

George Edmund McKay. (b. 1904)

George McKay was the son of John James McKay (b. 1885) and Catherine McKay¹ (b. 1884). His grandparents were Angus McKay (b. 1836), the brother of the Honourable James McKay, and Virginie Rolette the daughter of Joseph Rolette and Angelique Jerome of Pembina.

George was a pioneer from Berens River, about 200 air miles northeast on Lake Winnipeg. He was a lifelong fisherman and at age 73 (in 1979), he would still wander down to the river every now and then to fish. George and Marie Louise McKay had fourteen children. Mr. McKay initiated the Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF) Local in the area and remained an active member. In March of 1978 at the Regional Conference, he was awarded an honorary plaque and a Métis Sash symbolizing an appreciation for his many years of service and dedication to local residents. He speaks fluent Saukteaux and English and understands a little Cree.

In 1979, he related the following stories: “Half-Breed was the most commonly used word for us in the early days because in the history of the Méti people, after the Riel Rebellion, they gave the “half-breeds” the land settlement. At that time they called it the Half-Breed Land Act. Now they call it the Scrip Land Act. I don’t fancy the word “Metis” because it doesn’t really give us an identity; to me, Méti means to be half-French only. To be a half-breed means you can be part anything.”

“My granduncle was the Honourable James McKay, on of the early pioneers of Winnipeg. For some reason or other, he learned four or five languages. At one time, he owned all of the area where Silver Heights is now. He was the first to herd (domestic) buffalo in that area. He built a lodge where Deer Lodge now stands. That’s how it got its name.”

“James McKay was taken on as an interpreter for the government because he knew all these languages. He toured through all of the Lake Winnipeg area and helped make treaties with the Indians. In the meantime, my grandfather, Angus McKay, took a homestead at White Horse Plains and started a maple farm. His house later burned and his brother, James McKay, gave him the position of the first Indian Agent. He started his work at Fort Garry and travelled through surrounding areas where he’d be away all summer.”

“During his travels, Grandfather McKay went to Berens River and decided to stay. He asked to transfer his family there. This was granted, so he raised his family there. My father, who was raised in Berens River, met and married my Indian mother there. I’m very proud to be a Half-Breed because now it’s hard to find a real Half-Breed. Blood has been all mixed up as the centuries passed. My grandchildren have six or seven races of blood in them.”

¹ His mother’s father was a Goosehead from Little Grand Rapids.

“Today at 73 years of age, I am the oldest non-treaty resident in Berens River. We live alongside treaty people who call us outsiders, meaning we’re like White people because we’ve always had privileges such as voting. We’re non-treaty. We’re outsiders. If you live among White society, the White man calls you an Indian, so we’re right in the middle. We’re neither White nor Indian. I am very proud to be a Half-Breed because I have the instincts and knowledge of an Indian and the cunning and knowledge of a White man.”

“If the White society calls you down as an Indian, just tell them you’re a Half-Breed and proud of it. There’s a lot of discrimination, but maybe not so much with the younger generation as before. It’s too bad that children growing up in the city don’t learn their Native language.”

Reference:

Manitoba Metis Federation. *Reflections Yesterday and Today*, Winnipeg: Manitoba Metis Federation Press, 1979: 80-81.



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