

## **John Morrisseau. (b. 1939)**

John Morrisseau is a residential school survivor and esteemed Métis leader from Grand Rapids, Manitoba. He currently serves as a member of the Indian Residential Schools Survivor Committee. He was the Director of Public Participation for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.

He has served the Manitoba Government in the capacity of Assistant Deputy Minister and Deputy Minister and the Manitoba Métis Federation as President from 1976 to 1981. Mr. Morrisseau is considered a Métis historian and is a recipient of the Order of the Métis Nation in recognition of his dedicated service to his people and Nation. Mr. John Morrisseau served as President of the Manitoba Métis Federation from 1976 to 1981.



John was born on August 18, 1939 at St. Rose du Lac, Manitoba, the son of Bella Moar and Ernest Morrisseau. His mother, born at Kinosota, was the Michif-Ojibwa daughter of John Moar and Louisa Asham. His father, born at Spence Lake, was the Ojibwa-Michif son of Jean Baptiste Morrisseau (St. Francois Xavier) and Cecile Nault (St. Rose du Lac).

John took grade eight then was a fisher and trapper at Crane River. He also worked on an extra gang and a surface driller at Thompson. In 1960, John married Nellie Sinclair from Grand Rapids. John entered the Canadian Forces at age 18 and served for six years, leaving in 1964. He worked for Indian Affairs at Fort McMurray. He then began working as a truck driver, came back to Manitoba and also worked for Manitoba Highways as a grader operator.

In 1966 John became politically active. Since John was truck driving he worked at this from Mondays to Thursdays, then for the rest of the week worked as a political organizer with Howard Asham and Willie Dumont, going to organizing meetings. In 1967, Adam Cuthand asked him to organize a Metis local at Grand Rapids.

Mr. Morrisseau recalls in 1976, the Liberal government under Pierre Trudeau was willing to provide federal dollars to fund mutual claims research on land claim issues such as outlined under the Manitoba Act.

His team including Harry Daniels and Sam Sinclair began the task to put together a proposal. The proposal would require people to go through the archives to search for material to support the claim but the issue was there were no Métis with the skills to do the job. Doug Sprague who had the skills and is a well known historian, was hired to train Metis.

After working with different government departments in drafting the proposal, it was presented to the Trudeau government for consideration.

Through intense negotiation, they were able to secure research funding through 1981 which allowed for intensive examination of church, and Hudson Bay Company records.

Mr. Morrisseau says Trudeau staff clearly saw the land claim like a treaty believing an opportunity existed to repatriate the Constitution.

In 1981, MMF President John Morrisseau told the Metis and Non-Status Indian Constitutional review Commission: “We can’t draw up the rights of a new constitution when our rights entrenched in the Manitoba Act of 1870 are still outstanding. We’re only putting ourselves back and giving them another way out. First of All, let’s settle the issue that’s there, that’s the issue of land claims.”



John Morrisseau, March 3-4, 1981,  
speaking to the Metis and Non-Status Indian Constitutional Review Commission  
in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Moreover, the absence within the patriation resolution of a requirement for Métis consent to constitutional amendments affecting them raised the real possibility of government removing the Métis land rights sections of the Manitoba Act that the MMF intended to make the subject of major litigation. Mr. Morrisseau said “If the Government of Canada was to repeal section 31 and 32 of the Manitoba Act through an amending process, we would consider such a maneuver to be the greatest breach of faith in Canadian history.”

On April 15th, 1981, the Native Council of Canada joined the Manitoba Métis Federation in a major land claims suit against the federal government and the Government of Manitoba. The Statement of Claim *MMF v. Canada* challenged the unfulfilled treaty

promises made to the Metis people promising 1.4 million acres of land under the Manitoba Act, 1870

After leaving the MMF in 1981, Mr. Morrisseau joined the Howard Powley NDP government as an Assistant Deputy Minister hoping by working inside government, he could continue his valuable work for the Métis.

Mr. Morrisseau says “The work to file the land claim helped to re-ignite pride in Métis. It was time to lift our heads again to feel good about ourselves and it helped us to build strong Métis communities.”

Now retired, John Morrisseau currently lives in Grand Rapids, Manitoba and currently serves as mayor of that town. He and his wife Nelly are celebrating 45 years together. They have two daughters and 4 sons, and 4 grandchildren.



Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell  
Coordinator of Metis Heritage and History Research  
Louis Riel Institute