but given that there is no priest in residence the church records for Our Lady Of Seven Sorrows Church are no longer being kept to date and numbers are difficult to obtain. Also many families are now doing traditional Nehiyaw funerals where the only witness to the burial is the attendant from the funeral home. Many individuals I spoke with said they offer food for their deceased relatives on a daily basis simply by lifting their dinner plates and inviting their deceased relatives to eat then leave. Some individuals also put a small amount of food aside from their daily meal and take it outside to a clean place for the souls of the dead to feast on.

This thesis has also examined the various feasts and celebrations, dances and memorial events that take place to feed, feast, and honour the community's deceased friends and family members. Possibly one of the more important of the feasts being the Give Away Dance and Ghost Dance, for which very little has been said in regards to the

Plains Nehiyaw. But this leaves the door open for other researchers to investigate maybe even some community members.

In summary the dead are very much a part of Plains Cree people's lives. Although they have left for a better place or "a Good Place" they are called upon regularly to be fed and feasted and to dance and celebrate with the community. I do not say this in a demeaning way, but in a sense the dead are cared for almost like one would cater to a child. They are constantly being thought of, looked after and fed. The spirit bundles receive particular care and attention several times a day. At the same time, the souls of the deceased play a monumental role in the community through their capacity to carry messages, petitions and prayers to the creator and in return bring his blessings to the people when they come to feed and feast with the community.

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