

Tomkins, Peter Jr. (1899-1970)

By Leah Dorion.

Peter Tomkins Jr. was born on January 1, 1899 at Poundmaker's Reserve. He was the son of Peter Tomkins and Marie Essawakapiw from Poundmaker's Reserve. Pete Tomkins Jr. was raised on various reserves and spoke Cree fluently since his father was an Indian Department farm instructor at reserves such as Saddle Lake, Sweetgrass and One Arrow.

His father had a great influence on his life and told him stories about the 1885 Resistance at Batoche. Pete Tomkins Sr. worked as a cut line worker on the telegraph line near Duck Lake. During this government contract, the Metis took him as a prisoner of war at Batoche. Pete Sr. was sympathetic towards Riel and felt the Metis were not treated justly by government officials. In an 1969 interview with Pete Jr. he explains his father's perspective on Riel, "...he used to say, "Pete, some day these scissor-bills that they've got who put Riel to hang him, they'll be gone and another outfit will spring up and they'll see the mistake that these guys made. They should never have hanged Riel. He never did anything worse than a good Union man would do to his group and some day they'll build a monument. And look what they've done."

Pete Sr. was a very community minded person and he built the first hospital in Grouard, Alberta. People always came to the Tomkins family for assistance and advice. Pete Jr. followed closely in his father's footsteps; he was always good at lobbying and got doctors to come to the community of Grouard. He took action on health care issues and helped many people in the community.

Pete Jr. received a formal education in Winnipeg and lived with his father's sister. In Winnipeg he experienced discrimination because he spoke no English, only Cree. Pete went through a challenging educational process and later moved back to Grouard and opened a blacksmith shop. He married Isabella Andrews a Métis originally from the Grouard area.



In the 1930s, Joe Dion, a teacher, often met with Pete Tomkins Jr. to discuss the conditions of the Métis people of Alberta. Tomkins was a good organizer, diplomat and negotiator and played a key role in the establishment of the Association des Métis d'Alberta et des Territoires du Nord-Ouest (Alberta Métis Association). At that time he formed what was to become a long lasting friendship with activists, Malcolm Norris and Jim Brady.

Tomkins, Brady, and Norris were the main negotiators with the Province of Alberta during the Ewing Commission, in 1935, which studied the "Alberta Half-Breed Problem." The main focus of Tomkins during the commission hearings was to liaise with

Dr. Cross the Minister of Health for Alberta. Tomkins wanted government studies about the health concerns of the Métis. The leaders all believed the Métis had inherent rights to land, education, resources and healthcare. However, the provincial government viewed the assistance to the Métis as a welfare scheme, not a right.

After the recommendations of the Ewing Commission were presented to the Alberta legislature, Pete Tomkins Jr., because of his diplomacy, was selected to assist in drafting the Métis Betterment Act, which was passed in 1938. Tomkins was made supervisor of the Metis settlements before W.W.II and traveled to the Métis settlements to ask where they wanted the settlements located and made sure the Metis chose the settlements themselves. Tomkins had high expectations for the settlements and both he and his brother signed over their lands to the Elizabeth Métis Settlement.



Unfortunately, his role in Settlement administration was cut short and a new non-Metis supervisor was hired to replace him. After the war it was very difficult to get Metis people organized especially since government was then overseeing the management and daily affairs of the Metis settlements with very little input by the Metis people themselves. Tomkins drifted away from Metis politics especially since all five of his sons entered into the Canadian Army, which had a significant impact on the family. Of the original Métis Association leaders in the 1930s, Tomkins was one of the only ones left in Alberta as Jim Brady and Malcolm Norris both enlisted in the military during W.W.II.

After his great disappointment with the Metis settlements and the stagnation of the Métis Association, he turned his socialist efforts into organizing the Fresh Fish Marketing, Fur Marketing, and Cooperative Movements in Northern Alberta and Saskatchewan. In order to obtain justice for Aboriginal people he felt it was necessary to break the exploitation of the Hudson's Bay Company monopoly. In 1950, Jim Brady and Malcolm Norris arranged for Tomkins to come to Saskatchewan as a special field officer for the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) government. His work involved setting up cooperatives and government stores in northern communities such as LaRonge and Cumberland House.

While in the province he also worked with the CBC providing Cree radio programs in Northern Saskatchewan. Pete Tomkins was part of a close knit family and they remember him as a great man, a revolutionary without a revolution. In the minutes of the Métis Association meeting in 1940, Joe Dion comments about Tomkins and other Metis leaders. Dion states that:

Pete as we like to call him, has been a pillar of strength; his untiring efforts on behalf of his brother Métis have borne fruit and will ever be remembered. We have made numerous friends, and I hope that some day when a complete history of the Métis struggle is finally written and introduced to the public, the names of these men will live through the ages to come, a fitting tribute for the part they have played in helping to better conditions amongst my poor Métis people.

One of the major misfortunes is that Pete Tomkins never took residency on the Métis Settlements in which he worked so hard to form. He is remembered for his organizing abilities and his dedication to improving the quality of life for both Indian and Metis people. He suffered three strokes and passed away in 1970.

Reference:

Leah Dorion. "Peter Tomkins Jr.: Metis Socialist," *Eagle Feather News*, December 1999/January 2000.



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