Introduction

The oral histories of Indigenous Peoples of the Great Plains are imbedded in their oral traditions. They include the stories of genesis and mystical times, stories of the recent past, and personal reminiscences. According to Cree Elders, for one to understand Cree oral traditions, one needs first to acknowledge that everything begins with the Creator. The sacred stories explain that the Creator gave First Man the gift of communication in the form of prayer, that speech is manitokewin, *sacred, an act of prayer*, and that the spoken word is sacrosanct.

Indigenous histories come in a wide range of oral narrative forms – while storytelling is the most common form of transmitting knowledge across the generations, stories are often accompanied by songs and ceremonies which also hold teachings and serve to protect the integrity of the story. Oral history is not a new method for Indigenous scholars. Indigenous oral histories are as old as the land and are still alive and practised. They are, however, very unique and serious students will learn that they do not conform to Western academic tenets or standards.

Among the Plains Cree, oral histories consist of many different kinds of overlapping and related stories. Âtayôhkêwina are stories of the mystical past when the earth was shaped, animal peoples conversed, and Wisakejac transformed the earth and its inhabitants through misadventure and mischief into the world we know today. Âcimowina are stories of events that have come to pass since Wisakejac's corporeal presence transformed into spirit presence. But unlike the rigid binary categories imposed on âtayôhkêwina and âcimowina by mainstream oral historians, anthropologists, and historians of Indian-White Relations, âcimowina do not always begin where the other leaves off. Neither is one exclusively 'mythical' and the other exclusively 'historical.' 'History' is not separated from 'tradition' because the spiritual and the mundane overlap in human life. Also unlike conventional understandings of oral history, in the Cree world, personal reminiscences are not more valued or authoritative than historical accounts of events in the distant past. The official versions of significant events from

the distant past, like the Treaties, the 1885 Resistance movements, and epidemics, are reliable because they are protected by ceremony and protocol[1].

The debate about whether or not Indigenous oral histories – sacred or mundane – should be translated and transcribed into static written form is ongoing. Over the years much has been lost or has gone underground because of outside interference and influences. Many stories are not told publicly, even today, because the old timers still fear retribution from state authorities. Many stories have been stolen and reproduced inappropriately by curious social scientists[2].

The fear that our oral traditions will be lost in this modern age of literacy, cyberspace, and cable television is very real. In the 1970s, in an attempt to stave off the loss of traditional knowledge and languages, a handful of Saskatchewan Elders participated in series of 65 Elder workshops. From 1970 to 1978 approximately 414 Elders from 55 Cree, Assiniboine, Saulteaux, Dakota, and Dene communities committed their teachings and life experience stories to audio tape. At first many were hesitant about recording oral histories, sacred songs, and ceremonial teachings, but fear that all would be lost convinced them that recording might be the only way to preserve them for future generations. Tyrone Tootoosis explains that "they came to the conclusion that they would have to make some compromise and concession regarding Laws of Access and the custom of traditional protocol[3]." Long before these Elders committed their stories to archives, Anishnabe scholar William Whipple Warren spent years among his Elders in the early 19th century recording their oral traditions. His work culminated in the classic *History of the Ojibway People* published posthumously in 1885[4]. In the years intervening and since, Indigenous community and academic scholars have continued the work.

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1. See Herman Michell, "Pakitinâsowin: Tobacco Offerings in Exchange for Stories and the Ethic of Reciprocity in First Nations Research," *Indigenous Thought* (Fall 1999) HYPERLINK http://www.sifc.edu/Indian%20Studies/Indigenous http://www.sifc.edu/Indian%20Studies/IndigenousThought/fall99/tobacco.htm.
2. See Canadian Plains Research Centre, *Proceedings of the Plains Cree Conference held in Fort Qu'Appelle, October 24, 25 and 26, 1975* (Regina: University of Regina, 1979).
3. Tyrone Tootoosis, "Our Legacy: Ka ke pesi nakatamakiawiyak," *Eagle Feather News* 1, 10 (1999), 21.
4. William Whipple Warren, *History of the Ojibway People* (1885. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society reprint, 1984).

It is clearly the position of the contributors, and their storyteller/teachers, that the stories offered here should be recorded in written text. But these are not verbatim transcripts. Indigenous oral traditions are variously didactic but they seldom, if ever, have built-in analysis because discovering answers and lessons are the responsibility or obligation of the listeners. The job of the writer, like that of the listener, is to find and apply meanings through analyses and introspection. Thus, the articles offered here are stories about stories – they are about personal relationships, new knowledge, challenges to prevailing conventions, alternative world views, and personal introspection. Most evident in each, is the high degree of influence that informants/storytellers/teachers have had on the intellectual development of the writers. It is within the context that Indigenous oral histories are unique living traditions that this special edition of the COHA *Oral History Forum* is presented.

The Northern Great Plains are the traditional homelands of the Anishnabe (Saulteaux), Nêhiyawak (Cree), Datoka, Nakota (Assiniboine), Metis, and Blackfoot Confederacy, and all but the Nakota and Blackfoot are represented to various degrees herein. Angela Cavender Wilson grew up in a family strong on Wahpetunwan Dakota oral traditions. From her grandfather Eli Taylor of the Sioux Valley Reserve in Manitoba she learned about the role of oral traditions in the development of historical consciousness and Dakota identity. Neal McLeod was also raised swathed in Cree oral traditions and he explains that Nêhiyâwiwin, Creeness, is a lived memory which is held in the stories and relationships across the generations. Neal stresses that the collective memory – the larger collective experience – emerges through "lived" individual stories. Both articles point out that for students of Indigenous history, it is not enough just to acknowledge Indigenous oral traditions. The teachings found in oral traditions are meant to be learned and applied – Indigenous world views and wisdoms can inform contemporary scholarship.

Nicole St. Onge's article challenges the celebratory Canadian myth of the "family farm." Through her interviews with Metis women of Saint-Eustache, Manitoba, Nicole demonstrates that prevailing historical analyses not only ignore the "impoverished underclass of rural wage workers", but totally neglect Metis women and children. Rob Innes challenges the conventional standpoint that returning Aboriginal World War II veterans were primarily responsible for the development of First Nations and Metis political activism and social reforms in post-WWII Saskatchewan. Through interviews with Aboriginal veterans, Rob explains that they were too busy

trying to make a living and reintegrate into their communities to tackle political reform. Instead, they apprenticed under the older and more traditional leaders, and assumed leadership roles later on in life.

"Narrative Wisps" is concerned with how significant portions of collective memory are lost over time in Indigenous communities. Through her work on an oral history project for the Fisher River First Nation, Manitoba, the author/present editor learned, that while gaps in the collective memory remain, answers to methodological dilemmas can be found when working with Elders.

The collection of articles offered here opens with the editor's analysis of the Cree and Western versions of the origin of the Cree syllabic system. This brief article serves two purposes. First, it is an example of a conflict between an Indigenous oral account and an 'official' recorded account of a very significant historical development. Second, it provides some historical background for the use of Cree syllabics in this volume.

In four of the following articles, the abstracts are presented in English, French, and Cree syllabics. The objective for including the Cree version is to stress that in most Indigenous communities, Indigenous languages are the official languages used in the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next. While there is a very real fear that many Indigenous languages are being lost through disuse, there is also much effort being made in the areas of language retention and promotion[5]. Bringing Indigenous language usage into mainstream academic journals is a small contribution towards these goals. A very special thanks to Neal McLeod for taking on the task of translation and transcription. A very special thanks also to Darren Okemaysim, Jean Okimâsis, Arok Wolvengrey, and Guy Albert for working with Neal on this project[6]. Finally, I thank Ken Clavette, Ronald Labelle, and James Morrison, for guiding me through my first effort at editing a special issue of an academic journal.

Winona Stevenson
Guest Editor/rédactrice invitée

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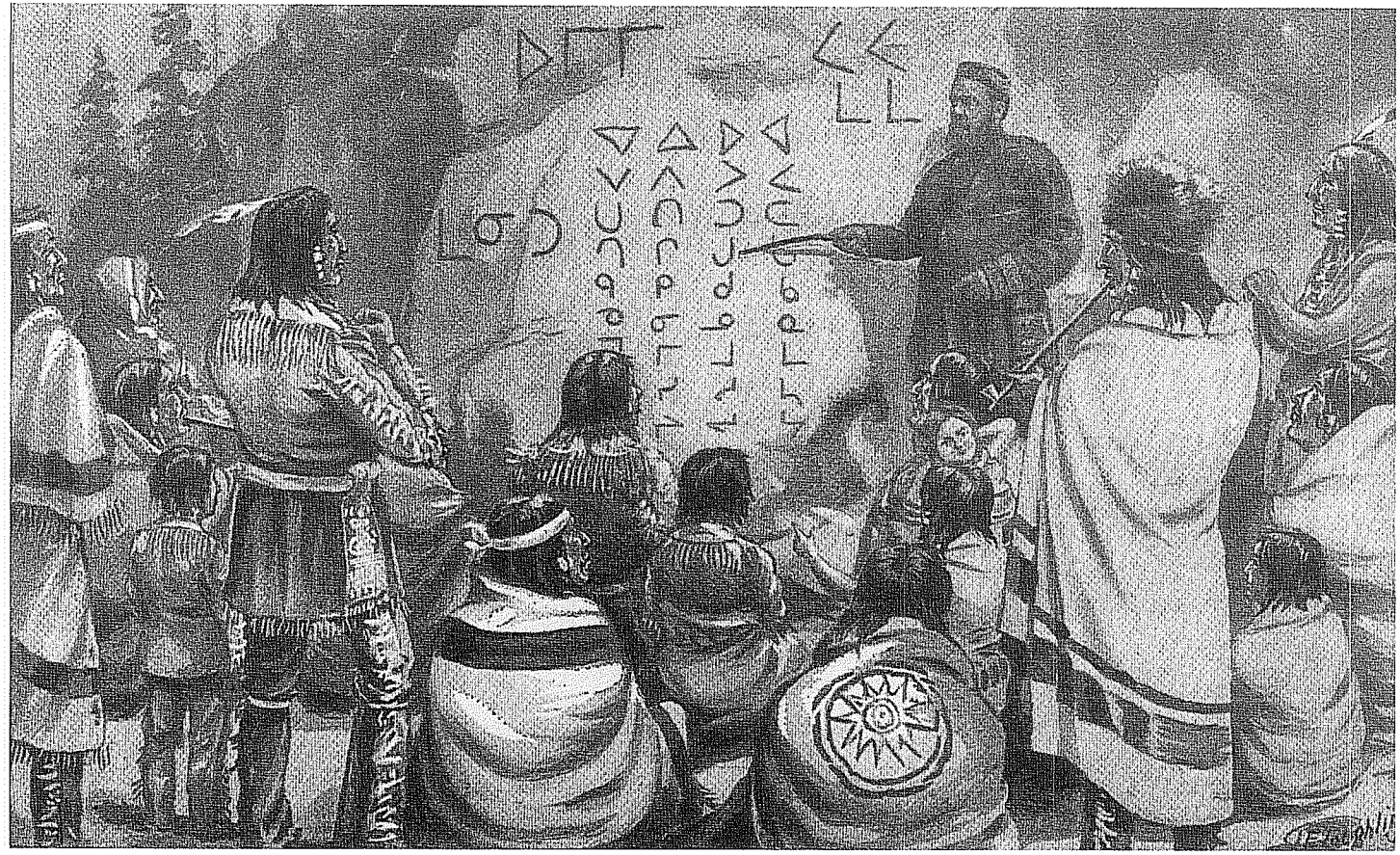
5. See Verna J. Kirkness, *Aboriginal Languages: A Collection of Talks and Papers* (Vancouver: Verna J. Kirkness, 1998).
6. All of these wonderful people who worked on the translations are either staff or faculty at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, Regina campus.



GOD ON THE ROCK.

Source: Egerton R. Young, *On the Indian Trail* (London: The Religious Tract Society, n.d.), 95.