

Narrative Wisps of the Ochekwi Sipi Past: A Journey in Recovering Collective Memories

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The Ochekwi Sipi (Fisher River) Cree First Nation live 2 ½ hours north of Winnipeg, Manitoba. The reserve straddles the Fisher River some five miles inland from the river's confluence with Lake Winnipeg. The community looks like many other large reserves – dirt roads, new Canadian Mortgage and Housing (CMHC) houses interspersed with older Indian Affairs houses, big trucks, dead cars, and scruffy dogs. On either side of the bridge connecting the north and south shores of the river is the child & family services centre, the school, recreation centre, Band administration office, health clinic, and housing subdivision. Collectively these make up an impressive community centre. A little further downriver are the Treaty grounds, the site of the old Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) post and the old church, formerly Methodist, now United. The panorama from the bridge yields the barren river bank, home to new and retired fishing boats, bulrushes, flood plains, mud flats, and traces of the old river lots where the founding families made their first homes.

Before Treaty No. 5 in 1875 and the reserve survey in 1878, the region was a hunting, fishing and trapping commons, a migration corridor shared by Muskego-wininiwak, *Swampy Cree Peoples*, from the north and Anishnabe or Saukteaux Peoples from the south, many of whom were related through marriage or through social and economic ties with the Hudson Bay Company (HBC). The majority of the Cree people who settled the region came from Norway House on the northernmost tip of Lake Winnipeg. A handful of Saukteaux and Saukteaux-Cree people came from Netley Creek or St. Peter's Reserve on the Red River to the south, and from the islands and eastern shores of Lake Winnipeg.

Prior to the Treaty, Norway House was the hub of the north. As the HBC inland administrative centre in the early 1800s, it attracted Aboriginal

wage labourers (full-time and seasonal) in the HBC Home Guard Cree tradition. The Methodist mission, established in 1840 and named Rossville, encouraged further Aboriginal settlement so that by 1875 there were over 800 Aboriginal souls at Norway House – the Christian Crees lived around the Rossville mission, the Pagans lived along the shores of Playgreen Lake. In the summer months the population almost doubled as inland fur brigades and supply boats from the Bay exchanged their freight and turned around before winter froze the waterways again.

Up to the early 1870s the HBC employed an average of 200 Aboriginal men as full time or seasonal wage labourers. However, as the trade declined and steam boats replaced flotillas, the HBC dramatically reduced its labour force. Between 130 and 140 of the 200 Aboriginal men employed by the HBC lost their jobs on the boat brigades and another 60 to 70 lost seasonal wage labour jobs.¹ Facing starvation and in need of an alternative livelihood, the Christian Crees of Rossville petitioned the federal government for a Treaty to secure land in the south for farming.² In the fall of 1877 a large flotilla of Muskego-wininiwak from Norway House arrived on the banks of the Fisher River, and their descendants have made this place their home ever since.

I came to Fisher River initially through kinship ties, then by discovery and work, and was drawn into this community's heritage as a member, a student, and a land claims researcher. Over the past 10 years the land claims research branched out well beyond its original mandate to the point where it now includes: close to one hundred hours of taped interviews with thirty-eight Old People; an Elder's genealogy project; a founding families genealogical project; a historical photograph collection consisting of over 450 turn of the century photographs of reserve life; a large historical documents and secondary source collection; the creation of the Ochekwí Sipi Cultural Heritage Committee; and a beautiful log house for the Cultural Resource Centre. In the meantime, the specific claims case has been stuck in the hands of the federal Indian Affairs and Justice Departments for over three years now. Still in progress are curriculum development materials for the Sinclair School (K-12), a CD-ROM oral history project, and a book

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1. The Reverend John H. Ruttan, "Report on Norway House Mission," *54th Annual Report of Missionary Society of the Methodist Church of Canada, June 1877-June 1878* (Toronto: 1878), xvii-xviii.
 2. Provincial Archives of Manitoba (PAM), MG12, B1, Alexander Morris Papers, No. 783: Indians of Rossville to Alexander Morris, 25 June 1874.

manuscript tentatively titled *A Narrative History of the Ochekwi Sipi Peoples*.



York Boat in Full sail on Hayes River en route from Norway House and Lake Winnipeg to York Factory. Photo taken from another boat. (c. 1880).

Photo: Western Canada Pictorial Index Inc., University of Winnipeg.

Of all these projects, the writing – the textual representation of the Ochekwi Sipi Peoples’ past – has proven to be the most challenging. The collective directive I received from the Elders was to write their history in their own voices, to tell it like it should be told. Although schooled in social science rather than literary methodologies I was confident and comfortable enough working with oral traditions that the task did not seem insurmountable. But the writing just wasn’t happening. When asked by a few Elders, “what’s taking so long?” I whimsically replied, “writer’s block.” However, retrospection reveals that the problem is much deeper – more complex – than that. The problem stems from an amalgam of intersecting and paradoxical methodological contests. Simply stated, it boils down to the problem of how to write the story in the voices of the Elders, as they instructed me to, when the oral history has so many gaps that the bulk of our material comes from conventional Eurocentric primary sources.

The documentary records are plentiful. The Methodist church was thorough, records of birth, death and marriage records as well as annual reports on the state of the church and community go back to 1840 in Norway House/Rossville.³ Through the HBC materials I could trace family migrations southward, in some cases back 10 generations, and the RG10 Indian Affairs (Black Series) and Canada *Sessional Papers* provided invaluable socio-economic data for the post-treaty era. But over the last nine years, during which our research team interviewed thirty-eight of the oldest and most respected members living in the community, personal reminiscences and family histories rather than oral histories of significant events dominated their tellings.⁴ We heard and recorded wonderful stories about their own and their parents' life experiences. We also heard stories about Wesakejac, the Little People and other Lake Winnipeg mysteries, as well as descriptive accounts of traditional healing practices.

However, all but a few of the Old People were reluctant to talk about what they heard of events that occurred during their grandparents' time or earlier.⁵ Everyone could trace their ancestors back to 1875 and even earlier. Everyone knew that their ancestors converted to Christianity back at Norway House and some knew who the baptizing ministers were. Everyone also knew when the Treaty was negotiated and that they settled at Fisher River as result of the Treaty. But no one interviewed gave us detailed stories about the Christian conversion process or what transpired at Treaty No. 5,⁶ nor where there any detailed stories about the 1877 migration from Norway House to Fisher River – a momentous event in which a fair sized flotilla consisting of three York boats (containing the women, children,

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3. The earliest baptism, marriage and death records for the Methodist mission at Rossville and later missions are housed in the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.
 4. Personal reminiscences differ from oral histories because they are specific to the life experiences of the teller – they include direct observation and to a large degree are autobiographical in nature. Oral histories, on the other hand, while they may contain autobiographical details, are stories about significant events and persons from the more distant past.
 5. Interviews conducted with Elders from the previous generation have proved invaluable especially the stories on family migrations to Fisher River. A special thanks to Verna Kirkness for providing a copy of an interview she did in 1967 with her late grandfather James Kirkness (1871-1975).
 6. Alexander Morris, "Lake Winnipeg Treaty No. Five," in *The Treaties of Canada with the Indians of Manitoba and the North-West Territories including The Negotiations on which they were based* (1880 reprint. Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1991), 343.

dogs and baggage), ten fishing skiffs, and twelve canoes brought 160 people, or about forty families, across Lake Winnipeg through late-autumn rain storms and unseasonable cold, on a journey that took close to 2 ½ months.⁷

In the collective memory of the community these were significant events but the details were missing. For the research team, this collective memory gap among our Elders was confusing. As far as we naively assumed, Old People were supposed to know everything – were they purposely withholding this information, or did they really not know? How could the details of such significant events just evaporate? To a handful of Elders I finally asked directly, “why don’t we know this history anymore?” Some admitted that they did not really listen when their grandparents told them the stories. Others replied “we didn’t think that stuff was so important to remember” or “that was too long ago to remember.” Finally, two of the Elders, on separate occasions reprimanded me: “well, that’s your job now isn’t it? Go on out there and find out!”

None of this discussion is intended in any way to provide fodder for those historians who forcefully, or secretly harp, that oral history is unreliable. Numerous studies demonstrate that where Indigenous oral histories exists, they are strong, that in their own right they can stand on their own as legitimate methods, sources and forms.⁸ Here I am describing a different kind of situation—gaps in the collective memory.

So how does a community lose pieces of its collective memory? How do the details of significant historical events, events that shaped the current

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7. United Church Archives, Personal Papers (UCA PP) John Semmens, fond 3204, Box 1, file 1, “Under the Northern Lights: Notes on Personal History, 1850-1921,” 30, 31; Ruttan, “Report on Norway House Mission,” xvii-xviii. The Hudson Bay Company reported that the government hired two good boats (York) and one condemned boat, to take forty families to Fisher River. Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Hudson Bay Company Archives (PAM HBCA) B.154/a/71, Norway House Post Journal, 5 September 1877, fo. 62.
 8. The scholarly literature on the tenacity of Indigenous oral histories of events and peoples of the distant past is vast and has a long history in and of itself. See for example, Gordon Day, “Roger’s Raid in Indian Tradition,” *Historical New Hampshire* 17 (June 1962): 3-17; and Oral Tradition as Complement,” *Ethnohistory* 19, 2 (1972): 99-108; Bernard L. Fontana, “American Indian Oral History: An Anthropologist’s Note,” *History and Theory* 8, 3 (1969): 366-370; Angela Cavender-Wilson, “Grandmother to Granddaughter: Generations of Oral History in a Dakota Family,” *American Indian Quarterly* 20, 1 (1996): 7-13.

realities and dynamics of a community, disappear from the collection of past stories held by our Elders?

Bernard Lewis tells us that the history of events, movements, persons or ideas that were forgotten at a certain stage may in fact have been rejected by the communal memory for some reason.⁹ A closer look at the historical experiences of the Home Guard Cree of Norway House helps shed some light.

By the 1840s the Home Guard Cree of Norway House had endured and adapted to a century of colonial intrusion and culture change. The shift from a single sector to a dual sector economy found them entrenched in a global market system that had little appreciation or respect for their unique ways of life. Methodist missionaries arrived in 1840 which attracted further settlement and placed even more stress on available resources, and soon thereafter, the fur trade began its decline. These series of events eventually left the Home Guard Cree vulnerable with few options. By 1875 starvation reduced many of these once self-sufficient people to welfare dependents on the HBC and Methodist mission.¹⁰

The missionaries' arrival was timely. While they offered a new way to make a living, it came at a costly and distressing price. The history of Indian missions is a well-known story. Christian missionaries were/are colonial agents *par excellence*, demanding nothing less than total cultural transformation and forcefully condemning Aboriginal customs and religions as heathen and inhuman. Albert Memmi explains that the colonizer is preoccupied with imposing urgent change and drives it home with a vengeance:

*[T]he mechanism of this remolding of the colonized is revealing in itself. It consists, in the first place, of a series of negations. The colonized is not this, is not that. He is never considered in a positive light; or if he is, the quality which is conceded is the result of a psychological or ethical failing.*¹¹

9. Bernard Lewis, *History: Remembered, Recovered, Invented*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1987), 12.

10. See for example, PAM, HBCA B.154/a/71, Norway House Post Journal, 27 March 1875, fo. 10; *ibid.*, 27 July 1977, fo. 59.

11. Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 84-85.

Many of those who convert eventually internalize this indictment – they come to view their own culture and history as strange and become more receptive to even more colonial pressure. Peter Nabokov and others tell us that for memory “to endure, someone somewhere must continue to bear witness, must intuitively resist the demands of archive and media in favor of the interactive, oral narrative.” Oral history is called into being during and for inter-personal situations.¹² Add enforced residential school internment to their colonized past, and alienation from community, family, the past and self pervades.¹³ Writing about alienation, Franz Fanon explains that the

*historical conditions which confront men always structure their actions: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.'*¹⁴

In time the “oppressed learn to perceive the cause of their oppression in their own inferiority, their power of resistance weakens.”¹⁵ Then, as Albert Memmi explains:

*As soon as the colonized adopts [the values of the colonizer], he similarly adopts his own condemnation. In order to free himself, at least so he believes, he agrees to destroy himself.*¹⁶

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12. Peter Nabokov, “Present Memories, Past History,” in Calvin Martin, ed., *The American Indian and the Problem of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 145.
 13. Numerous studies of the residential school experience and the impact of that experience on contemporary First Nations communities have been done, many of which incorporated the personal reminiscences of the inmates. For example, see Jean Barman, Yvonne Hebert, and Don McCaskill, eds., *Indian Education in Canada, Volume 1: The Legacy* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1986); Linda Jaine, ed., *Residential Schools: The Stolen Years* (Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan Extension Press, 1993); Celia Haig-Brown, *Resistance and Renewal: Surviving the Indian Residential School* (Vancouver: Tillacum Library, 1988); J. R. Miller, *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).
 14. Renate Zahar, *Franz Fanon: Colonialism & Alienation* (New York: Monthly Press, 1974), 5.
 15. Zahar, *Franz Fanon*, 19.
 16. Memmi, *The Colonized*, 121-22.

As his own institutions die he scarcely believes anymore in the remnants that do remain because he is faced with "daily confirmation of their ineffectiveness".¹⁷ In time he "draws less and less from his past" and when asked,

*who are his folk heroes? His great popular leaders? His sages? At most, he may be able to give us a few names, in complete disorder, and fewer and fewer as one goes down the generations. The colonized seems condemned to lose his memory.*¹⁸

Franz Fanon summarizes the experience of alienation in colonial contexts in a well-known dictum:

*Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the natives brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.*¹⁹

The situations presented by Fanon and Memmi represent extreme colonial experiences. No one can deny that the experience of colonization is traumatic – displacement, depopulation, alienation, powerlessness, demoralization, internalized hatred – the forces of colonialism not only rape the land, they violently assault the body, spirit and mind of the colonized.

While the degrees and impacts of colonial encounters vary across time and space, there is no denying that the overall effects are long-lasting. A recent study by Bonnie Duran, Eduardo Duran, and Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, describes the impact of colonialism on Indigenous peoples as "historical trauma or intergenerational trauma" the contemporary symptoms of which include disproportionately high rates of "alcoholism, poverty, learned helplessness and dependence, violence, and the breakdown of values that correlate with healthy living."²⁰

17. Zahar, *Franz Fanon*, 37.

18. Memmi, *The Colonized*, 102-3.

19. Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991 reprint).

20. Bonnie Duran, Eduardo Duran, and Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, "Native Americans and the Trauma of History," in Russell Thornton, ed., *Studying Native America: Problems and Prospects* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 61.



**Indian children from Fisher River, Portage La Prairie
Indian Boarding School, c. 1890s (93.049P/1749N).**

Photo: The United Church of Canada/Victoria University Archives, Toronto.

A handful of studies have been done on the impact of historical trauma on the collective memory of a people. Raymond Fogelson's study of Cherokee memories of the 1830 'Trail of Tears' demonstrate in this instance that the Removal event was so traumatic it was denied: "Removal experience was so degrading, so incredible, so brutally real that it became unreal to the Cherokee mind."²¹ Thus, despite the abundance of written documentation left by non-Cherokee eye-witnesses there were practically no Cherokee oral accounts of the event itself. In a study of Holocaust survivor testimonies, Naomi Rosh White explains that often Holocaust

21. Raymond D. Fogelson, "The Ethnohistory of Events and Nonevents," *Ethnohistory* 36, 2 (1989), 143.

survivors slip into silence. "For some," she claims, "silence has its source in the pain from which the survivor seeks protection."²²

*Silence can be a sanctuary which protects speakers from themselves and from their listeners. It encloses feelings and experiences which may attract censure because they are unfamiliar, alien or threatening to the listener. The sense of impotence and powerlessness ... feelings of having been defiled, diminished and humiliated may remain unspoken because the listener's response may be disbelief, contempt, abandonment, misunderstanding or pity.*²³

Rosh White speaks of "anguished memory" which recovers the sense of being divided, of living in more than one world at a time. She speaks of "humiliated memory" which reveals a "besieged self", who, as in the past, is unable to act in the present because memory and the process of narrating offer no rescue from uncompensated and uncompensatable loss. "'Unheroic memory' reveals the 'diminished self' with its deprivation of moral agency and its partially traumatized or maimed self-esteem. The long-term impact of which is a fractured, fragmented self."²⁴ Within the historical context of colonialism, it is a testament to People's spiritual strength and tenacity that so much oral history still exists in our communities.

Ethnohistorians are in the business of historical reconstruction – they seek to recover the history of events, movements, persons, and ideas that have been largely neglected by conventional scholarship. They also strive to correct errors and reach deeper understandings. But theirs is an objective and generally distanced pursuit of knowledge. Their initial questions are seldom informed by experience, generational or direct. Most ethnohistorians begin their research in the archives and later on end up in community, if at all. On the other hand, many Indigenous historians begin at community and end up in the archives. The distinctions and implications of these two methodological approaches has not been seriously considered, but they should be. We all recognize that the kinds of questions we ask informs our methodologies which in turn inform, impact, or dictate the outcome. For scholars doing Indigenous historical research a significant question to ask at the onset is, how the forms and content of their work

22. Naomi Rosh White, "Marking Absences: Holocaust Testimony and History," in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 176.

23. Rosh White, "Marking Absences," 176.

24. Rosh White, "Marking Absences," 180.

compare or contrast when the questions are framed in an archives and when questions are framed by community oral history.

Students of Indigenous oral histories are well aware that each community has its own ways – its own forms and methods – of keeping and transmitting knowledge about the past across generations. Some oral historical accounts are rigidly formulaic, others less so. And while the forms of its transmission have received considerable scholarly interest from folklorists, linguists, and literary studies, for example, they are studied as objects rather than applied or adhered to. What very few recognize is that oral traditions are unique among Peoples and can be used as templates for the textual representations of oral historical accounts. In communities where oral traditions are alive and strong we have a lot to work with. Not only do we have templates for form, we also have direction on content. We have the community's point of view or determination of what constitutes a significant historical event or person which in many cases differs from an outside perspective.

In the case of the Fisher River, however, the priorities of the research team were determined by what we did not know or what was missing in our collective memories. Another paradox is that while many of the details we sought had been lost, the traditional story-telling form is alive and well. In fact it was the pervasiveness of the oral tradition form in the community, the story-telling tradition and the great storytellers, that initially lead us to believe that there must be lots of oral history – that the Old People would have lots of stories about the Treaty and the migration from Norway House.

So, our Old People are great story-tellers, and they want their book to be filled with great stories, and my questions become more pointed – the Indian and the academic in me engage: “would not using our oral tradition story-telling forms to textually represent non-traditional (non-Indian) sources undermine or bastardize traditional and scholarly integrity? Would this not be an exercise in inventing tradition?”

Bernard Lewis, Eric Hobsbawm, and Terrence Ranger provided some help here.²⁵ Hobsbawm explains that the “strength and adaptability of genuine tradition is not to be confused with the ‘invention of tradition.’ When the old ways are alive, traditions need be neither revived or

25. Lewis, *History: Remembered*; Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

invented.”²⁶ If history has demonstrated little else, it is that we are a strong and adaptable People. Thus, the tasks of tribal historians are to recover the past and to present it to the public in a form that meets the approval of the people whose histories and lives it represents. Recovered history is a process of reconstructing the forgotten past, which Bernard Lewis explains, is a “modern and European task.”²⁷ Tribal historians, like ethnohistorians, glean our data from all possible locations, but unlike most ethnohistory, our questions and ideally our textual products are directed by community.

In the end, the problem is not whether or not to write narrative history, but rather what kind of narrative history would be most appropriate – what forms and literary strategies could be borrowed to write our recovered histories in a way that respects the integrity of tribal oral traditions and the academy?

Twenty years ago this would have been a lonely venture, but the challenges and inroads made by Hayden White and other critical theorists, by literary critics and New Historicism, are pushing historians to think more critically about what we do, how we do it, and the limits of our potential.²⁸ Way out in the front are our own people, our literary and intellectual greats like Gerald Vizenor, N. Scott Momaday, and Maria Campbell who have been writing in the oral tradition for a very long time. They teach by doing which has helped pave the way for my generation to return home and learn to write from our own places.

So there I was, at once filling in the gaps in our oral history with eurocentric documentary records and listening to the taped interviews of the Old People over and over again to feel the rhythm of their voices, to discern the local nomenclature and their unique Cree-English syntax. Trying to disassociate from my modernist social science training, I strived to adopt a creative literary approach, so I could write our histories the way the Elders told me to. As always, I found temporary respite in a conventional historical method – I kept doing research. One afternoon while learning about whitefish pemmican I presented one of our Elders with my dilemma – “Lena, how can I write our histories in our own words when most of the information we have about our past comes from journals and books written

26. Hobsbawm, *Invention of Tradition*, 8.

27. Lewis, *History: Remembered*, 13.

28. See for example, Robert Berkhofer, Jr., *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University 1995).

by fur traders and missionaries?" The immediate look on her face struck me – it was one of those 'what a dumb question' kind of looks. Then staring me strait in the eyes she said, "just take it!" "Just take it?" I replied a little dumbfounded. "Yes, just take it!" "Listen girl," she said, "they took our memories from us, now you just go on and take those memories back, and make them ours again."

Sifting through the thin stained pages of missionary journals I searched for the ancestors of the Fisher River Muskego-wininiwak – the People I knew. Historical imagination some call it ... reading through the lines, between the words, across the cultures, into the minds, and searching through their eyes for narrative wisps of the Ochekwi Sipi past.

Sitting on his worn-out couch Old Alec raised his eyes and slapped his hands together ...

"Ahow!" he started, "We come from up north, us. Where the muskeg and rock, and the caribou and the moose, they meet. That's what old Jim he told me when I was a kid working the boats with him. Back then some of us were known as asini-wininiwak, Rock Cree Peoples. Now we are all known as muskego-wininiwak, Swampy Cree Peoples. How we came to be, one from the other, now that's a long story"

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