

# VOICES OF THE GRANDMOTHERS

## *Reclaiming a Metis Heritage*

*Christine Welsh*

I HAVE SPENT THE PAST fifteen years making documentary films with, for and about native people. During that time I have listened to native people speak at length about almost every aspect of their lives, and I have been privileged to hear a great deal of native oral history from elders and tribal historians. Their words have not only convinced me of the validity of native oral history, but have also forced me to redefine my notions of the very nature of history. Through them I have come to see history as a continuum, and to view the native oral tradition as an ancient yet viable form of human discourse that encompasses the entire story of a people, both past and present.

But the native oral tradition is also a form of discourse that has been ignored and often deliberately suppressed by the dominant society. These attempts to silence the native voice have had far-reaching consequences, not the least of which has been the erosion of cultural identity among generations of native people, of whom I am one. Yet even among those of us who have been almost entirely cut off from our native heritage, remnants of the oral tradition survive. It is these cryptic messages from the past that have enabled me to recover my native heritage — to hear the voices of the native grandmothers I never knew, and to begin to understand how they were muted. For it was in working with the native oral tradition that I first discovered that we as native women have a unique history and discourse of our own, but being both women and native we have been doubly silenced.

This is the story of my search for the voices of my grandmothers. It is not a story which presumes to speak for all native people, for we come from many nations and we have many different stories, many different voices. I can only tell my own story, in my own voice. Leslie Marmon Silko, the Laguna poet and storyteller, puts it this way:

As with any generation  
the oral tradition depends upon each person  
listening and remembering a portion

## METIS HERITAGE

and it is together —  
all of us remembering what we have heard together —  
that creates the whole story  
the long story of the people.

I remember only a small part,  
But this is what I remember.<sup>1</sup>

I grew up in Saskatchewan, the great-granddaughter of Metis people who, in the late 1860s, migrated west from Red River in pursuit of the last great buffalo herds and eventually settled in the Qu'Appelle Valley of southern Saskatchewan. My great-grandparents were among the first Metis families to set up camp down on the flats beside Mission Lake where the village of Lebret now stands. As long as the buffalo were plentiful they continued to live from the hunt, wintering in the Cypress Hills and returning to Lebret each summer to sell their buffalo robes, meat and pemmican at the Hudson's Bay Company post at Fort Qu'Appelle. With the disappearance of the buffalo they no longer wintered out on the plains, choosing to remain at Lebret and earn their living by trading, freighting, farming and ranching. They are buried there beside the lake among their kinfolk, and the names on the headstones in that little cemetery — Blondeau, Delorme, Desjarlais, Ouellette, Pelletier, Welsh and many more — bear silent witness to the diaspora of the Red River Metis.

I don't know when I first realized that amongst those ghostly relatives there was Indian blood. It was something that just seemed to seep into my consciousness through my pores. I remember my bewilderment when the other children in my predominantly white, middle-class school began to call me "nichi" on the playground. I had never heard the word before and was blissfully ignorant of its meaning, but it wasn't long before I understood that to them it meant "dirty Indian."

By the time I was in high school I had invented an exotic ethnicity to explain my black hair and brown skin and I successfully masqueraded as French or even Hawaiian, depending on who asked. But I still lived in mortal terror that the truth would get out. In 1969, when the province of Saskatchewan dedicated a monument to Louis Riel, all the other girls in my class took advantage of a perfect autumn day and skipped classes to attend the ceremonies. I decided not to go with them and afterward, much to my horror, was commended by the teacher in front of the whole class for behaviour which he deemed to be exemplary — given the fact, he said, that I was the only one who could claim a legitimate right to attend such an observance by virtue of my ancestry. This oblique reference went right over the heads of most of my classmates, but my cheeks still burned with the knowledge that I had been found out. It was no use: no matter how hard I tried to hide it, my native background seemed to be written all over me.

THE 1960S GAVE RISE to a new pride in native identity among native people across Canada, and even though I had no contact with other native people, I was swept up by the spirit of the times and began to feel that it was no longer necessary to try to hide who I was. But who was I? By the time I reached university in the early 1970s, denial of my native ancestry had given way to a burning need to know. My curiosity was fuelled by the discovery of a much-worn volume entitled *The Last Buffalo Hunter*, a biography of my great-grandfather, Norbert Welsh, which had been written in the 1930s and rescued by my mother from a second-hand bookshop. I revelled in the references to Norbert's Indian mother and his part-Indian wife, but I didn't really understand that I was reading about a distinctly Metis experience which was separate from that of the Indians — or that it was, in fact, one of the few existing memoirs to be left by a Red River Metis.

Though I was clearly interested in tearing away the shroud of mystery that seemed to surround our native ancestors, my attempts were largely futile. Whenever I tried to raise the subject, strenuous attempts were made, especially by my grandmother, to diminish and deny any connection we might have to native people. She actively discouraged my burgeoning interest in and involvement with “things Indian”: “we” were very different from “them,” she implied, and such associations would only bring me grief.

Despite my grandmother's dire predictions, I was increasingly drawn to Indian people by my desperate need to find out who I was and where I belonged. Though I made every effort to fit into Indian society I was continually made aware that here, too, I was an outsider — this time because I was too “white.” Nevertheless, I spent much of the next fifteen years in “Indian country,” travelling to Indian communities across Canada and making documentary films on issues of concern to native people, and eventually the pieces of my identity began to fall into place.

Though I didn't realize it at the time, the making of these films amounted to a “crash course” in understanding, appreciating and working with the native oral tradition. This experience proved invaluable when, in 1982, my husband and I began to work on what was, for us, the project of a lifetime — a film series that would depict the history of Canada from an aboriginal point of view. We knew that if such a series was to have any validity or authenticity it must accurately represent the experience of native people *as they perceived it*. We also knew that the only way to ensure such accuracy was to seek out the tribal historians, listen carefully to their stories, and accept their guidance and direction as to how those stories should be presented on the screen.

We spent three years recording oral history interviews with native elders across Canada. Despite our long association with native people, it took some time before we really understood that looking at history from the native perspective meant

much more than seeing historical events from a different point of view. It meant surrendering our pre-conceived notions of the very nature of history — that it is linear, progressive, date- and event-oriented — and adapting our thinking to a fundamentally different aboriginal world view which is cyclical and ultimately timeless. Asking people to talk about “history” as we understood it frequently led nowhere. Such history, they believed, was found only in books and was the private domain of white “experts.” While we were told some historical recollections, for the most part it was their lives and their experience of the world both individually and collectively that the people wanted to talk about. They were always careful to distinguish between what they had experienced themselves — “what I know” — and what had been told to them by others, and under what circumstances. Attempts to talk about significant events and people prior to the speaker’s own lifetime were usually met with stories which would commonly be described as myths or legends — stories of people, animals, spirits, and the worlds which they inhabit, stories which challenge our commonly accepted notions of both physical and temporal reality. Yet we came to understand that it is these stories that capture the very essence of the aboriginal world view, and that what others call “myth” is in fact the embodiment of history as native people perceive it.

The oral tradition has an acknowledged place and purpose in aboriginal society. Its practitioners have traditionally occupied a responsible and important position in the culture, supplying a moral code and taking the place of written history. Myths, prophecies, songs, dances, religious rituals, genealogies, personal testimonies — all of these are ancient and viable forms of record-keeping among aboriginal people, and it is through them that the collective memory of the people has been passed from one generation to the next. Native oral history begins with the act of creation, and is deeply rooted in the land; it provides a continuity that helps to nurture and sustain the people and their way of life. In it we find the expression of their cultural values and world view. In this respect native oral history is at least as accurate a version of native experience as that provided by the often biased accounts written by non-native observers. The fact that much native oral history cannot be substantiated by documentary evidence is not the most important consideration here: what is essential is the extent to which it is believed by the people themselves.

Native oral history is a living history. Much of its strength and meaning is derived from the relationship between the oral historian and the listener, and from a mutually understood social and cultural context in which language plays a crucial role. But there can be no doubt that the circumstances that nurtured and maintained the oral tradition were irrevocably altered by the coming of the Europeans, and most particularly by the removal of successive generations of native children from their families and communities so that they could be “educated.” For native people, perhaps the most devastating consequence was the loss of their language,

for without their language the children were effectively placed beyond the reach of the storytellers — those who had, for all previous generations, passed on to the children the wisdom and the history of their people.

As a result, in some native communities the oral tradition is on the brink of extinction. Elders are passing away, and there are fewer and fewer young people who are able to speak their native language and thus carry on the oral tradition. While some elders still insist that their wisdom be passed on in the traditional way, from storyteller to listener in the language of its origin, many others emphasize the need to record and preserve this tradition before it is too late. There is no doubt that the process of recording, translating and transcribing native oral history alters it in profound ways, for it loses the interactive, highly personalized quality that is so essential to the transmission of collective memory. Yet for many native people — and especially for young people who, for one reason or another, have been cut off from their native heritage — cassette recorders and video cameras have become invaluable tools in helping to bridge the gulf between the generations, between elders raised in fishing camps and on traplines and young people reared on packaged food and television. Thus the recording of native oral history has an important role to play in preserving and indeed revitalizing the native oral tradition.

**T**HIS EXPERIENCE RECORDING native oral history was largely responsible for rekindling my relationship with my own grandmother. This happened quite unexpectedly, because in most of the Indian communities we visited it was the men who were put forward as being the tribal historians, and as a consequence we spent most of our time interviewing men. Yet often, when my husband and I had finished interviewing an old man, his wife would manage to manoeuvre me out to the kitchen so that she could speak to me alone. Over cups of strong tea, these women told me the stories of their lives — their experience of marriage and childbirth, their hopes and fears for their children, the work they did, the things that gave them pleasure, and the intricate workings of the communities in which they lived — all freely given, and deliberately so, well after the tape-recorder had been turned off and well out of ear-shot of the men in the next room. For the most part these women were reluctant to be “interviewed” in any formal sense, insisting that they knew nothing about history and that nobody would be interested in what they had to say. But I began to realize that, without their story, an “Indian history of Canada” would be shamefully incomplete, and so I painstakingly went about overcoming their reluctance to speak. In the process I was forced yet again to re-examine my conventional notions of what was historically important and to recognize that the everyday lives of women — the unique patterns and rhythms of female experience — are history, too. In the end, it was this revela-

tion — and the sense of kinship I felt to the native women who shared their life stories with me — that finally led me back to my own grandmother.

I had seen very little of my grandmother during the years I spent in “Indian country.” I was living in Toronto, she was in Regina, and our contact consisted of occasional letters and brief visits once or twice a year. But the passage of time and my own changing perceptions of the value of native women’s experience gradually led me to see her in a whole new light. Whereas in my youth I had felt nothing but contempt for the values that had led her to deny her native heritage, I now began to feel a genuine bond of compassion and respect for this formidable old lady who seemed to shrink visibly and grow more fragile with each passing season. I was acutely aware that just as we were getting to know each other we would soon be separated for good. She was my only living connection with the past, my only hope of finding out who I really was so, despite her reluctance to talk about the past, I kept on asking my questions. And while she continued to maintain steadfastly the distinctions between our family and other native people, she must have had some sense of how important this was for me because she began to try to give me some answers. We spent hours poring over old family photographs, putting names and faces to those ghostly ancestors who had haunted my childhood. And then, quite suddenly, she died.

My grandmother had very few possessions, but care was taken to distribute what little she had among her children and grandchildren. I received a child’s sampler, embroidered by my grandmother’s mother in 1890 when she was still a schoolgirl. There, woven into the cloth amongst the crucifixes and barnyard animals, was my great-grandmother’s name: Maggie Hogue. Ironically, my grandmother had bequeathed to me that which she had found so difficult to give me while she was alive — the key to unlocking the mystery of who I was.

We had finished our fieldwork for the “Indian History of Canada,” so I decided to pursue my deepening interest in native women’s history by studying the work done by Sylvia Van Kirk on the role of native women in the North American fur-trade. I learned that, initially, very few white women were permitted to brave the perils of the “Indian country” so most fur-traders took Indian and mixed-blood women as “country wives.” These “marriages à la façon du pays” were socially sanctioned unions, even though they were not formalized according to the laws of church or state. But with the establishment of the Red River settlement white women began to go west, and it soon became fashionable for the traders to legally marry white women and to try to sever their ties with their native country wives.

In the forefront of this trend was Sir George Simpson, governor of Rupert’s Land and, by all accounts, the most important personage in the Canadian fur-trade, who had taken as his country wife a mixed-blood woman named Margaret Taylor. Though she bore him two sons, Margaret Taylor was abandoned by Simpson when he married his English cousin, a move which signalled the wide-

spread rejection of native women as marriage partners by “men of station” in fur-trade society and reflected the increasing racial and social prejudice against native women throughout pre-Confederation Canada. Clearly, Margaret Taylor’s story epitomized a crucial chapter in the history of native women in Canada, but I was equally intrigued by its epilogue — her hastily arranged marriage to a French-Canadian voyageur whose name was startlingly familiar: Amable Hogue.

On the basis of my great-grandmother’s faded sampler and a rather incidental footnote in a history book, I began a search that eventually verified my connection to my great-great-great-grandmother, Margaret Taylor. For me it was the beginning of a journey of self-discovery — of unravelling the thick web of denial, shame, bitterness and silence that had obscured my past and picking up the fragile threads that extended back across time, connecting me to the grandmothers I had never known and to a larger collective experience that is uniquely and undeniably Metis.

My search for my grandmothers was hampered both by the inadequacies of traditional historical sources with respect to women and by the code of silence that existed in my own family with respect to our native heritage. But, after venturing down a couple of blind alleys, I finally called my great-aunt Jeanne, who is my grandmother’s youngest sister and the only surviving female relative on that side of my family. When I called Grandma Jeanne I hadn’t seen or spoken to her in more than twenty years, yet she was surprised and touched that I remembered her and seemed eager to help me in any way she could. Grandma Jeanne knew about Margaret Taylor, and knew that she had some connection to George Simpson, but said that this had never been discussed because, in the words of Jeanne’s mother, it had brought shame on the family. Nevertheless, Grandma Jeanne was able to tell me the names of Margaret Taylor’s daughters and granddaughters, and in the act of naming them I finally had the sense of reaching back and grasping hands with all my grandmothers and great-grandmothers — right back to Margaret Taylor.

Like most native women of her time, Margaret Taylor left no diaries, no letters, no wills — no written record that might help us reconstruct her life as she perceived it. Her voice is not heard in the historical record. Instead, we must rely on the maddening snippets of journals, letters and trading post records written by the men of the fur-trade for the only factual information that exists about the life of Margaret Taylor.

**M**ARGARET TAYLOR WAS BORN ON Hudson Bay in 1805, the daughter of an Indian woman known only as Jane and the Hudson’s Bay Company’s sloopmaster at York Factory, George Taylor. It is impossible to know whether Jane approached her marriage to a white man with enthusiasm, indiffer-

ence or dread, but we do know that their union produced at least eight children, including Margaret. However, when George Taylor retired from service with the Hudson's Bay Company and returned to England in 1815, he left Jane and her children behind.<sup>2</sup> The family must have maintained their ties to the post, for by the early 1820s Jane's son Thomas had become the personal servant of George Simpson, the Hudson's Bay Company's governor in Rupert's Land, and it was probably through Thomas that his sister Margaret first came to the Governor's attention.

My great-great-great-grandmother was just twenty-one years old when she became the "country wife" of the Governor of Rupert's Land. Though George Simpson was notorious for indulging in short-lived liaisons with young native women, his relationship with Margaret Taylor appeared to be different. He relied on her companionship to an unusual degree, insisting that she accompany him on his historic cross-continental canoe journey from Hudson Bay to the Pacific in 1828. Not only did Simpson recognize and assume responsibility for their two sons, but he also provided financial support for Margaret's mother and referred to Thomas Taylor as his brother-in-law, thus giving Margaret and the rest of fur-trade society every reason to believe that their relationship constituted a legitimate "country marriage."<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, while on furlough in England in 1830 — and with Margaret and their two sons anxiously awaiting his return at Fort Alexander — Simpson married his English cousin, Frances Simpson.

It is not hard to imagine Margaret's shock when she learned that the Governor was returning with a new wife. No doubt she and her children were kept well out of sight when Simpson and his new bride stopped at Fort Alexander during their triumphant journey from Lachine to Red River. Once the Simpsons were installed at Red River the Governor lost no time in arranging for Margaret's "disposal," and a few months later she was married to Amable Hogue, an event which drew this comment from one contemporary observer: "The Gov[ernor]s little tit bit Peggy Taylor is also Married to Amable Hogue, what a downfall is here . . . from a Governess to Sow'.<sup>4</sup>

Amable Hogue, who had been among Simpson's elite crew of voyageurs, was hired as a stonemason on the construction of Simpson's new headquarters at Lower Fort Garry. From her vantage point in the Metis labourers' camp just outside the walls, Margaret would have been able to watch the Governor and his bride take up residence in their magnificent new home. For his service, the Hudson's Bay Company gave Hogue a riverfront lot on the Assiniboine River just west of the Forks, and it was there on the banks of the Assiniboine River that Margaret Taylor and her daughters and granddaughters spent most of the rest of their lives, raising their families and working beside their men-folk on the buffalo hunts and riverfront farms that were the mainstay of the Red River Metis.



**M**Y GREAT-GREAT-GREAT-GRANDMOTHER's life spanned the rise and fall of the Metis nation. By the time she died in December, 1885 — just a few weeks after the hanging of Louis Riel — the world that she and other Metis women had known had changed irrevocably. Rupert's Land had become part of the emerging Canadian nation, and immigrants from Eastern Canada and Europe were pouring into the old Northwest to lay claim to homesteads on land that had been the home of Indian and Metis people for generations. The Buffalo were gone, the fur-trade was no more, the Indians were confined to reserves, and the Metis had lost their land and their way of life. The Metis resistance that had begun at Red River in 1870 and that ended at Batoche in 1885 resulted in the final defeat, dispossession and marginalization of the Metis people. In the dark years that followed, very few Metis people spoke about being Metis and there was widespread denial of Metis identity among the generations of Metis who survived that troubled time and who grew up in its aftermath. While most of them were not subjected to the brutal suppression of language and identity that Indian people experienced in the residential school system at that time, their contact with the dominant society made them feel ashamed of their heritage and many of them came to see assimilation to the "white ideal" as the only way to escape desperate lives of oppression and grinding poverty.

It is impossible to know when the process of denial and assimilation began in my own family, but I feel in my heart that it goes right back to what happened to Margaret Taylor. Here, I believe, are the roots of our denial — denial of that fact of blood that was the cause of so much pain and suffering and uncertainty about the future. It is such a surprise that, many years later, Margaret's own son would choose to describe his mother as "a sturdy Scotswoman" rather than the halfbreed that she really was.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps Margaret herself perpetrated this myth, if not for her son's sake then certainly for her daughters', to try to spare them a fate similar to her own and that of her mother. I'll never know. But I do know that the denial of our native heritage, which has been passed on from generation to generation of my family, is explicable in light of those events that took place so long ago, and I am finally able to see it not as a betrayal but as the survival mechanism that it most certainly was. For we *did* survive — even though, for a time, we were cut off from our past and our people — and we did so largely because of the resourcefulness, adaptability and courage of my grandmothers.

Unlike those whose search for roots is prompted by obscure snatches of stories passed from one generation to the next, my search for my grandmothers was prompted by silence — the silence that is the legacy of assimilation. When I began, I assumed that no such fragments of the oral tradition, no messages from the past, had survived in my family. Yet in Grandma Jeanne I found incontrovertible evidence that this was not the case. For Grandma Jeanne, the answer to the question

“Do you remember?” was like coming up from very deep water, giving voice to things which had not been forgotten but which had been deliberately submerged in a process of alienation from her native heritage and assimilation into the dominant society which had become more firmly entrenched with each new generation. Yet it was Grandma Jeanne who allowed me to put the final pieces of the puzzle together — to match what I knew about my grandmothers from the historical record with the record of feelings, attitudes and beliefs that can only be found in the vaults of memory. Thus, for both Grandma Jeanne and me, reclaiming the oral tradition has been a process of affirmation — affirmation of the importance of women’s experience; affirmation of the strength, courage and resilience of our grandmothers; affirmation of our ability to speak both our past and our present, and to make our voices heard.

Native women will be rendered historically voiceless no longer. We are engaged in creating a new history, our history, using our own voices and experiences. And as we raise our voices — as we write, sing, teach, make films — we do so with the certainty that we are speaking not only for ourselves but for those who came before us whom history has made mute. We have a responsibility to our children and our people to ensure that the voices of our grandmothers are no longer silent.

And so the voices of my grandmothers are alive today, for they speak through me.

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Leslie Marmon Silko, *Storyteller* (New York: Seaver Books, 1981): 6-7.
- <sup>2</sup> For information on the family of George Taylor, see H.B.C.A. biographical file on George Taylor; also H.B.C.A. D4/113, fo. 146-d.
- <sup>3</sup> H.B.C.A. B239/c/2, fo.10; H.B.C.A. B239/c/1, fo.346.
- <sup>4</sup> W. Sinclair to E. Ermatinger, 15 August 1831; quoted in John S. Galbraith, *The Little Emperor: Governor Simpson of the Hudson’s Bay Company* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1976): 109.
- <sup>5</sup> “Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Hogue, Both Born in Manitoba, Wedded 60 Years Ago Today”, *Winnipeg Free Press*, 11 January 1919: 9.

