

Frances Riviere

Frenchy's
granddaughter
keeps the Metis
magic alive

By Pam Asheton

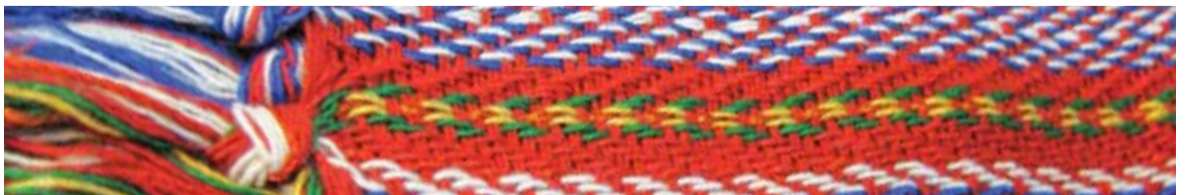


Supreme storytellers, aboriginal people around the globe passed on their history orally. Homesteaders did, too, at family gatherings where “receipts” and poetry mingled. Poet and rancher Bryn Thiessen once remarked to me that the best would be memorized, improved upon—and that’s why there’s often so many variations of “one p’ticular event”.

In the early days of Alberta, the fabulous memories of Danish-Cree Peter Erasmus—a trapper, linguist, interpreter and guide—were only recorded by the most coincidental of flukes. When a journalist heard of his storytelling skills and knowledge of Canadian fur-trade

history, the scribe visited, listened and returned a month later with a tape recorder to get it all down. The writer was, frankly, astounded to hear the story again, delivered identically, word for word, right down to the pauses.

Frances Riviere, too, is a storyteller. Her traditions are Metis. Her grandfather was “Frenchy Riviere,” who gets more than a few mentions in his neighbour Andy Russell’s





Metis Defined

The word Metis comes from the Latin word “*miscere*”, which means “to mix”. It was generally used to describe the children of native women and the men who came West as voyageurs and fur traders.

The Metis are one of three distinct Aboriginal peoples of Canada, recognized under section 35 in the 1982 Constitution. Fiercely independent, the Metis were instrumental in the development of Western Canada.

Opposite Page Top

Frances with long-time friend and trusty mountain horse, *Spinner*

Opposite Page Bottom

The Metis Sash is a symbol of pride and identification for Metis People. Traditionally hand-woven and over six feet long, its uses range from a belt to an emergency bridle.

This Page Top

France’s well-worn hands —adorned with traditional silver and turquoise (traditionally believed to protect riders)—folds the feather of a red-tailed hawk into a well-used hat

This Page Bottom

A close-up of the exquisite beadwork created by Frances’ grandmother, Nelly Gladstone. The belt, hand-crafted with beads and buckskin, was made in the early part of the last century for Elsie Steward, a neighbour of Gladstone’s.

in the spring), and how to hunt with a shoelace when I didn’t have a gun.”

Riviere, currently head of the Metis Nation of Alberta Local 1880, is in her 70s, a mother of five and a schoolmistress of many years standing. She’s worked for outfitters, years up in the Willmore Wilderness areas “where I cooked and did whatever else presented itself.” (A stunning understatement, indeed.)

“I was relatively handy with horses.” She shrugs. “It was hard work.” Her camera, throughout, has followed her; she keeps a little darkroom upstairs, although she admits to loving digital and Photoshop these days, and “not messing with all those chemicals.” Her photographs, her memories and her writing (“perhaps a sequel to come....perhaps a novel, I just get these thoughts drifting in”) are meticulously labelled, filed and cross-referenced.

“I have,” she says with emphasis, “a writing desk and a business

later bestsellers, notably *Memoirs of a Ranching Man*.

Frances Riviere has published her own childhood memories, *Washing at the Creek*. After our interview, I went and reread it. She writes of the hardiness and adaptability of her people, who were often workers on the land of others, hired for haying, mending fences and, particularly, working with horses. She underlines the

sheer grit of a childhood that wove not only its magic, but tragedy and a toughness of character that helped all to survive. She was one of five; four girls and one brother who were “all mountain people. We rode alone. We grew up knowing what to do out on those trails.... I learned to chew the wild sorrel leaves when I was thirsty. I learned about the nourishing parts of the poplar tree (found under the bark





Top Left
Frances riding Redwing bareback at Drywood Creek, west of Twin Butte

Top Right
Henri Arnous "Frenchy" Riviere, among his careers, was a storyteller at the popular Prince of Wales Hotel in Waterton. The photo was hand-painted sometime in the past.

Bottom
Children have always threaded through this storyteller's life; her garden is full of unexpected childish delights and where this 'bouncy horse' is a hot favourite

desk." There are enchanting boxes of beads, thousands of colours, and a skill she teaches still—the incredible mixture of French, Scots and Cree flair for beauty that resides in museums, and inspires top designer outfits worldwide. Twin Butte's superbly eccentric mix of store and restaurant sells local work.

"Oral to written, it's not that difficult," she says breezily. "I can write as fast as I think. The best thing is this book is educational, that way of Metis life—there's so little written about this south-



west corner. It's about bringing culture back to the people, even to baking bannock."

"I loved scenery, wild places. When I was 30, I went out with Andy Russell, asking him all about the flowers and after that I always packed a book, referencing." She has, she admits, spent the last 20 years riding in the mountains, prairies eastwards, too. Her charmingly eccentric ranchhouse—originally a roadhouse stopover for stagecoaches—has an eclectic selection of writers' books most libraries would kill for.

"The 50-year old age group started losing the connections in the '60s and '70s, away from their culture, and now the young people are coming back in droves," she says. "Louis Riel predicted: My people will sleep for 100 years; when they awake, it will be the artists who give them their spirit back." *C

Pam Asheton is the author of *Alberta Backcountry Equestrian One-Day Trail Guide*, a guide to horseback trails in Alberta. She is currently researching details for two major photographic writing epics.



Washing at the Creek

"Frenchy was a powerful man and even in his old age he stood six-foot-four... 'Come on', he commanded as we entered his one-room bachelor cabin. Odours of goat cheese, sour-dough and smoke-tanned buckskin.... I was used to them. That was the smell of my grandpa and I didn't know anyone who was lucky to have a grandpa who smelled like that.... Then a scabby reddish-brown little book caught my attention: *Dickens' Stories about Children*. I opened the book and began to read a story about Little Nell ...*'The house was one of those receptacles for old and curious things.'* (and) thus began my introduction to the classics — in 1948, in my grandpa's cabin in the pines."

— Excerpt from *Washing at the Creek*, Frances Riviere

PHOTOS COURTESY FRANCES RIVIERE; COURTESY GLENBOW MUSEUM; BY PAM ASHETON