

Interview with Juliette McAdam, Nêhiyawak Elder, Big River First Nation

Interviewer: What is your name?

Juliette McAdam is my name, but my Cree name is, "Mîtokowapiskowin"

Where are you from?

Big River

Can you tell me or talk about how a Chief was selected, before the treaties?

My Grandfather was an Assiniboine speaker, my mother's dad.

My grandmothers and grandfathers told me a lot. A person who was called a Chief, was truly a Chief, the person was kind, lived in the middle of encampment.

It was circular. The Chief was in the middle, that's what they told me (grandparents).

There were women in one area, which were the Chief's helpers, to keep order and send people away.

That was a true Chief.

My grandmother had told me it took twelve buffalo to make a tipi for the Chief.

Twelve is what my grandmother said.

The person had lots of duties (Chief), but he kept order and peace.

He (Chief) had a village crier/caller always. He had a faith keeper.

The caller would circle the camp and announce the happenings of the day.

We still see that today at Sundances. Some people call this person a "stick man."

These are all the responsibilities the Chief had.

The women, too, had many. As the Elders said, the women were responsible for half of everything along with the men. The person who was Chief was a very kind hearted person.

The individuals who sat in higher positions were all kind.

As individuals earned their feathers of ranking, that is how they were seated in rank.

The women were also the same. Nothing or anyone was ever disrespected long ago.

Even the children were respectful and listened.

The children were connected to their mothers. And the Chief, too, listened to them.

But also back then the Chief had foresight, saw the arrival of the Whiteman on this land.

It was also known they were going to be bribed by the White people, the Indians knew.

But they did lots of ceremonies, because they have that knowledge, the intelligence.

Not too many of us have that intelligence now (reference to ceremony).

They knew the arrival of the Whiteman, they were coming to this continent.

The condor was the one who bribed the native people, the condor came from a different country.

Our own eagle was there, too. And the leaders (Chiefs) knew they were coming, to be cautious,

to be very careful, as told by the Chief. And they prepared for it (arrival). That's why a Chief was highly regarded.

As was told by the Elders, the Chief was a very kind person. There was interconnection, inter-families.

That is why our relationships were so humbled, so humbled, they were respected.

Today we don't know how to do that anymore, don't know how we are related to our cousins anymore.

He has to teach his clan, the Chief. Those teachings, that is why they (teachings) are important.

The Chief is highly regarded. He had to teach. He had to see his people were taken care of.

He had to do that, that's why he's Chief; that's he was called Chief.

He has to look at everybody equal. No family had more, no family had less; that was the rule of the Chief.

That was then, back then. Now it's so changed, now we have our people living in the street.

It always hurts me when I see our own people living on the streets being real poor.

What do you think the benefits would be to people with Aboriginal lifestyles?

Traditions is what they're called. How would this help leaders today?

It would be very good if today's leaders would listen to Elders,

if focus was on the subject of how to be a Chief, the role of the Chief.
The leadership role, most of our leaders are men.
They have to learn the laws of leadership. The person called the Chief must look at all people respectfully.
There shouldn't be poor families
should have to suffer because of the Chief, because the Chief is too greedy.
That was not the role of the Chief long time ago. They need to hear,
today's elected system, they need to hear a lot of these. They need to hear the role of the Chief.
Maybe we can get out of that system of being poor, that's what I think.
I have a lot of empathy when I hear children crying. I feel for children who are sent out from their homes.
When children are being kicked from their homes, it hurts in my heart, it really hurts
because I grew up with my culture. I grew up respecting my grandfather because he was Chief.
He was a true Chief, that was the last time I see a true Chief. And my brother,
when it was handed down my brother to become Chief. I started to see greediness start to take over.
I seen my brother being beaten up, I seen my Dad being beaten up
because of the hereditary system that they had.
It always brings emotions in my heart because the people that beat them up rule our reserves.
Now they are Chiefs and leaders. And hereditary people are being suppressed way down.
That's not how things are supposed to be, the hereditary people will have to get up.
That is why I kept these things all these years, I grew up with this system.
I grew up with knowing the Indigenous laws, the laws of the women. I grew up with them.
I knew them but I have been silent all these years.
When they signed the treaties, "Otayapîkîw" was the name of my great-Grandfather, he was there.
Sîsîwahum was our grandfather, our great-grandfather, he was the signatory to the treaties.
That's where these stories have been handed down to my generation
and I have been handing it down to my children's generation.
Those (treaties), before they were signed into treaty, they had ceremonies
and the women had a big important role in there, along with the Chief.
It wasn't done in one night, there was a gathering back then, - had ceremonies four nights.
That is where they included all the treaties. A free ride on a train -
I remember taking free rides on a train, I remember taking free rides on a bus to Prince Albert.
I remember those things, all we had was a treaty ticket, it was about this long.
The treaty ticket was about this long, it was the color of my skin.
It was about this wide. This is what was given to us. We were given those treaty tickets.
These tickets gave us a pass everywhere. We went to exhibition, we didn't have to pay.
We were given free meals, we just showed our treaty ticket.
This is how it was long ago. The Chief was the Chief. His people had to be looked at in an equal way.
This was the decision of the Chief. At the treaty signing, that is what was said by the Commissioner.
Where he arrived, on the fourth day, when they finished the ceremonies,
there was a woman who was riding a horse. Her legs were to the side, where the horse was being led by a Chief.
Stop, I can't speak to you because you are with a woman, the Chief replied.
I can't talk to you, too, because you came here on behalf of a woman.
So the Chief turned around and took the woman back. Another messenger was sent.
This is what was said by my grandfather Netmaker. That was my grandmother's father.
My grandmother's name was Laughar. That was her dad, Netmaker.
So, again, they (Netmaker) came down the hill and put the treaties in place.
I guess that woman was there, I never knew who the woman was. Women were held in high regard.
I still strongly believe in the treaties. My dad used to say,

a person with two legs can never break the treaties.
It's like smoke, it's up here; some day it's going to come down.
That's what my Dad said, our treaties will be strong again.
But the women have to get up, that's what he said. He used to sit my children in a circle,
talking about them treaties. He would say, there is going to be a big court case about our treaties.
They're going to be the strongest when that happens. The White government will break.
That's what my Dad would say.

Not so much change in the treaties, but change in general.

Things changed, the Indian Agent became known as the farm instructor person.
They (agent) used to live on reserve. We always lived off the land.
Me and my husband lived off the land for many years.
I don't remember going on welfare too much, I don't remember that .
We lived off the land. The Creator gave us hands to work with, our hands to pick with.
The farm instructor lived inside the reserve. He brought with him medicine, he brought with him tools
for the men to work with to be farmers. And they did so well.
I have a picture of my dad, my brother, and my grandfather. My grandfather was Chief.
I have a picture of them; they're thrashing. We used to play around there, the thrashing machine.
Rations, they called - brought by the farm instructor. We weren't allowed to get off the reserve.
We had to have a permit to get out of the reserve. He brought rations.
There would be pork, there would be tea, sugar, salt, beans. Those are the things he brought.
Once a month we used to get those. Before that, before that happened,
I remember these food stamps. Then my dad and my mom,
I was wondering why they would take one food stamp to get tea.
One pound of tea. They used to go sell their beaver pelts and things like that.
When those were gone, when food stamps were gone, the rations
and then those are the ones that started coming in, because we weren't allowed to go off reserve.
So the men, the Chief, my grandfather said. We listened to the Chief.
Go in silence, go hunting. So we listened to my grandfather, as he told us what to do.
We used to go. We would go hunting, to bring something back to eat.
We were never hungry. We were rich. We had a good life.
Our grandmothers, our moms, they used to dry meat out in the bush.
Things started to change to gardens, rations
a lot. When I look back fifty years ago I see a lot of things change.
It's a big transition. I grew up. We used to have horses, we used a saddle,
hitching up the horses, wagon or sleigh. We come to visit here.
My grandparents were from Saulteux, next reserve here. And my sister married into this reserve.
We used to come visit, we used to play on those hills over there. This place was called "Saschiwîyasihk".
I think about lots of things. When we drive up here, I had a flashback, I had my parents with me.
I felt like a child again coming into this reserve. But those are the things I was talking about
At one point the permit wasn't needed to leave the reserve. We don't have to have that permit anymore.
Even when we tried to cut the trees we had to have the permit.
But later on when my brother was the Chief, when he was Chief, my brother,
things start to happen. He asked for a saw mill, a little saw mill, he got it.
That's when these lumber houses started to begin in our reserve, because my brother was Chief.
He wanted something good for his people. He was a farmer, he put up gardens.
And yet that farmer instructor had - my mom that one day woke up early in the morning.

She heard a noise, she heard the dog barking, she got up. Here was the farmer instructor digging from her garden. That farmer instructor was stealing. He did that to our other neighbors there, stealing from their gardens. We didn't say nothing because he lived on the reserve and he wanted to know everything that goes on. His name was Mr. Jones, the only name we knew, Mr. Jones. He used to drive a little army jeep. He used to go steal around. The Chief knew that was happening, he went to talk to him, and there was one interpreter, he was a Métis person. He got that Métis person, he went to Duck Lake because the Indian Agent was in Duck Lake. He went over there on a wagon. He went and told on the farmer instructor, what he was doing to the gardens. He was released shortly after that, released from our reserve. From there we had another farmer instructor but he was a kind man, a real kind man. He showed people how to build bridges. That's what they did, worked together with that farmer instructor. But I strongly believe in the treaties. Because my father said, because nobody will ever break them. Not even the Whiteman. But in the future, my father would say, this money it's going to flow in, my father said. It's going to come into our reserve, My grandfather would say the same thing. He said slowly the elected system is going to buy off our treaties, my grandfather said. Be careful, he said. Nothing can be really done. Nothing can be done, from my point of view. I think a lot. Treaties are the only thing Whiteman can't buy. That's why I talk to children of school age. I go everywhere across Canada, I tell it to university students. You have to get a hold of your own Indigenous laws. We had them. You have to approach your elders, they keep them, they sit with them. Your elders sit with these laws,. Ask and they will be given to you. That's what I have been starting to do, too, sitting with these laws. My grandfather, the Chief, had told me. My grandmother, she was kind, my grandmother. She was a midwife, my grandmother. She was the one who delivered one of my girls in the house. That's the other thing, too. The government is very afraid because we still have our people. We still have our people that were born on our land, instead of the hospital. That, too, is worth a lot of value. That is one of the most important things. My grandmother said. When a child is born, when it makes the first cry. Right there, they bring a story, they bring a message. Those are one of the roles of the midwife, they understood that child's first cry so they know what's going to happen in that child's life, because that child brought a message for them. Some of the children when they are born they wear a bonnet. It's a second layer of skin that covers their eyes up to here. Those are very gifted people. My grandmother used to tell me that. Those are the ones who are going to talk about many things. And they are gifted with understanding, my grandmother would say. Boys are the same. Some children, while they were in their mother's womb, had already seen many things. Those were the ones that were very gifted, my grandmother would say. She told me many things.

How did people live before the treaties, just like, I will say hunting, or berry picking or things like that, how did they travel?

My grandfather, the one who would tell me stories, my grandfather Whitefish. He would talk to me a lot, along with my grandmother. They came from across the border, my grandfather told. Some dogs would carry packs when they moved camp. When there were animals or game, like deer, antelope or buffalo, that is where they would camp. They prepared their food, the women worked lots. The women hauled and packed, what is the name of those? birchbark baskets.

They used to dry saskatoon berries in them. The berries were placed on the ground. Saskatoon berries, they used to dry them. Chokecherries, they used to pound them on the rock and make them like hamburger patties and used to dry them. Then put them in birchbark baskets. They were called dry chokecherries. I was taught everything. To prepare different foods, and use - They put traditional lard, too. What we call traditional lard. It's bone marrow, bone marrow. It's off that animal, that's what they used to use for grease. That's what they used to put on their meat, on their berries, everything like that. That's how women prepared things long time ago. That was bone marrow. Sometimes they put berries in there. We never had candies growing up, it was berries. We got sent to go feed on berries, go have something sweet. We used to have sap from a tree. In the spring that sap would come out, and us children all be sucking from that tree. That was our candy because it was so sweet, lots of things I can talk about. There are many things if the students, if they want to learn, maybe one week, maybe two weeks, about the middle of, or end of July, first week of August, best time to learn about the way we used to live a long time ago. Then you can prepare your own chokecherries. You can prepare your own saskatoons. In the middle of winter you can eat those. That's how we preserve, that's how we used to preserve berries, dry meat, moose hides, deer hides. I did all of those things, I made moccasins, I made lots of things, I know how to make those things because I grew up with them. But also this thing called "education." I encourage my children, my grandchildren to get into it. But never forget you're an Indigenous person. Always put that first, and just because you have an education, humble yourself, I tell my children. Because that is one thing we were taught is to humble ourselves. No matter how much money you have in Indian country, my grandfather would say, it's not going to open doors for you in heaven. That's what he said, it doesn't matter how much money you have. It's not going to open doors for you in heaven, that's what my grandfather said, a true Chief. It's nice to enjoy, it's good now, to have that enjoyment outside the reserve. You got to have that money. But to have that enjoyment. Like myself, I am old now. I can enjoy lots of things over there. In the morning when I get up sometimes I forget to light up sweetgrass, I will go outside and listen to the birds just like their talking to me, just like I can understand them. Sometimes I think I can understand the wind. Those are the things the Chief taught us, because a lot of us grew up that way. When I stand there outside, I am thankful, we can never hate the Creator because he's the giver and he's the taker, that's what the Chief said. He's the one that gives and he's the one who takes, he can take a life. No matter how much you love your parent, your sister, he will take it. That's what he said. For that reason, he said, my grandfather, to be kind to your sibling. Be kind to your uncle, aunt, grandmother, to be kind to them. Everyday be kind to them. That's what he would tell us, my grandfather, the Chief.

How did things change since the signing of treaties for the women?

Things really started to change a lot for the women. When alcohol first started coming in, there were bootleggers, I seen this. When we started school, I think that's where a lot of things started to change. The boys don't respect the girls, they started growing up that way, because they seen the teacher hit us. The teacher used to hit the girls, I think that's when the boys don't respect the girls anymore. The way my grandmother used to tell, God created our hands for us. Man's supposed to use those hands to provide for their families, not to hit the women with them. God didn't give you those hands to hit women. That's what was said to us by my grandmother.

And the Chief also told us this. When we started school a lot of things changed. We used to have a strap or a ruler. That man used to hit us with those things, and the boys see this, and I think that's when the boys think they're the rulers. Before then, the women used to come first. As they grow up like that, I seen these, my school mates, I seen them hitting their women, many when they have women. I think back to that teacher that gives us lickings with a strap, I think that's when they, especially after 1960, '61, '62, somewhere there, when our Native people were allowed to go into the, to go sit in the bar and drink alcohol. I seen a lot of changes after that. I seen women being dragged around by the hair, by men. And then, I think that's when it started to change for the women. That's when men do not respect women. Now today I look around and I see young ladies don't respect themselves anymore. I think we should go back to respect ourselves as women, because we have important role to do. Yet in the future, that's how changes took place for women. Very few, very few women are respected nowadays, very few.

How did you come to understand the treaty promise for education?

My father used to say, in 1952, everything was going good, the promise. Over in Stoney Lake, many children went to school there. There was a Catholic school there. There was an Anglican school, in our reserve. We had a white farmer who spoke Cree. He was the one that said the right to education will never end, just like the Queen. She doesn't own (education). She is obligated to give us the right to education, the Queen. Queen Victoria, she was the one who promised Aboriginal people as long as the sun shines, as long as the grass grows, and the rivers flow. Those (treaties) we are to have forever, she said, as I grew to believe. Nobody can break treaties, until maybe, we will break them ourselves, or someone breaks for us. There are all sorts of Chiefs now. Now we have Tribal Councils. We now have AFN; we now have FSIN. What do they accomplish for our treaties? I don't see nothing, me I don't see nothing. It's like they (treaties) are getting weak. It's like they're going down, our rights are going down. In 2010, our friend from Ottawa came to tell us, a lot of things are going to change. We might have to start paying for hospital, we might have to start paying for education. Whose doing is that? Who is to blame? Who is selling our rights? We have to ask ourselves, these university students, have to do research on those things. Who is responsible if that is going to happen? We have to start understanding these things. That's why I say, you got to have one side which is Indigenous person, and one side which is European system. We have to have that mentality, and understand it. Plus to love your Indigenous side more, because you can never be Whiteman. That's what the old people said anyway. But we must still learn the English language, and understand it. It's going to be used everywhere. That's what was said by the Chief. As a matter of fact, in 1952, my dad was sent when they brought in the Indian Act. They opposed it. I still have a picture of my dad, there was three, one was named Edward Fox. I believe he was from Sweetgrass or somewhere here in Battleford anyway. And Andrew Paddy. There was three of them that opposed the Indian Act, that's when started to change everything. Medicine we used to have on the reserve. We used to go get it. Now there is nothing. Sure, there is a clinic in our reserve, but there is nothing there. There is nothing there for emergency, nothing. Those are the things I think about. why can't we prepare? Why is it that we don't prepare for when something happens? What is it you asked me? I am getting carried away.

We are just about done, what do you want to say to students attending university?

What is it they need to think about when it comes to leadership?

What is it they need to do to make it better?

What I was thinking and saying is - You learn the European system.

Don't forget you're always an Indigenous person, you're always that first. What we call being Chief

Look around, the Great Spirit gave us eyes. God gave us vision.

Look around as you go into your education. You finish your university.

you become a doctor or you want to be in leadership, use these (eyes), and use these (ears),

and use this one (heart). That's the one, that will take you far away, far away.

It will take you a long way. Plus to teach the underprivileged children.

That is what the Chief had done. He took the orphans as his children, the Chief.

If this is how the work is done, this is true leadership.

If that leadership works in that form. That's why I tell them, when you finish education,

when you finish university, when you finish your goal, what you want to be, what you want to become,

kindness, humbleness, that's it. But don't forget the others who are not privileged enough to be where you are.

You're going to have to bring them up, bring them up, talk to them.

Young people should be able to start talking to each other now.

Along with the Elders, that's what I wish for in prayer in this way.

You have earned. It's like when you go fasting, you take one more step.

It's a baby step to your culture. You take one more step, one more step, that's how it goes

with this European education. Some children are very gifted, some children are born with that intelligence.

And those children when you enter their house they know your personality already.

Those kinds of things like that, should go back to it, while you're learning the European system, too.

Go do your fasting so you can understand the true meaning of what you went to school for.

But, like children that are not privileged in that form, try always include them there.

It's not always going to be easy. But, as you go, please, I want to talk/say, you deserve to learn your culture.

If you're done with your school, learn your culture. Learn that intelligence our people had long time ago.

Even as a woman. When I became, the first time when I became a woman, when I begin having my moons, my grandmother took me in the bush. She kept me there for eight days till I was clean.

When we got back to my parents house there was a wooden lodge there.

That's where she sit me. She said, you sit over there by the door. She used to smoke a little pipe,

that twisted little pipe like that. She used to have a bundle here, that's where she used to put her pipe.

I didn't know my grandmother had a little hunting knife about this big

and this long. And she sat me there. And she said, what I am going to say to you

is going to really hurt you, but you're going to be mad at me.

She looked in there (her pocket), took out her knife, staked it there (in the ground).

If you're going to be mad, she said, you take that knife and kill me

because I do not want to live with your anger, that's what she told me.

She started telling me a lot about being a woman, my breasts were made to feed my children .

I have that natural gift from the Creator, I have the natural gift of a womb

where my children are going to be. They're going to be living in water for nine months.

That's what's she told me, she told me everything there, I started to cry.

After she was done, I hugged my grandmother and said I would never, never be mad at my grandmother.

we shared a lot of things when we were out there in the bush. That's it for now.

You are done?

Yes