

## Tyrone's Story of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada



This story occurred around a campfire during Festival Days at Elizabeth Metis Settlement. Several thirteen and fourteen year old visitors wanted to know what we were celebrating.

**Julie:** Today was lots of fun, with all the singing and dancing and colourful costumes!

**Todd:** ... and the food! That was my favourite part. I'm stuffed!

**Levi:** Tyrone, why do people at Elizabeth Metis Settlement have this celebration every year? What's it all about?

**Tyrone:** Well, today is all about remembering my aboriginal history.

**Ivan:** I've heard "**Metis**", "**Aboriginal**", "**First Nations**", "**Inuit**": do all these words refer to the same people?

**Tyrone:** "**Aboriginal**" refers to original inhabitants of North America. First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples are various descendants of original inhabitants.

**Julie:** So who are the **First Nations**?

**Tyrone:** **First Nations** means Aboriginal people who lived in Canada before the European settlers. First Nations peoples are not Inuit or Métis.

The arrival of European settlers in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century had a great impact on Aboriginals. Europeans wanted furs and pelts, which were status symbols, so the **fur trade** began with First Nations exchanging furs for other goods. But Europeans also brought many diseases such as smallpox, typhoid, measles, whooping cough, and tuberculosis, which killed many First Nations peoples. Over time, land that First Nations used for hunting was converted to farmland, and they lost their main source of food. As the fur trade and European settlement spread, First Nations' culture and language deteriorated. The British government established many treaties, recognizing First Nations' rights to the land, setting aside reserves, and forming a government branch called the *Indian Department*. We don't use the term "Indian" anymore.

**Ivan:** You also mentioned "**Inuit**"; how are they different from First Nations people?

**Tyrone:** The **Inuit** people came from western Alaska, after crossing the land bridge from Asia around the year 1000, and spread eastwards across the Arctic. After 1350, during the Little Ice Age, Inuit were forced to abandon their hunting and whaling sites in the high Arctic as bowhead whales disappeared from Canada. Without whales, these Inuit existed on a poor diet and

didn't have access to essential raw materials for tools and architecture. In Canada, Inuit had a traditional semi-nomadic life north of the Arctic tree line until mid-1900s.

**Julie:** This is called the Elizabeth Metis Settlement; who are the **Metis**?

**Tyrone:** Many First Nations women married European (French, British, or Scottish) men and had children, who embraced both cultures. These aboriginal descendants, many of whom settled in Red River, Manitoba, lost rights to the land when they married non-aboriginals. The Metis defended their way of life and land rights, and after a very long time, the government granted these rights to the Metis. Many Metis moved from Manitoba to Alberta and came to live here in Elizabeth Settlement, so you see, Julie, my ancestors were Metis who fought in the Riel Rebellion a hundred years ago!

**Fatima:** So what's happening with Aboriginal Peoples today? Are they still around?

**Tyrone:** They sure are, Fatima, although maintaining our culture hasn't been easy. After **The Indian Act** was passed in 1876, the Canadian government thought it might be easier for Aboriginal peoples to live if they assimilated, or conformed, to a European lifestyle. This policy of cultural **assimilation** imposed many restrictions on Aboriginal peoples. The government removed children from their families and forced them to attend **residential schools**, where they were forbidden from speaking their own languages or practising their own beliefs.

**Julie:** Wow! When I started school, I was scared being away from Mom, and that was just down the street from my house. If I had to be away from my family to go to school, I would have died!

**Levi:** Add not knowing the language adults expect you to understand and that's everyone's worst nightmare! Is this still going on? What happened to the children?

**Tyrone:** This practice was very damaging to individuals and their culture, and finally, in 1996, the Canadian government closed the last residential school. In 2008, on behalf of the Canadian people, Prime Minister Stephen Harper formally apologized to Aboriginal peoples for the suffering and abuse they experienced in residential schools. The government is still working to compensate all who suffered.

**Fatima:** I see the Metis culture continues to be celebrated in festivals like the one here today. Where can I attend other Aboriginal cultural events?

**Tyrone:** Various Alberta First Nations, such as Ben Calf Robe, Saddle Lake, Alexander, Alexis, Kainai, Tsuu T'ina, Lac La Biche, Beaver Lake, Peigan, Driftpile, Enoch, Ermineskin, and Siksika hold *PowWows* every year. June 21<sup>st</sup> is also National Aboriginal Day in Canada, where events are held nation-wide. You can often see and hear traditional hoop dancing, drumming, singing, and fiddling as well as rap, hip hop, breakdancing and other modern genres, which are growing significantly on the Canadian music scene. Well known hip hop groups like *Foreign Objects*, from Winnipeg, Manitoba, and *Team Rezofficial*, from Hobbema, Alberta, are very successful.

The creative expression of FNMI (First Nations, Metis, and Inuit) artists is extensive: poetry, song writing, music, dance, sculpture, beadwork, plays, and novels.

The *Aboriginal Peoples Television Network* is the first and only national Aboriginal broadcaster in the world, with programming by, for, and about Aboriginal Peoples. One successful author who was interviewed many times on APTN programs is Drew Hayden Taylor, who celebrates his Ojibway culture through his humour and honesty. He wrote two really good plays we studied in my English course this year. They're called *The Boy in the Treehouse* and *Girl Who Loved Her Horses*.

**Levi:** Thanks for all the information, Tyrone. You sure know a lot about FNMI in Canada!

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