

MÉTIS VOYAGEUR

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PHOTO: Roland St. Germain

(left to right) Manitoba Métis Federation Senator, Ed Head, Métis Nation of Ontario President, Tony Belcourt and Elder Francis Eagle Heart Cree in North Dakota.

Métis Receive Song

During the second week of August of this past summer Tony Belcourt and several members of the PCMNO travelled to North Dakota to attend a most remarkable ceremony. The event took place on the Turtle Mountain Reservation at Belcourt North Dakota and was to celebrate the transfer of a song.

BY TOM SPAULDING

The transfer is the result of a two year search on the part of Tony to find a song that could be brought to the Nation-to-Nation relationship being forged between the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO) and the Anishinabeck Nation.

Some time ago, Elder Gordon Waindebence, had recommended that this relationship be developed in a traditional way through song, smoke, feast and dance.

After much searching for an appropriate song Nicholas Vrooman contacted Tony and

said that such a song might be one that was sung during the alliance involving the Métis and the Ojibwe in the 1820's in North Dakota. This possibility was discussed with Elder, Francis Eagle Heart Cree, who is the keeper of the song in the Chippewa community at the Turtle Mountain Reservation. A sweat was held at Belcourt, ND and it was agreed that this song would be transferred to the MNO in a ceremony during the Traditional Elders and Youth Circle in August 2004.

The history of the song goes

back to a time of stress for the Assiniboine, Cree, Ojibwe and the Michif (Métis) living at that time in North Dakota. In the early eighteen hundreds they were being squeezed between the Sioux and Cheyenne in the south and the Hudson's Bay and Nor'westers to the north. When in 1821 the HBC and NWC combined to become one, and the Sioux to the south increased their push on extending territory, the need for a formalized alliance between the Assiniboine, Cree, Ojibwe and the Michif became paramount.

Nicholas Vrooman goes on to describe what followed: "As the Ojibwe and Michif were the newest comers to the territory they needed to be brought in on the workings of the Great Mystery in that part of the world. A Thirsty Dance was called, where the dance would be given to the newcomers. The Ojibwe were Mdewin, out of the woodlands, but now needed to have the Medicine of the plains. The Michif were Romish (Roman Catholic), but some were to take on both tra-

more on next page

Métis Receive Song in North Dakota ceremony

continued from front page

ditions, just as many Ojibwes maintained their Mdewin.

“The Buffalo Lodge Lake Thirsty Dance (Sun Dance) would form a bond between these peoples that would create a unified front when dealing with the HBC and other Euroamerican fur trade outfits, as well as other indigenous enemies to the south and west.

“Many Eagle Set was the Cree Assiniboine leader of the dance. It is said it was the largest Sun Dance ever to occur on the northern plains. There were 14 centre poles, and 1500 dancers. Many Eagle Set received a song from Gishay Manitou to commemorate the Unity of the People and symbolize the alliance made through that Thirsty

Dance at Buffalo Lodge Lake. The song was given to the people and lives on through Francis Eagleheart Cree a Thirsty Dance priest and spiritual and cultural leader of the Turtle Mountain people. Francis Cree is the great grandson of Many Eagle Set. This song is sung every year at the Sun Dance on the Turtle Mountains commemorating

the alliance amongst the Assiniboine, Cree, Ojibwe and Michif, which has remained intact since the dance at Buffalo Lake.”

Tony can now be described as “the keeper of the song” for the Métis of Ontario. Such a privilege cannot be taken lightly. He has the responsibility, and the honour, of passing it on to others. ∞



A brief historical context —

Many Eagle Set Thirsty Dance Song

BY NICHOLAS VROOMAN

It was the early 1820s, the Cree, Assiniboine, Chippewa (Ojibwe/Saulteaux), and Michif came together at Buffalo Lodge Lake, in what is now northwest North Dakota, but then, open indigenous buffalo pasture prairie, to form one of the most significant alliances ever to occur at the center of the continent. It was land contested between the United States and Canada as belonging to (in their terms, respectively) either Louisiana or Rupert’s Land. It resides along the border region that ranges from Minnesota to Montana’s Rocky Mountain front now referred to by peoples of pre-Euroamerican nationalism as the “Medicine Line”

The fur trade was trapping-out in the woodlands by the late 1700s. Assiniboine (Nakota) had already split from their Dakota and Lakota relations to the east and moved to the west to become “Plains” people a few generations back. The Anishnabe (Chippewa/Saulteaux) were pushing west from the Great Lakes, competing with the Sioux and forcing them out onto the prairie. There, the Sioux formed alliances with the Cheyenne who inhabited the land between the Red and Missouri Rivers. The Anishnabe from the east, and their Cree cousins from the northeast, had been coming onto the plains for a generation and more.

Already, by the mid-18th century there was a distinct society of mixed bloods at the

forks of the Assiniboine and Red Rivers. Some were Bungi, the offspring of Orkney Viking fathers (the first employees of the Hudson’s Bay Company dispatched to the hinterlands after 1670) with various Algonkian speaking tribal women in the area. Others were of French stock, descendants of LaVerendrye’s men who came to the territory in the 1730s and 40s and married within the same maternal tribal variations of the country. A third group, which would come to comprise the most numerous and politically and economically savvy current within that newly forming mixedblood society, were a mixture themselves of the southern Great Lakes and the Mississippi/Missouri River Métis. These Métis were the descendants of the Old R gime France in North America, left dispossessed in the United States after the French and Indian War, who had been mixing within the diverse tribal milieu south of the Great Lakes and east of the Mississippi, and among themselves, for the previous 150 years.

The Assiniboine, Cree, Ojibwe, and Michif were squeezed between the Sioux and Cheyenne in the south, and the Hudson’s Bay and Nor’westers to the north. When, in 1821, the HBC and NWC combined to become one, and the Sioux to the south increased their push on extending territory, the need for a formalized alliance between the Assiniboine, Cree, Ojibwe, and Michif became paramount.

As the Ojibwe and Michif were the newest comers to the territory, they needed

to be brought in on the workings of the Great Mystery in that part of the world. A “Thirsty Dance” was called, where the dance would be given to the newcomers. The Ojibwe were Mdewin, from the woodlands, who now needed to have the Medicine of the plains. The Michif were Romish (Roman Catholic), but some were to take on both traditions, just as many Ojibwe maintained their Mdewin.

The Buffalo Lodge Lake Thirsty Dance (Sun Dance) would form a bond amongst these peoples that would create a unified front when dealing with the HBC and other fur trade outfits, as well as any of their indigenous enemies to the south and west.

Many Eagle Set was the Cree Assiniboine leader of the dance. It is said it was the largest Sun Dance ever to occur on the northern plains. There were 14 center poles, and 1500 dancers comprised of the groups. Many Eagle Set received a song from Gishay Manitou to commemorate the “Unity of the People” and symbolize the alliance made through that Thirsty Dance at Buffalo Lodge Lake. That song was given to the people and lives on through Francis Eagleheart Cree, a Thirsty Dance Priest and spiritual and cultural leader of the Turtle Mountain people. Francis Cree is the great grandson of Many Eagle Set.

This song is sung every year at the Sun Dance on the Turtle Mountains commemorating the alliance between the Assiniboine, Cree, Ojibwe and Michif, which has remained intact since the dance at Buffalo Lodge Lake.
