

Maria Campbell, *Eagle Feather News*, March 2008

This article is copyrighted by the author Maria Campbell and can only be used for reference purposes.

The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees,
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon the cloudy seas,
The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
And the highwayman came riding,
 Riding, riding,
The highwayman came riding up to the old inn-door.

As mom's voice half sang the words of the poem, my imagination would take me to the Bodmin Moor and the romantic figure of the highwayman would become my dad riding across an open meadow being chased by game wardens, who were, in the 1940's, the kings men. And my mom, with her braided black hair became Bess, the highwayman's sweetheart and the landlord's black-eyed daughter, plaiting a dark red love knot into her long black hair.

My imagination as a child was as huge as the stories mom read to us and it wasn't hard to turn a dreary boring day into one of excitement and adventure. My mom loved books and in our home they were treated with the same care and respect as my kokoms and cheechum, who were the storytellers in our small community. And although we didn't have many books, my brothers and I could recite almost all of them from memory.

Like all moms, ours was pretty special. She was tiny, gentle with an iron will and for her nothing was impossible and for sure everything was a great story. Even poverty, which we had in abundance became a story that was guaranteed to teach a great life lesson and "who said rabbits were poor people's food?"

Why they were so special, mom said, that the rich folk in England, had game keepers to protect them, and " just taste this meat pie, its made from rabbit, venison and grouse, cooked at Camelot, just the way King Arthur loved it."

We'd hear about the great battle fought at Bannockburn, in Scotland as we ate bannock with our dinner and learned that it was not our traditional bread and that we never really had bread until Europeans arrived and introduced flour. When my brother asked what we used for flour before they came, Mom called our kokom to tell us all about the flour that was derived from bulrushes which was not only good to eat but was a medicine as well. This story meant that we would go to the marshy slough with kokom and dig up bulrushes and get a lesson on how to make medicine and thickening for soup and no, said kokom, we never had bread long, long ago.

Mom also believed in discussion and debate and this was especially encouraged after she'd read to us or after one of the kokoms told a story so it was always easy to compare our situation and lives to those we found in books and surprisingly, the similarities were more common than not. In fact, I thought our poverty was nothing compared to that of the many characters in those stories. I must admit however, that as I got older, I realized that it was no wonder the British were so good at colonizing, they'd had lots of practice in Ireland and Scotland, and as my cheechum pointed out, "with their own people too."

Once we started school, all this discussion at home did not always sit well with our teacher. I remember eyes dropping on a grade seven class one afternoon. (I attended a one room school) our teacher was talking about Merlin and his magic and I interrupted to tell her that Old Naychan, who was visiting our house right now, could perform great feats just like Merlin, as well as magic, why he even did a shaking tent. Needless to say that did not go over well. When I got home mom had to explain to all of us that it was best we keep this kind of information to our selves because if we didn't we could fail our grades.

Books have remained an important part of my life and the lives of my siblings and our children. We are all avid readers. Books are treated with the same respect we give the old people in our lives. I cannot even begin to imagine a world without them and so in this issue I honor all the moms, kokoms and chapans who make books and stories a part of their children's lives. Hearing stories told or read by people who love you is as healing as it is educational. Books and stories give us keys to worlds inside and outside of "ki mam to nay chi kun now," (our mind) There can be no finer gift.