

mihko kiskisiwin - Blood Memory



PAUL SMITH

To Batoche and Back: A Family's and a People's Story

Across the prairies of big skies, undulating grass, and aspen-swathed parkland hills, my ancestors thrived in what the Hudson's Bay Company called "Rupert's Land," at the heart of Turtle Island. They hunted among the thundering, dusty herds of buffalo. Made pemmican surrounded by Red River carts and teepees. Or plied the great northern forests and rivers for beaver pelts. I imagine wandering among the poplar groves, wolf willow and fireweed, picking saskatoon berries, snowberries, and chokecherries, all while swatting the flies. My own dreams of a lost time and my forgotten people conjured in my mind.

The Métis Nation is a "proud people," they say—that's the turn of phrase—part truth, part myth. But our people's identity as Métis is often denied, denigrated, or dismissed. "Miserable half-breeds" and "pemmican eaters," according to John A. MacDonald. More proudly, we call ourselves Michif, Otipemisiwak, or Bois brûlé, but not Anishinaabe, Nehiyah, nor Mooniyah. Fake vinyl Naugahyde, not real buckskin, to use Marilyn Dumont's metaphor. "Not red enough, not white enough," as Ray St. Germain sings.

My family was no different. We all knew we were Métis but dared not say it too loudly. Some spurned anything Indigenous. Not a source of pride—rather, an impediment. Some embraced it. Yet our roots are deep in the Métis heartland.

My uncle was there with Harry Daniels in 1982 as Harry went head to head with Pierre Trudeau and Jean Chrétien to get the Métis recognized as an Aboriginal people in Section 35 of the Constitution. "Call Harry off," said Chrétien, and we had won!

My memories of the homeland are vivid, visiting as a child and youth. Greeting voyageur re-enactors in 1967 with my mooshoom, who hosted them at St. Peter's on the Red. Walking on the deep ice of the frozen Red River as a teen. Enjoying my noohkoom's bannock and

the beautiful quilt she made me. My own father lies buried near the Red River in St. Peter's Parish, beside my mooshoom and noohkoom.

Our family's journey parallels the struggle of the entire Métis Nation. The Hudson's Bay Company hired one ancestor, who landed in Red River with his Cree partner. Their thin family-farm river lot stretched back from the Red, just south of Lower Fort Gary. Another family branch arrived from Quebec with Anishinaabe partners to land at White Mud, near Portage la Prairie. Anishinaabe, Cree, Orkney Islanders, English, Danes, and French, in a great mash-up, became the Michif. And so, it began. Those were the prosperous "golden years" for the Métis Nation.

After 1870, the family went west, escaping the reign of terror inflicted by Canadian troops and the tragic unravelling of the promises to Riel and the Métis embodied in the Manitoba Act. It would be 2013 before the courts recognized this betrayal and the blight on Canada's flawed nation building.

They followed the Buffalo herds and the Red River cart trails west to what is now Saskatchewan in search of a good life for our families. Across the vast prairie and parkland, sharing the land with Nehiyah, Nakota, and Anishinaabe sisters and brothers, Buffalo hunters and farmers.

Duck Lake, Batoche, and Prince Albert are where my family landed—places now seared into Métis history. My mooshoom was born in Prince Albert, one of eleven children.

My great uncle, William Baptiste, became a ferryman on the South Saskatchewan River, like our hero of 1885, Gabriel Dumont. Life must have been good the along the Saskatchewan River, a respite after the earlier tumult at Red River.

But my oldest great uncle, Uncle Jack, just a teenager then, was not satisfied with the fate of our people and our family.

He joined Riel, Dumont, and all the women and men resisting Middleton and his soldiers at Batoche in 1885. The story is that Jack reloaded the single-shot rifles for the Métis shooters. John A. sent the troops to put down the "miserable half-breeds" and to clear the plains of Métis and First Nations to make way for colonists.

Yet not all the family got behind the resistance. Peter Erasmus, a famous Métis guide and translator for the First Nations of Treaty 6, advised against confronting the government.

The resistance was doomed, of course, but their heroic efforts have inspired generations.

Uncle Jack survived Batoche. But the family feared the backlash that descended upon the northwest after 1885—the dark age.

They became part of the great dispersal of the Métis, headed south, north, and west from Batoche.

Many of my family left to join other family at Turtle Mountain in what is now North Dakota—still in the Métis homeland, but south of the Medicine Line. At Turtle Mountain, the Métis joined their Anishinaabe cousins as part of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians, as the US did not recognize Métis. My mooshoom got his early schooling here, before returning to Manitoba late in the nineteenth century after the politics cooled down.

My own pilgrimage to Batoche was not until later in my life.

Such a striking, powerful place. The village stands frozen in time as a national historic site. Graveyards, the battlefield, memories, and bones of our ancestors. All perched on the great South Saskatchewan River. With its headwaters in the Rockies, the Saskatchewan flows all the way to Hudson Bay via the Nelson—across the breadth of our homeland. The highway of the fur trade, the crucible that forged the Métis Nation. My visit stirred my imaginings of the lives of my ancestors, thriving on the prairies and enduring the dark times.

My father, a World War II vet, is now honoured on the shining, black stone veterans' memorial at Batoche, along with my mooshoom's brothers, who fought in World War I. It was a personal triumph to have my war-haunted father honoured there.

The next generation, my nephew, attended the unveiling of the veterans' memorial during the annual Back to Batoche festival. He got a “crash course” in Métis culture and soon after, he signed up as a citizen of the Métis Nation.

Just a few years later, the family converged on Selkirk for a reunion at the heart of the nation. And I went with my own son along the Red River, to Riel's house and grave.

Somehow it feels like a reclaiming of our heritage. Perhaps a personal reconciliation—*kawi chi kitootitoohek* in Michif. And our journey continues.

Paul Smith is a writer and a citizen of the Métis Nation living in Guelph with his wife and son. Paul's family heritage is Red River Métis, and he has worked in environmental management for more than three decades. In recent years, he has been active in writing and broadcasting on Indigenous, agricultural, and environmental topics. He has been active in Indigenous organizations such as the Nation-to-Nation Ontario Government Indigenous Employees Network and Grand River Métis Council.



Paul speaking.