

Preserving history: Little Shell dedicate new cultural center

Article by Lawrence J. Barkwell

On May 3, 2014, the Little Shell Chippewa had the dedication ceremony for their new cultural center located on the historic Michif road allowance community site at Hill 57 in Great Falls, Montana. Guest speakers from Canada included Karon Shmon (Director of Publishing) and David Morin (Curriculum Developer) of the Gabriel Dumont Institute (GDI) in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan and Norman Fleury (author and Michif-language consultant) and Lawrence Barkwell (author and Coordinator of Métis Heritage and History Research) from the Louis Riel Institute (LRI) in Winnipeg, Manitoba.



Norman Fleury of the Manitoba Louis Riel Institute leads a prayer during the dedication Saturday. / TRIBUNE PHOTO/RION SANDERS

David Morin, GDI's Michif project leader, demonstrated "Michif to Go," the first English-to-Michif Dictionary available for Android. It features over 11,500 translations

and audio pronunciations by Michif-language expert Norman Fleury who worked alongside David to compose and compile the phrases. A search tool allows users to look up the English word to find the Michif-Cree translations. This project was developed by GDI, and was funded through the Department of Canadian Heritage's Aboriginal Languages Initiative. The University of Saskatchewan's Media Access and Production (eMAP) unit was contracted to provide the technical expertise required for the app. This app resource is also available on the *Virtual Museum of Métis History and Culture* at: http://www.Métismuseum.ca/michif_dictionary.php.

Gerald Gray, the Chairman of the Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa was presented with Michif-language books, dictionaries, teacher's manuals, CDs, DVDs, Little Shell Tribal History research papers, posters, Métis sashes and sash lapel pins by GDI and LRI as resource materials for the new Little Shell Cultural Center. GDI and LRI have tentatively agreed to join a Little Shell Chippewa Michif Language consortium along with Turtle Mountain Community College in Belcourt, North Dakota, Stone Child College in Box Elder, Montana and the Great Falls School Division to assist with Michif-language retention and preservation.

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Written by: Briana Wipf, *Great Falls Tribune* Staff Writer

The Little Shell Chippewa Tribe celebrated a historic day Saturday, the dedication and grand opening of the Little Shell Cultural Center at 1529 Stuckey Road.

It was a homecoming of sorts for the tribe, which has faced a decades-long struggle for federal recognition. But that struggle may be coming to an end just as the tribe is gearing up its efforts to sustain and preserve its three languages — Cree, Chippewa and Michif.

“We are the closest we’ve ever been” to federal recognition, tribal council chairman Gerald Gray told the 100 people in attendance at the tribe’s quarterly meeting, which doubled as a colloquium on tribal language and the dedication of the cultural center.

The landless Little Shell have a little more to call their own with the cultural center. There will be no more renting of facilities, no more asking of permission to use a building for meetings or events, said former tribal chairman John Gilbert.

“This is a great day,” Gilbert said.

But the Little Shell did not celebrate alone. With them were representatives from educational institutions in the United States and Canada who discussed their own experience with tribal language revitalization. Those who came were, like the Little Shell, of Chippewa-Cree or Michif heritage.

The Little Shell, along with the seven federally recognized tribes in Montana, received \$250,000 as part of the Montana Indian Language Preservation Pilot Program, which was created during the last state legislature to provide funding to tribes to preserve their languages.

Dr. Jim Davis, president of Turtle Mountain Community College in Belcourt, N.D., was one of the speakers who shared their knowledge.

Davis held up a Michif dictionary, which he presented to the tribal council. The dictionary holds 365 pages of Michif words, he said.

But the words on those pages, inert printed letters, can only come alive in the mouths of speakers of the language.

“There is so much embedded in the language,” said Nicholas Vrooman, a Little Shell historian.

The history, culture, skills and collective experience of a people are within the words.

Keeping the words vital, maintaining not only their definitions as printed in dictionary but also the meaning conveyed by their use, is the challenge, one that Nate St. Pierre, president of Stone Child College in Box Elder on the Rocky Boy’s Reservation, home of the Chippewa-Cree tribe, thinks can be met.

St. Pierre shared a Cree saying: “*Kah-ki-s-ki-mi-to-tah-n.*”

It means, “We learn from one another.”

St. Pierre explained the link between language and culture and that preserving and strengthening one does the same for the other.

“It’s our tribal DNA — the codes of life passed on by word of mouth,” he said.

Representatives from the Louis Riel Institute and Gabriel Dumont Institute, two educational and cultural centers for Métis people in Canada, shared their own experience in language preservation and offered their assistance to their relatives below the Medicine Line.

Michif language and cultural expert Norman Fleury of the Riel Institute in Manitoba, echoed St. Pierre, emphasizing the link between language and culture. And while some of the speakers shared stories of loss of culture and language, Fleury said that loss isn’t inevitable.

“We didn’t lose all these things. We just set it aside,” he said.

Saturday, with the confluence of Little Shell members and their Michif and Chippewa-Cree friends and relatives, marked a day when those things — culture, language, mores — were picked up again.

It was perhaps fitting for that to happen at what Gray called the “christening” of the Little Shell Cultural Center, the tribe’s new home base.

“We’re excited and honored to have these people here. When Indian Country builds alliances, we can do anything,” Gray said. “That’s what is going to help us succeed. As Indian people, we know we’re all related.”



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