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The Storytellers

Chipewyan Elders Pass
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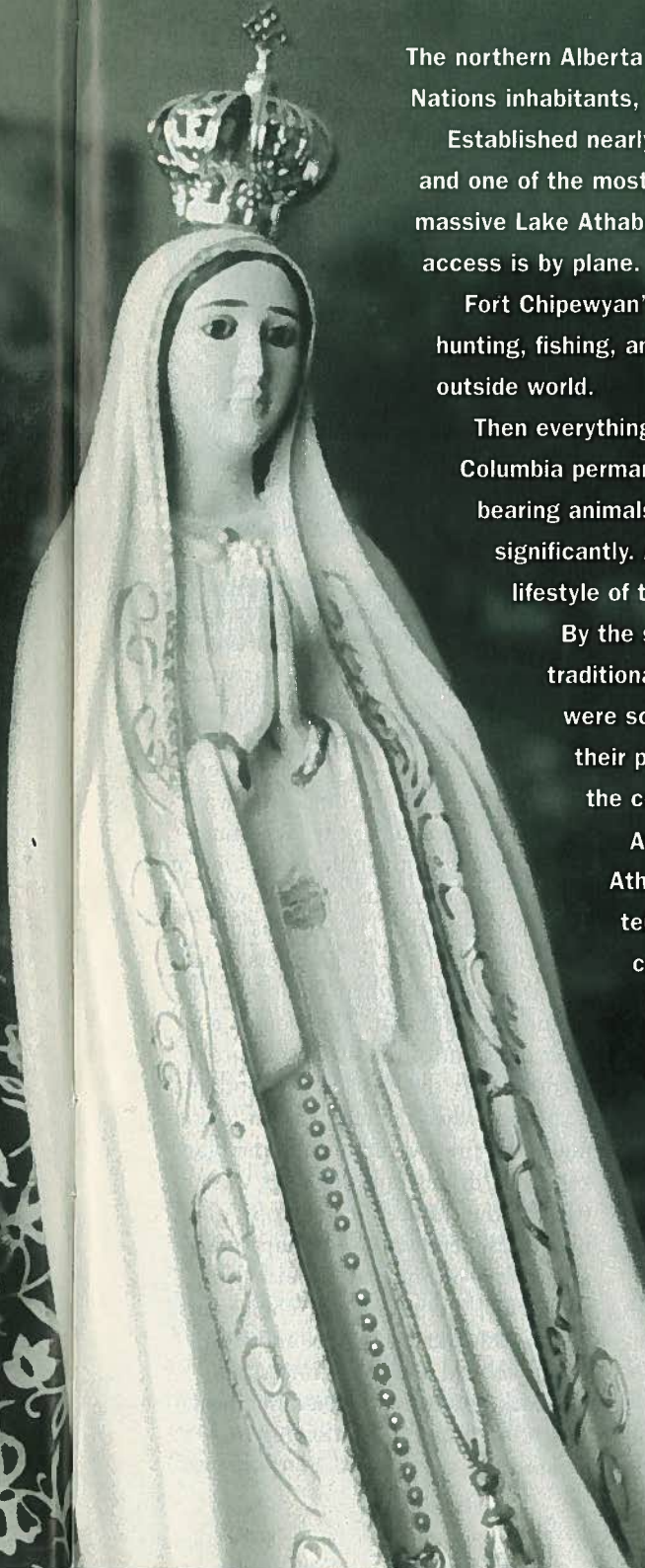
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THE STORYTELLERS

The traditional knowledge of the Athabasca Chipewyan is handed down through the stories told by their elders

Mary Bruno, like most of the elders, is spiritually connected with the Roman Catholic Church.



The northern Alberta community of Fort Chipewyan is home to approximately 1,200 First Nations inhabitants, including some 250 members of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation.

Established nearly 200 years ago, Fort Chipewyan is both the oldest European settlement and one of the most inaccessible communities in the province. It is perched on the shore of massive Lake Athabasca in the northeastern corner of Alberta. For most of the year, the only access is by plane.

Fort Chipewyan's remoteness proved a blessing for many years: a traditional lifestyle of hunting, fishing, and trapping was able to flourish, largely untouched by contact with the outside world.

Then everything changed in the 1970s. The construction of the Bennet Dam in British Columbia permanently altered the water flow in northern Alberta, an area in which fur bearing animals had thrived. At about the same time, the demand for fur garments declined significantly. Almost overnight the trapping industry, a core activity in the traditional lifestyle of the Athabasca Chipewyan, disappeared.

By the summer of 2000, the community realized the urgent need to record their traditional knowledge, culture, spiritual traditions, and land use practices. There were scarcely 50 Athabasca Chipewyan elders left. These elders were the last of their people to have lived the traditional, land-based lifestyle. With their passing, the community's link to its past would vanish.

Award-winning photojournalist **George Webber**, '73 BA, was invited by the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation to join them in creating a book that would tell the elders' stories. These pages show just a few of the images he captured, together with excerpts from the book *Footprints on the Land: Tracing the Path of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation* (reprinted with the permission of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation).



"I was invited to create photographs for the book and recognized it as a wonderful opportunity. My work in documentary photography has been about seeking out people with important stories to tell and in the recording those stories to learn about and to be more connected to life."

—George Webber



Mary Madeline Marcel (centre) and her sister Eliza Flett with a portrait of their mother, Esther Price.

ACFN Elder Mary Madeline Marcel was a new bride of 16 in 1937 when she joined her husband Benjamin Marcel on their first summer hunting trip together to the mainland with a group of families from Jackfish. The young newlywed didn't have many skills that would be useful on a month-long hunting and camping trip, so her husband, who was 36, told her to stay behind. As Mary's daughter Alice Rigney tells the story:

"Mom told him that she was going and needed to know what to pack for the journey overland. Dad told her to make dog packs. She had no idea how to do this so she went over to her sister-in-law's and looked at their dog packs until she had an idea on how to pack the necessary items for such a journey. She had to pack the bedroll, clothing for two, dry goods and balance the packs so that they didn't fall over to one side or the other. This took some skill and practice. My dad helped Mom load the precious cargo on four dogs and then they were ready.

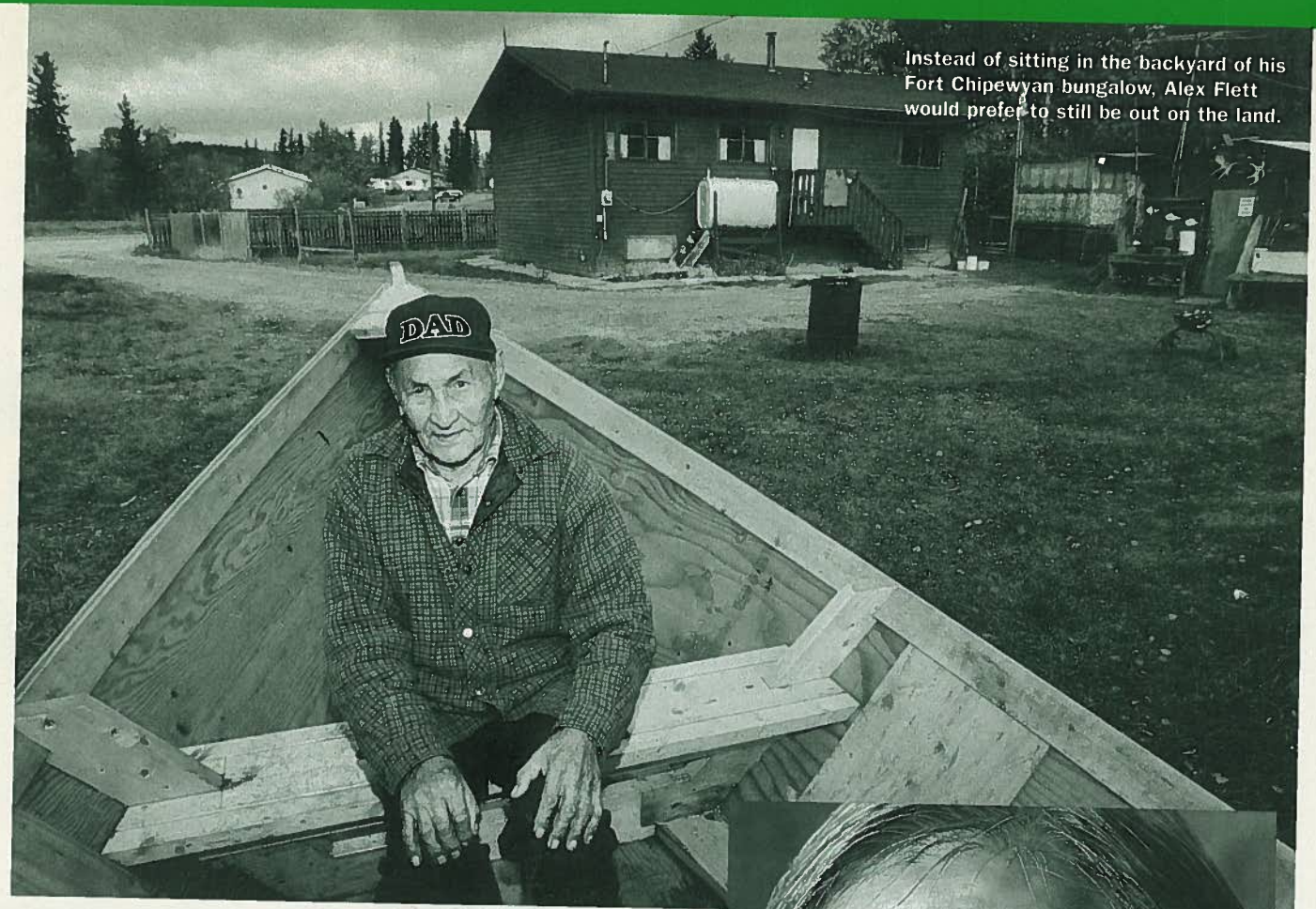
"Other extended family members on the trip included Isadore and Columbe Voyageur, Uncle Joe and Rosa, Jonas and Annie Piche, and Marie Mercredi, Gabriel Mercredi's mother. They left Jackfish Lake and boated as far as Jonas Laviolette's house (now Magloire Cardinal's home). They unloaded the boats, put the dog packs on the anxious animals and started on their journey. The men and women travelled together until they arrived at Big Rock, where they had lunch and rested the dogs. The dogs each had a leash, which the women would hold so they didn't wander or chase rabbits or grouse. From Big Rock, the men left before the women, who would follow about three hours later.

"Granny Marie (Mercredi) was the leader as she was the oldest and the wisest. The men were headed for the campsite and were hunting along the way. When the women started on the trail, which followed the natural ridge of the sand hills, they would watch for notch signs on trees, which was their signal indicating the direction the men went.

"Mom said it was a hot day and the dogs were thirsty. The women did carry water for the dogs in pails, but the dogs' sharp noses told them there was water up ahead and they started to pull away from the women. Granny Marie told the women to hold on to the leashes. However, some of the dogs got away and made a beeline to the lake, much to the dismay of the onlookers. One of Mom's dogs got away and followed the others into the lake—it was the one with the blankets! Needless to say, that was the spot where camp was to be for the first night. The women got their dogs out of the water and proceeded to dry the bedding and clothing.

"Later, when the tent was set for the night, the fires were burning, the blankets were drying, and the dogs were tied up, the children were happy, and the atmosphere was one of happiness—a feast was on the way. Dinner [on such trips] was usually the choice cuts, which included the brisket and ribs, usually boiled and made into soup. Bannock and tea completed the meal."

(from Chapter 7: *Following the Seasons*)



Instead of sitting in the backyard of his Fort Chipewyan bungalow, Alex Flett would prefer to still be out on the land.

Josephine Mercredi told the story of Ttha'naltther, an important tale about the early relationship between the Cree and Chipewyan people.

The story of the Dene woman Ttha'naltther (Falling Sand) is an important part of the Etthen eldeli Dene's oral history concerning their early encounters with the fur trade.

According to stories told by the Elders, the beautiful Ttha'naltther was captured and enslaved by the Cree in the early 18th century during one of their armed raids into Chipewyan areas to obtain furs for trade. The Cree had acquired guns from the European traders and had killed many Chipewyan people during these raids.

Ttha'naltther travelled to Fort York with her captors and while there she told James Knight, the chief Factor of the Fort York trading post, about the treatment of her people at the hands of the Cree. Troubled by Ttha'naltther's story, Knight sent company trader William Stuart into the interior with Ttha'naltther on a mission to make peace between the Cree and the Chipewyan and to

bring the Chipewyan into the fur trade. According to Elders' stories, Ttha'naltther was a courageous and dynamic woman who spoke Cree "with indifference." Stuart also spoke Cree.

The trip into the interior was difficult and Ttha'naltther had some trouble locating her people, most likely because they were trying to avoid the threatening Cree. She finally found them somewhere north of Lake Athabasca and east of the Slave River.

However, the Chipewyan people most likely had been pushed north and east as a result of the increased aggressiveness and firepower of the Cree during this time.



It appears that Ttha'naltther was instrumental in making peace between the Cree traders and the Chipewyan and in encouraging her people to join the fur trade, thus beginning a new era in their history.

(from Chapter 3: *First Encounter*)

Charlie Voyageur is still very active on the land.

Controlled burning is a traditional way the Aboriginal people exercised their stewardship of the land.

Charlie Voyageur told about the spring when he was 11 years old and was out picking eggs. One day he left his campfire burning while he picked duck eggs and the fire got away from him. His father was going to punish him for letting the fire go out of control, but his grandfather said "Leave the kid alone—he has done the country good."

"Two years later the raspberries were tremendous in that area," Charlie recalled.

(from Chapter 9: Respecting and Preserving Traditional Knowledge)



Victoria Flett, at home with her husband, Alex, continues to make traditional garments, like slippers made of moose hide with beaver trim and intricate beadwork.



Victoria Mercredi has recounted many legends, including the legend of Otchôpê, the Arctic Giant.

Chipewyan legends tell of two giants who fought a great battle in the Arctic many years ago. One fell dead with his legs landing in the Arctic, his backbone forming the mountains and his head ending up close to where the Chipewyan people lived. The "head of the giant" melted, as a glacier would melt, with the giant's blood (the rivers) flowing from the body. ACEN elders, including Victoria Mercredi, say the body of the giant represents the lands of the Dene people. Some believe this story might relate to the migration of the Dene from the north.

(from Chapter 1: In the Footsteps of Glaciers)