

Stories of the First Nations



Stories abound in the traditions of the First Nations. Their legends, for example, bring accounts of the past to life in their telling. The art of storytelling ensures that these narratives are passed down through the generations by oral tradition. This tradition also explains why certain stories have alternate versions.

Myths and legends represent a good part of the stories passed down through oral tradition. Legends are generally inspired by real-life situations and seek to explain the origins and purpose of animals, unexplained phenomena, places or events.

These narratives are usually short and descriptive, as well as deeply respectful of the environment and of animals, which often play symbolic roles. Horses embody strength, speed, and elegance, while eagles represent omnipresence and dominion.

The fantastic stories which we call legends are part a rich oral tradition which gives life to the customs, ancient beliefs, and spirituality of the First Nations.

The traditions and stories presented here are taken from three sources, the primary of which is Émile Petitot's 1886 book *Traditions indiennes du Canada Nord-Ouest* ("Indian Traditions of North-West Canada"). In this collection, legends from the Cree and Blackfoot nations are presented among others. Two other legends complete the module: one taken from Antoine Champagne, C.R.I.C.'s 1971 work *Nouvelles études sur les La Vérendrye et le poste de l'Ouest* and one reported in 1890 by Georges Demanche in *Au Canada et chez les Peaux-Rouges*.

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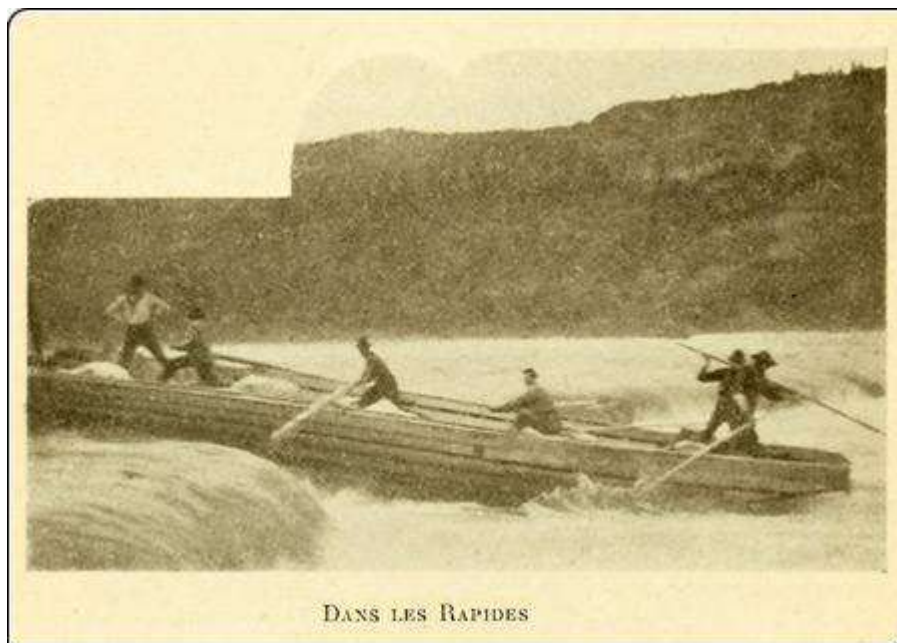
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WARKENTIN, John & Richard I. RUGGLES. *Manitoba Historical Atlas*, The Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, Stovel-Advocate Press, 1970, p. 119.

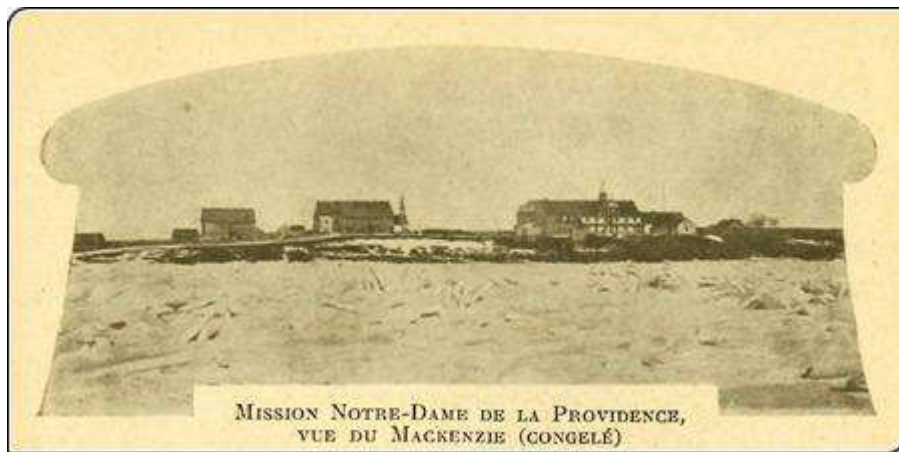
Shooting the Rapids



“It was a long route by river, lake, and portage, which we will simply sum up with these lines written by Father Petitot in 1875: At Fort Garry (as Winnipeg was formerly known), we bid adieu to our shining civilization [...] We settled ourselves to the best of our ability in a boat 30 feet long in the keel; heavy, massive, and bulbous in order to withstand more than just shocks, to brave more than just rapids...leaving St Boniface in May, we could not arrive at Lake Athabasca before August...” (Translation from the French)

Duchaussois, Pierre, O.M.I. Aux Glaces Polaires; Indiens et Esquimaux, Paris, L’Oeuvre Apostolique de Marie Immaculée, 1921, p. 82, excerpt from p. 88

Our Lady of Providence Mission

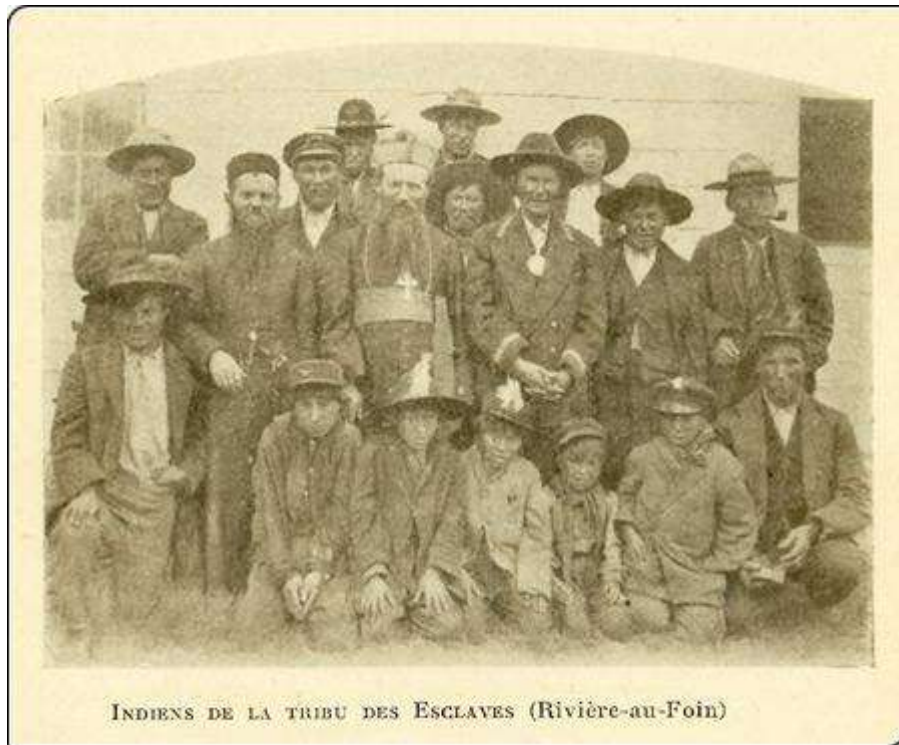


“The Mackenzie River proper consists of water flowing northward from Great Slave lake. The source from which this giant river, called Naotcha, begins its course is 35 kilometres wide...”

On August 12th, 1862, Rev. Grandin and Father Petitot found their way to Providence Mission (Northwest Territories), which at the time consisted only of a canvas tent, a cross, and scaffolding. The later arrival of Brother Boisramé permitted “Father Petitot to devote his time to the study of the languages of the savages.” (Translation of the French)

Duchaussois, Pierre, O.M.I. Aux Glaces Polaires; Indiens et Esquimaux, Paris, L’Oeuvre Apostolique de Marie Immaculée, 1921, p. 329, excerpt from p. 330

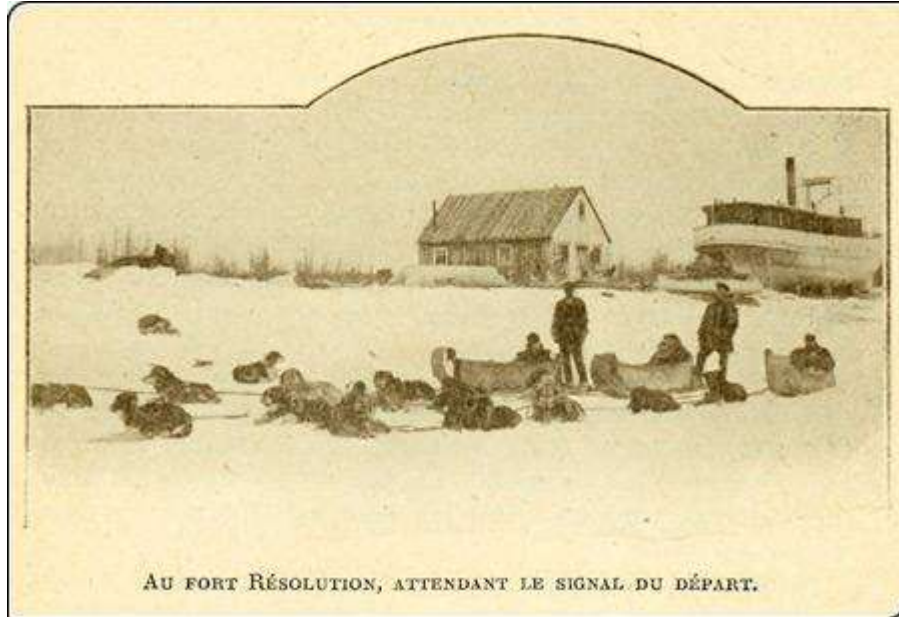
Ste Anne Mission, Alberta



Group of Dene people at the Ste Anne Mission (Alberta) situated at the mouth of the Hay River.

Duchaussois, Pierre, O.M.I. Aux Glaces Polaires; Indiens et Esquimaux, Paris, L'Oeuvre Apostolique de Marie Immaculée, 1921, p. 360

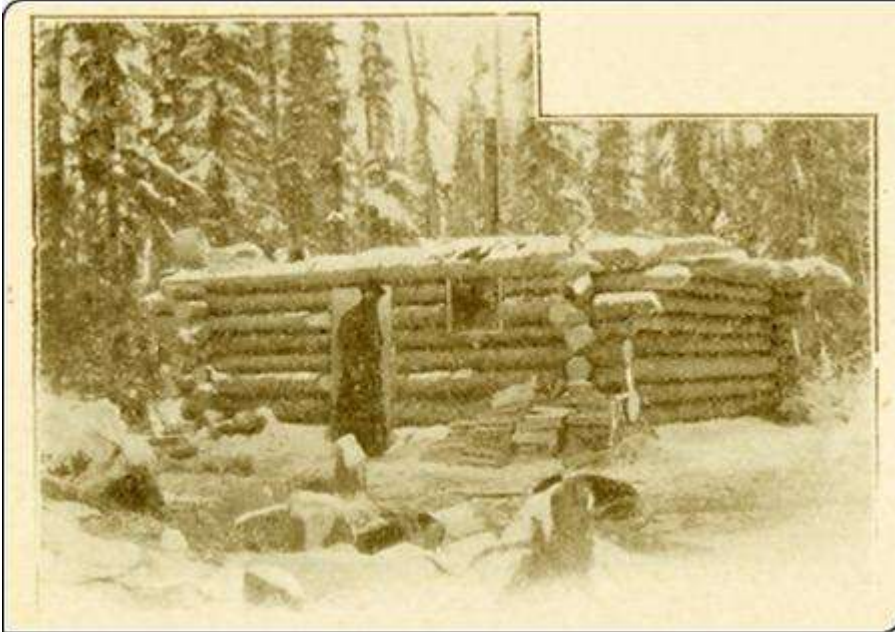
The Fort Resolution Mission, Northwest Territories



The Fort Resolution Mission (Northwest Territories), was also entrusted to Father Petitot, who would be the only one from there to venture farther north-west than Fort Rae. “This was in 1864. He (Father Petitot) went northward from Fort Rae, very far beyond the woods, into the Barrenlands, towards Great Bear Lake” (translation from the French).

Duchaussois, Pierre, O.M.I. Aux Glaces Polaires; Indiens et Esquimaux, Paris, L'Oeuvre Apostolique de Marie Immaculée, 1921, p. 51, excerpt from p. 462

Missionary Residences in the North-West



Missionary residences in the North-West: “Not a single modern necessity yet, in these residences engulfed by snow. The long winter nights were illuminated only by a single lamp, resting in the middle of the ‘family’ table.” (...) “Those who have never had to live in a house with windows covered only by parchment (a piece of scraped moose skin), in such a cold country as ours, could have no idea of what is suffered for lack of glass...” (Translation from the French)

Duchaussois, Pierre, O.M.I. Aux Glaces Polaires; Indiens et Esquimaux, Paris, L’Oeuvre Apostolique de Marie Immaculée, 1921, p. 120, excerpts from p. 104 et 120

Dog Sled



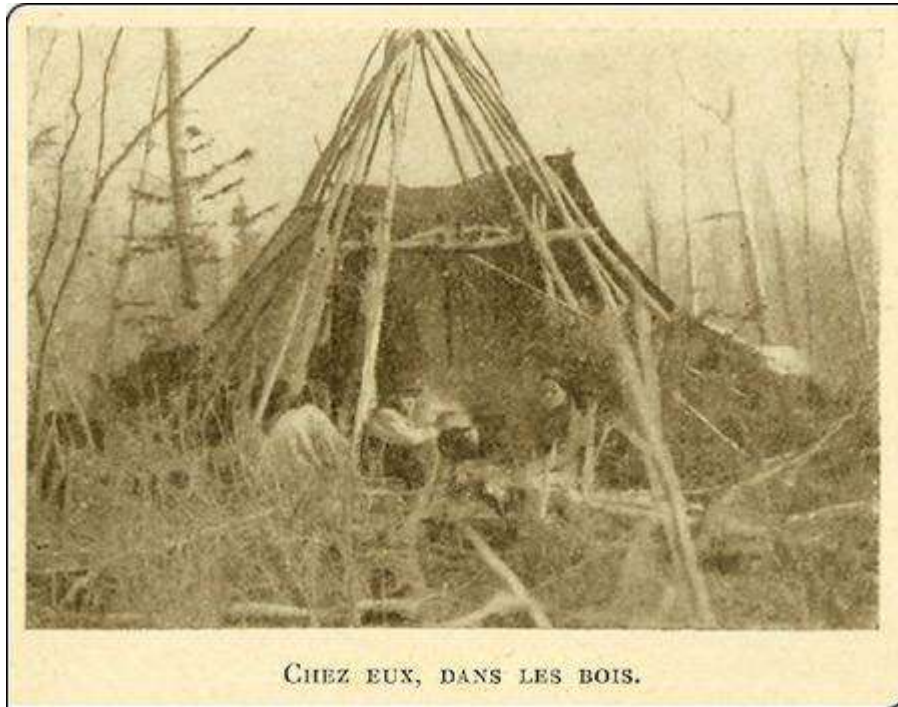
“One does not travel for pleasure in the dead of winter. The men endure great fatigue, and the dogs even more so. The whole journey, they work hard for each night’s meager portion!”

(Translation from the French)

The great dangers threatening travellers included crevasses, pressure ridges (when the ice is pushed up due to pressure against land while thawing), lakes, and blowing snow.

Duchaussois, Pierre, O.M.I. Aux Glaces Polaires; Indiens et Esquimaux, Paris, L’Oeuvre Apostolique de Marie Immaculée, 1921, p. 107, excerpt from p.125

Dene Residence



CHEZ EUX, DANS LES BOIS.

“Housing is the least concern of the Dene (who live in the woods around Athabasca and the Mackenzie). He can sleep under the stars in extreme weather. When he needs shelter, a few boughs, thrown against a leaning willow, serve as his house...such a hut is his regular residence. In a quarter of an hour, the house can be taken down, packed into the canoe or onto the sled...”

(Translation from the French)

Duchaussois, Pierre, O.M.I. Aux Glaces Polaires; Indiens et Esquimaux, Paris, L’Oeuvre Apostolique de Marie Immaculée, 1921, p. 135, excerpt from p. 33

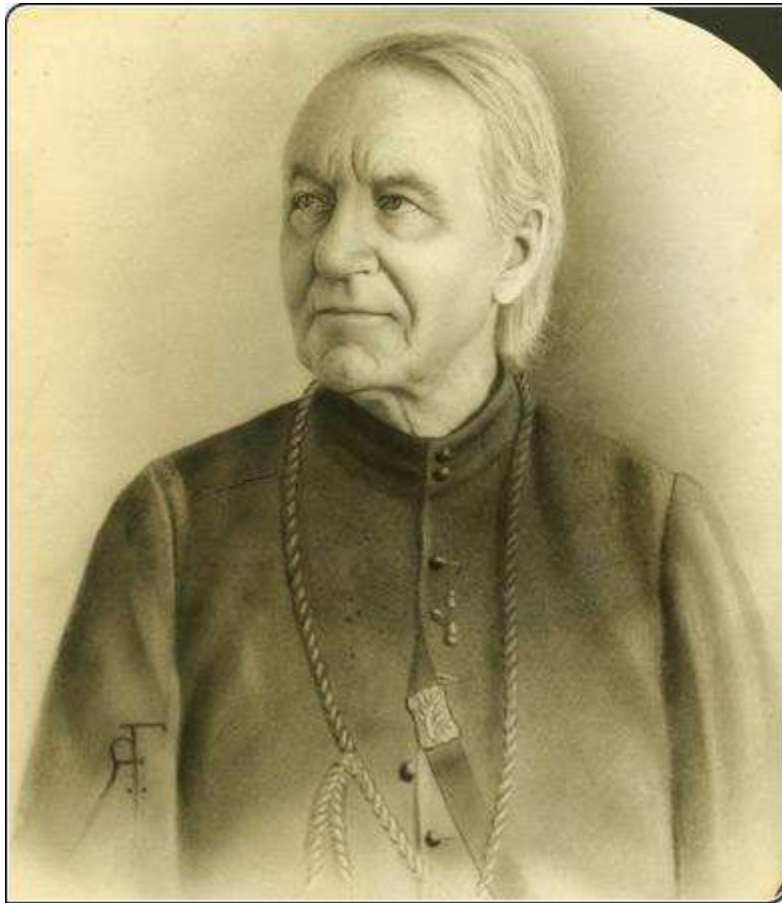
Two Members of the Dene Nation



Pictured here are two members of the Dogrib tribe, who formerly lived near Fort Rae. “The Dogrib flatter themselves that they descend from a great dog the way many of our scientists have the humility to trace our origin to a great ape” (translation from the French).

Duchaussois, Pierre, O.M.I. Aux Glaces Polaires; Indiens et Esquimaux, Paris, L’Oeuvre Apostolique de Marie Immaculée, 1921, p. 311, excerpt from p. 314

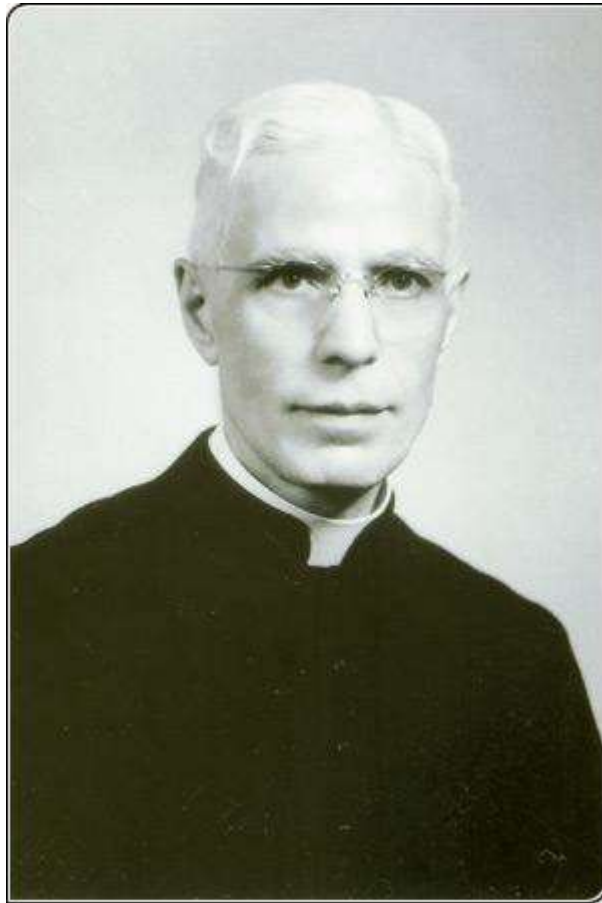
Missionary Albert Lacombe, O.M.I.



A well-known missionary in Western Canada, Oblate Albert Lacombe was regarded as a good friend to the Cree and the Blackfoot.

Archives of the Société historique de Saint-Boniface, General Collection of the SHSB, SHSB 16802

Father Antoine Champagne, C.R.I.C.



Starting in 1937, Father Antoine Champagne devoted many hours to researching genealogy and history in Western Canada. This photograph was taken when he retired in 1948.

Archives of the Société historique de Saint-Boniface, Fonds Antoine-Champagne, SHSB 19442

The Legend of the White Horse



This illustration of the legend which gave the White Horse Plains their name was done by Réal Bérard, a well-known Manitoban artist, for Henri Létourneau's book *Henri Létourneau raconte* ("Henri Létourneau tells a story").

Létourneau, Henri. Henri Létourneau raconte, 3rd ed. revised, Winnipeg, G.F.L. Press, 1992, opposite page 1

Cree Legends and Traditions

Légendes et traditions des Cris

Ethnographic note on the Cree.

Émile Petitot, Traditions indiennes du Canada Nord-Ouest, part six, « Légendes et traditions des Cris », p. 445-446

UMITCHIMO-‘WASIS (Dung-Child)

UMITCHIMO-‘WASIS (Bouse-enfant)

UMITCHIMO-‘WASIS (Dung-child), legend from Hook Lake, 1881.

Émile Petitot, Traditions indiennes du Canada Nord-Ouest, part six, « Légendes et traditions des Cris », p. 447-450

AYATÇ-OT-’ATAYOKAÑ (Story of the Stranger)

AYATÇ-OT-’ATAYOKAÑ (Histoire de l'étranger)

AYATÇ-OT-’ATAYOKAÑ (Story of the stranger), legend from Hook Lake, 1881.

Émile Petitot, Traditions indiennes du Canada Nord-Ouest, part six, « Légendes et traditions des Cris », p. 451-59

MASKWA-IYINIWOK (Origin of the Woods Cree)

MASKWA-IYINIWOK (Origine des Cris de bois)

MASKWA-IYINIWOK (Origin of the Woods Cree), legend from Hook Lake, 1881.

Émile Petitot, Traditions indiennes du Canada Nord-Ouest, part six, « Légendes et traditions des Cris », p.460-2

WÉMISTAKUSIW-OT'ATAYOKAN (Origin of White People)

WÉMISTAKUSIW-OT'ATAYOKAN (Origine des blancs)

WÉMISTAKUSIW-OT'ATAYOKAN (Origin of white people), Cree folktale from Water Hen Lake, 1880.

Émile Petitot, Traditions indiennes du Canada Nord-Ouest, part six, « Légendes et traditions des Cris », p. 462-65

Story of the Europeans' Arrival

Histoire de l'arrivée des Européens

The story of the Europeans' arrival, as told as a legend by the Cree of Waterhen Lake, 1880.

Émile Petitot, Traditions indiennes du Canada Nord-Ouest, part six, « Légendes et traditions des Cris », p. 465-472

WISSAKÉTCHAK (Origin of the Earth) - 1880

WISSAKÉTCHAK (Origine de la terre) - 1880

WISSAKÉTCHAK (Origin of the Earth), legend from Cold Lake, 1880.

Émile Petitot, Traditions indiennes du Canada Nord-Ouest, sixième partie, « Légendes et traditions des Cris », p. 472-4

WÉSAKÉTCHAN (Origin of the Earth) - 1869

Origine de la terre - 1869

WÉSAKÉTCHAN (Origin of the Earth), second version, 1869.

Émile Petitot, Traditions indiennes du Canada Nord-Ouest, part six, « Légendes et traditions des Cris », p. 475-6

WISAKUTCHASK (Origin of Lake Winnipeg's Dirty Water)

WISAKUTCHASK (Origine de l'eau sale du lac Winnipeg)

WISAKUTCHASK (Origin of Lake Winnipeg's dirty water), legend, 1862.

Émile Petitot, Traditions indiennes du Canada Nord-Ouest, part six, « Légendes et traditions des Cris », p. 476

MITÉWI (Work)

MITÉWI (Le travail)

MITÉWI (Work), Cree, Biennial Medicine Festival, tradition, 1873.

Émile Petitot, Traditions indiennes du Canada Nord-Ouest, part six, « Légendes et traditions des Cris », p. 477-483

MASKWA IYINIWOK (The Bear-Men) - Origin of the Cree

MASKWA IYINIWOK (Les hommes-ours)

MASKWA IYINIWOK (The Bear-Men) (Origin of the Cree), legend,
Original text and literal translation.

Émile Petitot, Traditions indiennes du Canada Nord-Ouest, part six, « Légendes et traditions des Cris », p. 484

Cree Heroes and Deities

Héros et divinités des Cris

Cree heroes and deities.

Émile Petitot, Traditions indiennes du Canada Nord-Ouest, part six, « Légendes et traditions des Cris », p. 488

Blackfoot Legends and Traditions

Légendes et traditions des Pieds-Noirs

Ethnographic note on the Blackfoot or Ninnax tribe.

Émile Petitot, Traditions indiennes du Canada Nord-Ouest, part seven, « Légendes et traditions des Cris », p. 491-2

NAPI or NAPE (The Perfect) - 1882

Le parfait - 1882

NAPI or NAPE (Le parfait), legend of-from Porcupine Mountains, 1882.

Émile Petitot, Traditions indiennes du Canada Nord-Ouest, part seven, « Légendes et traditions des Cris », p. 493-4

NAPI (The Perfect) - 1873

Le parfait - 1873

NAPÉ (The Perfect) another version of the same legend, as told by the Cree of Fort Pitt, 1873.

Émile Petitot, Traditions indiennes du Canada Nord-Ouest, part seven, « Légendes et traditions des Cris », p. 495-6

Story of the Three Blackfoot Lovers - 1879

L'histoire des trois amants Pieds-Noirs

The story of the three Blackfoot lovers, a legend from Fort Pitt, 1879.

Émile Petitot, Traditions indiennes du Canada Nord-Ouest, part seven, « Légendes et traditions des Cris », p. 496-9

Account of the Blackfoot's Festival of NATOSI, or the Sun - 1874

Récit de la fête du soleil

Account of the Blackfoot's festival of NATOSI, or the sun, as told by Father Lacombe, 1874.

Émile Petitot, Traditions indiennes du Canada Nord-Ouest, part seven, « Légendes et traditions des Cris », p. 500-504

Sample of the Blackfoot Language

Spécimen de langue pied-noir

Sample of the Blackfoot language from Father Lacombe, missionary to the Blackfoot tribe.

Émile Petitot, Traditions indiennes du Canada Nord-Ouest, part seven, « Légendes et traditions des Cris », p. 505-506

Blackfoot Heroes and Deities

Héros et divinités des Pieds-Noirs

Blackfoot heroes and deities.

Émile Petitot, Traditions indiennes du Canada Nord-Ouest, part seven, « Légendes et traditions des Cris », p. 507

History of the Legend of the White Horse Plains

Historique de la légende de la Prairie-du-Cheval-Blanc

This excerpt from Antoine Champagne's work *Nouvelles études sur les La Vérendrye et le poste de l'Ouest* ("New studies on the La Vérendryes and the poste de l'Ouest") puts the legend of the White Horse Plains into historical context.

Antoine Champagne, Nouvelles études sur les La Vérendrye et le poste de l'Ouest, Québec, Les presses de l'Université Laval, 1971, coll. « Les Cahiers de l'Institut d'histoire, no 17, p. 158-162
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Legend of the White Horse Plains

La légende de la Prairie-du-Cheval-Blanc

The legend of the White Horse Plains, taken from Antoine Champagne's work *Nouvelles études sur les La Vérendrye et le poste de l'Ouest* ("New studies on the La Vérendryes and the poste de l'Ouest").

Antoine Champagne, Nouvelles études sur les La Vérendrye et le poste de l'Ouest, Québec, Les presses de l'Université Laval, 1971, coll. « Les Cahiers de l'Institut d'histoire », issue 17, p. 162-4
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Paper on the Introduction of Horses into North America

Étude de l'arrivée des chevaux en Amérique du Nord

A paper on the introduction of horses into North America which presents the historical context of the legend of the White Horse Plains.

Antoine Champagne, Nouvelles études sur les La Vérendrye et le poste de l'Ouest, Québec, Les presses de l'Université Laval, 1971, coll. « Les Cahiers de l'Institut d'histoire », issue 17, p. 165-6 [Digital Version © la Société historique de Saint-Boniface 2003]

The Legend of the Birch

La légende du bouleau

The legend of the birch comes from the lands of the Blackfoot and the Tsuut'ina (Sarcee), near Calgary. Among their world of supernatural beings is a Spirit with the power to control others. It features in a number of legends. This one explains why birch bark does not grow "in haughtiness" like the bark of other trees.

Georges Demanche, Au Canada et chez les Peaux-Rouges, Paris, Librairie Hachette et Cie, 1890, p. 168