

Title: 0028-Our Voices-Legends and Prehistory  
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Recorder: Louis Bird  
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My name is Louis Bird and I used to be from Winisk, Ontario in Canada. But for the last three months, I have been residing in Moosefactory, Ontario in Canada. First of all, I am going to tape this thing. And also I am going to try to explain what I am and briefly explain what is - what I am actually. To begin with my history and also to say that I am an Indian. The Cree Indian in the area of Hudson Bay in which they call the James Bay lowland in Ontario, Northern Ontario in Canada.

My grandparents, like my grandfather was pure Indian, pure Cree Indian. And my grandmother was Maggie Sutherland. According to her story she was not pure Indian, she was mixed blood. I never did find out whether it is true or not. And for that reason I not going to try to explain my ancestors mixed blood or not. What I am going to attempt to do is to try to record the important things in my life and what I think is important. And very quickly voice, what was the verbal history where I came from, according to the information I have got from my ancestors, my grandfathers and another elders that I have worked with, that I have associated with and also that I have friends with, make friend with and who are still my friends. And also the information I got is also...I got it from the Europeans; the teachers, the priests, the missionaries, their writings stories about our peoples in the James Bay and Hudson Bay area. And also partially from the early fur-traders with our peoples, like the Hudson Bay company employees. And also the other fur-trading companies that have - did business with our people in the James Bay lowlands. This recording is made for somebody to listen who want to know about a story that is similarly done by Indian people amongst themselves. But this is done in English language, which is not going to be very accurate. But the idea

that the difference of professional writers and the Native people, the verbal history, and the stories that have been passed down amongst them... is this an example.

And to introduce this idea, I have been done a bit of research work myself for the past five years. I have already introduced myself as Louis Bird. My original name in Cree is XXBen-ae-sheeshXX which is mean a bird. It doesn't specify what kind of bird. One of the known fact about our north American Indians is that they never established their written language as we know it today. And the second is that... it is a supposed that they never reached their developing stage to have been civilized enough to create their written language. That's according to the people who study the native people of North America. And the historians and the linguistics, whatever you want to call them; archaeologists find in their digging the sign of... let me put it this way: the archaeologists have dug up signs of western Europe that cave dwellers had created cave paintings that could be consider the language development. Recently, the western people have found that North American aborigines did have their rock paintings. And did have some kind of a sign language amongst themselves. That's what the historians are telling us. And they are backed by archaeological findings and anthropological studies in the scientific dating process which is called sometimes, Carbon-14. So they have all the scientific, technical undertakings which gives them very professionally done for their works and historians and all those different groups who deal with this kind of matter. They also have this dating which I find very important for historians to be considered professionals and amongst the intellectuals in the Western Society. There is no question of their methods of being true. There's no other ways one can come close to the finding the truth. There is only one thing that has been overlooked by these fact-finding methods. That is to listen to the aborigine people of North America; that is to listen to them, regardless whether it's true or not. There are a lot of things that Natives of North America, especially in northern Canada, that has not been thoroughly recorded by early Europeans like supposedly discoverers of North America. Down to the fur-traders, the early missionaries. So much has been ignored by the intellectuals who have recorded their assumption about the Natives in recent years, especially in the remote areas of Canada. And that is my opinion. It's not because I'm doubt, or doubtful what they have found, but no Native person in this area has ever voice his own history. No native Indian

has methodically or scientifically, maybe not to use scientific term... there is no Indian a very extensive research to his own ways, or her own ways, and then to be able to write it down or come up with his own given written language to come up with a book which can be called the Native version of history, it's own history by it's own people story, by it's own effort to make their own history, to write it down. They make their history already. They have created their history whether it was uncivilized. That is my opinion.

Now quickly I'm going down to the few items that I am interested as a research of my own work. I call it research, but it is not considered research because I did not have any degree or a piece of paper that would classify me to be taken seriously by the intellectuals, or by the professionals in the western society. So here are a few things that I want to talk about. I'm just going to itemize them for the time being. One thing that I have found out amongst my own people, is amongst my own people that are still living when I listen to them or when I talk to them the method I use is I do not question them, I do not repeatedly question them anything about their past for what they have heard. I just created the atmosphere for them to be free to speak with me. And I do not make it a dramatic for them because the native Cree people in our area, they do not dramatize anything, not the way the western people do. In the western society as I mentioned before with the assistance of their technology have come up with something they call prehistorical findings, where it says evolution is a type of thing they use... type of term they use to tell us about the prehistory of human kind or human being. Our people in the Cree or any other part of northern Canada or northern area, they have a legends...they call them legends. They begin from anywhere. They do not begin in order. They begin at the end of the story or it can be coded in the middle of it, then the story begin. I will give you an example what I'm talking about. This I classify a prehistorical event amongst them. It's about the legend of a Giant Skunk. And another one...there is not verbal history amongst the Cree as to where they had originate from. There is no creation story amongst the Cree that is taken seriously. Legends are the only indicators of a prehistorical records of man amongst the Cree people in James Bay lowland. What we need for such would be to try to interpret of legends, that means the Elders. Their legendary ancestors telling legends, therefore the first European supposedly to set foot in North America was Columbus, or Norseman's, or a monk according to the western

historians. Having that idea for the two kinds of people to exchange the ideas or two different ways of doing a research. I am quoting a few words from the western writers. Now this is my own.

First thing the native do - like as I do myself - one must try to put himself back in the centuries before the European sailed into this country. It could not be proper to state European discovery of this continent because no Europeans knew such a continent did existed. Everyone know that. Even expert seafaring Norseman didn't know they had sailed into another continent. So as Columbus. He was looking for the China, for a silk. Therefore, his mistaken assumption was that he had landed somewhere in Indian. Therefore he called the people that he has seen as Indians, that he encountered. We know the rest. It's just part of the western history. The way they write it. The way they have assume it was. It is true really. According to them they have discovered the land. They discovered the people. My idea is the natives who have overpopulated their country or territory had to develop what it terms as civilization today. Civilization to my term is knowing how to live together. Utilizing resources available. Learning how to live together, sharing common goods. There beginning industrialized. To live together in organized manner. So to my understanding civilization means that.

Well then Columbus sailed into this massive continent, he assumed land was already being developed in such a state, but the continent in which he landed was still unexploited by overpopulation because the native, according to Columbus was still uncivilized. In fact the aborigines were classified as savages. The continent was vast and sparsely populated. Plenty of land to spare for migration, or migrating type of life. The native of North American then... America way were satisfied with their tribal territories. To them, the aborigine were satisfied what the land could provide for their livelihood. Their traditional culture was well established. Now let us begin to explore their traditional culture.

This part will only be a list of topics to be written later. This paper is only to organize the main written Indian version of history. Here it is: To categorize or itemize the facts which I have discovered from our ancestors, our Elders and their Elders.

First there is no Cree Indian story that can be traced to tell where our Cree Indian came from in today's Hudson or James Bay lowland areas. Because our ancestors did not develop their own written records or language. The only thing that we can find or still retain today is our Cree legends. Therefore, that's the only form of our nations prehistorical record and the history our original people. In studying these legends is a fascinating experience and is truly amazing. Take for example the modern theme of evolution theory. Life begin from modern million of years ago. Then the giant beasts roamed the earth, etc. etc. That's what the western prehistorical term. Then out of the beasts form a monkey then the missing link later early Homo sapiens emerged. Then the modern man. This is what the western prehistorical historians are telling us. And so they get all kind of assistance... all kinds of a research team. I can name a few: archaeologists, anthropologists, historians, and modern technician who use a very modern sophisticated equipment to find the dating process. All of this we know.

Now comparing that to the Indian legends, that the Cree legends start like this: Once upon a time, many moons ago there was this Giant Skunk... and so and so it goes on. This was before the human being. And so the story goes on. So a time when the animals only... only the animals existed on the earth. So the story begin this way. This ancient legend had been passed down ages before the European ever set foot on this continent - on North America. How could the illiterate native could have created such fables, fairytales, or a fantasies. The story of the Giant Frog with the sharp teeth. The Giant Lynx. These imaginary animals are in old legends. Are a fantasy. The question are Giant Ape, later term as Wendigo, even sometimes called Sasquach. The spirit belong, whatever that was, will sometimes indicate as a prediction of the death of a fellow man amongst the Cree family. There were enormous short stories. Mystery stories. Unexplained stories amongst the people in our area. Meaning the Cree territory, that is the Hudson and James Bay lowland today. The mystery is the mysterious land marks. There are a few things listed here that are almost forgotten today. This spiritual aspect of our ancestors is another mystery. That's why early Christians call it devils power, demon's work. We found out later that the missionaries were fascinated by our ancestors. Whatever they have acquired in order for them to survive in our country, or in the territory called James Bay lowland, only dealing in the James Bay lowland. We are

not talking about the entire land where other tribes like Oji-Crees, Ojibwas and Chippewa and Mohawks and XXOmegasXX and whatever you call these tribes who roams inside or had center of North American continent. I am not talking about them. I am only talking about the Crees. The Cree tribes who have existed in what is known today as the James Bay lowland. So that is the first part of my story.

Now to begin, I have not mentioned everything. I have only touch a few things. There is a very long time consuming explanation about to explain our people's spiritual aspect of their life in time before the European ever came to the North American continent. Even before the supposedly Vikings landed in Labrador, which we believe it was. And long before the... even if there was such a thing as a monk, they were landed in Newfoundland, or any other place in North America. These things existed a long time ago. The spiritual practices amongst our people, the Cree people is a fascinating research work. But these things will not exist forever. The knowledge that has been passed down is diminishing. It is really vanishing like. It's disappearing in the minds of our people. It is truly forgotten, let alone to be practiced or studied. One of the reason is that let me state this fact from the bottom of my heart, from the bottom of my belief. I do not condemn the Christian idea... Christianization or conversion of our people to Christianity. The Christian beliefs is one of the best religion that was established mankind. To believe in one God, all powerful that had created whatever we see, whatever we use. And to have created human beings is one of the belief that I truly believe. Let this recording be heard any place on earth. That is what I believe. Even though I was born amongst the savages who originate from a people termed in our history as savage people, I have belief in conversion to Christianity. I was born at least two hundred years after the Fur Traders had arrived in our area, in our district. I had no choice to have begin one... to have been the original spiritual teaching, to have acquired or even let alone... practice it. I have heard lots of it. I have listened in legends. There in the Native legends contain fifty percent of such belief and practice. But recently as a Christianity came in to take over the minds of our people and beside the missionaries condemning this kind of a practice and belief, our Elders today are forbidden to explain in detail what was the... what was our spiritual belief and practice a long time ago. And that is why I said it is a shame... unfortunate that we have to wait this long for us be able to mention such thing

amongst our people... amongst ourselves as native. They long tried to do that to our people... to a western kind of people. Because they turn it into a funny matter. They turn it into a fable or fairytale, which was not a fairytale when our people use it for our survival. And that is the sad case.

I think my batteries dead on this machine, so I'm going to stop for a while. My thought were like that. And I do not have time to finish what I have started off because the machine is even failed me. And this machine... recording machine that I use... I'm using up batteries. And my batteries are not healthy. So we'll wait for now until later...

Let me try again. It seems to me that my batteries are still working. The only problem is that when I transfer this thing or when I transfer the machine this recording may sound like a chipmunk. So as long as there's a machine that can control the speed, this will be alright for someone to listen to it. So let me get back to the thing that I have said before about the spiritual part of our history. I will do that at the other side of this tape. Because this tape is just about the last of it. So let me turn the tape and listen to the other side...

[END OF SIDE A, SIDE 1 of 2]

TAPE TRANSCRIPTION: LOUIS BIRD ORAL HISTORY PROJECT – 00 MIN.

Date Transcribed: January 3, 2002

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Recoding NO.: CRLS # 28 (Bird #616) Side 2 of 2, Counter #157 on tape.

“LEGENDS & PREHISTORY”

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[BEGINNING AT COUNTER # 157 ON TAPE]

Here we go again. Let me try first that it's working. Yes, it's working. Now as I said the... very last part of the other side of the tape is that... the western writers and intellectuals tend to take the Indian stories like fairytales and fictions and fables and superstitions. All kinds of names. The Christian leaders call it the that evil work. The devil inspired thoughts. And for that reason no man or nobody that Indian ancestry would like to talk about and that is one of the problems. I have found out in the past when I was working with the anthropologist who came to study our people in our community of Winisk. They tried especially when the person is known to be a Christian. A lot of our Elders are not actually to be a shamed to talk about it, but they respect the old beliefs still that they do not want to give it out. What I am doing today... bringing out these things in... of our history before the Europeans is I could be considered as a sell-out person. Selling or giving out the secrets of our past. But the thing is, things that we already lost... that we already at the last leg of our... our culture, I feel at least can be recorded... at least partially as it was. In that's as much as I could interpret it. And as much as I understand the way it has told me... always by the legends. What is contained in the Indian legends. That's the only place that our ancestors could mention such things. Such as the old ancient Cree philosophy. People call it philosophy of life, the westerner people. And our people call it their past. So there are many words like I don't know how



to describe them. That's most of our proverbs. Because many of us who try to tell a story about our past, our ancestor's past, are not fully or professionally educated in the English language to be able to describe what it was before the White Man. To talk about spiritual beliefs and practices. All that I can say now with this is now as I find out... as I have listened to my Elders is that our ancestors traditional culture consist mostly spiritual associated practices which have become a tradition. And the traditional culture is consists of half of whatever they had done, how they have survived. If there was no spiritual belief and practices, the traditional culture that exist before the Europeans would not be possible. It would have been impossible for our people to live in this land if the Christianity were to exist only, or be wrong. Maybe the Christianity was thoroughly been explained to the young people, like five year old. They would have maybe become the holy people. There could be a lot of people who could believe in spiritual part of life and they could have preformed some miracles. But the problem is the Christian missionaries came in amongst the Elders. Amongst our Elders, amongst our shamans who are strongly and proficiently practiced their spiritual beliefs which gives them the courage or expertise to master the life as migrating people. Specifically the Algonquin people as we are classified today. Which we call ourselves the Omushkego people. It was not only the Omushkego who were able or who were in that state of development, or have acquired such a culture and begin their tradition. There were many other tribes in the North American continent that were existed in the different territories as the European find out, as a Western people find out later. Before they came to this country, there were many tribes, even a very small tribes. And there were bigger tribes associated with the other tribes. And their spiritual practices were similar with one another. But the thing is, their spiritual practice and belief did not begin...was not ever, universal, or for one tribe.

There were some tribes that develop such spiritual society in the place like South America, the Aztec people and other tribes were begin to be known civilized before the Western people came into North America. In these parts, part of the country at that time, they were then able to establish the communities, even cities as the archaeologists find out. But in the northern part of the country it seemed our people, because of their migrating type of life, they did not develop this kind of life, or culture. Especially in the northern part of the country where Omushkego dominated the territory. They begin

migrating type of people and therefore in order for them to migrate they... people describe them as gipsy type of people. They move from one place to the other, different every season. And they are within our area in the territory where the Omushkego have existed for many years. And have begin migrating type of people within seasonal timing, they could not form the society. Only a temporary society exist amongst them. And that is in the season, or seasonal gathering. Usually in the springtime usually when the waters have been opened or the rivers have been opened, or lakes or waterways have been open for them to use the rivers for them to transport themselves from one place to the other. Or to move to another place. And they usually in the spring, early after ice break-up and again in the fall just before the weather again sets in. Before the river systems again are starting to freeze up. And they use these seasons to meet again one another and they're there for they form a temporary society where they practice their trade amongst each other, and also the marriages take place, and also the games – competitive games, Native sort of it. Their own games; recreational activity or any other things which we know today in a human society tend to create when they live together in towns or in cities. And at that time, there were no permanent communities. Only the villages or sometimes a larger villages formed amongst tribes. And therefore all those activities come into being and each family has his own games and introduce it to his other clans or families. And in those times also the marriage took place. And because they are a migrating type of people, they didn't have much of a possessions. They didn't have any real estate, or properties like that, but they did have a territorial properties which is not bothered by anything, but is well known amongst them; the territories, the areas, the districts. And which they called amongst themselves their "hunting areas, hunting territories." And these hunting territories can overlap easily, and their agreement was suitable amongst them so there is no disagreement amongst them, so there is no disagreement amongst them. But there were rules, there were policies, there were regulations that were created by themselves and were passed down to the next generation and therefore there was no enforcement type of body to enforce these rules or regulations. But the enforces were the Elders and the parents for the young ones. And these were always were handed down from the Elders to the youngest. And the youngest to understand them thoroughly because they hear them everyday. Every evening as if the ritual when the legends are

come into play, either for entertainment or for educational purposes for the young people. So that was the tradition. That was the education process. And those legends... there was also the spiritual practice that was introduced to the young people... the young children of five. Soon as they can understand their language they can listen to their grandfathers, grandmothers, or granduncles, and everyone that is an Elder amongst them would be asked to do a lecture, using the legends.

Now I have been touching a little bit of the things that I know. I only touched them. I am not defining them. There were other stories that were mysteries. Some stories that have been experienced by recent groups. Or even in the past centuries. Many centuries before the White Man. And also before the time when people can remember or record as we know Indian, our Cree people never had the status, the time factor, or even to right the date or anything to measure. They have only used the measure of time factor by generation. One generation which could be between sixty five years and one hundred years. Our western writers and historians and professionals to be have come to look at things as an average. So if we were to use the average life span, within fifty years or a hundred years as an average, one person can then could easily be sixty-five years old. So if we want to think that way. If we are trying to waste our time trying to argue exact time or the length of time our stories will be lost to the time morning. So that is why the Indian, our ancestors, our Cree ancestors never waste their time in trying to specify exactly. So the date generalize the time as in generation, one generation to the next. And they will time the things using by twelve months period, but they use a winter; one winter, the period of one winter, or the period of one summer. And the most well known timing factor they know is one month or one moon. And that was one of the best way to measure their time.

About the distance also was very... it would be difficult today to try to measure the distance of how far one person can walk... five hundred years ago. Five hundred years ago our ancestors were built, physically durable to be able to cover the distance between ten hours period of today easily of sixty miles. If we were to measure it with the mile today and the time they say I have traveled very fast today, seems to dawn this morning and up to this time it is dusk. They would cover even sixty miles even in the summer time. Especially if they travel in the coastal areas. If it was in the wintertime and days

are short, which is only about six hours daylight if we relayed our timing to the hours today to tell a story. In the winter then they would cover easily about thirty-five miles distance in a day, because their physical structure was having trained for them to travel very lightly and fast. And they have skills to walk on a different terrain. Different condition in the winter of ice and snow and whatever. So these things are very hard to define. So that is why are Indian stories when we want to try to measure the distance of one person of what covers in one day is very... it be very hard to pinpoint or to say how many miles was that. So... besides that, coming back to the spiritual part of their tradition and culture, some men, some individuals in the past were able to overcome the physical difficulties because of their acquired will to overcome the impossible physical limits of a human person. They were able to overcome their tiredness or physical shortness. They were able to overcome that and to continue to use their will power to continue the distance they use to cover. And that is only... that was only normal.

And I'm not talking about another mysteries that I was talking about some men who were classified as Mitew, that is the word we use. It is translated very roughly as shamanism, shaman power, or medicine man. These are the only two words in English that I have heard in recently trying to describe what I'm talking about. So there is a shamanism and there is the a medicine man. So the shamanism is maybe I can classify what I am talking about. If I have to say Mitew. In our word Mitew mean a person that have acquired certain power or capability to overcome a physical limitless. A body, a physical being that is limited without using the will to overcome difficulties. So the higher the shaman power once acquired, the more impossibilities he could overcome. So the shaman could travel the distance in very short time of a very long distance. That is in human... that is not practical. He would not be the ordinary man. He would be using the power he acquired by himself. So these are some of the mysteries I wanted to explain. Not only traveling the distance, but also accomplishing things that are not be possible with the ordinary man. They use to do before the White Man came. And also before the Christianity denied their spiritual practice and beliefs. Their beliefs and practices or vice versa. These are the things that I wanted to bring out in my stories, to pick out one story that sounds so impossible or mystical that actually have happened and was really mystified amongst the people themselves. But come to believe that only a shaman...

only a shaman can accomplish such feats. And so this is where the western Historians have left off. They do not talk about such things. And so is the early missionaries. They may mention a little of it, but they only termed them as evil powers and evil practices and all that. So that is where I come in. I come in to try to explain these things. How exactly where - how did the story go? And to try to compare the distance... if I were to talk about the mystery that had happened amongst our ancestors in distance coverage by such an individual, if it was a shaman. That is the point.

Now, not every individual in the past before there were Europeans, not all individuals were master shamans. Almost every person had acquired some part of shamanism. It was not a mystery for them to acquire such things. Here is the thing that I have come to try to describe what could have been. This is only my assumption. Let us again compare the westernized people or the European expert, scientist, the medicine, experts, medical doctors, or every intellectuals have come to agree that every human being has seven senses. It's to see, to hear, to smell, to feel, and what else... so there's another one, there's five that we use everyday. What in our natives, our North American natives or ancestors, or aborigines... we might use the word as aborigines because aborigines as I term is before the European. When our ancestors in North America were by themselves. Where they were self-sufficient, what makes them... what makes them self-sufficient in the land that was very harsh and unlivable condition? And they have adapted themselves very well to that. They have adapted themselves to the seasons, to the weather, to the conditions and to the severe conditions and to everything. What could have given to adapted eventually, which is impossible almost today to do that.

What I want to say now is this: As I understand our Elders as when they explain some things using the legends is that they know they have every human has five senses, but they have, apparently have acquired an another extra four senses which they use. Let me explain very briefly two or three what I can think of. These are the ordinary people. These are not shamans I'm talking about. They have acquired five and then they have acquired an extra one which gives them to be able to sense the danger before it happens. They can sense it. They can almost feel it. I think the English word is called "intuition" or "instinct" or "hunch." They have acquired that. And also some people have acquired the dreams, the visions. And the visions they believe in it. And it sometimes save them

from being involved in a tragic situation, life and death situation. And they also have acquired... this can be classified as a hunch, I don't know if it's a hunch, but they can feel in their body when somebody that is their relative is having problem, whatever if it's twenty miles, ten miles, or if it's fifty miles or even a hundred, even five hundred miles. They know at the moment when the person is really thinking of them in sorry, or wishing to see them. That's three. And now the next they have developed the sense of direction. In time past before the European came to mingle with our people and bringing their culture and many things, most of the people had developed a sense of direction. Not using the compass or anything. But this also another development they have this. They have developed amongst themselves to be able to survive the harsh land as we know it in northern part of Canada. So that's only four. These are ordinary people, the ordinary Indian people. They have nine senses. Now I'm not talking about the shamans. Only the shamans develop those intensively, extensively. These senses. And also acquired some other senses or practices which are related to the spiritual thing, or a supernatural thing. Or being, what ever it is. So I would talk about, in another tape. I not going to talk about these things in this tape because that subject itself is lots of topics. Lot of ways to try to explain. So these are the things that I doing the research on my own. So we shall listen to another tape. Because this one is coming to the end.

[END OF SIDE B, PART 2 of 2]