

## **Aboriginal Life Rich in History**

Written by Jim and Joyce Roberts

Thursday, 18 March 2009

### ***My Great-Grandfather; by Jim Roberts***

My great-grandfather, Oliver Bellerose, joined the employ of the Hudson's Bay Co. as a middleman in the Saskatchewan Territory of Rupert's land. It is reported that he rescued, from the Assiniboines, three Snake women who were facing torture and death. They were the sole survivors of their tribe, following an Assiniboine massacre.

As mentioned in the book "When Fur Was King" by Henry John Moberly, some 18 years later, while Oliver was encamped with a small band of Shuswaps, he met one of the women who told him her story.

Her tribe had consisted of some twenty families, living entirely in the mountains and for decades they were at war with the wood Assiniboines. The Assiniboines proposed a peaceful meeting, each band to come unarmed. The Snakes agreed, but when they showed up for the meeting the Assiniboines wiped out all but three young women, whom they brought as prisoners to Fort Assiniboine. They were stripped, bound and placed in a tent, and were to be tortured and killed the following day.

During the night, Oliver Bellerose crept into the lodge, cut their bonds and gave them his knife and fire bag containing flint, steel and punk. The women made their escape and followed the Athabasca River to its junction to the Baptiste. Two of them followed the Athabasca, making a raft and taking with them the fire bag, crossed the Baptiste and were never heard of. The third, left only with the knife, travelled up the Baptiste some thirty miles and there made preparations for winter. Berries were still available and she managed to kill a few squirrels and using the sinews from their tails made snares for rabbits. She killed small animals such as porcupines, groundhogs, rabbits and dried their meat. From the rabbit skins she made a dress. Three months later, an Iroquois hunter came across her tracks, he was not able to figure out what kind of animal could make them. Many tales of "weetigoes" (cannibal) were made.

The next summer, this same Iroquois hunter returned to the spot, trying to find what kind of animal made the mystifying tracks. He found the woman, brought her to camp, where she remained with his family for two years. After that an officer in Jasper House kept her as a servant to his wife. Later on she married a Shuswap. She was the only survivor of her tribe. A small stream to the northwest of Jasper house still shows on some maps the name of the Snake Indian River.

### ***The Métis Sash; by Joyce Roberts***

The Métis sash, as with most Métis cultural artifacts, was developed from both European and Aboriginal roots.

Several Eastern Native tribes shared the tradition of the wampum belt – a sash like belt made of hide upon which prophecies of the future were embroidered.

The Métis sash borrows from this tradition and the tradition of the tartan from Scotland.

Plant fibers were used prior to the introduction of wool. Wool and the sash, as an article of clothing, were introduced to the Eastern woodland peoples by the Europeans.

The Six Nations Confederacy, Potawatami and other Aboriginal nations of the area blended the two traditions into the finger woven sash. The sash could sometimes be up to twenty feet in length.

Sashes were not merely ceremonial, but functional.

Traditionally it was tied at the waist to hold a coat closed or as a scarf. Known as “the toolbox of the prairie,” they tied small objects like keys or wooden cups to the ends, they would even pull a piece of yarn out of it for mending.

It was used as a rope for such things as dog harnesses, hauling canoes over portages, or carrying large bundles.

While paddling their canoe, they would wrap the sash around their waist several times to help support their back. The sash was also used to identify ownership of killed buffalo during a hunt.

The owner’s sash (colors and patterns specific to a family) was draped across the carcass. Also, if a Métis was found hurt, they would know where he was from and get word to his family.

The Métis family is like the sash. The lives of the Métis have been interwoven from a variety of cultures, traditions and beliefs.

For example, we are descendants of the English, French, Scots, Cree and Ojibwa to name a few. If you look at the sash, it’s a composite; it’s a mixture, its Métis. It is made up of a variety of elements, like the lives of the Métis.

What the colors of the sash represent:

**Red** – the blood that our people sacrificed over the years.

**Blue** – the vast reserves of spirit to be drawn upon.

**White** – signifies the spirit of truth in our nation.

**Green** – fertility, growth and prosperity.

**Black** – the dark period in which the Métis people had to endure dispossession and repression.

**Yellow** – future and hope, good things yet to come.

Métis sashes are today worn with pride at social gatherings, celebrations, events and any other time a Métis wishes to express pride of heritage.

---

If you have a topic of interest you would like to see in Aboriginal Voices, contact the Aboriginal Business Development Centre at 562-6325 or e-mail an article to [abdc@bcgroup.net](mailto:abdc@bcgroup.net).