

Journey to Ministikwan

Elaine Enns

The mighty South Saskatchewan (Cree, *kisiskāiwani*, “swiftly flowing river”) bisects the heart of Saskatoon, where I grew up. As a teenager, in summer I would swim and play in it (though forbidden because of dangerous undertow). It flows through my soul, pulsing alongside the genetic currents of my ancestors, its reflections of wild lightning storms and fall colors imprinted on my soul as *home*. So too the memory of walks with my parents along its banks (which thankfully have been preserved as public space by the City of Saskatoon). It defines my inner landscape, alongside other memories of my bioregion: dancing northern lights and the ghostly call of loons; the magic of fireflies and a luminous harvest moon; the smell of autumn and feel of grain flowing through my hands; the stillness of falling snow.

-- edited excerpt from *Healing Haunted Histories* (157-158).

Below, the [river flowing through downtown Saskatoon](#).



My love of the people, landscapes, flora and fauna of Saskatchewan is deep. This summer Ched and I again experienced its beauty as we traveled around the province by road and by water. The drive to visit Harry and Germaine Lafond at [Muskeg Lake First Nation](#) has become familiar. About 65 km north of Saskatoon, the highway descends abruptly into the majestic North Saskatchewan River Valley at Petrofka Bridge. A few years ago, this is where we began our annual summer canoe paddle with my oldest sister Janet and brother-in-law Rob.

(Right, with Janet and Rob after a day on the North Saskatchewan last year.)



Pulling off the grid road onto Harry and Germaine's yard, we are warmly embraced and welcomed. Each time we visit, we meet more family and friends from their extended clan. This time it is grandchildren Lyrica, Isabel and Seth. We also catch up with their son Jolon, a gifted leader who directs [White Buffalo Youth Lodge](#) in Saskatoon. After a few hours reconnecting and enjoying



rhubarb punch, Harry and Germaine *again* serve us a delicious four-course dinner! It is a wonderful day, visiting for hours around the dining table and walking the land together.

A few days later, Ched and I meet Harry, Germaine and their inquisitive and fun grandson Mateo in North Battleford. We hop into their van and began the journey to [Ministikwan Lake Cree Nation](#) about 400 KM north of Saskatoon. Having prepared for the long drive with a list of questions, we are grateful to hear their stories of family and land, faith and struggles for justice. Close to the Alberta border, Harry tells the story of the 1885 [Frog Lake Battle](#).

After signing Treaty 6 in 1882, Chief Big Bear and his band had settled near Frog Lake in 1884. The Indian agent assigned to support them was withholding food and supplies, and people were starving. Just days earlier, Cree resistance had erupted at nearby Duck Lake, which mobilized the warriors of Frog Lake to join the [North-West Resistance](#) to fight for Indigenous sovereignty under Métis Catholic leader [Louis Riel](#). A few days earlier, Ched, Janet, Rob and I had canoed to Batoche, the epicenter of this resistance, learning another layer of the relentless violence of settler colonialism and Indigenous survivance. (Right, Métis cemetery with village church in background, [Batoche National Historic Site](#).)



After four hours, we arrive with the Lafonds at [kâniyâsihk Culture Camp](#), at the edge of the [boreal borest](#) (left). We are greeted by elder Matilda Lewis, who takes us on a tour. The Camp is an amazing educational space, where all are welcome to learn traditional economic and language skills through land-based education. Courses include Cree-immersion, hide tanning, peeling birch trees, paddling, harvesting herbs and medicine, creating porcupine quill jewelry, sustainable and responsible hunter education, dogsled building, filleting fish, cutting meat and food preservation. kâniyâsihk offers certification programs in basic and advanced wilderness First Aid (see this lovely [CBC article](#) that describes their work and its impact on the author's own journey).

Matilda's son Kevin Lewis is a professor at the University of Saskatchewan, where he developed and launched their Indigenous Languages Certificate (*check out his 13 minute TedX talk [here](#)*). Matilda has taught for over 30 years. As she shares on the website: "Since we started learning how to tan hides, they have been teaching us how amazing our relatives were. Their resilience and their strength was worn on their bodies. Their strong arms and legs were wrapped with love from these hides and animals. There is so much teaching in hide tanning. The knowledge was lost in our community, but we researched, asked around, and traveled to find out how to tan the different hides. Moose, deer, antelope, caribou, buffalo and elk have been tanned at our camps." (Below, l-r: Mateo with tanned hides; with tanning scrapers made from animal bones; birch bark canoe that Kevin Lewis built; inset, Mateo holds a piece of birch bark).



We enjoy a lovely picnic together, and our time with Matilda is filled with wonderful stories and laughter. “I like being on reserves,” says Harry, “because people are always smiling.” (*Right, Matilda and Harry share a funny tale.*)

We are surprised to be invited to witness part of a Sundance ceremony that is in its final day nearby. It is a great honor to attend this sacred ceremony and its celebration of the gift economy and symbiosis with the land. Harry helps us understand what we were witnessing, explaining that everything is bathed in prayer. Lavish gifts are given to both elders and children, including us settler visitors. One child exclaims “Is ALL of this for ME?!” There is laughter and solemnity. We tell Harry, who is always looking for parallels between Cree and Catholic spirituality, that we have never encountered a church space as compelling as this one.



On the drive back, we talk with Harry and Germaine about their vocation as bridge builders, traveling back and forth between Indigenous and settler worlds. They even live on the edge of their reserve, where for years they have invited settlers like us to share in music, food and tradition, in order to build relationships. (See “[Indigenous Couple Live a Life of Reconciliation](#)” from the *Canadian Catholic News*.) We are so grateful for their friendship and eldership, modeling in deep and powerful ways what it means to be Ambassadors of Reconciliation.

We part company after a lovely meal at the Gold Star Casino in North Battleford, an intertribal Casino. We take a longer route so we can drive on a divided highway, since we are using a car borrowed from dear friends’ Laura Fohse & Jordan Cantwell. Alas, just before midnight, 20 km outside of Saskatoon, we are “hit by a deer” (as locals say, since you never see them coming). We are not hurt physically, and it could have been much worse, but this common-yet-traumatic experience shakes us deeply, and totals the car.

Coming at the end of our annual summer sojourn to my beloved home place, this was literally a jolting reminder of how at odds our civilization is with nature. Since childhood, as I traversed the prairies, I have seen deer, fox, coyote, wolf, moose, black bear, and pronghorn antelope—right on the side of the highway. Why would we be surprised if we hit one, traveling at high speed through the dark? We felt so badly for the deer, who disappeared into the night, and for our friends who were so generous with their car. This “epilogue” to our trip was another indication of how much work we have to do in becoming more literate in both Indigenous life *and* the land.



This is why this fall we are making a second big push in the work of [Healing Haunted Histories](#). Please read the attached letter to learn about exciting tools, opportunities and resources we are developing for the ongoing work of decolonizing discipleship.

(Left: Kevin Lewis, who runs *kâniyâsihk Culture Camps*, paddles on Ministikwan Lake; photo credit [here](#).)