



Young Aboriginal Woman. George Gwynne Mann Family
fonds, University of Saskatchewan Archives

Narratives and Drama in 1885

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The 1885 North-West resistance was a source of many eyewitness accounts that have been told and re-told in newspapers and history books for more than 100 years. The amount of secondary history written about this monumental event in North American history is understandably significant; enough to give many historians pause when they think of adding their own interpretations to the literature. However, many people in Saskatchewan still feel very connected to this history and continue to engage the historical process as they try to re-evaluate the thoughts of the people involved in those significant events. Several scholars, new and experienced, continue to search the archives, reading and rereading the primary source material, in search of new angles on old stories that will expose a fresh understanding of certain individuals or groups not previously thought of. In the last five years at the University of Saskatchewan at least three MA theses have been written on aspects of 1885, with more sure to come.¹ My MA thesis titled *George Mann was not a Cowboy: Rationalizing Western versus Aboriginal Perspectives of Life and Death "Dramatic" History* completed in October, 2007, began as an interest in the Aboriginal oral history of 1885, an area that has received relatively little attention in the academic community until recently. This work still consumes my interest as I continue to develop relationships with the Aboriginal community, and find additional evidence in various archives.

If you read the introduction to my thesis, you will see that my connection to the narratives of 1885 was my great great grandfather George Gwynne Mann's involvement in those

events as a government farm instructor in Onion Lake, North-West Territories. In 1878 he came west from Bowmanville, Ontario alone, and was joined by his wife Sarah and their three children, Blanche, Charlotte and George Junior in 1883.² On the morning of 2 April 1885, Plains Cree warriors in Frog Lake, North-West Territories (approximately 25 miles north west of Onion Lake) decided to take matters into their own hands and killed nine white men in a tragic event that has become infamous as the Frog Lake “massacre.”³ Two of the men killed were farm instructor John Delaney and Indian agent Thomas Quinn, government colleagues of Mann. The primary interest of my thesis were the narratives that reported that later that day two of these warriors were sent to Onion Lake to kill Mann and complete the elimination of government men in the area, men that perhaps represented the long list of broken treaty promises. The grievances of the Cree people in both Onion Lake and Frog Lake were not unnoticed by Quinn and Mann, and a letter sent by Quinn to Mann two days before his death revealed his plans to visit Onion Lake on 2 April 1885 to address their concerns. Mann notes in his account of 2 April 1885 that when Quinn did not arrive “...I could see they (the Cree) were very excited. They expected to see the Ind. Agent Quinn from Frog Lake, who did not arrive as he was killed that morning with the others.” Later that night Mann says he was warned by a “friendly Indian,” about the men killed in Frog Lake, and so he decided leave everything and go to Fort Pitt. These were the only details he gave of that night.

In file A-751 of the Saskatchewan Archives Board Saskatoon office is a narrative written by Blanche Askey (nee Mann), who was Mann’s oldest daughter and about 10 years old the night of their escape to Fort Pitt. Blanche wrote down her story several times, the above version was probably the one sent to her nieces grade eight class in Battleford, Saskatchewan in 1923. Student Edna Beaudry added her own dramatic

touches to Blanches original narrative in her essay. Blanche also wrote her recollection down in 1935 when 50 year commemoration celebrations occurred in several Saskatchewan communities, and newspapers sought to publish stories from the 'old timers' who were witness to events in 1885.⁴ The Prince Albert *Herald* published several first hand accounts of 1885 in their 1935 publications, and later compiled them into one volume titled "Reminiscences of the Riel Rebellion of 1885 as told by old timers of Prince Albert and District, who witnessed those stirring days." One of these stories highly dramatizes and sensationalizes the Frog Lake "Massacre." As I discuss in greater detail in chapter two of my thesis, drama played a role in the many narratives of 1885, especially in the mid-twentieth century as the development of a nationalist historical myth was well under way. Some of George Mann's descendants collected these stories and commented on the inaccuracies they found in them. However, Blanche Askey was not immune to this influence, and I argue that aspects of her account show her own flare for the dramatic. In my thesis I connect this to a long held British tradition of defining dark skinned 'others' in historical theatre and literature. The British would often paint their faces dark and become the 'other,' sharing knowledge with each other about how they perceived these people to think and act. Since the completion of my thesis I have found pictorial evidence that the use of 'blackface' or darkening up found its way into early twentieth century amateur theatre productions about Indians in Saskatchewan.

In the face of these multiple dramatic narratives of the 'Wild West,' which dominated the newspaper stories, historical literature and school classrooms of western Canada well into the twentieth century,⁵ Aboriginal people and Aboriginal versions of similar events tended to be pushed aside. If you read Blanche's account, you may notice that she does not

mention the names of the Aboriginal people that helped save her and her family that evening, referring to them only as “friendly Indians.” Although this is not an inaccuracy it is quite a glaring omission, considering she and her family lived in Onion Lake for 17 years, and that they spoke Cree fluently. She shows this and other tendencies to follow the literary conventions of her fellow Canadians. Thankfully in 1985, when the 100th anniversary of 1885 arrived, there was a desire to revisit the narratives of that time, and to include Aboriginal oral history of the events. Finally, many of the Aboriginal people not previously acknowledged began to be discussed.

Fortunately for my family a remarkable man by the name of Edgar Mapletoft, who lived and farmed near Onion Lake in the Fort Pitt District, led the Fort Pitt Historical Society when they assembled a local history of the Fort Pitt area called *Fort Pitt History Unfolding*.⁶ Although many local histories rarely engage Aboriginal oral history, a section of this work is dedicated to Aboriginal versions of the events of Frog Lake, Frenchman Butte and Onion Lake in 1885, material that Mapletoft was responsible for collecting and transcribing. The original recorded stories of the elders in the Cree language have been digitized and preserved at the University of Saskatchewan Archives. Mapletoft had these stories translated and transcribed for their history book, including those of Jimmy Chief, the great grandson of Treaty Chief Seekascootch.⁷ According to Chief it was his ancestor Seekascootch and his son Misahew that were responsible for saving the lives of the Mann Family.

In chapter four of my thesis I put the transcribed oral history of Jimmy Chief alongside the narrative of Blanche Askey for comparison. Analyzing where these narratives diverged and intersected made for an interesting discussion, and sparked my interest in making further efforts to understand the Aboriginal

perspective. Throughout my work these narratives were the starting point of discussions between me and members of both families, as I sought to understand how our families remembered this past today. This discussion is also a part of chapter four, as is the remarkable discovery I made when I chatted with elder Mary Whitstone. Her story was the first oral history I heard from an elder in Onion Lake, and set the tone for the rest of my work.

When I went to meet Mary, I thought it remarkable that she would still hold stories about Indian agent Mann, but then again the Cree oral tradition is meant to be kept alive from generation to generation. I wondered what new story she might tell that I had not obtained from Edgar Mapletoft's research, and discussions I had already had with descendants of Seekascootch. I was shocked to find out that she wished to talk about George Mann Jr., the son of Indian agent Mann and my great grandfather. She told me that she had seen him when she was a young girl in Onion Lake, speaking Cree fluently to her parents. She said she was surprised to see a white man speaking Cree so well. While she watched him speak to her parents, Charlie and Matilda Trottier (nee Black), her older sister Mabel nudged her and told her that this white man was her father.

At first I was shocked that I had never heard of this familial connection of our family to the Cree people of Onion Lake. I had grown up very much separate from the people there, and had never really taken an interest in our family's history until recently. However, as I continued my research and went over our family photographs, things began to become clearer. There are several images of George Mann Jr. with the people of Onion Lake, pictures that I looked at in a different light after Mary's story. Mary also related to me that Mann Jr. continued

to visit the people there long after his dad's transfer in 1900, to see his daughter and to visit the people he had grown up with.

In 1904, Mann Jr. married Barr Colonist Ethel Mary Burgess, and together they had four children. Their only son, George Reginald Tudor (Pete) Mann, was my grandfather. An Aboriginal mid-wife delivered him and two of his sisters while the family lived in the north at Moose Creek telegraph office. Even after they moved to a homestead near Lloydminster, the family would often return north on camping trips and to visit their friends. It seems very likely that many of these friends were part of the Aboriginal community, as Mann Jr. had grown up in Onion Lake and was a fluent Cree speaker. Although it is not always evident in the archival photographs, or in the early 20th century historical literature, many of the new settlers of Canada had good relations with Aboriginal people. Aboriginal versions of events and a fresh interpretation of archival documents reveal these connections.

In Métis Joseph Dion's book, *My Tribe the Crees*, he tells how Indian agent Mann had a good relationship with the people of Onion Lake. The archival documents show that Mann sent a petition to Ottawa in November, 1887 to lobby for the release of three men that were convicted of murder in 1885. In chapter five of my thesis I relate these and other stories that suggest Indian agent Mann's family sought to create a community with the people of Onion Lake, and worked hard to help the people who had saved their lives in the spring of 1885. These stories have become pushed away from our family and lost in favour dramatically influenced historical myths about Indians, and not about people working together.

I recently hosted a get together of the descendants of George Mann Jr. and Matilda Trottier (née Black) at my parents' farm near Lloydminster. At this gathering I shared some of my

research and asked Mary Whitstone to speak to all of us about our extended family. I think that was the first time anyone has spoken Cree on our farm. I hope that this analysis of the historical record in the archives, combined with my family's stories and the Cree oral tradition, will become part of a more balanced dialogue between cultures about a shared history.

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Endnotes

¹ Paget Code, "Les Autres Métis: The English Métis of the Prince Albert Settlement, 1862-1886," (MA thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 2008), and Erin Jodi Millions, "Ties Undone: A Gendered and Racial Analysis of the Impact of the 1885 Northwest Rebellion in the Saskatchewan District." (MA thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 2004).

² The history of George Mann and his family's move west was researched by family member Frank Nash and is on file at SAB.

³ The word massacre is put in quotation marks to denote that it is a non-Aboriginal term that presents this historical event in a one-dimensional way. As I allude to in my thesis, there is much historical evidence that casts considerable doubt on the assumption that it was an unprovoked and senseless act.

⁴ These versions of her story can be found in the George Gwynne Mann fonds at the Glenbow Archives, Calgary, Alberta.

⁵ Jerome Alvin Hammersmith, "The Indian in Saskatchewan Elementary School Social Studies Textbooks: A Content Analysis," (M.Ed. thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1971). Please refer to the abstract of this work.

⁶ This book is available in special collections at the University of Saskatchewan Library, Saskatchewan Archives Board and Saskatoon Public Library Local History Room.

⁷ Edgar Mapletoft et al. *Fort Pitt History Unfolding, 1829-1985*. (Frenchman Butte: Fort Pitt Historical Society, 1985) p. 101.