



THE DIRTY OLD INDIAN *A Canadian Hero*

War Bonnet
of
MIKE MOUNTAIN HORSE
In the
MILITARY MUSEUM
Calgary

A short fiction story based upon

MIKE MOUNTAIN HORSE

By

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©

1 WHAT OTHERS SAID ABOUT “THE DIRTY OLD INDIAN”

You’ve got to be kidding. You’re actually going to say that [the title, that is].

—Alberta play director

Its about time somebody said it.

—National Indigenous leader

Amazing and inspiring story. I am thankful that I read it.

—Ontario Indigenous woman

The manuscript is explosive and will no doubt cause a huge stir. I agree with all you have said.

—Kainai Elder

We get it!

—Two Alberta Indigenous women

You have an important message ... you really have an excellent book here with important Alberta history and social and political issues. It could be adopted as a textbook.

—Former university professor

You've provided a narrative that runs counter to the mainstream, hobbled as it is by its own easy biases and assumptions.

—Former senior Alberta Legislature reporter

Fantastic title! It makes you think.

—Museum curator

That is one awesome and interesting story.

—Former police chief

This is an amazing story, beautifully written, and it brought tears to my eyes.

—Teacher

(Continued overleaf)

Mike Mountain Horse's example is a commendable way an Indigenous person dealt with the racism toward him.

—Mount Royal University honour graduate, sociology

Relating and discussing a racial incident is not racism. Openly talking about these kinds of things is the first step to solving them.

—Former Israeli combat paratrooper

The title is not racist because they are Mike's words.

—Young missionary in Southeast Asia

The title could be changed to "The Unkempt Indigenous Person"

—Female non-Indian athlete with Indigenous teammates

The title is a powerful message.

—U of C lecturer

Wow, I bet there is a story here to tell!

—Young soldier

Abrasive and courageous.

—Former Treaty 7 Chief

Extremely powerful heart wrenching story that needs to be told.

—Southern Alberta cattleman

I was very drawn into the narrative. Wonderful work.

—Grandson of soldier in Mike's CANADIAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCE 1917

Clearly a fascinating man.

—National theatre director

What a great tribute. I'd love to see the play.

—Western Canada university blogger

The poem at the end could be the lyrics for a ballad.

—Southern Alberta philanthropist

You may be a year ahead of public interest or acceptance of your play being the vast majority of people have heard enough of indigenous demands and need a rest.

—A prominent Lethbridge leader

CANADA COUNCIL PRIZE COMPETITION

Fiction based upon Mike Mountain Horse

"The Dirty Old Indian" A CANADIAN HERO

The top half of the medal could be seen. The ribbon attached to it floated on a thin layer of urine.

In the other corner of the backyard *Siksikasomitai* was preparing a new place for the outhouse.



His name was not Benjamin Gladstone. His name was *Siksikasomitai*, as given by his mother, but the English recruiting officer could not understand this. So, like hundreds of immigration officers who did not understand new arrivals to Canada, the World War I recruiting officer arbitrarily assigned him an English name and a birth date. The officer chose Gladstone after the officer's favourite English Prime Minister, and his given name, Benjamin, after Gladstone's rival Benjamin Disraeli. *Siksikasomitai* had no idea what a birthday was, but it did not matter because his residential school did not have birthdays.

This was *Siksikasomitai's* introduction to the vagaries of non-Indian life "in a hurry". He was no longer isolated from the real world by Reserve life — the *Indian Curtain*. The introduction was amplified by his first time on a train from the enlistment centre to the training camp in Calgary today marked on a hillside by white-washed rocks on the southwestern edge of the City.

From this hillside, the army practised lobbing shells across the river onto the Tsuut'ina Reserve. To this day, the residents of the Reserve detonate unexploded shells that rise above ground with the Spring thaw.

The young recruits at the camp, boisterously anticipating a romantic vision of wartime adventure and heroism, buddied-up and gave each other nicknames. To them, the nickname for Gladstone was obvious: "Happy Rock", but to *Siksikasomitai* it didn't mean anything, so he laughed along with his fellow recruits.

The nickname turned into a life-long wound that he deeply resented as it mocked his heritage — a resentment he never expressed until he was on his death bed.

From Calgary, *Siksikasomitai* and 500 other soldiers were sent to Montreal where they were packed into 3rd class below deck on a ship bound for South Hampton. The steamship, *Ascania*, was attacked by submarines but escaped due to its superior speed of thirteen knots over the submarine's speed of just five knots. For *Siksikasomitai*, never crowded by more than those inside his family teepee, the ocean voyage shoulder to shoulder with 500 other humans combined with the bone chilling fear from a simultaneous submarine attack, the voyage was a life changer. However, the horror of three years in the trenches in France would make the ocean crossing a pleasure cruise in comparison.

(On a subsequent sailing the *Ascania* ran aground and sank off the southwestern coast of Newfoundland. Strangely, there were no fatalities. That would be made up for in the carnage of the trenches in France.)

Siksikasomitai received three-weeks training in England before being sent to France. It gave him a chance to settle from the ocean crossing, and to be shocked by the lifestyle of the English, although given his meagre free time his exposure was limited to that around his camp,

and even that was limited by his obvious ethnic difference which would leave him on the periphery. His exposure was mostly to the “camp followers” who hung around “outside the barracks by the corner light”. Nevertheless, he and his fellow Indian soldiers were favoured customers of the camp followers who were, however, disappointed by *Siksikasomitai* because he had his pay assigned to his mother in Canada.

Siksikasomitai, a full-blooded Indian, fought and was wounded three times in battles at Vimy Ridge, Hill 70, Amiens, and Cambrai. One of the wounds was categorized as “dangerously wounded”, which at the time was a euphemism for “not expected to live”.

For the first time in wars, tanks were used at Cambrai, creating mass fear in the enemy, just as Hannibal’s elephants had when they were first used in battles. The tanks were an innovation implemented by Winston Churchill while he served as the Minister of Munitions. Before becoming Minister, Churchill had been First Lord of The Admiralty but was fired because of the disastrous defeat at Gallipoli that he had orchestrated despite fierce Cabinet opposition.

The trip across the channel to France was short compared to the trip across the Atlantic. It took him directly to Vimy Ridge where Canada suffered more than ten thousand casualties in taking an objective that French and British troops had several times failed to do. In preparing for the battle to take the Ridge, at different times the Canadian officers sent 60 raiding parties across no-man's-land for the purpose of gathering information, but their primary effect was terrorizing the enemy. For the enemy, the Canadians became the most feared of troops.

Much of the success of the Canadians in terrorizing the enemy was owed to the participation of Indians who would strip down and crawl into enemy trenches where they would scalp Germans, an action Canadian officers with a modicum of contrition would call “scouting”. *Siksikasomitai* was one of these raiders. During his service, his knife would dispatch three enemy

in hand-to-hand combat. He recorded in a post-war book that he was carrying on the “warrior tradition” of his “People” by demonstrating that they were still warriors.

Indians were segregated in a way that today is considered racist. Most, if not all, of the over four thousand Indians who served in World War I were segregated into squads rather than being integrated with all the troops, much like the Black American experience in the military until post World War II when President Truman ordered desegregation of the service. The difference between Black and Indian military discrimination was that Indians were given guns to point at the enemy. The American military was not as confident, given how Black people were treated in America, in which direction the guns would be pointed.

After the war, *Siksikasomitai* recorded his war experiences on a calf robe. Using stickman characters, the robe had twelve drawings of his battle experiences. He used this to illustrate stories he told to school children. The story most liked by children was the one where he was buried for four days by an exploding shell while on one of his night-time raids. He was in an enemy trench when one of his own shell explosions buried him. While buried, enemy soldiers would eat their rations while sitting on the debris covering him.

However, teachers, feeling the details of his war battles were too graphic for young children, would caution him. For example, children did not need to know the details of his knife struggles with enemies or that he shot others in trenches, one of them a German officer who shot him first.

General Byng, the English commander, asked the general of the “colonial” troops (that is Canadians, among others) to bring to their next meeting “one of those Indian fellows” he was hearing so much about. He wanted to present a Distinguished Conduct Medal to *Siksikasomitai*.

The general, upon being introduced to *Siksikasomitai* at the medal presentation ceremony, perhaps thinking he was being familiar instead of perfunctory, flippantly asked “how ya doin chief”. *Siksikasomitai* considered the greeting and its tone to be disrespectful. He instantly reacted by dropping his salute and sauntered away.

The presentation ceremony was unceremoniously ended, the medal was handed to Canadian General Currie who put it into his pocket to give to *Siksikasomitai* at a more agreeable time. It went through time and many pockets before going into *Siksikasomitai*'s pocket when he was casually told he was now an Acting Sergeant.

After the War, *Siksikasomitai* wore the medal and his sergeant stripes on the train home where the soldiers in the car jeered him shouting “hey chief, where’s your feathers?”. The War over, military discipline ended, along with respect for the uniform and the Indian.

There was much respect however for *Siksikasomitai* when he returned to his Reserve. He was an honoured warrior and eventually elected a minor chief, but he had experienced modern life in the outside world, and he could not settle back into the primitive lifestyle of the Reserve. He left to live in a city, but he did not forget where he came from. It became obvious to him that his People were treated in a way which seemed to allow society to neglect the rights of Indians, especially regarding land ownership. Without consulting Indians, the Canadian Government was often seen re-classifying Indian land for non-Indian use and at times selling some of the land to non-Indians.

Siksikasomitai began writing letters to editors of newspapers denouncing these practices and demanding remedial actions. The points he made in the letters were substantiated and many were of legal authority and quality in their structure and arguments.

He did not go un-noticed, but he was inherently aware that letters to the editors lasted only until the next day's newspapers. For meaningful change, Indians needed political power and that meant collective action, which he organized by calling for an assembly. Over two thousand Indians from western Canada gathered at a small town close to his Reserve. There they formed *The Allied Tribes of Western Canada*; *Siksikasomitai* was its first president. The alliance eventually evolved into a modern national political lobbying force.

More than fifty-seven newspaper articles around North America noted *Siksikasomitai's* achievement: newspapers such as the Edmonton Journal, The Province (B.C.), The Los Angeles Star, The Desert News (Salt Lake City), The Miami Herald, and The North Bay Nugget (Thunder Bay), among others.

He used his leadership abilities in his non-native community as well. At the railway where he worked, he was elected president of the labour union. An astoundingly unique achievement for an indigenous person, anywhere in the world — a minor Chief (his native society) and a labour president (his functional society)! *Siksikasomitai* succeeded in the modern world while still maintaining his cultural heritage.

Siksikasomitai was employed as wiper of railway engines that were fueled by coal. He therefore came home from work very dirty, his traditional striped, gray-bibbed overalls covered in coal dust. Well liked by his co-workers, they invited him for a beer after they had elected him president of their union. They went across the street to a small beer parlour, but *Siksikasomitai* could not sit with them because it was against the law to sell beer to Indians. A big red sign at the entrance said, "NO BEER SOLD TO INDIANS". *Siksikasomitai* had to sit alone in a corner, the bartender turning a blind eye as the railway workers who brought *Siksikasomitai* were his regular customers, and he wanted their business.

Many times, *Siksikasomitai* took much pleasure describing the scene. Vigorously jabbing his finger into the air, he would mimic the patrons in the bar who would point and say about him, “look at that dirty old Indian”, and every time as though it were the first time telling it, he would laugh loudly.

Siksikasomitai would laugh every time he told the story, because *he was dirty he was old and he was a proud Indian.*

Fame however, like magnets, attracts opposites, and *Siksikasomitai* got his share. A self-styled local historian without credentials of any kind proclaimed that *Siksikasomitai* did not earn a medal. He could not find *Siksikasomitai's* war records. A one-armed veteran who was a member of the *Alberta All Indian Legion* established by *Siksikasomitai* came to his defence. The veteran, a lawyer, noted that there were no records of his own service, leaving him to wonder how he had lost his arm. In the fog of war, it is a wonder any record exists for anyone, especially in the muddy morass of World War I.

The local media, however, played up the no medal story. He was shunned by his tribe. *Siksikasomitai* felt he had disgraced his people. He could also see it in the eyes of his non-Indian friends as they looked away.

Siksikasomitai, the proud Indian, was no more

From the window of their unpainted unheated clapboard house in the displaced persons section of town, *Siksikasomitai's* partner watched *Siksikasomitai* tip over the old outhouse and drag it to the new pit and then fill the old pit with dirt from the new one. Now the two-seater

outhouse faced south, catching sunshine, and shielding occupants from the cold northerly winter winds. Next year's potatoes would grow larger because of the waste below the old outhouse, she thought, and they would be savoured by *Siksikasomitai* because of the medal buried in it.

Less than a year later, *Siksikasomitai* could see the "no-Indians" hospital across the street from the Indian hospital he was in. The divide between Indians and non-Indians lingered, as it had throughout his life, and he saw no signs of the divide ending. Indian life today, he thought, was not as good as it was 100 years ago, and unless the Indian Curtain were lifted, it would be even less 100 years in the future. Indians were an endangered species on the brink of becoming an extinct species, waiting to go extinct while hiding behind the Indian Curtain. Reservations were a dead end, as Apartheid was in South Africa. As he had written in his book, the buffalo were never coming back.

After several days languishing in a hospital bed, he said goodbye to the world. Weakly raising his wrinkled arm, the white hospital gown sliding down to his shoulder, he defiantly gestured at the "no-Indians" hospital across the street.

One week later, he was buried. To this day, his grave is unmarked.

(Continued overleaf)

In *Siksikasomitai's* notebook beside his bed, this untitled poem was found. It is a poem of optimism and hope—no matter what, tomorrow will be a better day!

*The heart
and soul
of a Nation*



Embrace this Canadian home,
take it to your heart.

It is my home,
your home,
our home.

It is a home rich with
magnificent mountains
wild horses, and
hunting hawks

Our home represents our values,
tolerance and respect,
rights and responsibilities.

We share these riches and values,
then leave a little of ourselves
for future generations,
just as others before
did for us.

Embrace this Canadian home,
take it to your heart.

And its riches and values
will make your heart ...

Strong like a mountain ...
Spirited like a horse ... and
Soar like a hawk!