

THE WISDOM OF PAPASSCHAYO A CREE MEDICINE MAN

by

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Transcribed by David Morin

My maternal grandfather Lawrence Garneau had been a follower of Louis Riel during the troubles on the Red River in 1870 and as a consequence of the persecution which followed that episode joined the exodus to the West. He settled at Strathcona or present day Edmonton in 1877. This land adjoined on the north a small Indian Reserve known as Papasschayo's Reserve and my grandfather was on very good terms with him and his band. Papasschayo was a rare combination of band chief and medicine man. He was adept in the occult arts being possessed of clairvoyant and clairaudient powers.

In 1882 the railway was being constructed northward from Calgary to Edmonton. Papasschayo's reserve was still intact but a movement began among the White speculators to dispossess them – their small reserve lay astride the projected right of way. The railroad needed this in order to build the line to the south bank of the Saskatchewan. But the Indians resolutely refused claiming that at the time of the Indian Treaty they had surrendered all the land the White men had asked for: that they had been solemnly assured that no further claims would be made against them and they would not be molested. Now the White man wanted their reserve. Their answer was no.

Finally the railway company stated: "If we can't get the right of way we will make the terminal at Ellerslie on the south end of the Reserve and will not build into Strathcona at all."

This statement had a violent effect on the more vicious elements among the White speculators – a reaction somewhat similar to the present day White Citizens' Committees in the American Deep South. A vigilante spirit arose. "Are we going to allow a few stinking blanket Indians stand in the way of progress? Let's go down there and clean them out." However the band councillors were determined and would not give up the reserve. The situation became ominous.

This land is today part of the campus of the University of Alberta and the adjacent residential suburb known as Garneau named for my grandfather.
This tract was between Strathcona and Ellerslie.

Due to the efforts of a few sensible mediators a final meeting was called and the band members assembled

Papasschayo meanwhile had gone into solitude and fasted. He communed with the familiar spirits and those elemental spiritual entities who influence the destinies of the nations and races of mankind. At council in the Indian tradition the Councillors speak as the Great Spirit moves them. But the final decision always rests with the Chief into whose hands is confided the safety of the tribe. Once spoken the decision of the Chief is binding on all. By custom one must accept his command or leave the tribe.

Thus spoke Papasschayo "My children surrender the land. This is a bitter decision for our people. The Palefaces are coming against us again for they are full of greed, lust and murder. If we resist they will utterly exterminate us, yes even to the little ones in their mother's arms. They are not evil. They are like little children who are lost because they do not understand the teachings of the Great Spirit. We made peace and we promised the Great White Mother that we would make war no more. This is a beautiful land. It is wrong that we should stain the soil of the Land of the Red Sun with the blood of our White brothers. We must accept this and seek a new road for our people. We must find the pathway that leads to the stars. I have spoken."

The band accepted the decision without one dissident voice and the land was occupied by the White men. The band dispersed and sought refuge in the lonely and remote valleys of the foothills of the Rockies beyond the reach of the covetous Whites.

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Seven years earlier during the rebellion Canadian government troops arrived at Fort Edmonton and declared martial law. All local residents were ordered to retire within the fort. But my grandfather and another French Métis Benjamin Vandal ignored the order to abandon their farms as they felt they were in no danger from the Indians. Vandal who lived on the White Mud Creek about eight miles above Edmonton had also been a soldier in the Manitoba Métis army of

They were arrested taken before a military court given a summary trial and sentenced to death for disobeying a military order under conditions of martial law. The execution was set for six o'clock the following morning.

Riel and his council had sent letters to my grandfather and Vandal enquiring as to the local situation and the degree of support that could be expected from the local Métis. My grandfather kept this letter to read to some of the Métis sympathizers who were illiterate.

My grandmother was in the kitchen when she heard a sudden clatter of hooves. A sergeant and four constables of the North West Mounted Police galloped into the yard and dismounted. The sergeant entered. He asked my grandmother "Mrs. Garneau, where is your husband? We have a warrant for his arrest and a search warrant for these premises."

"He is sleeping upstairs," she replied. My grandfather was an excellent musician, much in demand at social affairs. The night before he had gone across the river to the fort to play the violin at a dance and had returned shortly after daylight to secure a few hours sleep before returning to the field to work.

The sergeant bounded up the stairs to place my grandfather under arrest. The other police immediately ransacked the house. One policeman went to the actual spot where the letter had been hidden. It was evident they were acting on information from an informer. But they found nothing. My grandmother had acted with great presence of mind. She had been laundering when they came into the yard and she reached up, placed the letter and other incriminating material in the wash tub (sic) and calmly destroyed them by rubbing them on the washboard until they were completely disintegrated.

The death sentence caused great excitement in Fort Edmonton. The more responsible White residents, particularly the Hudson's Bay Company people, free traders and the earlier White settlers, even the Protestant clergy, protested the severity of the sentence. Inspector Griesbach of the North West Mounted Police made a personal appeal to the military commandant. All agreed that they had erred in not complying with a military order, but they felt the death sentence was harsh and vindictive. A delegation of prominent White citizens led by Hon. Frank Oliver, who founded the Edmonton Bulletin and was later Minister of the Interior in Laurier's Cabinet, went to Col. Ouimet, the military commander, and interceded on their behalf. But to no avail.

Ouimet, a classic example of the one-track military mind, was adamant. "These men are rebels. They must be taught a lesson. I have my orders from Ottawa and I will obey them. They will be shot."

As a last desperate measure, the Committee sent posthaste (sic) for Bishop Grandin, who, with two Oblate Missionaries, was among the Stony Plain

Indians counteracting the activities of two Métis agents Crossarms and Pat Maude The Métis agents had already succeeded in winning over a large number to take the war path (sic) Bishop Grandin hurriedly returned to Edmonton by buckboard

It was feared by experienced men in the country that this dramatic execution would afford the war like element among the Crees with an excuse for precipitating an attack which would have ravaged the fort Bishop Grandin immediately went to interview Col Ouimet He pointed out that the safety of the fort and its garrison hung on the tenuous threads of the condemned men's lives Their execution could unleash a prompt and bloody vengeance and the painful missionary work of fifty years would be undone in one day

Ouimet replied: "I am a soldier not a politician and will carry out my orders "

Ad (sic) a last measure Bishop Grandin requested that an appeal from the Committee be transmitted to Ottawa by military telegraph This was a reasonable request which the commander could not refuse Bishop Grandin added an appeal to the Minister of National Defence Sir Adolphe Caron who was a personal friend urging a stay of execution A few hours later the Committee were informed that the Minister had reversed the verdict of the court martial However the prisoners were held in custody until after the rebellion Then they were tried in a civil court and sentenced to six months imprisonment

Here Papasschayo entered the scene After the rebellion considerable animosity and attitudes of revenge appeared among the Anglo Saxons against the defeated Métis In those days social aid and other amenities of the welfare state were unknown My grandmother and eleven children were left destitute to shift for themselves The Whites it seemed without thinking about it punished them for my grandfather's rebellious spirit They would have starved but for the enduring friendship compassion and generosity of Papasschayo and his pagan Indians For during this period of imprisonment they fed both the Garneau and Vandal families My grandfather never forgot this

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Years passed My grandfather and related families moved to the old St Paul Halfbreed Reserve in Three years later and nearly twenty years after the rebellion my grandfather heard that Papasschayo was old and in straitened

circumstances. So he journeyed to the foothills and brought the chief back to St Paul des Métis. The Cree band of earlier days had broken up; it now existed only in the memories of the old timers.

My grandfather had prospered from his timber, fur trading, and ranching activities. He was a man of substance, with an enviable rating in Dun. The once simple Métis rebel could now write a cheque in six figures honored by any bank in Canada. But he never forgot his rebellion days. A comfortable cabin was built for Papasschayo across a small lake near our trading post, and here Papasschayo lived with his two wives. An Indian youth also lived with him, a neophyte who was learning the practice of Indian medicine and occult arts. The summer seasons were spent in the old style prairie tepees.

After the formation of the Province of Alberta in 1905, White settlers wanted to encroach on our reservation. They found we had the finest tract of land in North East Alberta. This movement among the Whites was fortified by the official announcement of the projected railway policy of the Provincial Government. Hon. C. W. Ross promised that a railway would be built from Edmonton to Battleford and would pass through our reserve. St Paul des Métis would then be a center with railways coming from all directions.

The cupidity of both the Whites and Métis was excited. All our related families held Half breed grants within the reservation. My father and uncles were overcome with the general speculative fever. They had grandiose schemes of subdividing their holdings into lots and selling them profitably to the hordes of Whites who would indubitably appear.

One day, in the spring of 1905, my Uncle Louis said to my father and to my other uncles, "Let us ask Papasschayo about this. He is a medicine man. He will consult the familiar spirits and predict the future."

I had an uncle by marriage, Arthur Poirier. He had an Irish mother and came from Ste. Rose de Kildare in Joliette County, Quebec. He spoke Cree fluently, for he had the remarkable facility that many French Canadians have for Indian languages. He and my father were staunch Liberals – followers of the Oliver faction which developed from the schism of the Liberal Party after the formation of the Province. They were also keenly interested in international affairs.

So they all mounted their saddle horses and rode to Papasschayo's camp. Following the customary protocol, they dismounted, sat in the grass, and remained silent until Papasschayo addressed them.

For a time he gazed fixedly at the sun. Then he said: "Grandchildren I know why you have come. But the time is not propitious for consulting the spirits. Return hence in four days when the sun stands highest in the sky and your questions will be answered." He turned to his neophyte or "segundo" and said: "Prepare the sweat lodge for I must fast and purify myself."

Four days later at high noon my father and uncles again approached Papasschayo's camp, dismounted, sat silently in the grass and waited. Papasschayo emerged from the sweat lodge stark naked, crawling on his belly like a snake. I am reminded of the Biblical passage wherein it is related that Isaiah prophesied in all nakedness before the Lord. In reply to the mundane questions about expected financial gains, Papasschayo said: "The Half breeds will gain nothing. Already the White traders and the Black Robes have stolen and divided your lands behind your backs."

It was true. We had only three years to wait till the full blown political ecclesiastical (sic) and mercenary conspiracy drove us from our reservation. Our family, relying on political assurances, expected the railway to reach St. Paul within a year or two, and the townsite to be on our land. We were wrong. The mission secured the townsite and profited enormously from their share of the spoilation (sic).

When asked about the arrival of the railroad, Papasschayo held up both hands and counted fifteen fingers. "Thus, Great Suns shall pass before the Iron Horse comes." He was about right, too. It was September when the railway reached St. Paul. He later took my uncle to the exact spot where the end of steel remained for seven years. My uncle remarked about this, as the railway company had to move his barn fifty feet. It was on the right of way on the exact spot where Papasschayo had indicated it would be. Everything he told us about our family and its future was fulfilled.

My father and Uncle Arthur asked if there would be a war. At this time, even before the Agadir incident in Morocco, Germany and France were snarling at each other.

Papasschayo said, "Hear me, grandchildren, and be warned. Yes, before ten Great Suns shall have passed there will be war." One must remember that Papasschayo was a pagan Indian, completely illiterate, and with no knowledge of any European language. My uncle enquired: "How shall that be wise grandfather?"

“Grandchildren beyond the Great Salt Water there is a tribe of Black Hearts who are swift and eager to make war. They are like our old enemies the Blackfeet. They have an evil chief. He has many stout hearted warriors and he will gather a mighty war party and go up and do battle in the land of the Wooden Boats. But the Cunning Ones will come to aid the Wooden Boats. Now beyond the land of the Black Hearts there is another large tribe. They are many and mighty in the land of the Sheepskins. They also shall come to the aid of the Wooden Boats. There shall be great slaughter and many deeds of bravery on both sides.”

My uncle asked: “Will our country fight?”

“Yes Grandchildren” replied Papasschayo. “Many young warriors shall cross the Great Salt Water. There shall be weeping in the land of the Red Sun for many warriors shall fall in battle in the land of the Wooden Boats and their voices will never be heard again in the lodges of their mothers. Truly many women shall weep.”

“How long then Wise One will this great evil endure? How shall we know what is to come upon our land?”

Papasschayo remained motionless speaking in a subdued voice. “Lo there will be signs. When the Long Knives come that will be a sign that the end approaches. After they come a great chief shall stand up in the land of the Sheepskins and in that hour the traders Black Robes and the men who speak with forked tongues shall be thrown down and things will not be as they were before. When this comes to pass the Black Hearts will lose their courage and return to their own land.”

“Is this the end?”

“No” said Papasschayo. “These White warriors are like dogs who have mauled and crippled each other. They crawl back to their dens and lick their wounds and patiently wait for revenge.”

“So there will be a second war?”

Wooded Boats or the plural Mist choo gu cu awak is the name for Frenchmen derived from the fact that the French came up the St. Lawrence in wooden sailing ships and they met the Algonkian tribes of which the Crees are linguistically a component part.

The Cunning Ones refer to the English for so the Crees designated their mercenary characters when they first appeared on Hudson's Bay.

When the first Slavic settlers or Galicians appeared in Western Canada they were called that because of the distinctive sheepskin coats they wore.

Indian term for the Americans.

A reference to Lenin and the Russian Revolution in late

“As soon as a new crop of warriors is ready for the warpath ” averred Papasschayo When one considers this point it is evident that it required years for a warrior to reach manhood This is the exact interval between and

“They have rested ” Papasschayo went on “They have regained their strength and are ready for battle and revenge And it will be the same tribes who will fight again in the same way The Black Hearts will again go up to do battle in the land of the Wooden Boats The old fight will have to be finished But the sheepskins will prevail and the Black Hearts will be beaten and they will never fight again ” Curiously Papasschayo never gave any indication of Japanese participation in World War II

“Is that the end?” my uncle asked

“No that is not the end The last great battle remains The Paleface is never satisfied He wants everything under the sun In that day an evil thought shall come into his mind to go up and utterly make away with his enemies Then our people are in great danger The Land of the Red Sun shall stand alone For a great punishment shall come to the White man He shall go up to do battle and in one single battle he will be destroyed Beyond the waters of the Setting Sun are our little cousins with dark colored skins the people with almond eyes They shall come and set us free and they shall free our White brothers because they are not able to free themselves In that day the Paleface shall sit in our lodges and we shall be truly brothers There shall be no enmity between us For who remembers of even the distant echoes of the fury of the night storm when darkness departs and the dawn has come ”

My uncle sat contemplatively and then spoke: “Oh wise grandfather your words are words of strength and understanding You have spoken of signs and omens How are your children to know when these things are to be fulfilled?”

The old medicine man gazed intently into the sun Then he looked at an aspen tree which had begun to leaf He calmly stated: “Be guided my grandchildren when the leaf begins to bud the time is at hand ” He then suddenly rose and said to his neophyte “I fast bring me water ”

Thus ends the story of Papasschayo