

Kookoom Mariah and The Mennonite Mrs.

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This is the story of two wonderful old women who were an important part of my early life. One of them was my Kookoom Mariah, the other was her friend “the Mrs.,” an old woman who lived across the big meadow from her. The Mrs. was Mennonite, although I didn’t know that at the time and if I did it meant nothing. She was just one of the grandmothers who worked with Kookoom Mariah, who was a midwife and healer. But before I tell you their story, I would like to tell you about Kookoom Mariah’s homeland, which was the community where I spent my childhood and the place my family still calls home.

Today it is called Park Valley, but prior to 1925 it was known as Nukeewin, which means “the stopping place” in the Cree language. Kookoom Mariah’s people used to camp here on the way to their hunting and trapping territory, which was across Puktahaw Sipi (Net-throwing River), where her mother-in-law, my great grandmother, lived with several other families. “Hiee, akee katowasik oma aski kiyas” (Oh my, this land used to be so beautiful), Kookoom Mariah would tell us as we drove by wagon through the countryside. To my young eyes it was still beautiful, but Kookoom remembered it when it was still old growth forest and the trees were so big that three men together couldn’t put their arms around one. She would point out the different landmarks and make us say the Cree names: Kiseyinew Isputinawah (Old Man Hills), where our father and uncles hunted deer; Omisimaw Pusqua (Oldest Sister Prairie), the place where we picked the medicine she used for midwifery; and Notikew Sahnkikun (Old Woman’s Lake), the place of ceremony.

Around 1915, the Federal government decided to turn the territory around Notikew

Sahkikun into a national park, and the families who lived there (had lived there for as long as they could remember), were told they had to get out. They moved to Nugeewin, where they were joined by other displaced non-status Indian and Metis families. They built homes, planted gardens and continued to live as trappers and hunters until the 1920s, at which time Nugeewin and the land around it was opened for homesteading. Among the homesteaders to come were the Mennonite people. A few Metis families also took homesteads but the majority of them didn't, moving instead onto the road allowances and becoming "road allowance" people. Within a short time the land was cleared, a post office and store were built and place names were changed. Nugeewin became Park Valley, Puktahaw Sipi became Sturgeon River, Kiseynew Isputinawah Ladder Hills, Omisimaw Pusqui Bergan's Meadow and Notikew Sahkikun became Mariah Lake. Kookoom's homeland and history were erased.

We never knew the Mennonites who came to our territory. They were not friendly people and they kept to themselves, and so my early memories of the Mennonite people are not good. As a child I was afraid of them. They always seemed so angry and disapproving. In those years if I had been asked to think Mennonite and pick a color, I would have chosen gray. The people just seemed so gray and gloomy. You can imagine my surprise when years later I met Isaac Glick and Rudy Wiebe, Mennonites with a sense of humor! And then, the biggest surprise of all, I found out that maybe I was a Mennonite.

My late father, after listening to me one night going on about the Catholic Church for the umpteenth time, calmly said. "I don't know why you're so mad about them, you're not even a Catholic".

"Not a Catholic, what am I then?"

"You're either a Mennonite or a Lutheran. We were on the trap line when you were born and you got sick. Your mom was scared you'd die and wanted to bring you out to be baptized, but then this horseback preacher came and we asked him if he would do it and he did it. Well you got better and we came home and your mom never told anybody cause she was scared the priest would get mad. She prayed for a long time to be forgiven for making you one of them."

My father didn't know what religion the preacher was for sure, but he did know that he came from the little log church at Lake Four. A Mennonite church. When I told my friend Leonard this story he said Mennonites do not baptize babies. Well, according to my dad, this man, "poured water on your head and said a big long prayer, so you're one of them."

Now let me tell you about these two old women. This is written as a story and I would like to dedicate it to our children, yours and mine.

It was a clear sunny day, almost hot. The kind of day you remember when you start to become an old woman and you search for role models to help you make the transition. The kind of lazy day when you can smell wild roses, brown-eyed Susans, the rich black earth, and amo may, bee poop in Cree, or honey as it is called today.

A soft breeze touched the willows where I, an eight year old girl, sat with my Kookoom Mariah and her friend "the Mrs." They were making medicine: sitting on a blanket spread on the ground, grinding roots between two stones. I was their helper, running errands, snaring a partridge for our lunch, hauling wood for the little fire where a tea pail hung from a tri-pod. I was as full of self-importance as a little girl can be when she is chosen, of all the girl cousins,

“Kah weechihaht notikwewah” (to be the “helper of the old ladies”).

I was hot and puffed out, taking a breather after making a one-mile run to the store for tea and black licorice candy. Do you know that even today I think of black licorice as old lady candy and no, I haven’t started to eat it yet...but pretty soon.

Anyway, there I was taking a break, leaning back against the old canvas bags that contained the dried and ground medicines. I listened to Kookoom Mariah sing as she ground the roots and watched as fine red powder fell onto a clean sugar bag. Without thinking, because I certainly knew better, I reached out, touched the powder with my finger tips bringing it to my face, rubbing it round and round on my cheek bones like I had seen my Aunt Mary do with a box of rouge.

“Hey hey awa!” Kookoom Mariah reached out and smacked my hand. “Muskee kee anima! (That’s medicine!)”

“The Mrs.” laughed, her body shaking like an old bear’s. Still laughing, she dug into the old blue apron she always wore and pulled out, not a black old-lady licorice, but a red one. Patting my shoulder gently she handed me the candy, then went back to grinding the medicine. Kookoom Mariah pretended not to see.

I can still see those two old women: Kookoom Mariah, as tiny and skinny as a burnt willow, “The Mrs.,” big and round like a brown bear. Both in long, much-mended dresses and old sweaters. One in moccasins, the other in laced-up felt boots.

Sometimes I see them on a hot day, bent over digging sticks in wet meadows or picking berries along the road. I see them in the garden exchanging wild ginger and dill. In the summer kitchens making headcheese, cooking moose nose. I see them helping my mother deliver my baby brother. I walk with the two of them to the place where old women bury meeko, the afterbirth.

I hear them talking, one in Cree, the other in Low German, although I didn’t know then that’s what it was called. Nor did I know that they did not speak each other’s language. All I knew as a child was the love and respect they had for each other: their laughter, their sharing.

Many years later when my father and I were walking around Kookoom Mariah’s home place, we came to the willows where these two old women often sat. The willows are gone, cut down for another bushel of wheat, the farmer oblivious to the history of this place. Dad and I laugh as we remember the things we had learned about life as we sat with the two of them. “Dah Mrs. was a strong woman.” Dad said, remembering the time our horse got stuck in the muskeg. “Me and Alec we just can’t pull him out. Den dat ole lady he come along and he talk to dat horse so he stop jumping an being scared, den he pull him out. Boy we shore feel stupid us two big mans.”

I remembered the time I went blue berry picking with them and we ran into a mamma bear and her babies. I was scared and they were too. The mamma bear was not going away, she was pacing back and forth sniffing the air. Quickly the two old women opened their grub sacks and out came our lunch. Head cheese and bannock, then slowly we backed away until we were out of sight, at which time they grabbed my hands and ran as fast as they could, dragging me between them.

“Why did we call her the Mrs.?” I asked Dad.

“I don’t know what his name he was,” Dad said. “Dat’s what his old man he always call him.”

Many years after that conversation I decided to go to university to get a Master's degree. I went so stories like this one would have some authority. We all know that the oral tradition does not have much power in the academic or white world unless you have some letters behind your name. Then, as my Uncle Robert said, "You can slick them up with high language and footnotes and everyone will think they are sacred." So off to university I went to learn high language and footnoting and for my first major research paper I asked the question: "How do a people retain their identity when they have lost their homeland?"

I wanted to prove that for my people, who had been displaced and dispossessed for over 150 years, identity had been preserved, maintained and nurtured through music and storytelling. I wanted to tell the world that the music and stories born on the homelands had been, metaphorically speaking, wrapped in the finest fabric the people had and carried from camp to camp; from one hastily built log shack to another, where each night the bundle was lovingly opened and the music and stories shared with the people, most especially the children. In my family the homeland stories are not about a place called Park Valley, rather they are about Nugeewin. Not about the Ladder Hills, but about Kisaynew Sputinawah. Not about Bergan's Meadow, but about Ormisimow Pasqua. Not about Lamire's wheat field, but about Notekew Nipissah, Willow Place of Two Old Women. And among those stories is the story of Kokoom Mariah's friend the Mrs., an old Mennonite woman who understood what it was like to be erased and made invisible.