



DOCTRINES & DISCOVERIES

AN MCC PODCAST



S1E1. Mistasinīy | Buffalo Child Stone: A visit with Doug Cuthand

Intro (Doug Cuthand):

“They were told a story that they would break it into some large pieces and be able to move it. So they were all standing there to watch this thing and, it was... my dad said it was horrible. Dad wasn't the kind of guy to go talk about his feelings a whole lot, but he said the thought of that stone being destroyed was almost a metaphor for our people. He said that we stand in the way of the industry and this is what happens. And that's the way he saw it. To him it was a symbol of our past being destroyed to satisfy the white man's need for a hydro dam.”

[music]

Host (Randy Klassen):

This is *Doctrines & Discoveries*, the podcast that takes you to sites across Saskatchewan to listen to great stories and hard truths, as told by Indigenous knowledge keepers. I'm your host Randy Klassen.

Today we're taking a trip to Lake Diefenbaker, about 90 minutes south of Saskatoon. At the southeast corner of this reservoir, just outside Douglas Provincial Park, we find a remarkable monument. It's centred on a simple rough stone the size of a picnic table, or maybe an altar, with three smaller rocks lying beside it. But the story behind this stone is huge. It's a remnant of the original Buffalo Child Stone, which was destroyed to make Lake Diefenbaker.

My guest is Doug Cuthand. He's a Saskatoon based journalist, filmmaker, author and traditional knowledge keeper. Doug is a member of the Little Pine First Nation in Treaty 6 territory.

It was a windy day out by the lake. I started by asking Doug about the importance of the Buffalo child's stone to the First Nations.

Doug Cuthand:

This stone out here is called **mistasinīy**, which means Big Stone in Cree, but Cree people also call it the Buffalo Child Stone, **mostos awāsis mistasinīy**, and it goes way back into history to a time when other people lived here. We don't know if they were in Lakota or Cree or who, but a group of people are traveling across the Prairie. And this is before the coming of Columbus, of course.

They were using dog travois, and not horse travois. And this one old lady had a large dog and on the travois they had put a baby in a little cradle board, and he was being pulled along by the dog. And in the distance they saw a small herd of buffalo. And the dogs rebelled—the dogs weren't properly trained, and they took off chasing the buffalo. And, as it turned out, the dog with the cradle board on the back also took off and went. And it took

them a while to round up all the dogs and get them back together again. But the dog with the Cradle Board came back and he had no cradle board on the travois. The baby was missing. And so they went out, they searched all over and they couldn't find the baby. And the night came, and they tried again the next day and they tried for several days but they finally gave up.

Meanwhile, on the plains, two young buffalo were grazing, and they overheard the sound of a baby crying. And they wondered what it was and went over and investigated. And here they found a baby and they didn't know what to do. They thought they should kill it because the people killed them. But then the other buffalo said no. We must be kind and let the baby grow. So they took care of the baby and they raised it on the berries that lived around there. And they took care of him over the summer months and winter months. They kept him warm. And he gradually grew into a beautiful young man, handsome young man. And he traveled with the buffalo, followed their cycles, and he would..., he regarded himself as a buffalo.

And many years later, he was a young man by this time, he saw a group of people, humans, and he snuck up on them and looked at them. And this woman came down and she was getting water from a river and he went down beside her, and he looked in the river and he was surprised to see that he was one of them. He wasn't a buffalo. And so he ran away and he didn't know what to do because he didn't think he was a human being. He thought he was a buffalo.

And he met the old buffaloes—by this time, the young buffaloes that had helped him out were old buffaloes. One was known as the Kindly Old Buffalo and the Kindly Old Buffalo told him to turn, four times, and pray to each direction, to the four directions. So he did that and he transformed himself into a buffalo. And then he traveled, continued to travel with the buffalo. And he didn't really feel normal after that. He felt he should go back to being a person. So he went back to the Old Buffalo and the Old Buffalo told him to do the same thing. And this time, pray to be a human. So he did, and he turned four times and he became a man. And then he traveled down to meet the people, and he lived with them for a while.

But he began to miss his old friends, the buffalo, and one day when they were out on the Prairie, he saw the buffalo in the distance. So he ran to meet them, and by then the old buffalo bull was very old and the Kindly Old Buffalo told him to do the same thing, turn four times and you will turn back into a buffalo.

By this time, he'd turned into a buffalo, but he was an old buffalo at this point, and he went away with the other buffalo. His friend, the old man buffalo, passed away, and he left him by himself. And he missed his buffalo friends. And so one day, he felt that death was coming to him. He felt it upon him, and he knew he was going to die because there comes some time when there's an end to all things. So he went down into this beautiful valley along the river, known as the Elk River, that came from the mountains. And he found a place where he rolled, sat down, rolled his feet up, put his head down. And then he passed away. And because he was both man and buffalo, he didn't deteriorate like any other one should, but rather he turned to stone, he turned to a rock. And that was the Buffalo Stone that was

on the prairie here, when they built the Gardiner Dam and the subsequent Lake Diefenbaker.

So that was how the stone came to be on the prairie, and it was a site of religious gatherings. And people would come and pray to the rock, pray to the buffalo, the long dead buffalo, and then they would go on and have good hunting or safety or a good winter, this type of thing. So it was in the 1960s, early 1960s, when they built the Gardiner Dam. It would be flooded.

And there was a group of people, including my father, who tried to save the stone, have it moved to a higher altitude or higher level, but it couldn't be. The Park people or the people of engineers of the day said that the rocks should be blown up because it was a hazard to navigation. And as it turned out, today the rock is 70 feet below the surface, so it never was any kind of a hazard to navigation.

Instead, they told the committee my dad was a member of, that they would plant a limited amount of dynamite in the rock. And so it would break into some large pieces. And then they could take it and reassemble it, in a safe place. And people from the PFRA came to blow it up, they brought in dynamite. And we don't know if it was by accident or by design, but they put way too much dynamite in it and blew it into small pieces. It could never be reassembled, and so the rock was scattered all over the place. Some are in museums. Some pieces sit on Poundmaker's grave on the Cut Knife Hill or overlooking the Battle River. And other places are..., some are in monuments in various places, including here at this park, along the shores of the lake. So it's a very meaningful story to our people, but it was very sad that it had a such a sad ending. And all we have is the memory, and we have to keep that memory alive, of the famous boy who turned into a buffalo.

Host:

Hearing this story, one of the things I'm left to ponder is the importance of sacred places. What can we learn from places like this, locations and landscapes that connect us to deeper meanings and deeper relationships in this land?

Doug:

Yeah, there's many sacred places, that are lost in time. Unfortunately for things like medicine wheels, when the settlers came and plowed up the land, a lot of medicine wheels disappeared, and tipi rings and places where people used to camp, these have been destroyed by agriculture and construction and hydro dams and stuff like that.

So, finding these places is very difficult, but the stories are out there. The people know of places that are sacred and places where we don't go, places where they belong to the animals, not us.

I was in Alberta recently and I was talking to a Blackfoot elder out in Siksika First Nation, east of Calgary, and he was telling me that when they signed the treaty, they didn't understand the meaning of ownership of the land. And he said as far as they knew, the land was owned by the buffalo. The buffalo owned the land and we were all guests on it.

And that really rings a bell because it gives a whole new identification to land and land ownership and tenure. It's very European to have a piece of land and mark it out and say I own it. But when something is owned by a species of God's creatures, it's very interesting. Because the buffalo were an ecosystem all of their own. They supported the plains grizzly, they supported the buffalo wolves, they supported the First Nations people that hunted them. They also supported the plains themselves by stirring up to the surface and fertilizing it and so on and so forth.

So to our people, and I think the Cree as well, the Great Plains were owned by the Buffalo. There are other stories of places where, like just.... here in rivers, for example, play a very important role, in our geography and where we belong. For example, the Woodland Cree north of us occupy the watershed of the Churchill River. If you look on all the villages they have and everything, they're within the watershed of the Churchill River. If you look at the Dene Nation in Northwest Territories, they live within the watershed of the Mackenzie River, which is a huge watershed, but they live in that watershed and it goes right into Saskatchewan. And so the boundaries between nations are defined by the rivers. The Peace River in northern Alberta got its name because it was where the peace was made between the Dene and the Cree. And so the Dene occupy the north side of the Peace River and the Crees to the south side.

The South Saskatchewan was never named that by our people. Because we didn't... it was named by the explorers who came from the east, and when they got to the forks, they saw the river going two directions. So, one must be the South Saskatchewan, when in reality it was called the Elk River, it's called the Red Deer River now. But that river comes out of the mountains in Alberta and all the rivers in southern Alberta join into the Elk River, Red Deer River. So it flows by here into the Gardiner Dam, is actually the Red Deer River, or Elk River as we would say, **wāwāskasiw sipiy**.

And so, when the peace was made between the Cree and the Blackfoot, at the Bear Hills in Alberta, the demarcation line was the Elk River. Blackfoot would have the land to the south, the Cree the land to the north. And that was where they would hunt and live.

And the Cypress Hills were regarded as an international area. Anybody could camp there. The Crow would come north and camp there, the Blackfoot, the Cree, Saulteaux, Nakota, Lakota. They would all camp there and it was considered international territory and there were no wars on those hills. It was only until the wolf hunters came from the United States that we had the Cypress Hills massacre, because the white people went in and killed them all—the Nakota people. It was a dreadful disaster and it was something people weren't ready for. There'd never been a battle on the Cypress Hills itself.

So these places are, some are large geographical areas, others are pinpointed areas, where certain things happened. We have..., I'm thinking of Sounding Lake, for example. It's a lake on the Alberta-Saskatchewan border and south of Lloydminster. And it was a place where a Thunderbird died and fell into the lake. And at night you could hear moans across the lake. There'd be the sounds of the crying of the poor Thunderbird. And that's where he got his name, the Sounding Lake. The Manitou Lake, which is to the east of that, was another lake, where people were crossing it in the wintertime. And a huge monster from underneath,

came up and broke through the ice and then and they all died. And in the term Manitou, in that lake, it means a “mystery,” a very deep mystery. It doesn't mean *the* Creator, it's another word for this mystery. So the Manitou Lake is a sacred lake. And it's been visited by our people for years, and ceremonies take place on it, and this and that. So there are lots of these places where stories, old stories, last for generations, and they tell, you know, they tell the history of our people and where we lived and how deep our roots go into this land. So I think, there's a lot of... there's sacred places, but there's more than that. There are... the land itself is sacred and it nurtured us and gave us life and it gave us a meaning and our roots go deep into it.

Host:

We circled back to the Buffalo Child Stone itself. I wanted to know more about what it looked like, and what it meant to those who remembered it.

Doug:

No, I've seen pictures of it. It was quite large. It was a..., the geologists call it an erratic. It was a stone that was picked up by the glaciers thousands of years ago and deposited on the plain. There's a number of these. You can see them all over the place, like Okotoks, Alberta, for example. The big stone out there comes from the Jasper Park, apparently.

But these stones, this was huge. I saw a picture of a man who climbed on top of it and was standing there. And it would be probably twice his height to the top of the stone. And, you know, proportionally it'd be quite..., it was an oblong shaped stone, so it was quite large.

There was a... when the story of the stone came out, there was a committee developed in Saskatoon made up of Indigenous people and their supporters. And my dad was part of that committee; and I believe David Knight, who was an urban leader at the time, was a member. Dennis Fisher, who was manager of CFQC [Radio], and he was a member of the Métis Nation. And there were others. I can't think of all their names now, but....

They tried to raise the money to move the stone. That was the idea, and they couldn't come up with enough money. But what they did was, when it was going to be exploded, a photographer from the StarPhoenix came down. And then the committee came down, and there was a number of them there. One of the Tootoosis boys was there, I think the youngest family member now is Eric Tootoosis. He might have even been there, I'm not sure.

But anyway, they were told a story that they would break it into some large pieces and be able to move it. So they were all standing there to watch this thing and, it was... my dad said it was horrible. Dad wasn't the kind of guy to go talk about his feelings a whole lot, but he said the thought of that stone being destroyed was almost a metaphor for our people. He said that we stand in the way of the industry and this is what happens. And that's the way he saw it. To him it was a symbol of our past being destroyed to satisfy the white man's need for a hydro dam.

And it was, yeah, it was... Like I say, he didn't talk about it a whole lot, but I think it left a deep mark on him. I know he had trauma about it for a little while anyway.

Host:

As I listen to Doug, and as I stand by the enduring remnants of the ancient stone, I'm deeply moved by this story of massive and inexplicable destruction. It seems so unnecessary, so unjust! But I'm also left with some lingering questions for today. I'm wondering about treaty and land sharing. About the loss of prairie ecosystems and sacred sites. Wondering about how we might do things better as we move forward together.

Doug:

Yeah, I think a lot of this has been destroyed, like you mentioned. I think it's more like 10% of the prairie still exists. Even the PFRA¹ pastures, which are... some of it is natural prairie, but a lot of it was cultivated and then destroyed in the '30s with the Dust Bowl. So, when you have a.... it's very, very difficult for a natural prairie to come back. If you were to stop farming tomorrow morning, you wouldn't get the natural prairie, if ever, I don't know! I've talked to farmers and they say, one guy said, I know a piece of land that's been..., for over 100 years it was farmed, and then they just left it. And it's never come back as a real natural prairie. It's come back with different kind of grasses and stuff, but not the natural prairie.

The natural prairie is really a beautiful thing. A lot of people don't... when they think of prairie, they think of grass. And really, when you get down to it, if you take a look at a piece of natural prairie where no one's touched it with a plow, you'll find willows and different kinds of grasses and flowers. Clover, for example, all kinds of things. There's a very rich, diverse ecosystem.

So yeah, the natural Prairie is, it's got to be preserved. It must be. As far as sacred sites go. It's more than sacred sites. There are lots of places where our people used to camp. You find them in the Cypress Hills. You'll find them along riverbeds, wherever it was sheltered. If people wouldn't set up camp in the middle of the prairie, they'd go for a nice wooded area, where there was, you know, shade and no wind and nice calm areas. You can find these usually along the river valleys and in the coulees and stuff like that. They're places where you'll find tipi rings and fire pits and places where... what they'd do for example: you might, if you find a pile of tools, for example, you'll see the stones and things that they used. What they would do is rather than— because they were either on foot or dog, using dog travois and stuff—they would make a bunch of these things. And then they'd pile them up in that place for the next time they came by and camped. They wouldn't carry these things with them because they were too heavy. And so they would... if you find a pile like that, that indicates there was a camp there and the people didn't come back to it. So yeah, ...sometimes when you find one artifact, you'll find several in the group because that's how they...

And so they had these different territories that they shared. The leaders would get together and they'd divide up the prairie so certain people would hunt in certain areas. They wouldn't be overhunting in one area. Fair for everybody. And so there would be campgrounds that people would go to repeatedly. When you... you know, anthropologists

¹ Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration: Crown (public) land community pastures.

say we were nomadic and all this, they put you in a little slot. But actually, the whole prairie was our home. And we moved around on top of it. It wasn't that we were aimless or didn't have any direction. There were certain places you went at certain times of the year. If there was a good berry patch, you would go in there and set up your camp and pick the berries. If there was birch trees, you'd set up a camp there and tap the birch trees for the sap, or else you'd use the birch bark itself. So there's hunting grounds... if there was a certain area where the animals would come, you'd plan to be there. So it was a territory where we moved around and basically lived off the bounty of the good earth. So these so-called sacred sites are more than that. They're living sites and people used to live there. And when you see a campground or a pile of rocks or something that looks familiar, just stop and think. Put your mind back in it. And look around and think: at one time, maybe 200 years ago, there were people living here. There were old people being taken care of by the young people. There was a hunter. There were women who picked the berries and stuff, and take care of everything, and it was a self-contained community. They fed each other, they cared for each other, and they loved each other. And it's a very different image than you get from the textbooks, or from cold readings of nomadic people on the prairie. These are real people with real human feelings and human qualities. So I think when you talk of sacred sites, it's not just the site. You've got to go back to the individual people and think of them, because this was their land.

[music]

Host:

You've been listening to ***Doctrines & Discoveries***, a production of MCC Saskatchewan Indigenous Neighbours program.

A big thank you to **Doug Cuthand** for sharing traditional knowledge, local history, and important insights. Proper protocol was followed for the sharing of these truths.

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For more information on this podcast project, including travel directions to the sites, discussion guides, and suggestions for next steps, follow the link in the podcast description. I'm Randy Klassen. Thanks for listening.