



An Elder, Children's Teacher

Around 1910, in the Fort Norman area, the country was very poor. There were two stores but they did not sell food, and there were no freezers at that time to preserve meat for bad times. It was a poor time of year for fishing and rabbits were scarce that summer, so people couldn't stay in Fort Norman for the usual length of time. There was a priest in the community, so they were able to have mass everyday. In those days, the Dene were very religious.

A good person and Elder by the name of Saul Blondin lived in the community. He was the Chief. During that summer, getting food and enough to eat was not easy. Saul had a big canvas canoe. He would invite about twelve children, eight- to

twelve-year-olds, and take them down the river to set fishnets. He carried four short fishnets that could be set in the eddies of the river. He also carried a fairly large tent for shelter, in case of rain.

At that time, there were no outboard motors and no leisure travelling like we do today. The people had to paddle or track their canoes and boats if they wanted to go somewhere. To get back to the story, Saul was one of the best moose hunters in the area, as he had hunted all his life.

Saul and the children paddled down the river. It was easy, because the current pushed them along. As the group drifted along at a leisurely pace, they constantly looked at the riverbanks, searching for good rabbit country. They wanted

to set some snares, but before doing that, they set all their fishnets in the eddies. Later, Saul and the bigger boys went in the bush to set the rabbit snares.

When they returned to camp, Saul told the children to wash their clothes on the bank of the river, as they were muddy. When the children had done all their evening chores, he began to tell them stories. Saul was a very religious person and when in Fort Norman, he attended church everyday.

As a method of teaching, he told the children religious and biblical stories every night. He explained that the Creator had created everything for them. He told the children, "If we are good, we will go to heaven. If we are bad, we will be punished for it." He also taught the children about the benefits of being a good person. "If you are a good person, everybody will be proud of you and it will help you when you get bigger and older if you continue that way."

Saul led praying with the rosary every night before they went to bed. The next morning, they said their prayers again before starting the day's work, but first they checked all their fishnets.

Saul had brought four dogs with him in case they were needed for packing. The dogs could also help pull the canoe upstream when they were tracking. It was useful to have dogs around. The group visited all the rabbit snares. Sometimes Saul had to double-check the snares to make sure the bigger boys had set them right.

When they returned to camp, Saul taught the children how to clean fish and make dry fish in preparation for smoking. He showed them how smoke keeps flies away from the hanging dryfish.

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The children also smoked the rabbits that they had snared and cleaned. He instructed the bigger children to have the smoke going at all times and to turn the drying fish and rabbits over and around so they would be evenly smoked. Later, Saul made sure that the children ate all they wanted.

After awhile, Saul decided he wanted to go hunting and told the older children to take care of the smaller children. He hunted, but did not see any moose tracks. Since there weren't any moose around, the next morning they took out their fishnets and rabbit snares, and moved downriver to another location.

At this new camp, they set the fishnets and a few snares. Saul was in a hurry because he wanted to hunt moose. He went moose hunting in the evening. When he got back, his pack was full of

moose meat. He had shot a moose in the bush about four miles from camp. Now, there was a lot of teaching and demonstrating to be done with the moose and all its parts.

Saul sent the boys out to pick up all the snares, since they wouldn't be needed now. After the evening prayers, everyone went to sleep. In the morning, they went to visit the fishnets and then walked to the place where Saul had shot the moose to collect the rest of the meat. They made camp and Saul built a rafter over the fire so they could hang the meat to smoke it. He did most of the butchering while the bigger boys hung the meat on the rafters. The other children helped by gathering wood. All the children enjoyed eating the fresh moose meat. They eat that way in Fort Norman.



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Saul and the children camped at that location and smoked meat all night. When they were ready to leave, they had four dogs and ten boys to pack out the meat. They did not waste any meat or throw away essential parts of the moose. They packed everything out to the canoe in one trip.

When they camped on the return journey, they smoked the meat again. The next day, they went further upriver and Saul figured they would be home by nightfall. With the help of the big boys, he prepared individual parcels of dryfish, rabbit and moose meat for each of the children to take back to their parents.

The big boys did useful work on that trip. When the river current was swift and strong, they would run ashore, grab a rope line and track the canoe. In some places, they could paddle. At nightfall, they arrived safely back at Fort Norman. The children had a lot of fun and they learned many lessons from Saul, the good Elder and teacher. So that is the story.

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