

Maria Campbell, *Eagle Feather News*, March 2006

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Honouring Women

A day set aside to honour and celebrate women's lives was first introduced at the turn of the century; however, it was the lobbying of women's groups in the 1960's and 70's that finally forced the United Nations in 1975 to designate March 8th as International Women's Day. Since then events have been held around the world to honour the social, political and cultural lives of women. And so in this column I wish to honour and celebrate some women who have made a difference in the life of our communities. There are hundreds and I wish I had room for all of them for they are the very heart of our nations.

I will begin with Cheechum, my great grandmother, whose determination to preserve our history and culture produced an extended family of writers, poets, playwrights, filmmakers, painters and recording artists. Her descendants have traveled the world to tell her stories and celebrate her people's history.

I remember and honour too, the late Bernelda Wheeler and the late Edith Josie, who by writing columns in small local newsletters in the 1950's and later columns in national newspapers, connected our communities for the first time and not only pioneered a Native Communications Network in this country, but also brought national and international awards and recognition in journalism, radio and television. Both women went on to publish books of poetry, prose and essays. Bernelda went on to become the first Native woman in radio in 1954. She later produced and hosted *Our Native Land* at CBC, another first as this was the first Native programming in Canada. Edith Josie's first collection entitled *Here Are the News* was published in several countries and languages.

There was Eleanor Brass, a grandmother from Peepeekisis Reserve in southern Saskatchewan, a children's puppeteer and storyteller who published three books in the 1970's and early 80's. Alanis Obamsawin, Abenaki filmmaker and recording artist, who has for over three decades documented in film and songs our peoples' struggles for land rights and self-determination. Her name and work are known around the world which also means our struggles are known around the world.

Marjorie Beaucage is another pioneer whose hard work and efforts on behalf of Aboriginal artists founded the Aboriginal Peoples Arts program at the Banff Centre making it possible for hundreds of young artists to meet, work with and be mentored by teachers of international caliber.

Then there is poet/scholar Beth Cuthand, her sister artist Ruth Cuthand, who has documented on canvas the powerful images of women and their history. Sherry Farrell-Racette, another international artist, writer and scholar Louise Halfe, Saskatchewan's Poet Laureate who has not only given us Aboriginal women's history in beautiful lyrical poetry; but has also traveled the breadth and width of this province speaking to and

mentoring new and young writers. There is actor, playwright, Maureen Belanger, who has immortalized Metis kookooms forever in the character of Ernestine. Donna Heimbecker, who has almost single handedly built a theatre company, giving Aboriginal youth a place where their lives and stories are valued. Winona Wheeler, historian, scholar, land-claims researcher, teacher, who fights for self-determination and good stories in the class room, the courts and in her life.

Janet Smiley, Physician, scientist, and poet. Raven Sinclair, teacher, researcher and activist. Tracy Lindberg, a lawyer, scholar and novelist who has established a World Indigenous Research Centre at Athabasca University. Marilyn Poitras, lawyer, teacher. Scholars and teachers, Verna St. Denis, Priscilla Settee, Marie Batiste, Patricia Monture Angus and community leaders like Rose Richardson, Marie Favel, Annie Iron, Karen Laroque. And my beloved aunty and teacher Leada Gaudry, my daughters Roxanne, Tanice and Cindy, my grand-daughters, Bailey and Samantha. My lodge sisters, Winona Wheeler, Brenda MacDougall, Gail Mackay, Judy Anderson, Cindy Doxtator, Ida Moore and Lucy Robinson. All these women who have given all of us so much I honour and celebrate. Hi hi good women, merci and thank you for your work and contributions to our people and homeland.