

**Living Off the Land in the Early Twentieth Century:
First Nations Subsistence in Saskatchewan**

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We got to teach our young people about their culture, their history, their heritage. Not... like how Christopher Columbus discovered the Indian people... because we all know now that's not true. How can you discover something that was always there before, like maybe he discovered himself being with Native people, I would say.

- Maria Linklator [Cree], Thunderchild First Nation (Linklator n.d.)

The Indian was the first here and this is where he was created; the white man was created overseas and came here afterwards. The Bible we were given is nature itself, but the white man was given a book. When it rains, their Bible is spoiled; it becomes wet and is destroyed, but our Bible is here forever: the earth, hills, lakes, all of nature and growth itself.

- Robert Bear [Cree, b.1892], Ochapowace First Nation
(Phillips, Troff and Whitecalf, eds. 1976)

It is difficult for us to realize how integrated all aspects of the environment are in the Native culture when we ourselves begin an analysis by separating things into categories and continue to categorize into sub-types, such as "uses." While we must continue to do this for comparative and descriptive purposes, it should be kept in mind that this compartmentalization does not necessarily reflect the Native view. (A. Leighton 1996b)

1. Evolution in Traditional First Nations Subsistence Strategies

Aboriginal subsistence in Saskatchewan in the late 19th century and early decades of the 20th century differed little from the lives of their ancestors over the millennia. There were differences, however, from north to south, according to the environment. Although all Aboriginal peoples shared a similar world view and this persisted strongly into the 1930s, southern and parklands First Nations subsistence strategies derived from a long tradition of hunting bison and gathering plants. Horses, a relatively new feature of Aboriginal life, had created a revolution in personal mobility and the ability to harvest many animals. Trade, always essential in gaining access to scarce and prestigious goods, became even more important with the arrival of Europeans and their foreign goods and technology. People lived and travelled in groups in the old ways, but increasingly had access to firearms and metal tools.

[My first firearm] Was 5 feet long with a snake carved on it. Gunpowder and straw were put in, then shot and straw were put down the barrel. Next a flint was put in and the trigger was pulled. It sure was a slow-firing gun. In order to buy one of these guns, furs had to be piled from the floor to the top of the barrel. That was a high price! - Charles Janvier [Dene] (Janvier 1980)

¹Quotations have been gathered from a variety of Aboriginal and other sources, including First Nations and Métis Elders.

In the north, Dene and Cree subsistence revolved around accessing boreal forest resources such as plants, caribou, moose, deer, beaver, muskrat, snowshoe hare, waterfowl, grouse and fish. While northern First Nations people did not originally have a great need for a wide variety of furs, with the coming of the Europeans and the fur trade economy, steel traps replaced the traditional Aboriginal use of snares and deadfalls and, by the 20th century, trapping had become an important part of their lifestyle, allowing harvesting of furs in greater amounts and giving them better access to European goods. By the 1920s, firearms and the motorboat had increased efficiency. (Epp and Dyck, eds. 1984; F. Leighton 1996; McConnell 1996)

Before the white man, people didn't trap. Why should they? They didn't know what to collect furs for. They only killed animals for clothing and to eat.

-Helen Joseyounen [Dene], Wollaston Lake area
(Holland *et al.* 2003:40)

In the same way, fishing became an important industry for First Nations people. Gardening was also part of the subsistence strategy: root crops such as potatoes were nutritious and stored well.

Our grandfather use to talk about make big gardens and they work together; used to have five acres gardens, potatoes. They made the big band, what they call this big band cellar. That where they put the potatoes. They feed all the people from there. ... Turnips, carrots all winter...

- Danny Muskwa [Saulteaux] (SICC 2002: Saulteaux Elders, p7-8)

In more recent times, First Nations people were severely hampered in feeding their families by the restrictions imposed on hunting and fishing by the government. Permits were required, but difficult to get.

...we had to get a permit, the only time you would [have meat, you would] be poaching, you know... but a Métis was not allowed to... just go hunting any time he wants... -Gade Aubichon [Métis] (SICC 2002: Swampy Cree/Métis, p13)

...we were left with nothing to supplant our children with. There were barriers everywhere. We could not hunt like we used to in the past. ... The Creator left this for us. -Ralph Paul [Dene Elder] (SICC 2002: Dene, p26)

2. First Nations Concepts of Their Universe

While there are differences in the beliefs of the various Saskatchewan First Nations cultures, there is a basic conception that all life on earth, including plants, animals, birds and minerals, has a spirit. Respect is due to everything on earth, as all things are gifts from the Creator.

When the Indian was first placed on this land, he was told: 'This land is holy; you will raise your children here. Do you see this buffalo? From them, you'll feed your children. Now turn around and look at the prairie. You see all these herbs;

these I give you, they're salvation of life, and from there, you'll cure your children.' These were some of our gifts.

-George Albert [Cree, b.1905], Ahtahkakoop First Nation
(Phillips, Troff and Whitecalf, eds. 1976)

When a tree dies, or an animal, it leaves this earth, it goes back to where it came from. Back up in the sky and you can see the spirits dancing as Wahwahtewak [northern lights]. (Missinipe Broadcasting Corporation 2001: Trapping, Trappers' Beliefs)

This respect dictated that the gifts of the Creator were not to be wasted, but were to be nurtured and husbanded. (A. Leighton 1996b; Paul 1976)

They took what they needed. I don't think they ever abused anything like, ah, a lot of times I'd say you'd go out in a slough and might see some eggs, duck eggs. ... My grandfather used to say "don't take the eggs because if you wait and the ducks are bigger and then you'd get much more out of it than taking an egg, one egg".

-Jim Lavalley [Métis], Crooked Lake
(Lavalley and Lavalley1999)

3. The Seasonal Round

Since Aboriginal populations were not large, harvesting of the Creator's gifts consumed but a small part of the variety of foods and other materials available across the province. Since not all resources are available at all times of the year, traditional strategies have been based, as they are in most parts of the world, on travelling by land or water from site to site where, for example, fish spawn at a certain bend in a certain river at a certain time of the year, berries ripen at another time of the year at another place, seeds ripen at a near-by location slightly later, deer gather in sheltered bushy areas in winter. The seasonal round affected all aspects of life: diet, health and healing, child rearing and where people lived.

We travelled a lot in the summer time, as my grandfather was hunting wild animals for food and my grandmother would do the berry picking. Also she would take care of the wild meat that my grandfather would bring from his hunting trips. Together, they would both skin the animals, dry the meat and tan the hide. Our means of travel was the horse and wagon. We would pitch up the tent and live in the woods for days and weeks. This was to restore food for the up coming winter months.

- Flora Gladue [b.1909], Flying Dust First Nation
(Groene, Pasqua and Whitecalf, eds. 1989:20)

When the water froze we would follow the caribou south.

-Marisis Aze [Dene], Wollaston Lake area
(Holland *et al.* 2003:8)

From summer to fall the people travelled. They travelled all over the place for buffalo. In the springtime they would build birch canoes to follow the buffalo

along the river. (Benjamin 1977)

Success in this strategy depends largely on traditional skills and intimate knowledge which are passed down from mother to child and grandchild within families occupying a large territory over many generations. It also depends on small populations harvesting a wide variety of resources, small amounts at a time, leaving the rest to propagate succeeding generations of plants and animals. This nomadic life is an ancient one.

Elders of the Johnson and Badger families from Mistawassis state that for years uncounted before the coming of the fur traders the people of their region had made two annual trips away from their wintering places along the edge of the forest of the Thickwood Hills or in the treed valleys leading to the North Saskatchewan River. One trip was southward toward the Matador Hills and Whitebear coulee regions to hunt buffalo. The other trip was northward into the southern boreal forest regions around Meadow, Green, Cowan, Delaronde, Sled and even Dore Lakes. (McConnell 1996)

...Dene cycle of hunting and trapping in the boreal forest in winter, fishing in the spring, and travel to nearby posts or traditional areas in the summer. Stories of large seasonal gatherings with the Inuit and with other Dene are still told today. (Holland *et al.* 2003:1)

The social aspects of this nomadic life were important also. Large groups gathered in summer to fish; then often travelled long distances in fall to the winter hunting territory. Feasts, give-away dances and gossip were important to people who, for the majority of the year, saw few who were not closely connected to them. First Nations people also travelled to access other areas for spiritual and aesthetic reasons: to camp and experience the beauty of the Earth. (McConnell 1996)

The seasonal round is not a thing of the remote past. First Nations people in the early part of the 20th century, and to some extent today, were still well acquainted with their traditional territories. Indigenous knowledge received from parents and grandparents was essential to survival on the trapline and on hunting trips. Traditional medicine and healing practices were often valued above “white medicine”; in any case, many people lived in areas where modern medical care was unavailable.

4. Skills and Technology

In the subsistence life, the various aspects of daily life skills are closely integrated: communicating with the Creator for guidance and inspiration, keeping healthy, finding game, gathering plants and plant material, fire-making, making shelter, travel, socializing, trading for minerals, goods and resources from beyond one’s territory, marriage, child rearing and teaching.

The ability to start a fire was essential. In the old days before matches, fire was carefully created, kept and protected.

Fire gives life and takes life. It represents life and death. It is alive and it is a spirit that comes to visit in the summer. When there is a forest fire, one that is not made by man, it is the spirit's visit to renew what needs to be renewed. Death has to happen before new life can take place. The trapper says you should never play with fire, because if you do you are playing with your life. Never spit into a fire when you are out camping, if you do, you are disrespecting the fire that is God's creation. The fire that represents God.

(Missinipe Broadcasting Corporation 2001: Trapping, Trappers' Beliefs)

Birchbark was stripped off the trees and cut thinly then lit by sparks from a flintstone. Then dry grass was put on to build up the fire.

- Charles Janvier, Dene (Janvier 1980)

When people travelled they used to keep the fire in a small metal pail. They put the soft coals in with dry rotten wood that had many holes... Then you covered it with something and put it right in the front of the toboggan.

-Marisis Aze [Dene], Wollaston Lake area

(Holland *et al.* 2003:9)

Travel by foot, horse, canoe, dog sled, snowshoes and toboggan was a fact of life on the seasonal round. Babies were born *en route*, children were carried or travelled *en travois* or on toboggan or sled; in areas where there are few trees, lodge poles were transported for reuse; trade for tobacco, pottery, ceremonial artefacts, chert or flint for stone tools was important, and remained important in the late 19th and early 20th century when blankets, metal knives, axes, firearms, pots, and other tools were needed. Contact at gatherings and when passing through far-flung territories allowed marriages to be made beyond one's own group and allows the exchange of information along well-developed networks of contacts, a network which may have been developed and nurtured over hundreds of years. The knowledge base of the group dictates what resources it can access, and therefore expanding the group's knowledge is important.

5. Gathering Plants and Plant Resources²

There is little information extant to give us a glimpse of the amount of gathering of plant resources in the past. As a result, it is difficult to gain any real understanding of how essential this activity was and the amount of investment and knowledge associated with it. This is particularly true of northern Saskatchewan, where few studies have been done and where little archaeological material has been discovered. Ethnological studies of plant use by the Cree in the

²Gathering also includes the mining or collecting of minerals. This aspect is not strictly within the purview of this paper. However, it is an essential aspect of subsistence life, at least in early times. Without clay for pottery, without chert for stone knives, awls and hide scrapers, breaking down and cooking food is more difficult, creating manufactured products such as hides, nets, shelters, weapons, clothing, boats, harnesses and ceremonial artefacts are next to impossible. Ochre and salt were acquired by trading. Stone was also needed for net sinkers, boiling stones and ceremonial artefacts. In the early twentieth century, trading for and gathering of minerals was still carried out. One reason that the First Nations prospector was essential in the hunt for minerals in the 1920s to 1950s period was his intimacy with his environment, a product of generations of inherited knowledge.

Lac La Ronge, Stanley Mission and Pelican Narrows areas in 1979 and 1980 have resulted in some extrapolation. (A. Leighton 1985,1996b) The seasonal round allowed plants from a wide variety of ecozones to be harvested: plains, tundra, sloughs and bogs, parkland, boreal forest, rivers, lakes and, most importantly, the thriving areas at the borders of these zones.

A. The Seasons

a. Spring

Upon spring break-up, plants sprouted new shoots, but accessing them was difficult because the snow-melt run-off raised waters to dangerous levels. Some spring resources could be harvested safely, however, including birch sap for syrup, the nutritious inner bark of the aspen tree, sheets of birch bark and pitch for canoe repair, and red willow [red osier dogwood] bark for smoking (Cook 2001), cattail pollen.

As the ice melted away from shore, people looked for water parsnip roots, collecting them before the plants started their spring growth while the roots were still full of winter reserves of starch. (A. Leighton 1996b)

b. Summer

Forest Products

Special forest product harvesting has existed for a long time as a kind of cottage industry: it was done on a small scale by local residents who had the necessary skills and wanted to supplement their incomes with the cash earned by selling the products. Because of the small scale of the harvest and the fact that it has been largely conducted by people who live in remote areas, there has been little danger of over-harvest. (A. Leighton 1996a)

Water Plants

At the lakeshore and on the riverbank, sometimes while *en route* to another gathering ground, First Nations people collected a variety of useful plants. Wild mint, for example, grows profusely in damp areas and was collected in large amounts and dried for the winter supply of tea.

Shallow water with a muddy bottom is a habitat where a number of important medicinal plants, such as pond lily and calamus, grow. The rhizomes of calamus are perhaps the most well known herbal remedy in the north. Edible plants, such as cattails and water parsnip, also grow in this habitat. In addition, while travelling by water, people visited portages connecting water routes. Portages provide unique habitats for plants, especially streamside plants of moist woods, such as ostrich fern. Plants were also collected from the woods in summer, including berries, wood for building, and stems, bark and leaves for various purposes. (A. Leighton 1996b)

Other resources collected in wet areas were sphagnum moss, medicinal plants, and spruce roots for sewing birch bark.

Herbs and Grasses

In the south, sacred sweetgrass, used for prayer and ceremony was collected. Sage, also used in ceremony, was gathered and dried in bunches. (SICC 2003)

c. Late Summer and Fall

Berries

While their use has been less important to the northern subsistence diet than meat and fish, berries are the most important plant food gathered. Prized for their varied flavour, quantity, time of ripening, nutritional quality and availability across the province, berries have long been an essential part of the First Nations subsistence round. A study of Pinehouse residents, typical of northern communities where Native people still retain well developed hunting and gathering skills, found that 6,687 lbs of berries were gathered between April 1983 and March 1984 for local consumption. (Tobias 1993: Table 1) The volume of this harvest demonstrates its importance in the lives of northern First Nations people over the years, not just for personal consumption but also for selling to augment the family income. (A. Leighton 1996a)

Oh yah... we used to pick a lot chokecherries, and Saskatoons ... my mom used to dry Saskatoons for the winter, you know, we used to pick by pail full and dry them for the winter and the same thing with chokecherries. We used to grind them... dry them... outside, you know, in a bag for the winter, yah, that's how we used to do a lot of that stuff. -Clementine Longworth, Metis (Longworth 1999)

Indigenous knowledge ensured that the most was made of the berry harvest, whether in the north or the south. Berries were collected both as a specific activity and as a pastime while *en route* to fall camps. A portion of the harvest would be consumed immediately as fresh fruit, including Saskatoons, raspberries, dewberries, strawberries, goose berries, blueberries, dry ground or low bush cranberries and bearberries. Some were eaten with fish. "Dry-ground cranberries are cooked with fish livers, eggs and fat, and raspberries are eaten with fish pemmican. Bearberries are cooked in grease, crushed and mixed with raw fish eggs, as are chokecherries." (A. Leighton 1996a) As indicated in the above quotation, some berries are suited for preservation by drying: Saskatoons, choke cherries, rose hips. Others are preserved by keeping them cold in bogs or in holes in the ground, or frozen for the winter.

With berries they would dry them first, then put them in birch bark baskets, sew them shut, and hang them up in the trees too. (Cook 2001)

Other Plant Materials

Many roots used in remedies were believed to be best in the fall and this was the time to replenish stocks of dried roots kept on hand year-round. Fall was the last opportunity to collect sphagnum moss before the bogs froze and women who anticipated a need for diapers throughout the winter collected it then. (A. Leighton 1996b)

Also, hazelnuts (filberts), amaranth seeds for soup thickener and decorative wolf willow seeds were collected.

d. Winter

In winter, First Nations people consumed resources gathered in the previous summer and fall and little else was harvested.

Sometimes they would find where there was a lot of berries (cranberries) cover them with hide. In the middle of winter they went and got them. My grandmother used to do that. (Cook 2001)

Rock tripe, however, was collected at times, and some plants which stayed fresh all winter, such as Labrador tea and rose hips.

People used to make a soup from the stuff that grows on rocks, black stuff that looks just like a leaf [rock tripe]. You can also use it sometime just like glue, just make it thick and you can use it for something like glue. (Clarke 1977)

Dead wood was collected for the fire.

B. Uses for Plants and Plant Material

a. Food

This use has been discussed above, under seasonal gathering. Fleshy leaves and fresh berries were consumed immediately upon gathering. Some foods, such as roots, seeds and nuts, required processing, either by leaching in water or by grating or chopping.

b. Spiritual/Ceremonial

Some plants and roots were collected for dyeing ceremonial items. Others, such as sage and red willow (red osier dogwood) were collected and dried for their smoke.

c. Medicinal

Many varieties of plants were gathered for their medicinal properties. First Nations peoples were both knowledgeable and experienced in treating potentially dangerous ailments, from cuts to fevers to uncontrollable bleeding. Leaves, barks and roots were collected and either used fresh or cleaned and dried for future use by those who knew intimately their environment and just where and when to find the correct remedies. Cloudberries and pitcher plants, for example, only grow in bogs. Poultices, healing teas, drum songs, singing and chants: all were part of the science and lore of traditional healing. (A. Leighton 1996b; Bart Dzeylion [Dene, Wollaston Lake area, in Holland *et al.* 2003:20-21)

*I can still see the medicine that Joe Smith used to give us for boils. Big leaves, you know. [coltsfoot, *Petasites* spp.] Used to get them around the lakes. They were white on one side and we used to spit on that and then put it right on the boil and it used to suck everything right out.*

-Nancy Monroe, Métis (Monroe n.d.)

The old people long ago use to make tea by boiling wild mint or by boiling roots.

Some roots they got from the swamp, and they called it swamp tea. ... Only the adults drank it, there was no sugar, just tea. They used to tell the kids that it was medicine and it was only for adults. When they had visitors, they liked to serve them tea. It was a big thing to the people long ago.

-Phillip Sewap [Dene Elder], Deschambault Lake (Sewap 2001)

...poplars, the young ones, they take the bark and chew it and then wrap it around the wound. And for big deep wounds they cut tamarack trees and they took the bark. They pound the bark until it turns soft and they wrap that around the wound and the... bark burns it clean. The children too, when they are small, they see this and they will learn from the Elders.

-Jim Settee {Woodland Cree Elder}, Little Red First Nation
(SICC 2002: Woodland Cree, Tape 2 side 1: 075)

d. Construction and other materials

Plant materials such as spruce and birch branches and boughs were used as poles and shelter material.

They made tepees from any kind of trees. Spruce trees if they stayed more than a few days. They used to cover the tepee with caribou fur. They use the fur as tarps and they use to spread spruce inside. And they would pile it a little more where they were to sleep as a mattress. (Cook 2001)

Waterproof birch bark sheets were used for canoe building; spruce roots and willow bark made flexible fasteners; tamarack wood was tough and flexible. Snowshoes were constructed from bent wood and sinew. Sometimes, in an emergency, boughs were used as is.

When there was an attack [by the Cree] on the camp, parents used to break off small treetops and tie them to the children's feet. These treetops were like snowshoes for the children, to help them run away.

-Helen Joseyounen [Dene], Wollaston Lake area
(Holland *et al.* 2003:40)

Wooden dog and horse *travois* shafts were carefully shaped so as not to chafe the animal and to provide a secure base for transporting goods and people.

e. Miscellaneous manufacturing

Whatever was needed for domestic and subsistence use was made from materials harvested from the environment: sphagnum moss diapers and baby powder from rotted wood; bracket fungi³, old man's beard moss and birch bark for tinder; the inner bark of red-osier dogwood and the leaves of bearberry [kinikinik] for tobacco; rotten wood, often mixed with conifer cones, for smoke-tanning hides; willow bark for netting; spruce root thread for sewing bark. Other objects made included baskets, utensils, hide stretchers, canoes, toboggans, harnesses, and children's

³This material was particularly useful for igniting on contact with a spark from a flint and steel. (A. Leighton 1996b)

toys. (A. Leighton 1996b; Marisis Aze [Dene], Wollaston Lake area in Holland *et al.* 2003:9)

A single item often requires the bringing together of many materials and skills. For example, a round-lidded basket is made with birch bark, fastened together with split black spruce roots, reinforced with red-osier dogwood stems and framed with an edging of almost paper-thin strips of white spruce wood. Similar techniques are used for making birch bark canoes. (A. Leighton 1996b)

6. Hunting and Trapping

It was through hunting and trapping that families gained the necessary fat and protein to survive the inevitable stresses of a subsistence lifestyle in a northern climate. The hunter had a special relationship with the hunted.

We must have respect for the animals that we take from nature. ... Everything has a spirit. The animal's spirit is to be honoured by the trapper, when he snares and he kills animals. Especially a fur bearing animal. The trapper cuts off the paws and then ties them together. He then looks around for the tallest tree and then throws the paws up into the branches of the tree. The trapper does this to honour the spirit of the animal, because he and his family's lives will be easier because the animal has given up its life. The reason why the trapper throws the paws up into the closest and tallest tree is to mark where this gift was given. The mark is not for man it is for God. We are to respect the animals God has made. By respecting what God has made, we show respect for God.

(Missinipe Broadcasting Corporation 2001: Trapping, Trappers' Beliefs)

The hunters would go out and kill the buffalo, then immediately slit the throat of the animal and drain some blood out of it. This was what gave a person life. ... When an animal is killed in the hunt, some of the life within it is passed on to us, to help us live.

-Edward Fox [Cree, b.1898], Sweetgrass First Nation
(Phillips and Whitecalf, eds. 1977)

The few statistics on early populations and "...the acceleration in large-scale logging operations today [ensure] that for many regions we will never know the full richness of the mammalian communities that were present prior to disturbance." (Ramsay 1996) Human activity since the arrival of the Europeans has had dramatic effects on animal distribution: the bison and swift fox have been extirpated while others, such as the coyote, have flourished and expanded their range. The beaver has gone and come again. Others at home in watery environments include the muskrat, otter and mink. The mature coniferous forest supports the red squirrel, marten and fisher. Still others, such as deer, moose, elk, foxes, bears, wolves, porcupines, rats, mice, snakes and turtles range widely over the ecozones. As with some plants, they thrive where one or more habitats mingle. (Banfield 1974; Beck 1958; F. Leighton 1996)

A. Respect, Knowledge and Skill Make a Successful Hunter

*I don't kill baby caribou or the mother caribou. The baby caribou are too small...
The baby caribou is like my son.*

-Jimmy Dzeylion [Dene], Wollaston Lake area
(Holland *et al.* 2003:36)

In the same way as an intimate knowledge of his environment, passed down from generations before, fitted the First Nations gatherer for harvesting plant resources, hunting and trapping was carried out within a territory well known to him and understood in all its dimensions.

As the caribou migrated south in the fall and north to their calving grounds in the spring, they followed centuries-old routes that took them along huge sand eskers and across lakes and rivers at narrow and shallow places. These caribou crossings were well-known to the Dene, and the hunters would camp there to wait for the animals to arrive. (Calef 1981)

Attention to detail, knowledge of animal habits and imagination were essential.

I walk on snowshoes through the bush, but I don't cut a trail. I just walk. My trail when I walk on snowshoes is just narrow. I set snares as I go. For link [lynx], he go there, that's where I go.

-Leon Medal [Dene, b.1913], Fond du Lac/Stony Rapids area
(Holland *et al.* 2003:100)

The month of February was the hardest time of the year for the people because of the frost. It seemed to stop everything, even the wind. It was hard to get fish or even a rabbit. It was hard to hunt because there was no wind, so the moose could smell you and run away. If you stepped on a twig it seemed louder in the month of February. The only time the men would hunt was when it was windy.

-Phillip Sewap [Dene Elder], Deschambault Lake (Sewap 2001)

I would bait my traps, set it on one of these trails and cover it with snow. Then I would go out on the trapline on horseback, and ride back and forth on each side and around the trap. Coyotes are very smart and curious, and there were a lot of wild horses roaming around then. The coyotes would investigate the tracks around the traps and sooner or later, get caught. I was not a good trapper, I just fooled them. I had to out think those coyotes.

- Solomon Johnstone [Cree, b.1888], Mistawasis First Nation
(Phillips, Troff and Whitecalf, eds. 1976)

Hunting and trapping methods were also learned at his father's knee. And her father's knee.

And I remember my dad when he trapped, he'd boil his traps in this solution and boil them in the spruce boughs, you know, spruce boughs to kill the smell, you

know, so the rats won't smell say, weasel smell and be scared of the traps, eh. That's what they used to do; they used to boil all, disinfect all their traps, boil their traps.

- Ethel Isbister, Métis (Isbister 1984)

It was a long way north. No kickers [outboard motors] that time, no planes. Maybe three or four men in one canoe would hunt together. Before freeze-up the men would go and get stuff and then go back up north. People didn't build houses at that time, they just used tents. Before the snow was gone they would come down south because there was no caribou up there to hunt. If there was no caribou, if the caribou don't come, boy you gotta get south or by golly, you'll go hungry. You've got to hunt for moose. You've got to snare rabbit. And you set a net for fish to feed the dogs.

-Leon Medal [Dene, b.1913], Fond du Lac/Stony Rapids area
(Holland *et al.* 2003:103)

Sometimes when there are no caribou, no ducks sometimes, you take that one beaver and dry it. You cut it up, put some salt on it and smoke it. You have to be careful to keep the flies away. When it's well-dried, you cook it, you boil it, and it's good meat again. You can travel a long ways and it's still alright. If a Dene has matches and snowshoes he'll be alright in the bush.

-Leon Medal [Dene, b.1913], Fond du Lac/Stony Rapids area
(Holland *et al.* 2003:102)

I want to tell about my grandfather, Omo Ko Ma Ni Wew. I stayed with him when I was young. When he went out hunting, he took his pipe, a stone pipe, along; he had it attached to his belt. He told me, "We'll go to the lake and paddle around." He had no gun or shells. When we got to the lake, there was a birch canoe laying upside down. With his bow and arrows, he used to kill many muskrats. When we got home he would take out his pipe and pray.

-George Albert [Cree, b.1905], Ahtahkakoop First Nation
(Phillips, Troff and Whitecalf, eds. 1976)

A large hunting party would sometimes construct a fence of rocks or wood and drive the caribou herd towards it. The trapped animals could then easily be dispatched, providing meat and hides for several families.

(Missinipe Broadcasting Corporation 2001: Caribou Hunting)

Netting water fowl in the fall was an efficient method of taking many birds.

...you know what my dad used to do... he used to ...put a net, he used to get sometimes 50, 60 nets in the fall at once, then he would put that away for the winter; he gut them and that's it. He didn't have to get them, then, ... all winter we would have ducks... he'd [frozen] them... in the fall...

-Gade Aubichon [Métis] (SICC 2002: Swampy Cree/Métis, p. 12)

...that's what we did in Cumberland, they hang them, aheyo, put their heads down and... they'd put salt inside the ducks...

-Mary Alma Chaboyer [Métis] (SICC 2002: Swampy Cree/Métis, p. 13)

Bison, deer, elk, moose and caribou were hunted and many smaller animals were snared or trapped.

I remember once in the winter time we saw three deer. The snow was so deep we used to catch them by the ear and ride them. The deer were big and fat then.

-Absalom Roberts [Dene, b.1894], La Ronge Band

(Phillips, Troff and Whitecalf, eds. 1976)

When we hunted we would hunt in groups, 'cause it would be very difficult to try and kill something like a moose by yourself. So it would be easier to hunt in groups now. ... a group went hunting about a day or two, cause they had to walk far from the camp to hunt big game like buffalo, and moose. Some of the hunters would go and hunt beaver for their families, also for the other people.

- Abolom Ratt [Cree Elder], La Ronge (Ratt 2001)

There is a lake not far from here called Little Horse Lake. My grandparents used to hunt muskrats there. We used to camp there when I was a child. They killed many muskrats. The hides they sold at a store some distance away. This store was beside a lake – the lake is called Sneaky Lake. We would camp by this store for days after grandpa sold his furs.

-Marion Dillon [Dene], La Loche area

(Holland and Hewitt 2002:128)

B. The Tools of the Hunter

While in the past arrows were made of wood and bone, with quartz, chert or flint arrow heads, metal blades replaced the chipped stone heads when Europeans first traded with First Nations people. Axes made of ground stone, adzes made with beaver incisors and knives of bone or flaked chert were now available in metal. Light stone-headed spears were used well into the 20th century. (Benjamin 1977; Clarke 1977; Calef 1981) Metal tools were appreciated.

Sometimes there were caribou at Fidler Bay and we used to kill them. The lake was not frozen yet so we waited until they came walking by, then we speared them. There were caribou all over. We'd make a thoth [spear] with a file and a long straight pole that you could throw. To make a thoth you need to use a big file. You have to make a big fire to shape the file to put at the end of your pole. This becomes something like a knife. Then you tie it to the pole. -Jimmy

Dzeylion [Dene], Wollaston Lake area

(Holland *et al.* 2003:36)

The Dog

The importance of the dog, intelligent and hard working, whose partnership with First Nations hunters dated back thousands of years, persisted into the 1950s. Equally ancient knowledge of techniques for survival in severe winter weather was also essential.

I used to be a hunter. We had plenty of dogs in those days and we made good use of them. I had one that could carry 40 traps on his back. Our dogs chased bobcats and moose. We'd be up north all winter, hunting. The leaves would be out by the time we came back.

-James Crowe [Cree, b.1914], Keeseekoose First Nation
(Phillips and Whitecalf, eds. 1977)

I have trapped many miles away, where there are no trees, in the barrenlands. [at Kasba Lake] I trapped white fox for three years using a dog team. I used seven dogs. There were no skidoos. ... I lived inside a snowbank with my dogs when I was trapping, but this was not a good living because it got really cold.

-Jimmy Dzeylion [Dene], Wollaston Lake area
(Holland *et al.* 2003:37)

Dene people would leave after freezeup, about Christmastime, trap all winter [at Waterbury Lake] and move back in spring before the snow was gone and there was open water. The trappers would buy many supplies for the winter, go to Swan River or Brochet with three dog teams. Sometimes, the store manager would pack up everything (tea, sugar, no flour as it was too heavy, shells, axe, files, clothing) and take it out to the trapline and bring the furs back. In these old days, trappers could cross provincial borders. Now they can't.

-Bart Dzeylion [Dene], Wollaston Lake area
(Holland *et al.* 2003:17)

When the men were out hunting in the winter in the old days they camped in the snow, without a tent. They would have a rabbit skin blanket and just sleep outside in the snow, under a shelter by the fire. If he wanted to stay for a long time he made a tent with four poles, tied on top. You take poles and lay them around, close together and plug the holes with moss. You pack snow around the bottom and make a fire inside. It was nice and warm. You just make tea, no smoke, nothing.

- Elzéar Herman [Dene], La Loche

(Missinipe Broadcasting Corporation 2001: Caribou Hunting)

For lynx, I used my hunting dog, who would chase them up a tree, making it easy for me to shoot them. Lynx pelts brought me \$20 a pelt and sometimes more. I also trapped muskrats in winter. It didn't matter how deep the muskrat lodge was, my dog could find it and begin digging in the snow. My hunting dog helped a lot.

-Solomon Johnstone [Cree, b.1888], Mistawasis First Nation
(Phillips, Troff and Whitecalf, eds. 1976)

Other tools

Snowshoes were an essential tool in the winter hunt. Dene snowshoes, unlike Cree snowshoes, had a right and left foot. Caribou lures were also made by the Dene of horns, tied together with a piece of leather, and worn on the waist. Imitating the clicking of caribou hooves, the lures attracted the caribou to where hunters lay in wait. (Missinipe Broadcasting Corporation 2001: Caribou Hunting) Birchbark horns were used for calling moose. (Bart Dzeylion [Dene], Wollaston Lake area, Holland *et al.* 2003:28)

C. Uses for the Products of the Hunt

Little was wasted in the use of animals killed in the hunt: all was found to be useful for food to structural materials, for fastening and tying, for clothing and shelter, for toys and games.

a. Food

One adult male bison provided about 700 kg. of meat and the cows about 450 kg. Moose, bear, elk and deer were also hunted. The meat was often roasted fresh on a spit or smoked and roasted on a stick.

Most meat we smoked, moose, muskrats, fish. And we cooked it by roasting it on a stick that was shaped like a fork (aponask). And we kept the meat in place by tying it with strips of that we got from the stick, we got from the aponask.

(Sanderson 2001)

It might, alternatively, be cooked by hot stones in a skin bag. The leanest meat was often sliced and hung on racks in the open air to dry. This “dry meat”, or jerky, could be stored or pounded and combined with berries and fat from the bones for making pemmican. Meat could also be covered and stored for a short period of time in tree tops away from other animals and birds.

(Trottier-Moine n.d; Cook 2001; Missinipe Broadcasting Corporation 2001: Food)

Long ago, elders ate only meat, no bread. There was no flour in those days, so they would dry meat, then pound it and mix grease in it. This is what they called pemmican. I'd sooner eat wild meat like rabbit or fried muskrat and sometimes grey squirrels.

-Mary Jane Rose Anderson [Cree, b.1892], Gordons First Nation
(Phillips and Whitecalf, eds. 1977)

We had a hole in the ground. First we put hay, then we'd put the potatoes in. And when we had dry meat we would wrap it with bark and put in there. With ducks we just cut them open leave the feathers on wrap it in bark, put it in the hole.

(Sanderson 2001)

The kids used to drink broth from the meat that was boiled. The bones were crushed and boiled to get the grease. After the grease was taken, the broth was good to drink. That's what the kids drank.

-Phillip Sewap [Dene Elder], Deschambault Lake (Sewap 2001)

b. Spiritual/Ceremonial/Artistic

The drum was perhaps the most important ceremonial item made. The horns and skull of the bison were used in the manufacture of ceremonial items. Similarly, bones were used in divination, for the hunt and for direction in the seasonal round. (Bart Dzeylion [Dene], Wollaston Lake area, in Holland *et al.* 2003:19-20;)

In the dead of winter, when food was scarce, men might be reduced to hunting the porcupine for meat. The quills were used by women, dyed with vegetable dyes, flattened and sewn onto moccasins and other items for artistic decoration. This form of decoration was used in the past before glass beads were available. (Cook 2001; Sewap 2001)

c. Shelter

When I was young, people used to make tents out of caribou hides, Some people used thirty hides for a big tent, less for smaller ones. The tents were high because you put two hides together, one above the other. You could see the piece at the top of the tent where the circular lines were cut around the neck of the animal. This used to be beautiful to me.

-Marisis Aze [Dene], Wollaston Lake area (Holland *et al.* 2003:9)

In the past the people lived in teepees made from caribou or moosehide. It would take as many as sixty caribou hides to make a teepee. When it was time to move on, the teepee would be folded into a bundle and put on a sled. Travel in the barrenlands necessitated taking the poles as well as there were no trees large enough for this purpose. (Clarke 1977)

d. Clothing and Related Items

The hides were tanned using brains, which are acidic, and urine.

We used everything from the caribou. Nothing was wasted. ... The only thing we threw away were the intestines.... You can make a small jacket for children from a small caribou. You skin the caribou head with its ears still attached. Then you make the jacket from the skin and sew these two pieces together to make a hooded parka. ... People used to wear caribou fur coats in the winter time. In the summer and fall people would use old winter coats with the hair falling out, or cut the hair off to make a jacket for warmer weather.

-Marisis Aze [Dene], Wollaston Lake area (Holland *et al.* 2003:9)

The older women here in Deshambault Lake... still know how to tan hides and how to make slippers. A long time ago that is how they used to make clothes for themselves. Footwear, leggings all sorts of things, gloves, mukluks. But, I wonder if they had socks? I don't know, but they made bags, all sorts of things. ... There was also the caribou, they didn't throw that away either. They used to use it as a rug, same thing with the bear.

-Jimmy Dzeylion [Dene], Wollaston Lake area
(Holland *et al.* 2003:36-37)

My dad had caribou hide pants... [with] fur inside them. The same thing with the parka. These clothes were very warm. All clothing was caribou hide, even the mitts.

-Jimmy Dzeylion [Dene], Wollaston Lake area
(Holland *et al.* 2003:36-37)

...the moose hide... Oh it smells so good after it has been smoked. The gloves and slippers that are made, even moose hats I used to see. Boy the Indian women used to be really good at making things. I know some men that can make moose hide, this isn't that long ago. I'm not that old but that is what I was told and that is all I know. Nothing was thrown away.

-Harry Custer [Cree Elder], Deschambault Lake (Custer 2001)

Caribou and bear rugs, rabbit skin blankets were also made. (Jimmy Dzeylion and Gabriel Tsannie [Dene], Wollaston Lake area, in Holland *et al.* 2003:36-37, 51)

e. Tools

Long bones were shaped for use as hide scrapers. Thread and snares were made from sinews. Horn was used for utensils and vessels. Antlers and bone were used for fish hooks.

f. Toys and Games

Many varieties of toys and games were made from scrap material: dolls, toy animals, bows and arrows, rattles, dice.

7. Fishing

The many rivers and lakes in Saskatchewan supplied freshwater fish including lake trout, northern pike, sturgeon, pickerel, sauger, whitefish, tullibee, burbot, suckers, and arctic grayling. Traditionally, First Nations people employed a variety of strategies to harvest fish, including nets, hooks and line, spears, traps, weirs and snares on poles. (Missinipi Broadcasting Corporation 2001: Fishing)

...wooden fish traps used in small rivers or creeks were in the form of a covered log box, handled dipnets made of willow bark kept wet always.

-Gabriel Tsannie [Dene], Wollaston Lake area
(Holland *et al.* 2003:51)

My father used caribou hide sinew to stitch caribou hide string to make a fish net and snares...

-Lucy Robillard [Dene Elder] (SICC 2002: Dene, p15)

Fish provided food for dog teams and supplemented the diet of hunters and gatherers. Eaten fresh during spawning, they were also smoked and dried. They were lightweight and easily transported on the seasonal round.

I would even do some fishing, when I was very young...

-Mary Alma Chaboyer [Métis] (SICC 2002: Swampy Cree/Métis, p.12)

During the 1920s, many First Nations people fished commercially, as well as for their domestic consumption. Large numbers were taken on northern lakes in winter and freighted to the rail heads and, later, to fish processing plants. The fish processing and refrigeration plants allowed summer fishing.

8. The Old Life is Remembered Fondly

The subsistence life, with all its hardships and insecurity, is remembered by most First Nations people who experienced it with nostalgia and longing: the closeness to the land, the sharpness of their skills, the personal nature of the need to survive and win against the odds.

Jonas Clarke sums it up when describes his feelings about the traditional subsistence activities of his youth.

I had operations on both my hips because I got hurt in a plane crash quite a few years ago [now 1977]. I can't hardly walk now. But I still go out and trap. I trap every year, fishing too. When you have been doing it all your life, well, you can't give it up. ... I miss it. I can't stay here. I'm used to it, you see. If my leg is good, by geez I can trap good yet! Scotchmen is tough. My daddy's from Scotland, my mom's from right here. My blood is strong, good, you see. ... Now I use a skidoo, that's why I'm alright eh. I've got the boys with me too.

-Jonas Clarke [Dene], La Loche area

(Holland and Hewitt 2002:12-13)

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