

The Importance of Rivers

-by Carleigh Baker

In September 2014, I paddled 500 kilometers through the Peel River Watershed in the Yukon, as a part of a documentary about art, adventure, and Canadian identity. The film also had environmental implications, as the Peel region is currently under threat of gas and mining exploitation. On July 7, the Supreme Court of the Yukon began hearing the case filed against the Yukon government by First Nations, the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Association, and the Yukon Conservation Society. The Supreme Court ruled in favour of the people, but as of March 2015, the government is in the process of appealing that ruling. The six artists on the trip were invited to address the environmental concerns however they wished, or not at all.

In essence, this was a documentary about the artists, six urbanites with varying degrees of outdoor experiences, on the Peel River for nearly a month. The film would document what we'd learned from our time in the northern Yukon and Northwest Territories landscape, and interpret its link to our identity as Canadians. There were also two scientists on the trip, two guides, and, of course, the film crew – twelve of us total. At thirty-seven, I was one of the oldest on the team. Most of the participants were in their mid-twenties. Everyone on the crew was non-Aboriginal, except me, a mixed-blood with little knowledge of my Métis heritage. Which is where paddling 500 kilometers across the Canadian North comes in.

When I was asked to be a part of the Peel Project documentary, I thought of my Grandma Carrière right away. A lack of pride in her French/Cree background kept her from being part of her family and her community. As I get older, I've wanted to fill the space that remained after her death. I thought the time spent on the Peel considering our relationship might bring about some epiphanies. I didn't know exactly how. But this is what people do when they want to find themselves; it is the classic transformative journey story—go, suffer, find out who you are. This was my call to action, so I agreed. I packed a photo of Grandma Carrière into a dry bag, along with journals, pens, rain gear, and a hundred layers of merino wool long johns. I suffered. I paddled. I did not find exactly what I was looking for.

Holy crap, I'm hungry.

The GPS says that we passed the Arctic Circle. Time to celebrate, or at least feel like superstars for a few minutes, though our river journey still isn't over. My fellow

intrepid travellers haul out their otherwise useless iPhones and we take photos of one another: Oh my god, me in the Arctic! Facebook-ready for whenever we get anywhere near a signal. Fort McPherson? Maybe Dawson City. We'll be ready.

It's not a postcard moment: the weather is misty and grey, the river big and brown and sluggish. Earlier in the trip things were more scenic, but now it's muddy shores, scrubby trees, and, beyond that, bare-ass mountains. We've been paddling through the Peel River Watershed for sixteen days, and we've got about four to go. I'm tired and cold and dirty, but I hope Grandma Carrière would be proud if she could see me now, flush-faced and grinning, posing for a picture with a canoe paddle in hand. "Bravo, Chérie," she'd say, using the accent that only really came out when she was drunk and swanning around like Edith Piaf. Yep, my Métis grandma was a boozier, and this prevented me from getting to know her very well when she was alive. Her habit may have robbed me of a grandma, but it also robbed me of the opportunity to learn about how to be a part of the Aboriginal community, and my Métis extended family. Fortunately, it's never too late for the latter.

A little farther down the river something extraordinary happens. We hear a boat, the only motorized sound we've heard since the trip began, besides the fancy drone camera the director uses for "money shots." Our canoes all rafted together to share a snack, we listen to the boat's approach, and excitement starts to bubble. Outside contact! Soon, a long flat-bottom boat appears. Three people are in the front, bundled up in parkas, and one is working the outboard motor in the back. They pull up beside us; greetings and names are exchanged. Ernest and Alice Vittrekwa are husband and wife and Margaret is Alice's younger sister. Kirk is on the outboard; he's in his late teens or early twenties and introduced as an adopted son.

Alice seems to be a few years younger than Ernest, who isn't easy to understand since he's missing teeth and he mumbles. He says something to us and Alice repeats it. "A little late in the season for canoe trips."

Somebody answers that we're making a movie about the Peel, and the three adults nod approvingly. Everyone who lives on the Peel is savvy to the situation and invested in its protection. In some ways we're only well-intentioned enviro-tourists, but those who make it the Peel their home understand that everyone's help is valuable. Ernest is right though – it is late in the season. The Whitehorse companies that outfitted us for the trip said the same thing, politely implying that we are nuts to be travelling in September. Our connections at the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Association insisted on regular check-in calls with the satellite phone, even though our guide is local and very experienced.

We laugh about this, and eventually someone cracks a joke about how we've been pushing to finish the trip before we run out of food. It's funny because it's true.

There's giddy laughter, but a question now hangs in the air between the Vittrekwas and us.

"Well, you better head over to our camp," Ernest says, answering it. "It's just down a ways."

Alice and Margaret aren't smiling, but they nod. Twelve people – that's a lot of unexpected guests. "There's a kettle, there's coffee and sugar," Alice says. "Get some coffee on." We're going a little farther up to look for moose." And so we were unceremoniously dismissed, left to paddle the last few kilometers to a stranger's camp, in search of coffee and a warm fire.

The Aboriginal people of this land have been providing aid to underprepared dumbasses like us for hundreds of years now, especially in the inhospitable North. Helping those in need is an ingrained part of northern Aboriginal culture, just as not asking for help is considered rude or wrong-minded. And we could use the help. The food situation has been grim. There have been whispered conversations about reducing portions sizes, already pretty skimpy for long days on the river. Lunches are the worst. On day two of a gruelling portage, we were given a tortilla with a smear of cold refried beans, a sixth of a can of tuna and shredded cheese. I took extra beans and looked around, daring somebody to object. It's making me nervous, and it's having an effect on the group dynamic too. Things are getting ... well ... weird. Gaunt, pale-faced travellers loom over whoever is cooking dinner and watch like so many wolves when portions are ladled out. At breakfast, people comment on how many apricots I have in my bowl, or how slow I'm eating. I eat slowly because it creates a feeling of fullness, but the number of calories remains the same – inadequate. Everybody has to have a say on when snacks are portioned out, and it only takes one naysayer, inexplicably proud of their capacity for self-denial, to delay a stop for lunch or a snack break for an hour, even though the very suggestion of food has already started my salivary glands working, stomach growling. This decision-making by committee is driving me crazy, making me angry and resentful of anyone who doesn't want what I want, when I want it. The Vittrekwas' invitation, once extended, sends a current through my cold, worn-out body.

A few kilometers down the river, their camp appears on our left. We pull our canoes up onto the muddy beach and make for higher ground. There's an outhouse and a smallish shack with a bowed roof. Across from that is a lean-to, where I find the hearth. A battered aluminum kettle on top of the grate. Some dried meat, moose, somebody guesses, and dried fish. Under a tarp is a big table set up with coffee and sugar, as Alice promised, but also butter and jam and evaporated milk, all kinds of delights we haven't enjoyed for what seems like an age. A little farther off is the main house, small, cozy-looking, with a rough deck out front. There is nothing fancy here, nothing ornamental. It looks, to the privileged eye, like poverty. I think about Grandma Carrière's shelves jammed with porcelain dog figurines, and the gold-threaded Mexican

blankets draped over rattan couches. She lived in Coquitlam, British Columbia, a long way from her Red River heritage. With her blue-rinse perm and her polyester pantsuits, she clearly preferred the Florida pensioner aesthetic to that of the Métis voyageur.

She liked rivers though – or at least, she felt at home on the river. In the photo I brought on the trip, she's walking along the Alouette River shorelines in Maple Ridge, BC. Three dachshunds, her stalwart companions, are by her side. She is wearing a pantsuit – mint green – the beaded moccasins on her feet likely a product of some kind of eighties Native American fashion trend. She's smiling her beautiful smile, eyes squinty behind thick glasses. The Alouette is the river that my dad spread her ashes in after she died. Rolled up his pant legs and waded in while those of us on the shore sang "Amazing Grace," for lack of anything better.

While she was alive, Grandma Carrière's devotion to alcohol made her a loner. She continued to drink heavily, even after most of her family had gone sober. My dad was her only child, and our communication with her remained sporadic, often contingent on her sobriety. But after she died, the family communication lines opened somewhat. No significant tears had been shed, and the memories people shared were distant and disjointed. Building a clear picture of who my grandma was wasn't easy. Eventually, two of her sisters-in-law cornered me over a cup of coffee and then tried to act nonchalant when they asked what I remembered most about her.

"Her wiener dogs," I said, and laughed. And then I realized what a stupid, shallow answer that was. "I, uh, didn't know her very well."

Their face opened to me. "She was hard to get to know," one said. We all nodded. We talked about my grandma's youth and hinted at familial skeletons: abuse, Catholic shame, neglect. They couldn't say where the shame came from that caused my grandmother to drink and try to erase both her French and Cree backgrounds. And I may never know, since family secrets, personal bias, and the decline of memory wind history into knots. "She was always so angry," another woman said, one of Grandma Carrière's blood sisters. All three nodded. "She was the angriest of us."

There's a tentative-looking husky tied up near the bow-roofed shack, cowering a little but wagging his tail. As good as coffee sounds, animal affection wins the day, and I approach fearlessly, burying myself in him and nearly bursting into tears at the contact. The dog pants and lets me hang around his neck like a yoke. I can hear the Vittrekwas' boat approaching.

Despite the invite, our team was unwilling to make themselves at home in the Vittrekwas' absence. But swept up in the current of our hosts, things just happen. The fire gets made and coffee is brewed in giant pots. Cups are distributed, and I fill mine before anyone else. People make jokes about how much I've missed my coffee, since we ran out days ago. Alice leads a few of us into the smaller shack, where a wood stove

creates three-dimensional heat none of us have experienced for weeks. They say we can sleep here for the night and the thought is intoxicating. Food is produced at such a rate we can barely keep up. Cookies and biscuits, bannock with butter and jam, dried fish and candies and, of course, endless coffee.

At one point, Alice pulls me aside. "Why didn't you pack enough food?" she asks, eyes narrowed.

"You're asking the wrong person," I start, raising my voice to implicate some of the people who were actually in charge of food, but I can see she's genuinely concerned, and now's not the time for humour.

"Why didn't you call ahead, ask us for help?" By "us" she means everyone at Fort McPherson, the band office, and a whole town full of experts in northern travel that would have been happy to offer guidance.

"I don't know, Alice. I was told there would be enough, and I trusted the people in charge."

"What do any of you know about being up here?" she says, huffy and frustrated and a little bit sad. Classic grandmother.

I start to offer excuses, the same excuses I'd been feeding myself for the last several days as I grew hungrier. "Nothing," I say finally. "Certainly not enough. We should have asked for help."

She nods, vindicated, lower lip protruding. And then she goes back to making sure everyone is fed. After dark, wieners are produced for us to roast, mustard passed around. She finds me again, the fire dancing across both our faces, a piece of buttered bannock still locked tightly in my grip. We talk about home and family. Or mostly, she talks and I listen. The Elders are smarter than you. I may be an ignorant mixed-blood, but I know this. Shut up and listen, and don't fill the quiet spaces with your words. And if you can roll with this, and let them have their space and adequate time to fill it, the benefits to you, the listener, are immense.

I'm reticent to tell her I'm Métis, nervous it might lead to questions I won't know how to answer. But I can't resist mentioning Grandma Carrière.

"So where is your family?" she asks.

"Well, my Métis family is from Manitoba," I say, "Red River settlement. But my family lives in BC."

"They're a long way from home then"

"You're right, but it was never really our home. My Grandma Carrière moved out west with her family when she was a girl," I said. "I don't know much about it."

"Why would she leave her home?" Alice's lower lip is jutting out again.

"My grandmother wasn't very proud of who she was," I say, "She drank a lot, so we didn't see her very often anyway."

This, Alice understands. She nods. "It's not your fault," she says simply, immediately.

I nod and gulp, feeling like I might cry. Alice's eyes are watery, but she nods with determination.

"It's not your fault," she says again. This is not ancient Elder wisdom. This is Al-Anon, straight from the blue book. Fort McPherson is a dry community, but that doesn't mean there's no drinking. A little knot is tied between the two of us, Alice and me. We've found a common language, at least for tonight: the language of healing.

I've never thought much about how Grandma Carrière's drinking affected me, but who doesn't walk away from a relationship with an alcoholic wondering what they should have done differently? I was an adult when she died; there was nothing stopping me from forging a relationship with her while she was still alive. I didn't want to. I think about how it affected my dad, having to cut off his own mother from contact for months, sometimes years at a time, the ultimatum of her sobriety hanging between them like an anvil. My mom, angry because I'd answered the phone when Grandma called and had been subjected to one of her drunken rants. The rage that swept through the house after my mom seized the phone from me on one of Grandma's drunk dials, with her asking my mother what her IQ was. My mom, from an immigrant family in which she and her brother are the only two with university degrees.

And really, that's what I remember most about Grandma Carrière. Not her anger, but the anger that surrounded her. My selfish, sulky anger at the lack of grandmothers in my life who baked cookies and took me to the park to feed the ducks. Why the hell didn't I have one of those?

Now I'm angry. But this is what Alice was talking about; this is the part that's not my fault. It's not my fault that I didn't want to get to know Grandma Carrière while she was alive. That I'm more likely to rewrite her now that she's dead, with significant edits. And it's not my fault that she's not here with me in spirit on the Peel, though I wanted her to be. People like her are never there for you.

I take these thoughts to bed with me, so I don't sleep much. Most people don't sleep much in the warm cabin, twelve of us packed in head to head like so many sardines. I don't think most people care; they're enjoying every minute of a full belly and the all-encompassing heat. The stove crackles and clangs, people gurgle and burp and fart like nobody's business, the chests of those able to grab a few z's rise and fall in a soft rhythm.

The next morning, we take our time packing up and cleaning the shack, savouring every last moment indoors.

"Looks like you had a good chat with Alice," one of the other artists says to me.

"I did," I say, not sure how to fill in the blanks for him. Very little was actually said. It's like that sometimes.

For breakfast, it's oatmeal and boiled eggs and dried fish, and the Vittrekwas send us off with more than enough supplies to keep us fed and caffeinated until the end of the trip. I am thankful but sheepish. Even with the best of intentions, we have continued in the colonial tradition of underprepared tourist/adventures, and benefited from the Aboriginal tradition of offering help without expectation. Well, maybe one expectation.

"Just make sure you tell people about the Peel," Alice says, waving away our repeated thanks. "Good luck," she says to me, when I hug her goodbye. I'll have plenty to tell people about the Peel, and about Alice. Maybe less to say about Grandma Carrière. If anything, I feel like I have more questions than answers now. That sounds clichéd, but no more so than the idea of finding myself on the river. It takes a lot more than a canoe trip to get in touch with your roots. And it will take more than a team of well-intentioned, accidental colonials to save the Peel. But it won't be wasted effort. As the people of the Peel know, everyone's help is valuable. That's how community works.

Baker, Carleigh. "The Importance of Rivers." *In This Together: Fifteen Stories of Truth and Reconciliation*. Ed. Daniele Metcalfe-Chenail. Victoria: Brindle and Glass. 2016.

