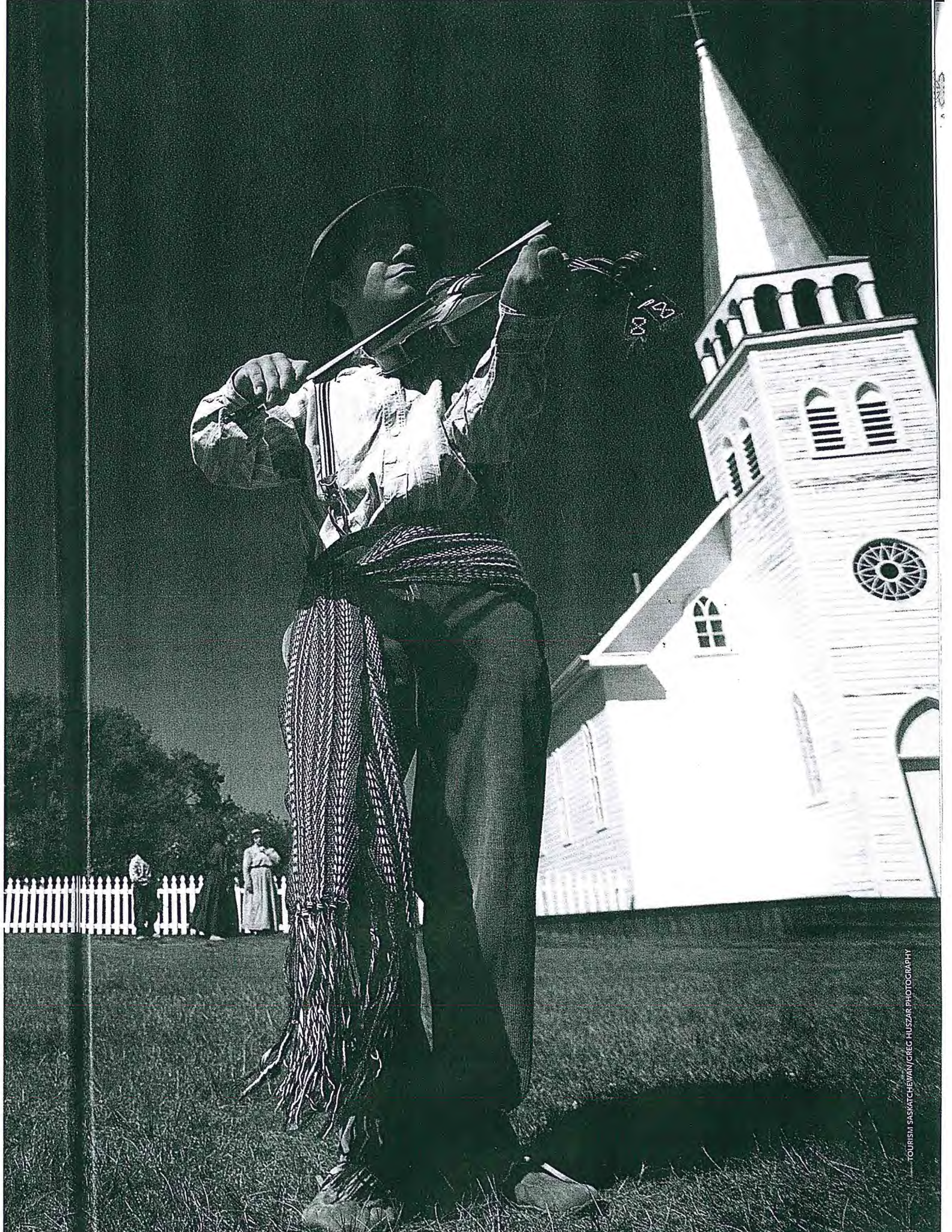


# KAHKIIHTWAAM EE-PEE-KIIWEEHTATAAHK

THAT MEANS "BRINGING IT BACK HOME AGAIN" IN MICHIF,  
THE LANGUAGE OF MÉTIS. THE STORY OF HOW A CRITICALLY  
ENDANGERED INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE CAN BE SAVED.

BY BETTY ANN ADAM





TOURISM SASKATCHEWAN / GREG HUSZAR PHOTOGRAPHY



Surveying the deserted Batoche National Historic Site in May before the season opening, one can imagine the Métis people in the spring of 1884 preparing their fields and garden plots by the same windswept prairie and glittering South Saskatchewan River.

By that time, the descendants of voyageurs and bison hunters in the Catholic parish of St. Laurent, where the community of Batoche was located, now about 90 kilometres north of Saskatoon, had seen their way of life altered dramatically with the near annihilation of the bison and the decline of the fur trade. Many Métis, traditionally bison hunters, had previously lived a freedom-loving, travelling life throughout the northwest, wintering in the Prairies and returning in the spring to communities around the forks of the Assiniboine and Red rivers in what is now Manitoba.

Amid the freedom of the Prairies, the people created a new language, one that mixed Cree and French in a way that, as a linguist described it 100 years later, was unique. But in the late 19th century, few outsiders

even knew the unwritten Michif language existed.

In the Red River area, the Métis's struggle with the Hudson's Bay Company and the government over land rights had culminated with the Red River Resistance of 1869-70, an armed political resistance led by Louis Riel. The Métis ultimately lost that fight, and the people of the new nation, as they declared themselves, were forced to disperse. Many went west to the

*AMID THE FREEDOM OF THE PRAIRIES,  
THE PEOPLE CREATED A NEW LANGUAGE,  
ONE THAT MIXED CREE AND FRENCH  
IN A WAY THAT WAS UNIQUE.*

Saskatchewan River area of the newly created North-West Territories. Over time, Métis in the north and elsewhere in the Red River area came up with other blendings of Cree and French, all of which they referred to as Michif.

At Batoche, the Michif (the name for their identity and their new language) people had established a permanent settlement in what had previously been a wintering place.

Many were eking out a living, still freighting for what was left of the Hudson's Bay Company, farming and selling bison bones picked from the carcasses left by government-sanctioned mass slaughter. They hoped that, this time, the government would recognize their ownership of the land. Between 1878 and 1885, they sent petitions to the government, seeking formal title to the land they had claimed. Their frustrations mounted as colonization companies were granted land rights, and so they sent leader Gabriel Dumont to Montana to entreat Riel, who had been living in exile, to join the cause once again.

By the spring of 1885, the Métis, including Riel, had sent 84 petitions to the Canadian government. Rather than negotiate, the government increased the number of North-West Mounted

---

*Betty Ann Adam is member of Fond du Lac Denesuline First Nation in Saskatchewan and is an award-winning journalist. She resides in Saskatoon.*

---

Police sent to  
The fight for  
declar  
three  
eight  
62 or  
ian si  
side.  
Riel :  
high  
Regin  
M  
Som  
tana,  
som  
B.C.  
eral  
to p  
peoj  
did  
Mét  
sma  
anc  
hig

THIS PAGE: JEFF WHITE/SHUTTERSTOCK; OPPOSITE PAGE: COURTESY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN



A view of the Saskatchewan River (OPPOSITE) from Saskatchewan's Batoche National Historic Site, a community where the Michif people emerged; Norman Fleury (LEFT) is a respected Métis Elder and Michif speaker.

guage, along with the nation's identity, is at risk of being lost — but there is hope.



**"I COME FROM GENERATIONS,** they were the buffalo people, they were the fur trade people, they made their own language, they made their own stories, their dances, their songs, became a people with the help of God," says Norman Fleury, a respected Michif Elder and speaker who wrote a dictionary of Michif terms. "They were able to adapt with different nationalities, but they made their own and they knew who they were."

Fleury is the foremost translator for the Gabriel Dumont Institute, a non-profit Métis organization that promotes the renewal and development of Métis culture through research and education, and a lecturer at the University of Saskatchewan. Fleury's Métis lineage goes back seven generations on both his parents' sides, with ancestors who were part of the resistances in Red River and Batoche.

Raised by his grandmother, Justine Landry Trottier, he once asked her where Michif came from. She told him to return the next day, as Elders do, so she could take time to ponder before answering. Fleury says the next day she told him, "God made the world, made everything. Over the water, there's people. The Germans speak German, and the English speak English. Over here, the Sioux speak Sioux; the Blackfoot speak Blackfoot language. God created all those people. It's just like a

Police and militia in the region and sent troops.

The Métis of Batoche decided to fight for their rights once again and declared a provisional government. In three separate battles fought over eight weeks from March 26 to May 12, 62 or 63 men died, 30 on the Canadian side and 32 or 33 on the Métis side. Dumont fled to the U.S., while Riel surrendered, was convicted of high treason and was hanged in Regina on Nov. 16, 1885.

Métis were forced to move again. Some went south to relatives in Montana, North Dakota and Minneapolis, some travelled west to Alberta and B.C., and others went north. The federal scrip system established in 1870 to provide land or money to Métis people was vulnerable to fraud and did little to provide a land base for Métis. Many resorted to creating small communities on the road allowances, Crown land set aside for highways, but these communities

were also subject to demolition at the government's discretion.

The once cohesive communities, busy with travel, hunting and trapping and vibrant with stories, music and dance, drifted apart. The culture and community, where the extraordinary Michif language was created and flourished, now faced the challenge of colonial assimilation.

Recent generations of Métis have grown up without learning the language. According to the 2016 Canadian census, Michif was the mother tongue of 725 people and the language spoken at home by 275 people, but those numbers include as many as four languages spoken by the Métis. Some now say there may be 500 fluent speakers, but others estimate fewer than 100 people speak fluent Michif today. The United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization has designated it a critically endangered language. As Elders become too frail or pass away, the Michif lan-

till  
he  
nd  
he  
ed  
his  
og-  
id.  
:nt  
ng  
ad  
ed  
ies  
ts,  
ler  
na  
ad  
:in  
35,  
el,  
ia-  
an  
ed  
ed  
—  
tu  
h-  
st.  
—



hoop, a circle. It was our turn to be created, and we finished that hoop. We were the last nation that God created, and he gave us a language and we're a nationality. We're Michif and we speak Michif. We brought that hoop together."

She continued, "God gives us those kinds of connections, spiritually, with the world, with our own nations, our stories, our histories, our medicines, our belief systems that are all connected. We cannot put things together without having that spiritual connection."

Fleury emphasizes that Michif is a nationality encompassing the language. Old songs that came from France were "Michif-ized," he says. The pronunciation of French

nouns was often Michif-ized, too. For example, "les chevaux," which means "the horses," became "Lii zhvoo." In Michif, "li zhwall" means the horse, but in French it's "le cheval."

Sometimes Michif borrowed from English, but even then words were so absorbed into Michif that native speakers often didn't realize they had any other origin, as in the case of a

woman who asked what the English word was for "beans" — the word had long ago been adopted into Michif from the English-speaking workers at Hudson's Bay Company trading posts.

"Michif was a family language, it was a ceremonial language, and it was a trade language," says Fleury.

Communities spoke Michif among themselves and within their homes. For many generations, most Métis

*'ALL OF A SUDDEN IT WAS  
A REAWAKENING, AND [MÉTIS] SAID,  
"THAT'S RIGHT! NOBODY SPEAKS THAT AT  
HOME. OUR KIDS ARE NOT SPEAKING IT."*

were illiterate and remembered important information in the oral traditions of their First Nations ancestors. Schools run by missionaries were instruments of colonization that prohibited the use of Michif in classrooms.

The ceremonial aspect of the language came from elements of Catholicism and First Nations spiritu-

ality, which were fundamental to the Michif worldview, and morphed into words and customs that became uniquely Michif. Fleury remembers his grandmother tying a black nylon cloth around his eyes to watch the sunrise on Easter mornings and seeing the vibrating, shimmering light that conveyed the glory of the risen Christ. His grandmother, a Catholic, was taught to kneel when picking medicines, like she was praying, and to lay down tobacco, in the way of the Cree.

Many Métis participated in the sundance and other First Nations ceremonies, and they respected protocols that still are not discussed casually with outsiders. The values of Métis are inextricably bound in the language. When Michif people began to marry outside the culture after the Second World War, the language fell into disuse. Parents stopped using Michif in their homes, and the use of the language declined, says Fleury.

Fleury, who speaks Heritage Michif, which is considered the first Michif language, is possessive of Michif as a nationality and culture, but he says he readily accepts other versions of the language that emerged within historical Métis communities, dubbed by the Gabriel Dumont Institute as Michif French and Northern Michif. However, not all Métis agree with this viewpoint. Instead, they feel that funding for Heritage Michif should be prioritized over the others.

Fleury also has a great fondness for Dutch linguist Peter Bakker, who helped introduce Heritage Michif to the wider world in the 1990s but also raised the alarm among Métis that their language was in peril. At that time, Bakker estimated that there were just 500 fluent speakers of Heritage Michif remaining.

An 1875  
day Win  
in the d  
linguist  
for years  
Europea  
such as  
(BOTTOM

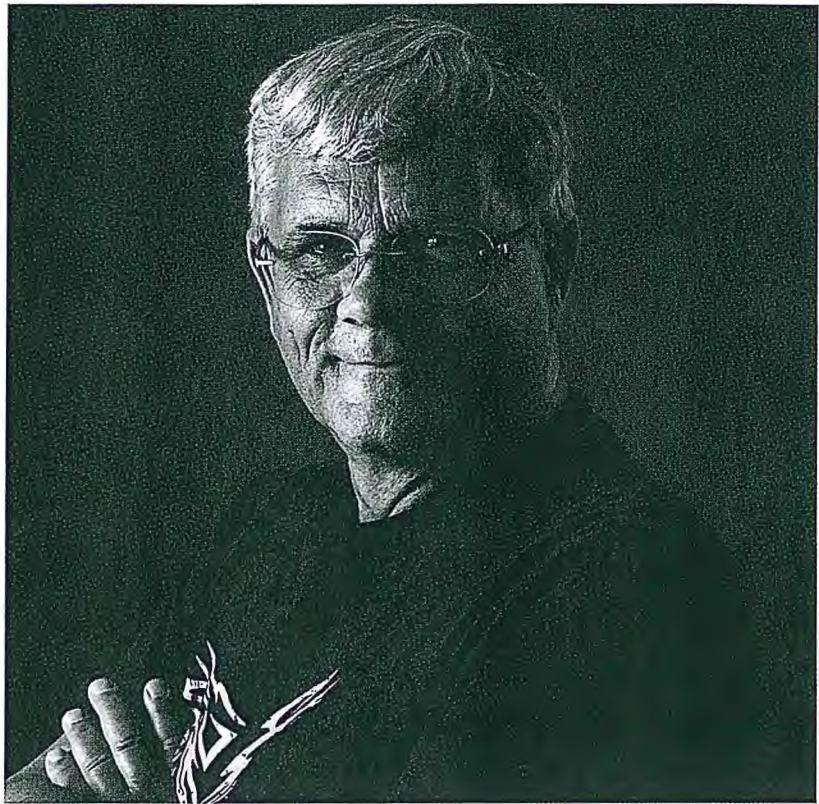
"All of  
ing, and  
Nobody s  
are not s

"If a le  
a culture  
of knowle  
uage is  
commun  
divide the  
and how  
taining a  
Sometim  
that disa  
museum  
Library of

As a lir  
study of l  
knew a l  
created l  
together  
prised hi  
in 1985: i

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: W.H. ROGERS, HARPER'S WEEKLY; IB SØRENSEN; ESPLANADE ARTS & HERITAGE CENTRE, 0395-0035

An 1879 painting of fur traders in present-day Winnipeg (OPPOSITE). The trade helped in the development of Michif, which linguist Peter Bakker (RIGHT) has studied for years. The children of unions between European traders and First Nations women, such as Mary Sanderson and her cousins (BOTTOM), circa 1890, also played a role.



“All of a sudden it was a reawakening, and [Métis] said, ‘That’s right! Nobody speaks that at home. Our kids are not speaking it,’” says Fleury.

“If a language disappears, then also a culture disappears and a whole system of knowledge,” says Bakker. “Each language is a unique solution to the communication problem. How do we divide the world into objects and actions and how creative people are in maintaining and changing the language... Sometimes it’s said that each language that disappears, it’s like the Louvre museum in Paris burning down or the Library of Congress burning down.”

As a linguist devoted to the scientific study of languages, Bakker thought he knew a lot about how languages were created by different groups coming together, but Heritage Michif surprised him when he stumbled upon it in 1985: it blended two languages in a

way he’d never seen before, using French nouns and Plains Cree verbs.

In 1987, Bakker, who already spoke French, came to Canada and lived with the Henry Daniels family at Saskatchewan’s Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation to learn Cree, so he

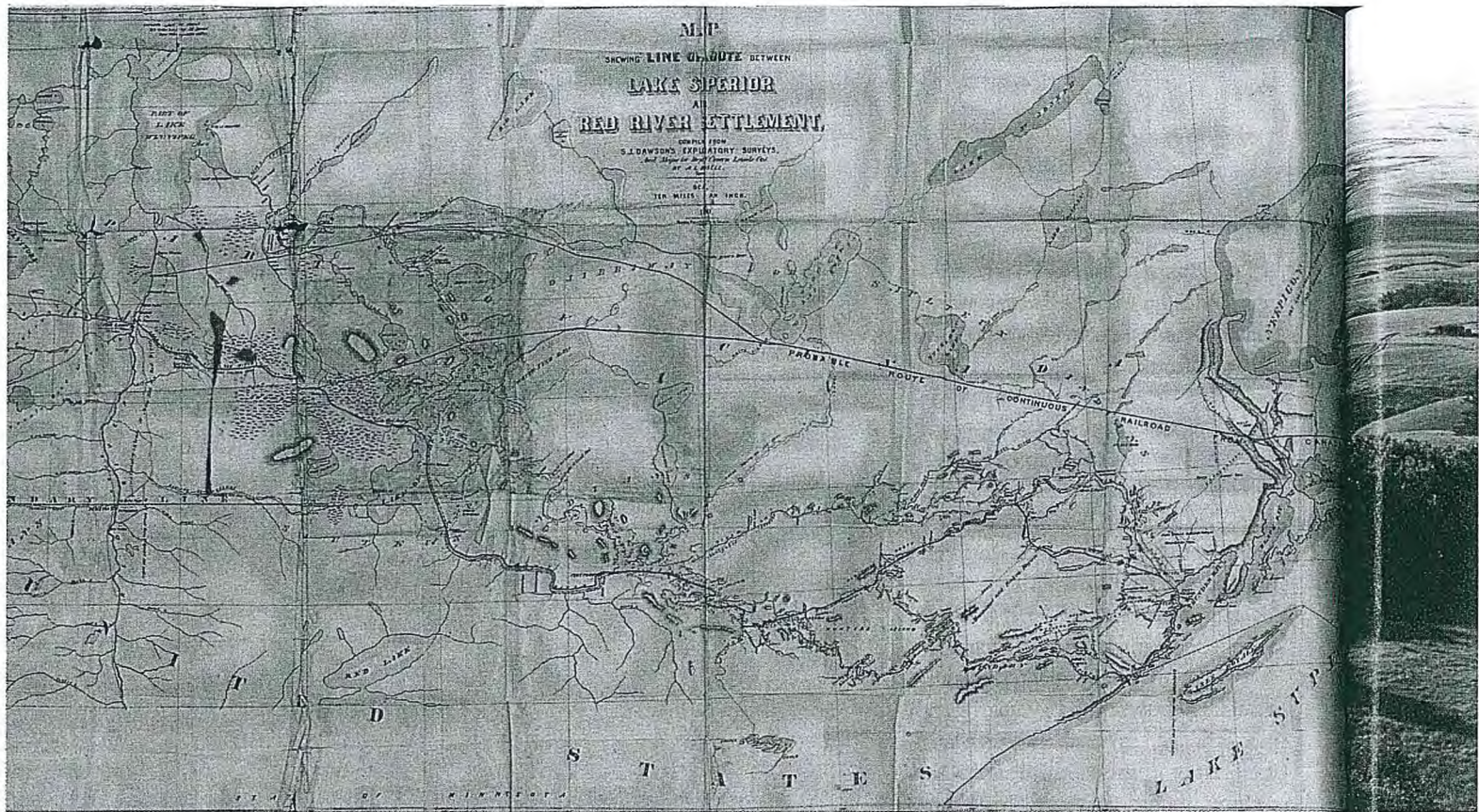
could analyze the Michif language. He met with Heritage Michif speakers in Manitoba and the northern U.S. and with speakers of other versions of Michif in Métis communities in Manitoba, central and northwest Saskatchewan and Alberta.

Among the 7,000 known languages in the world, only about 30 are mixed languages, of which about 25 have a specific pattern where their vocabulary comes from one language while grammar comes from another. Mixed languages, such as Michif, evolve when speakers are bilingual in both originating languages. In the case of Métis, this would have begun when the voyageurs began to marry Cree and Nahkawiniwak (Saulteaux) women.

There were mutually beneficial reasons for intermarriage: the white men were accepted as kin among the First Nations fur-trapping people who knew how to thrive on the land and in the climate, while the Indigenous families gained a member with



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: W.H. ROGERS, HARPER'S WEEKLY; IS SØRENSEN; ESPLANADE ARTS & HERITAGE CENTRE, 0395-0035



access to the traders. The bilingual couples smoothed relations in the fur trade, creating a peaceful co-existence between the disparate peoples. In the beginning, the children of these unions were brought up by their mothers as First Nations, but that changed over generations as more of the men made their lives in the northwest, leaving the employ of the trading companies and focusing on the bison hunt, trading in pemmican and hauling goods overland in the all-wood Red River carts they devised to increase the carrying capacity of horses.

While some Métis kept homes in the Red River area around present-day Winnipeg, others lived there only part of the year; some spent most of the year almost exclusively on the plains of Saskatchewan, Alberta and the northern U.S., following the bison; and others lived along the river systems in the northern forests. Métis often spoke the languages of Cree, Nahkawininiwak (Saulteaux), Dene and other First Nations, as well as French and English, which allowed them to interact and trade wherever they went.

With that ability, Bakker wondered why Métis would create a new language. To answer that, he needed to know when the language first appeared. There was scant information in the historical record about when the language emerged: Bakker found a reference to Michif from the 1930s and learned of other references from the 1890s. Elderly Michif speakers recounted oral history that traced Michif usage to at least as early as

*'IF A LANGUAGE DISAPPEARS,  
THEN ALSO A CULTURE DISAPPEARS  
AND A WHOLE SYSTEM OF KNOWLEDGE.'*

1840, facts confirmed by missionaries' genealogy records.

Michif was not created as a necessity for the fur trade, Bakker found. By 1840, many generations of bilingual speakers had long been trading successfully in French, Nahkawēmowin and Cree. Besides, trade languages are usually simple pidgins, when speakers with no common language create a lingo they can both understand, or creoles, when a primitive

pidgin gains wider usage, develops a complete grammar and becomes the mother tongue of new generations.

Heritage Michif is anything but simple. In addition to its intricate, descriptive Cree verb system, its French system of nouns and adjectives includes the unpredictable gender assignments of articles, such as "le" and "la" (the masculine and feminine forms of "the") and "un" and "une" (masculine and feminine forms of "a").

"It seems that the most complex categories of each language are part of Michif instead of the most simple," writes Bakker in his groundbreaking 1997 book, *A Language of Our Own: The Genesis of the Mixed Cree-French Language of the Canadian Métis*, which focuses on Heritage Michif.

Nowhere in the world did an economy trigger a language with the complexity and mixed nature of Michif. Its emergence is comparable to the way young people invent new words or use existing words in new ways to create an insider's language that distinguishes them from their parents, or what Bakker calls an "in-group" language.

The utmost group: uage fr Bakker "In [Michif] when see th differc the Cr The marri: custom: Europ ilies, l other grew their white of Ea being tome: in an the co north Com: de fa: wher busin amid on th

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA, H11701 (1870-1871), MNAC10371, PHOTOGRAPHY/ISTOCK



An 1870 survey map of the Red River area (OPPOSITE) and Cypress Hills, Sask. (ABOVE), two regions critical to the development of Métis culture and language.

These types of languages are “the utmost language of solidarity for the group members and a distancing language for non-group members,” writes Bakker in *A Language of Our Own*.

“In this case it is very likely that [Michif developed] in the early 1800s when basically, the Métis started to see themselves as a separate group, different from both the French and the Cree,” he says.

The generations who had intermarried, bringing the languages and customs of their First Nations and European ancestors to their new families, had children who married each other. This expanding population grew up without ever living with their First Nations relations or in the white settler cities and communities of Eastern Canada. The sense of being their own people, unaccustomed to outside authority, flourished in an era before Confederation where the colonial rule had not reached the northwest and the Hudson’s Bay Company exercised its authority as de facto government only where and when it needed to for the sake of business. Heritage Michif was born amid the subsequent life of freedom on the plains.

Métis “began to think, act and identify as a separate group. They gave themselves a collective name: the Bois-Brûlés (who would later become the Métis Nation)... They were fiercely proud of their independence and freedom,” writes Jean Teillet, a founding member of the Métis Nation of Ontario, founding president of the Métis Nation Lawyers Association and Riel’s great grand-niece, in her book *The North-West Is Our Mother: The Story of Louis Riel’s People*.

The fire of Métis nationhood was fanned by colonial authorities from the Hudson’s Bay Company who arrived on the Red River in 1812 with Scottish settlers and laws that benefited only them while hindering and excluding Métis. Participation in government, land and resource rights were at the heart of the conflict. By 1815, the Bois-Brûlés were flying their own flag, a white infinity symbol on a blue background. They asserted a new political consciousness and were developing their own language and culture, which they called Metif and pronounced Michif. In June 1816, the Bois-Brûlés fought HBC Governor Robert Semple and settlers at the Battle of Seven Oaks, the event that marks the birth of the Métis Nation.



IN ÎLE-À-LA-CROSSE IN NORTH-western Saskatchewan, Louise Oelke, 69, grew up with Northern Michif as her mother tongue. Now retired, she has become a sought-after Northern Michif language teacher. Oelke’s father hunted and trapped, returning home with beaver and muskrat furs. In town, they lived in a two-bedroom house with 13 children, a cast-iron wood stove and light from a coal oil lamp or just a wick in lard. Baths were every two weeks in a galvanized steel tub, with water heated on the stove. Sometimes the whole family would go and live in a tent in the bush.

Oelke didn’t start speaking English until she went to the village school, where she was forbidden from speaking her own language.

“The nun would hit us on the head with a ruler and said you cannot speak that language,” says Oelke.

; a  
he  
ut  
te,  
its  
es  
er  
e”  
ne  
e”  
”).  
ost  
ch  
rif  
e,”  
id-  
A  
he  
ee-  
tis,  
m-  
he  
of  
le  
ew  
ew  
ge  
eir  
in-

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA, 94-17001 (ART0187); MICHELLE BUCHANAN (STOCK)





While Northern Michif was widely used in the community, Oelke says she stopped using the language when she moved south to Saskatoon in the 1970s, mainly because there was no one to talk to. Many people in her age group lost the language or never learned it because there was so much prejudice against Métis people in the south. In the central part of Saskatchewan, many families hid their Michif language and declared themselves French. Oelke didn't teach her five children the language beyond a few words and phrases. As a single parent, sometimes working two jobs, "it was quicker and easier to use English. For me to teach them [Michif] was hard."

In recent years, Oelke has been asked to share her knowledge of Northern Michif. Last year, École College Park School in Saskatoon obtained a SaskCulture grant and hired her to teach Michif. The children enjoyed the class and picked up words and phrases,

but not enough to carry on a conversation. She says a couple of months of instruction is not long enough to create fluent language speakers.

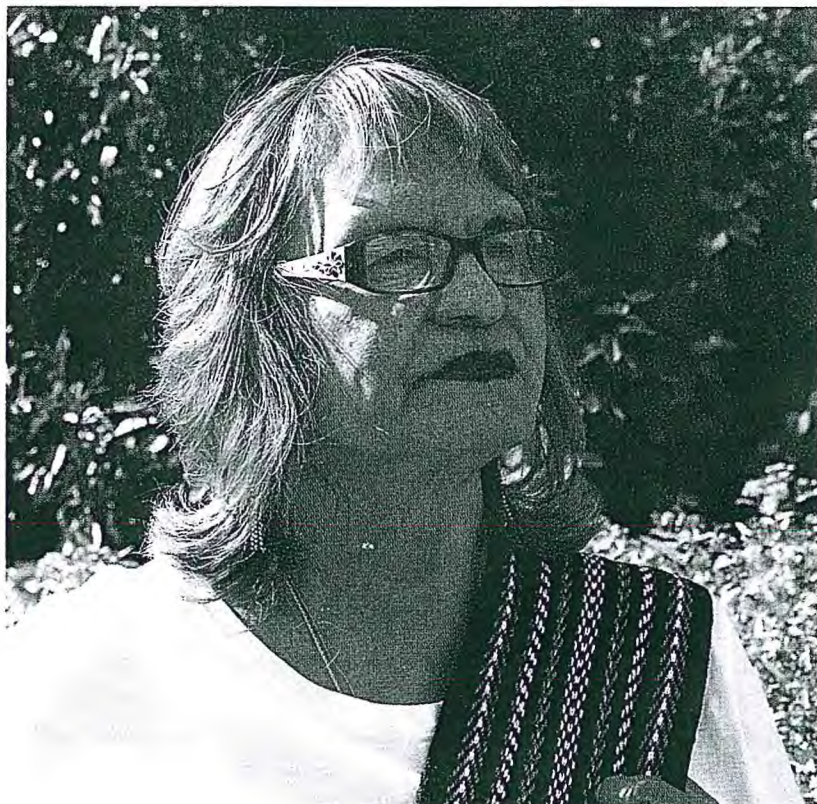
"It should be taught consistently, not just eight weeks," she says, wondering, "Is the language going to stay with them?"

Oelke is just one of the many people working to revitalize Michif.

At the Gabriel Dumont Institute, curriculum developer David Morin helps produce Michif phone apps, books (including illustrated children's books), transcribed recordings and other Michif learning resources, many of which are available for free on the organization's Virtual Museum website. And because Michif was traditionally an oral language, the institute includes an audio component with nearly all of its Michif resources. Fleury translates and records many of these resources. It's a painstaking process that's sometimes slowed by his busy schedule.

Fleury is also working on recording an 11,500-word Michif dictionary and phrase book he wrote years ago. In Michif's 200-year existence, it has been committed to the page only in recent decades, and there is no standardized spelling. Though some work has been done to create a standardized orthography, it hasn't been widely adopted, and different Michif speakers have come up with their own phonetic spellings. Fleury is also working with educator Angie Caron to create a two-year, 10-course Indigenous language certificate program with the University of Saskatchewan he says will include at least three classes in Michif. A certificate course is also in the planning stages at the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teachers Education Program at the University of Regina.

In Saskatoon, the public and Catholic school systems have each appointed an elementary school to have a Métis focus, bringing snippets of the language into the children's daily lives. In Ile-à-la-Crosse, Northern Michif is a regular feature of life at Rossignol High School and on the community radio station, where broadcaster Robert Merasty speaks the language for about five hours a day. Back in Regina, a Michif opera called "Riel: Heart of the North" premiered in the fall of 2019, marking the first time the language has been an integral part of a major orchestral and vocal project. Online, SkyBlue Morin's Michif Cree Language page on Facebook shows how the language is a living thing that can be used to describe the world today. She posts



Louise Oelke (LEFT), who grew up speaking Northern Michif in Ile-à-la-Crosse, Sask., is now a sought-after Michif teacher, while Elder Grace Zoldy (OPPOSITE, left) has helped learners such as Heather Souter (RIGHT) in a mentor-apprentice program.

AXIS IMAGERY; PRAIRIES TO WOODLAND INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION CIRCLE



dozen:  
her iPl  
she w  
and co  
way i:  
transc  
heard  
lish tr  
Yet  
while  
classe  
ness  
learn  
langu  
of hu  
"T]  
uage  
farm.  
ily, ca  
Ther  
uage  
"If w  
we h



dozens of simple videos made with her iPhone, including some in which she walks through her community and comments on things along the way in Michif. Her posts include transcripts of the Michif Cree words heard in the video, along with English translations.

Yet Fleury and others agree that while books, social media and classes are useful for raising awareness and sparking the passion to learn a language, efforts to save the language are missing huge swaths of human activity.

"There's no more using the language in hunting... in working on a farm, in butchering, fishing, in family, caring, love, legends. It's not used. There's a very small basics of the language that's used today," says Fleury. "If we don't bank all that terminology, we have no more language."

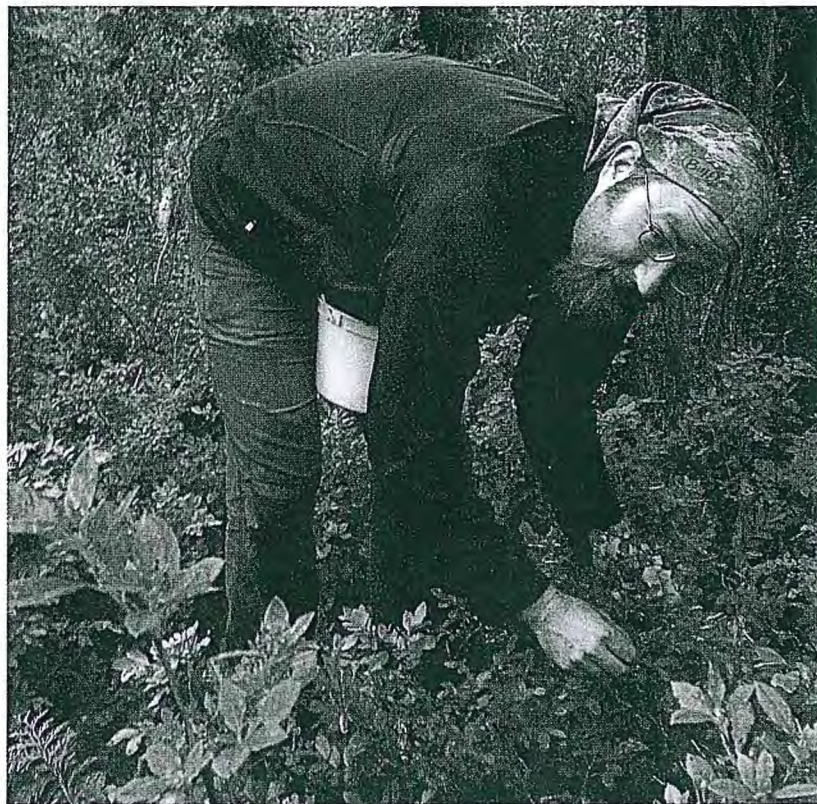


**ENTER THE MENTOR-APPRENTICE** program and language documentation. Mentor-apprentice, the one-on-one immersion technique developed by Leanne Hinton, Matt Steele and Nancy Steele Richardson, who also wrote the mentor-apprentice bible, *How to Keep Your Language Alive: A Commonsense Approach to One-on-One Language Learning*, pairs a fluent speaker of a language that is no longer commonly spoken with a younger learner in a home or other culturally appropriate setting. There, the two speak only the language they're focused on. Mentor speakers learn to convey messages without using English, and apprentices learn a few basic rescue questions and

how to indicate a query with pictures or gestures.

Through the program, students get direction from Elders while also taking responsibility for their learning, preparing questions in areas of study, rather than waiting to be taught. A lesson might have the mentor making a pot of tea, with the apprentice prompting commentary about filling the kettle with water, lighting the stove, heating the water until it boils and so on. Writing notes during sessions is frowned upon, as apprentices must remain fully engaged in the focus language, but they are asked to keep audio recordings so they can listen and re-listen to lessons outside of sessions to continue their learning.

Heather Souter found the mentor-apprentice method through speaking with Bakker. Growing up in Vancouver,



her father told her about their Métis history and culture, but there were no Cree or Michif classes at the University of British Columbia in the late 1970s when she attended. In the early 2000s, Souter was working as an interpreter and translator in Japan when she discovered Bakker and contacted him — a conversation that changed her life. Bakker's work had contributed to a growing pride among Métis people, many of whom had been raised by parents and grandparents who had suffered violent racism and taught their children not to draw attention to their heritage.

The linguist pointed Souter to the mentor-apprentice method and connected her with Michif-speaking Elders Rita Flamand and Grace Zoldy. When they agreed to teach her, she took both of them and fellow learner J.C. Schmidt to California to learn the mentor-apprentice program from Hinton and Richardson.

Souter also studied with other Indigenous language revitalization experts in the U.S. before moving to Camperville, Man., to apprentice with Zoldy and Flamand (the latter died in 2016). Souter went on to do a master's degree in Indigenous language revitalization in Saskatoon through the University of Victoria and partnered with local speakers, including Verna Demontigny, to start a non-profit group, Prairies to Woodlands Indigenous Language Revitalization Circle, and to train mentor-apprentice pairs, mostly relatives who have the benefit of relationship, trust and access to each other.

Demontigny grew up in a road allowance community near Brandon, Man., and spoke only Michif until she began school. As much as she loved speaking her language, Demontigny did not teach her children Michif because she didn't want them to suffer the ridicule and discrimination she had endured.

Though she didn't pass the language to her children, she has become a voice for Métis culture and language, giving school and other public presentations. When the revitalization circle received funding to run a mentor-apprentice program, Demontigny and her son Elvis were among six pairs who signed up. They have spent up to 12 hours per week for the past two years living in the language.

"You're literally not speaking English at all, just pointing or using pictures or cooking or shopping, doing the laundry. There's steps: you sort the laundry, this pile is white, there's colours. It's a lesson all itself," she says. "We learn the language through everyday living."

Demontigny has seen Elvis's confidence grow as his understanding and ability expands. "He's proud now because he knows the language and because the culture comes [with it]. He never realized it was our culture he lived. It gives him a lot of pride. It makes me feel proud. I fulfilled my obligation to him because now he knows who he is," she says.

Elvis is now teaching his daughter Michif, while Demontigny is passing the language on to her other son and his family.

Along the way, Souter met Dale McCreery, who was in the first semester of his master's degree in linguistics at the University of Victoria. Souter recruited him to the project, and linguist Nicole Rosen asked him to also document the Michif language for future learners, which led him to apprentice with Grace Zoldy. McCreery was the ideal candidate for the two-jobs-in-one position. At 26, he already spoke five languages and he had grown up listening to his Métis grandfather speaking some of the Cree words he remembered. McCreery had taught himself some Cree over the years from books his grandmother had given him.

W  
rece  
that  
"I  
half  
any  
I:  
me  
Mc  
whi  
cor  
Mc  
hot  
nea  
fou  
the  
anc  
ua  
for  
  
wa  
lea  
siv  
co  
the  
sel  
  
fo  
dc  
ef  
th  
lir  
u:  
w:  
fo  
th  
iz  
n:  
u:  
b:  
e:  
le  
s:  
A  
h  
b  
s  
s  
  
t  
2

PHOTO: VERNIA DEMONTIGNY

When he started university, he received some Métis student funding that brought his grandfather to tears.

"He said, 'it's the first time being a half-breed has ever done any good for anyone in my family,'" says McCreery.

In preparation for his 2009 summer of immersion in Michif, McCreery brushed up on his Cree, which provided a foundation in the complex verbs used in Michif. McCreery stayed at Zoldy's cosy house on the edge of Camperville, near Lake Winnipegosis, for about four months and returned twice over the next two years, doing the intense and rare work of learning the language while formally documenting it for future learners.

"Our goal wasn't just to learn. It was to make recordings of all the learnings that would be comprehensive enough that another learner could come by afterward and listen to them and learn the language themselves," he says.

McCreery, now a PhD candidate focused on best practices in language documentation for the purpose of effective teaching, says Michif is on the brink of "going to sleep," the term linguists use instead of saying a language is disappearing or dying. And with so few elderly Michif speakers, focusing on classroom teaching is not the best use of scarce language revitalization resources, he says. Learners need intensive time using the language with fluent speakers. Likewise, books and social media posts are excellent for sparking the passion to learn a language but, in and of themselves, will not create fluent speakers. At best, 50 or even a few hundred hours of instruction will produce a beginner speaker: fluency takes thousands of hours of conversation and study, says McCreery.

The mentor-apprentice method is the most immersive experience now available for adults wanting to learn a



language with few remaining speakers and is the "gold star" in teaching endangered languages, says Sonya Bird, an associate professor in linguistics at the University of Victoria and an expert in language revitalization. Equally important is large-scale documentation of the spoken word to provide teachers with a source of the language to work with when the current speakers have passed on. This kind of documentation requires specialized training, different from those of the average language learner. Doing it well requires a learner to spend time with the mentor, followed by time away from them listening to recordings of the sessions and returning with questions that will lead to deeper understandings of the language.

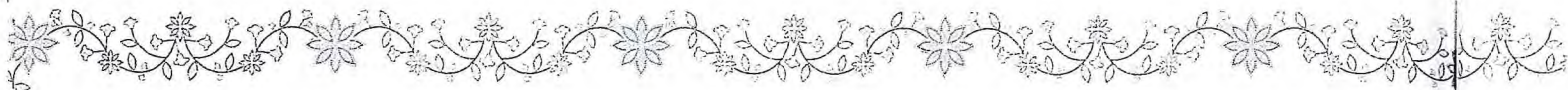
"To really document thoroughly is hugely time-consuming, and it's a lot of effort both for the apprentice and for the mentors during the sessions," says Bird. "If the apprentice is not being paid to be part of the team, they probably have some other job, and

Dale McCreery (OPPOSITE), picking berries in Bella Coola, B.C., says language fluency requires thousands of hours of study, which Verna Demontigny (ABOVE) is helping facilitate through a non-profit organization she co-founded.

there's just not enough time in the day to do that kind of work."

It's a full-time, skilled occupation that requires living wherever the speaker lives, however inconvenient that may be. And family members may be the best candidates for the method. With Michif, however, many of the remaining speakers have not regularly used their language for years. For some, it's too late for them to act as mentors, given the hours of intense mental work necessary.

Bird says what's needed now are funded teams of committed language speakers and learners, linguists to properly document the spoken language, classroom teachers who know the pedagogical needs and someone to administer such a program.



The Qu'Appelle Valley, Sask., (LEFT) is home to the Lebrét Farm (ABOVE, at harvest time in 1946), a spot where Michif was brought to life and today a site of a revitalization camp.

McCreery had the skills to record about 500 hours of Michif in Camperville, and he knows there are more recordings out there, but he says thousands more hours of systematically gathered conversation are needed to capture as much of the spoken language as possible.

Since his time in Camperville, McCreery has brought his knowledge of the mentor-apprentice method and language documentation to his current work with the last generation of speakers of Nuxalk, the language of the First Peoples along British Columbia's Bella Coola River and the surrounding area. Since 2012, he has spent thousands of hours building relationships with Elders, helping them to breathe life back into their language. It can take months or even years with a dedicated learner for an Elder to regain fluency, but it is possible to reawaken language in people who, when they began, could barely utter a phrase. McCreery has seen some of these Elders remember phrases they heard in childhood.

Bird, McCreery and Souter all believe fully funding mentor-apprentice programs with documentation is the last, best chance to create real Michif

speakers capable of transmitting the language, while also systematically capturing the complexity and nuances of language for independent learners in the future. Though McCreery says the mentor-apprentice method isn't for everyone, his and Souter's own language proficiency has shown that it does work. But Souter has had only limited success in obtaining funding for such projects. One challenge? As crucial as language is, organizations are not allowed to pay learners with federal language grants because apprenticeship, even to preserve endangered Indigenous languages, is classified as training and therefore a provincial responsibility.

"None of the money we get from Heritage Canada [for language revitalization] can be used to pay the apprentices for embodying the languages of their ancestors for this important work they're doing," says Souter.

"It would be nice to have real support for serious learners, as well as serious support for ongoing documentation," adds McCreery.

Bird is also concerned that sometimes groups are hesitant to work with linguists because of the history of

colonial and unethical practices of academic experts.

Glen McCallum, president of the Métis Nation–Saskatchewan, says he is satisfied with the expertise of the Elders in teaching the language. He points to relationships the Métis government in Saskatchewan established with the University of Saskatchewan to plan for the advancement of a Michif language certificate program. Between 2012 to 2019, the Métis government in Saskatchewan received about \$1.2 million from the federal government, which they decided to use for Michif language revitalization, and in part turned to Elder speakers to guide a project with *Canadian Geographic*. The initiative includes translating the Métis volume of the *Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada* into Heritage Michif and creating podcasts highlighting Michif language, a Michif word-of-the-day campaign and a documentary on Métis culture and Michif language, as well as a variety of additional education resources and tools.

The project is important for raising awareness among Canadians that Michif is the only language born of a combination of the First People and newcomers, says Charlene Bearhead, director of reconciliation for The Royal Canadian Geographical Society, *Canadian*

BENEDEK/ISTOCK; PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF SASKATCHEWAN

Ge  
ed  
Inc  
Inc  
for  
anc  
rea  
Be  
S  
val  
lan  
for  
fun  
app  
ma  
cou  
lan  
tice  
finc  
will  
savi  
F  
ren  
that  
spe  
first  
I be  
situ  
mon  
be  
hav  
they  
spe  
"I  
lang  
ple  
lang  
says

SEV  
stud  
Urb  
Prog  
driv  
into  
Vall  
ret F  
the

*Geographic's* publisher, and a former education lead for the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and for the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation. "If that's not a reason for 'national pride,'" says Bearhead, "I'm not sure what is."

She says governments need to value the preservation of Indigenous languages and take responsibility for adjusting Western mainstream funding criteria to fully fund mentor-apprentice programs. Ironically, a main stumbling stone to funding that could save a critically endangered language is the English word "apprentice," she says, and funders need to find a different word that will encompass the work of saving the language.

Regardless, McCreery remains optimistic. "I think that before we lose all our speakers, we will have other first language speakers. And I believe that as times and situations change, a lot more people will be able to be involved, and we will have done the work necessary so that they can achieve goals of learning to speak their language."

"On the bright side, 10 years ago, language wasn't such a big thing. People were just starting to realize our languages are really important," he says. "Elders always knew that."



**SEVEN MÉTIS FIRST-YEAR** students from the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program at the University of Regina drive from the city in spring 2019 into the sloping green Qu'Appelle Valley to the historic site of the Lebret Farm, one of the places where, in the days of the bison hunt, the Bois-

Brûlés had brought life to the Michif language. Between the 1850s and 1870s, a Michif community emerged, and in the 1930s, the provincial government established a Métis farm, the remnants of which still stand: derelict buildings, houses and a large barn remain amid acres of tall grass alongside Manitoba maples, poplars, chokecherry bushes and Saskatoon bushes. For these students, the site will be used as a Michif language camp.

Every school day for three weeks, professor Russell Fayant's students join six Elder speakers to learn Michif in a modified mentor-apprentice program. Students

**'If I could get funded to live with an Elder for a couple of months and actually learn one-on-one with somebody who speaks it fluently, that would be incredible.'**

receive an hour-long, Western-style class in language basics, such as grammar, pronunciation and conjugating verbs, before joining the "old ones" for small group activities, speaking only Michif. Three to four days are devoted to each of five language areas: greetings, kitchen and food, the land, labour and celebration. Students and Elders speak the language together as they pick medicines in the former Bois-Brûlés wintering area.

Student Dani LaValley was amazed by how much language they were able to understand in just a few days. "It was really quick, especially since all the Elders speak Michif so fluently. I felt comfortable speaking it myself. It was awesome. It got a lot more comfortable very quickly," says

LaValley. Having other students of the same age to learn with made the program fun, notes LaValley. It also provided other people to practise with outside camp. LaValley's biggest thrill, though, was speaking an unscripted sentence and being understood by the Elders.

Professor Fayant says he replaced a three-credit, 16-week in-class experience with a six-credit, three-week immersive language camp because no authentic language acquisition had happened in the traditional classroom. But as amazing as the camp is, stakeholders understand that three weeks isn't going to save the language. With the Gabriel Dumont

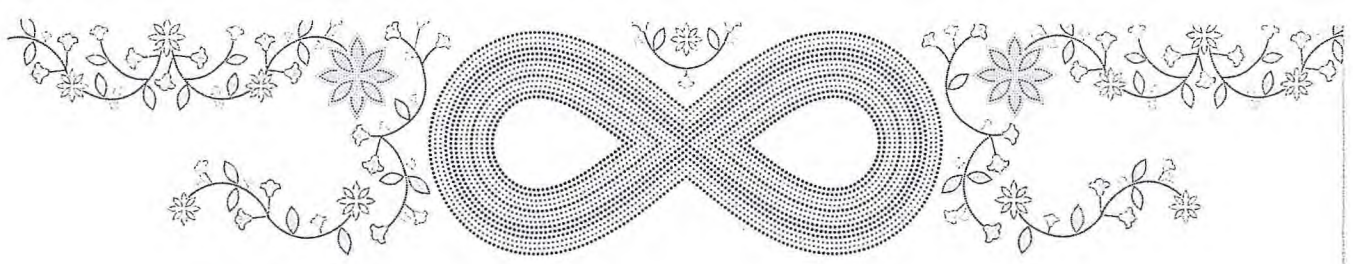
Institute and the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program working to start certificate language programs in Saskatchewan universities, the field of mentor-apprentice work remains open to any non-profit groups that can obtain funding to run them.

LaValley still practises phrases and reads their Michif language materials regularly. "If I could get funded to go and live with an Elder for a couple months and actually learn one-on-one with somebody who speaks it fluently, that would be incredible. We could get a lot more Michif speakers that way. But until we get there, the only options we really have are those classes or this camp once in a while," says LaValley.

"Our language is our culture. It's who we are as a people, and without our language, our culture dies. That's a big part of who we are as Métis, and it's critical we carry that on to the next generation and every generation after that." ☉



Learn more about Métis culture and history at [indigenoupeoplesatlasofcanada.ca](http://indigenoupeoplesatlasofcanada.ca).



# CHARTING MICHIF

LANGUAGE OF THE

# ∞ MÉTIS NATION ∞

The maps to the left and right represent the breadth of Métis history, with an emphasis on Michif, the Métis heritage language. The Métis are an Indigenous People distinct from both their First Nations and Euro-Settler ancestors. Born largely as a result of the fur trade, the Métis were indispensable to that trade, but soon became legendary for their own entrepreneurship and called themselves, the "Otipemisiwak" or "lii gens libre" — the people who own themselves or the free people. The Métis were recognized as a nation by other Indigenous Peoples and were a key component of the Nehiyaw-Pwat, the Plains Cree, Ojibwa and Nakoda alliance. The Métis also conducted war and made treaties. In 1851, the Métis won a resounding battle against the Lakota at the Battle of the Grand Coteau. This mirrored earlier action of Métis independence, such as the Battle of Seven Oaks in 1816 and the Guillaume Sayer free trade trial in 1849.

These events represent the golden age of the Métis Nation, when the Métis spoke their languages, notably Michif, practised their culture, governed their communities and engaged freely in bison hunting and trading.

From 1869 onward, Canada intruded on the Métis way of life. Wanting the West for settlement, the Canadians soon marginalized the region's First Nations and Métis inhabitants. First at Red River, the Métis fought to preserve their way of life and, in the process, brought Manitoba into Confederation in 1870. However, Canada never honoured its promises to the Métis regarding their land title as outlined in the Manitoba Act and in subsequent legislation. Moreover, scrip, the means by which the Métis's Indigenous title was both recognized and extinguished, was fraudulent, and the vast majority of Métis did not retain their scrip lands. The unnecessary and catastrophic 1885 Resistance was fought soon after, the Métis were defeated, and Louis Riel was executed by the Canadian state. After the 1885 Resistance, the Métis were socially, economically and politically marginalized. Because of the fraudulent scrip system, most Métis didn't own any land and as result lived in hundreds of makeshift communities, often on road allowances, hence the name "Road Allowance People" — a derisive term given to the Métis by neighbouring settlers. To deal with the plight of the impoverished Métis during the 1930s, Alberta created the Alberta Métis Settlements — of which eight exist to this day, the only recognized Métis land base. Saskatchewan later created Métis Farms, which ultimately failed. Métis community members organized during the 1930s to address their marginalization. The Métis movement continued these efforts into the 1970s, and because of their efforts, much of the modern social, economic, educational and political infrastructure of the Métis Nation was built.

MAPPING CANADA'S  
BIGGEST ISLANDS

MICHIF REVITALIZED: HOW TO SAVE AN ENDANGERED LANGUAGE

# CANADIAN Geographic



ULTIMATE

90 YEARS  
1930 - 2020

# QUIZ

WEATHER EDITION!

**50** QUESTIONS to  
test your geography IQ

HOW TO AVOID  
THE SIXTH  
EXTINCTION

ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME  
VIEWS OF  
OUR NATION

CANADA'S GREATEST RIVER ADVOCATE,  
NATURAL CLIMATE CHANGE SOLUTIONS, CELEBRATING  
THE 75TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE UN, GILLER PRIZE  
WINNER ESI EDUGYAN AND MUCH MORE!

canadiangeographic.ca

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2020 \$8.95



DISPLAY UNTIL OCTOBER 26, 2020