

JOE'S SPEAKEASY

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ABSTRACT. This story is about my grandfather, Joseph Carriere. Our stories as Métis people shape us but often have gaps in knowledge and detailed information because of the fear and oppression put on our people. In this recounting on the land of my grandpa, I imagine how life was knowing that the past has informed the present.

1. POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

Carmen Carriere lives with her family on the territory of the Tsawwassen and Musqueam First Nations in Vancouver, BC. She is the elected Chairperson for the Métis Women of BC (MWBC) and holds the portfolios for Women and Gender Equity and the Ministry of Health and Wellness with Métis Nation British Columbia. Carmen is a proud Michif woman whose roots run deep in the Red River, where her father and grandparents were born and raised in the communities of St. Boniface and St. Laurent. Some of her family names are Carriere, Hamelin, Parenteau, Vandal, St. Germain and McGillvray.

Prior to being elected, Carmen was a secondary Social Studies and English teacher and an advocate for pediatric heart transplantation and children living with disability. Carmen has a Bachelor of Arts in History and Bachelor of Education, both from the University of British Columbia. She completed the Indigenous Women in Community Leadership program through the Coady Institute at St. Francis Xavier University – a program that she now serves as a mentor for. Carmen enjoys writing non-fiction, reading, a good cup of tea, walking at the beach and spending time with her family.

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2. SHORT STORY

It was as if we casually travelled back in time that July evening in small town Hamiota, Manitoba, where life seemed slower than what us city folk were used to. After having made the trek from the West Coast back to the land where our parents and grandparents were born for my younger cousin's wedding, we had befriended two young local guys in a family restaurant and bar. My cousins asked what we could do for fun, and the locals' animated recommendation was to grab some beer and head out four wheeling to the farmers' fields where we could shoot as many rounds as we wanted from guns, undisturbed by authorities. Since we neither had the appropriate vehicles or guns, and with nowhere to go, we embraced our family prohibition story and set out to make our own fun and Joe's Speakeasy was born, with a pretend shroud of secrecy in my cousins' modest hotel room.

Joe was our Grandpa. Long before he assumed this venerable identity, Grandpa Joe, as a young Métis man from the Red River, was a handsome bootlegger during the prohibition era – something I would learn about when I was a teen. The Métis, having played an integral part in the fur trade, were no strangers to being traders and middlemen, but a bootlegger with its element of risk, seemed an odd job for a man whom my cousins and I had only known as a loving, gentle, kind, and generous man. The man we knew didn't have a secret distillery but kept a beautiful and abundant vegetable garden where us kids would often steal strawberries, peas and carrots under our Grandpa's watchful eyes.

As an older man, I could see that life had taken its toll on Grandpa Joe. He moved methodically, sometimes shuffling around his small two-bedroom house with care for his aging body. But he loved his piece of land and continued to attend to his big garden with an understated pride, always dressed in his neatly pressed slacks and slicked back hair, both meticulously kept. Grandpa embodied a tender spirit, patiently taking the time for us kids when we visited.

Grandpa enjoyed taking us grandkids for walks in the lush coastal forest behind his home, full of large coniferous trees and little creeks, a small oasis in the new urban sprawl. He didn't say much but allowed us to just be and experience the wonder of creation around us. I imagine this access to nature grounded Grandpa in some ways, far from his original home on the prairies, but he delighted in just being outside with us and us with him. He wanted us to learn from the experience, allowing our minds to wonder as we wandered about. When we returned from those walks, Grandpa was always so happy to offer treats from the large cookie drawer in the kitchen that he kept stocked with every variety of cookie a young child could imagine – it was stocked for us and he let us take as many cookies as we wanted and didn't mind the mess of crumbs we left behind. I always felt shy about asking for more, but Grandpa encouraged it with a warm smile and a sparkle in his eyes.

Grandpa Joe's tenderness also showed in his pride for his sons, whom he loved deeply with his time, attention and resources. Grandpa was generous with everything and anything. When my father, as a brand-new dad, was off work after a major surgery, Grandpa would stop by with groceries and money for rent. He had such love for dogs too, and he spoiled them royally, always having Milk Bone treats tucked away in the pockets of the sensible cardigans he loved to wear. Speaking baby talk, he'd tell his own dog Beauty and my childhood dog Daisy how funny they were, as they crawled on their small bellies, tails wagging knowing they would get a treat for this performance. They were funny, I concur, and those dogs loved him, one pure heart to another. To me as a child, Grandpa seemed to find joy in the simple things – his beautiful dahlia's, his big vegetable garden, his two boys, the dogs and his grandchildren of course – and he absolutely loved a good deal, part of the family folklore now, and a far cry from the adventures of rum running on the prairies.

I had a small glimpse into the fire that Grandpa had in his belly as a man outside of being a father and grandfather. If the embers were stoked, when he and my grandmother would argue on occasion in a French slang that I was intoxicated by, a rather animated fiery side would come out. I wasn't bothered by the sharpness of their conversation, only mesmerized by the foreign yet familiar beautiful language they used with ease. I yearned to jump in and fluently speak with them, not yet knowing how their first language tied them to the prejudices that are still existent in this country today towards Métis people. The Michif have been subject to cultural erasure, whether for being French or Indigenous or being in the way of western expansion for colonial settlers, but also from our loved ones who sought to protect us from their own internalized fear of discrimination. Is this why Grandpa didn't encourage the preservation of our language? I suspect so, given his family took up arms against Canada in both the Red River and Batoche Resistances.

When he spoke his mother tongue, a window into the complexities of the man he once was appeared. Perhaps this flame fueled Grandpa's willingness to brush up close with danger as he moved between the Manitoba prairie and American mid-west during his bootlegging days. When I think of Grandpa being part of the lucrative black market of bootlegging, associating with "nefarious" types, it's hard to visualize the possibility that he was involved in organized crime and secret speakeasies. I did not know this person. Perhaps the risk-taking behavior fueled an adrenaline rush? As his granddaughter, I take pride in knowing Grandpa continued the family tradition of "resisting" the status quo. I can see how this fire could have been a way of reckoning for injustices suffered by his Métis family, making money by any means, pushing back against all the confines imposed on Métis people that came with the settling of the West and Confederation. Perhaps.

Joe was a clever man I am told. Sharp witted, he knew how to play a strategic game of cards, where being good at the bluff, Joe often won against his

opponents. When I look at pictures of him as a younger man, I can see this chiselled poker face and how this skill would come in handy as a bootlegger. A head full of thick, dark hair and big hands that outsized a man of his stature, Joe, I can imagine, knew how to use his image and appearance to his advantage. As young people often are, Joe was clearly industrious, and I would think thrived as he sought the thrill of pushing the limits and making some good money in the process. Joe, it would appear, was human after all, long before becoming a mild-mannered older man with a beautiful garden and six grandchildren.

My Dad told me that his father Joe never raised a hand or his voice to his two sons when they did something wrong. Joe simply gave a “look” and his sons knew they caused disappointment and this guilt, it was said, was worse than any corporal punishment. Joe possessed a distinct ability to communicate with his physicality, a power and humble confidence that enabled him to move about in certain circles with some semblance of ease. Joe’s gentle nature spread out to his family, enveloping them like strong tendrils in the garden. He was kind and easy to like.

Pictures from the prohibition era in the 1920’s and 1930’s in both St. Boniface and St. Laurent, show Joe being very well dressed and owning a nice car, tangibles that came in handy for a young Métis man in the face of racism and the illegal doings of the time. Despite the stereotypes that followed the Métis people of that era as dirty traitors and half-witted half-breeds, Joe looked “respectable” decked out in fine suits and a fedora. I envision that his mild-mannered ways helped him as he moved about and faced the risks that came with his rumrunning, as men traveled the Dunseith trail along the Assiniboine River in Manitoba, through the brush and hills to North Dakota where their wares would be delivered. When I read that a young man could make as much as 10 000 dollars per load, it is no wonder that Joe was well appointed during a time when most were struggling to make ends meet in the 1930’s. Joe had done well for himself!

While I don’t know about his younger years, Joe as a family man rarely touched a drop of alcohol. Perhaps he wanted to keep his smarts about him or perhaps he needed to stay clear in his thinking and away from an Indigenous trope in the face of his Métis spouse who struggled with the ravages of alcohol. The irony of Joe’s former profession and how he conducted his life after seemed somewhat incongruent. Did the risk finally outweigh the benefits as the prohibition laws were repealed? However the story unfolded, already versed in entrepreneurship, as a husband and a father, Joe became a legitimate businessman with his own trucking business delivering bread in and around Winnipeg. As urban legend would have it, this chapter too was a bit short on detail and even raised more questions.

The story told is that Joe’s partner in the trucking business, a partnership formed by way of a respectable handshake, embezzled funds from their enterprise, which lead to Joe and his family leaving Winnipeg and moving

further west. With the family name – Carriere - embossed on the side of the truck, maybe the partner was not so legitimate after all? Could this have created an undue risk? My cousins and I have often questioned such a drastic move and wonder why this caused our family to move so far from their home. Leaving Winnipeg, never to return to his Manitoba roots, Joe became quite thrifty, quietly settling his family in BC where he worked for the City of Burnaby, raised his boys and always looked for a good deal. And planted a garden.

So much changes over a lifetime, and Grandpa's life told this story. I think about him often, and how his life undergirds the work I do for the Métis Nation in British Columbia, as I proudly represent our continued family story. We lost him when us grandkids were all still so young, and I know we would all love to sit with him now, at Joe's Speakeasy of course! We would ask him so much about his life, questions that my mind was just beginning to be curious about at age 14 when he died. While some facts are known and others are embellished, we are all products of our family stories, tableaux held in the constellations or in the earthy roots buried in deep crevices. But our stories ground us and it's the kindness of my Grandpa that remains and maybe a little of a Métis penchant for the mischievous, but certainly the love of a good deal!

Back on that summer evening in Manitoba, the sky was heavy with an impending rainstorm. We sat in Joe's Speakeasy, lights dimmed, laughing, sharing family memories and enjoying some beverages that we had purchased (legally) earlier in the day. Back in Grandpa's Manitoba home, where he and our Métis ancestors once made a life, I know he was there, all of us offering an homage to those roots and to the gentle grandpa who seemed to have a vibrant story that we knew little about but loved to imagine. In Joe's Speakeasy, we knit his story together with our story, laughing with Grandpa in spirit, grateful for him and the stories that formed us.

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