

Métis Superstitions¹

By Lawrence Barkwell, Ed Head, Audreen Hourie, and Norman Fleury

Many superstitions are cautionary stories intended to produce socially acceptable behaviour from children and adults. Many are intended to keep children from wandering outside at night and getting into mischief. Others have to do with enforcing religious prohibitions regarding Lent. At the Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota, the Michif legend is that there was to be no fiddle playing or dancing during Lent, except on St. Patrick's Day. If one danced during Lent, their legs would dry up and they would see *Aen Rougarou*. Other such cautionary tales are of the Devil coming to take you away if you played a fiddle with changed tuning. These beliefs were perpetuated by priests who did not want the Métis to play dance music at prohibited times.

Other beliefs have to do with the supernatural powers of certain people.

Seventh Son or Daughter, “le septième”: The Métis believed that the seventh consecutive son or daughter would have a special “gift” or “power” for healing. One must have faith for their curing power to work, suggesting that God works the cure through the individual. Throughout England, Scotland and Ireland any seventh child is regarded as having exceptional healing powers. They are believed to have instinctive knowledge of medicinal herbs. In French folklore, a seventh consecutive son is said to be gifted with the lily, (*fleur de lis*). This gift was one of clairvoyance and telepathy.

Prohibited Activities: Henri Létourneau has recorded a story that relates to playing cards during Lent. This particular story involves a parish priest, Monsieur L'abbé François-Xavier Kavanagh, the priest of Saint-François-Xavier from 1869 to 1909, deceased at Saint-François-Xavier on June 22, 1922. Those who knew him addressed him as “Saint Monsieur Kavanagh.” Josue Breland related this particular story to Henri.

When I was young, and Métis people spoke of his name, it was with great reverence. It was rare for old families to not have any stories about Mr. Kavanagh. They never referred to him as “Father,” it was always “Mister.” When he died his parishioners shared his old patched-up cassock. I remember seeing the small pieces of his cassock, faded by rain and sun, preciousy preserved by the people who were lucky enough to obtain a small piece.

Playing Cards

By Henri Létourneau as told by Josue Breland²

Translated by Amanda Rozyk

¹ This article contains excerpts from *Métis Legacy: Michif Heritage, Folklore and Culture* Volume 2, (Eds. Lawrence Barkwell, Leah M. Dorion and Audreen Hourie) Chapter 18 - Métis Superstitions, 2006: 201-206.

² Henri Létourneau, “Francois-Xavier Kavanaugh Monsieur L'Abbé.” In *Henri Létourneau Raconte* : Winnipeg: Éditions bois-Brûlés, 1978: 117-124.

Mr. Kavanagh even forbade his parishioners from playing cards during Lent. The two LaPensee brothers, Grand-Nezime and Ti-Modeste, both older men, lived near the Sale River. This area used to be called "les grands liards"; a half-mile southwest from what is now the town of Saint-Eustache. It was the time of Lent and it was an early spring. In addition to doing their daily chores, the two brothers liked to play a great deal of cards. One afternoon, Ti-Modeste was bored and as he put it, "he was bored to death". He proposed to Grand-Nezime that they do some gambling. Grand-Nezime responded: "No! Mr. Kavanagh has forbidden us to play cards during Lent!" To this, Ti-Modeste responded: "Mr. Kavanagh is in Saint-François-Xavier eight miles from here.

How do you think he will know that we are playing cards? Come on, what do you have to be afraid of!"

So they started to play. They were in their second shuffle when they heard a noise coming from the window. They turned around and saw an enormous black dog, with his front paws on each side of the window. He was watching them with his large red eyes. Ti-Modeste said: "To whom does that dog belong?" Grand-Nezime acknowledged that he had never seen the dog before. He got up and went outside, but the dog had disappeared. Grand-Nezime walked around the house. Nothing! He went back inside and said to Ti-Modeste: "It disappeared." So they continued to play. They were in their fourth shuffle when they heard a sound coming from the same window. The dog had returned. This time, Ti-Modeste went outside. He walked around the house, in the stable, even along the riverbank, but there was nothing. The dog had disappeared completely. Ti-Modeste had a bad feeling; it was he who had wanted to play cards. He entered the house and said to Grand-Nezime: "I did not find the dog, it disappeared. I believe that we had better stop playing cards." Grand-Nezime responded: "Yes, that would be good because if we start again, it is my feeling that the dog was a warning, and if he returns, something could happen to us."

The brave Elder who told me this story almost twenty five years ago, told me that they put the cards away in their case and did not take them out until the day after Easter. Further, since this incident, in 1900, Grand-Nezime (he himself told me this story) and Ti-Modeste never played cards again during Lent.

Additional Superstitions

Bad Luck: It is bad luck to kill a prairie chicken during its dance. It's bad luck for women to cut their hair when there is a full moon. Don't cut your fingernails after dark. It is bad luck to place shoes on a table. If you didn't go in the bush to shit, you would get a pimple on your tongue. It was believed that if a person urinated on the trail or road, they would get a zit on their face or a sty in their eye. If a bat pisses on your head, all your hair will fall out. Conversely, if a bird shit on your head it was good luck. If you put your shoes on the wrong feet, you will meet a bear. The Western Wood Lily is one of the few flowers that is not used as an ornamental. Its use as a table flower is believed to bring bad luck.

Birds in the sky: Don't stare at birds in the sky, especially blackbirds when they are swarming a crow. Part of a man's soul will disappear if he does this.

Birds of Death: Seeing an owl through your bedroom window predicts a death in the family. In the northern bush, the woodpecker replaces the owl in this superstition, i.e. a woodpecker landing on the house and pecking. Others say that if a loon lands in a nearby tree, it is a sure sign of death. If you hear a mourning dove cooing in the night, this is an indication that you will hear of the death of someone close within one week. Similarly, a bird hitting a window or getting inside the house indicates a death in the family.

Cedar: Cedar is used over doors and windows to protect the inside of the house/occupants from negative influences and spirits. It can also be placed in the four corners of a room for the same purpose. Christians consider this to be a superstition, but in Aboriginal spirituality this is not considered to be a superstition

Clothes Inside Out: Putting your T-shirt or other article of clothing on inside out meant that you would meet a bear. Nowadays, it means that you will get a surprise.

Devil: During Lent, if you walked around the outside of the house carrying the Ace of Spades, you would meet the Devil. If you leave your cards on the table overnight after finishing the game, you will hear the Devil playing cards that night.

Dishwashing: If you hadn't finished the dishes by nightfall, you left the bible next to them to ask the Lord for forgiveness for not doing the dishes.

Dreams: When a child or adult had a bad dream at night, they were to tell someone before noon the next day or the dream would come true.

Dust Devils: Sight of a dust devil causes one to question: "What did I do wrong?"

Ear Aches: To cure an earache, blow smoke into the ear and plug with cotton.

Eye Flutter: An eye flutter foretells a misfortune.

Fiddle Music with Changed Tuning: The Devil (Jiab) will come and take you away if you play fiddle tunes with other than normal tunings.

Fingernails: One must not cut a child's fingernails until they are over one year of age. If you do, the belief is that he/she will become a thief. Métis mothers therefore trim their baby's nails by chewing them off.

Grandfathers: It is the custom among some Métis to carry a stone (Grandfather) from where they lived when traveling. This ensures that they would return safely.

Headaches: To treat a headache, cut a potato in the form of a cross and bind it to the forehead with a bandage. Men would ward off headaches by placing a snakeskin inside

the headband of their hats. For persistent headaches, the person would be bled. A small incision was made at the side of the forehead with a small sharp stone and the “black blood” would be bled out.

Hunting Charms: Northern Valerian, rat root and the root of a cow parsnip are all components of a medicine carried to ensure a successful moose hunt. The components are dried, then carried in a leather bag. The “medicine” is said to bring the animal to the hunter.

Keeping rain away: The Thunderbirds do not like sharp objects, so if a pointed wooden stick, a sharp axe or knife is placed upwards toward the sky, no rain will fall.

La Veille de la Kaareem (The Old Woman of Lent): *La veille de la carême* is the old woman who will grab children if they are outside at night after 6:00 p.m. during Lent. Children were warned that the old hag would grab them up, take them away, and eat them.

Lightning: To ward off lightning you would pin a feather in your hair, or put a feather pillow over your head, because lightning never strikes birds.

Lying: Children were taught that if they told a lie, they would get a pimple on their tongue.

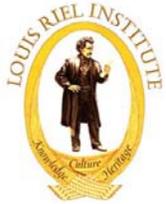
Northern Lights: Never tease or whistle (*lii chiiraan*) the Northern Lights; if you whistle at them they will come down and take you away. It is believed that the spirits of the dead are in the Northern Lights.

Pichiwapusawan: Mammals that have multiple offspring in their litters sometimes give birth to a fetus which has absorbed the fetus of a sibling while in the womb. The fetus is then born with its sibling preserved under its skin. Similarly, an ectopic pregnancy will produce the same result in the mother rabbit. In rabbits, this unborn fetus is called a “pichiwapusawan” by the Cree Métis. Trappers check freshly snared rabbits for these and carry them for good luck. Ed Head says that his father told him that when setting a rabbit snare, one should always throw the pichiwapusawan through the snare loop, and this would ensure that one would catch a rabbit in that snare.

Pouring Tea: It is believed that if a woman pours tea in someone else’s house, the woman of the house will become pregnant.

Thunderstorms: If a thunderstorm were near, the Métis would sprinkle Holy Water around the house for protection. A mixture of rat root, balsam fir and cedar was often burnt on the stove to protect the household from the evil effects of thunder showers. An alternate practice was to burn a piece of palm frond (*Rameaux*) in the fire (the palm leaves given by the priests at Easter). Alternately, the Métis would go outside and sprinkle some tobacco on the ground.

Visitors: Dropping a dishrag indicates visitors are coming. If one drops a knife, it indicates a man will visit, dropping a fork indicates a woman will visit. It was bad form not to have tea and bannock ready for visitors. Conversely, when the Métis were forced underground and often denied their identity and culture, they would “hide the bannock” if they were having non-Métis visitors.



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