

The man who killed Meech

By Roy MacGregor
Ottawa Citizen

June 23/

WINNIPEG — It is, in the end, the story of one man and one feather.

The man is there for history to measure. He has name, age and address: Elijah Harper, 41, of Red Sucker Lake, Northern Manitoba. He has a voice to speak for himself, a past that can be traced and on Friday he took action on a matter for which he will be forever judged.

At 12:30 p.m. his very soft "No" from the back row of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly brought an end to debate on the Meech Lake accord. Elijah Harper knows that he will be both blamed and cheered for having done what no one else would dare.

The feather is not so easily explained.

To the vast majority of Canadians it does not speak. No one knows where it came from. And what some say it has done here in the country's central province would, for most Canadians, defy logic and ridicule belief.

The feather is from an eagle and it is held in Elijah Harper's right hand each time he gives that quick shake of the ponytail that said for more than a week that the Manitoba legislature must stick to the rules of democracy.

By day the feather lies on his desk where he can reach out and touch it.

By night it sleeps in a Bible, in the Book of Isaiah.

Elijah Harper may have been educated in the missionary residential schools, but he learned from those who followed the traditional ways, what the missionaries would call "heathen" ways.

Spiritual teachings

He was born in the winter of 1949, born on the trapline, the second of what would eventually be the 13 children of Allen and Ethel Harper. He was raised by his grandparents, who clung to old spiritual teachings.

At the age of eight, Elijah Harper was sent away to school where the battle to change young Indians into future

whites was fought for eight unhappy years, until he came home again to take up trapping.

Like so many who came through this experience, he found he was straddling two worlds, with the footing unsteady in both. Like the others, he believed, wrongly, that he was alone. It is the mark of his generation.

He would fight back against the white society that was grinding down his own people, and he would do it by first getting an education and then returning to his home to work for the people, not as a trapper.

Harper eventually made it to the University of Manitoba, where he soon linked up with another angry young native, Ovide Mercredi. They soon created an ever-widening circle that would include the likes of Phil Fontaine and Moses Okimaw, all of whom would play key roles in Winnipeg.

They formed a native association and battled the university for their rights, and won. They forced the engineering students to apologize for a satirical newspaper that contained nothing but pictures of drunken Indians. They tried to impeach the president.

One winter when the group had been to Brandon to organize a similar organization for aboriginals attending university there, they hit a blizzard driving home. Cars and trucks were off everywhere. The others wanted to quit, but Mercredi and Harper refused and took turns running, out in front of the headlights, so the car would stay on the road. The police and stranded truckers yelled at them to give up, but they ran for 30 kilometres and made it when no one else did.

That stubbornness, that bond, would pay off 22 years later when they hit another bad patch.

In 1987 the Meech Lake accord had been passed by 11 first ministers in secret without a single thought for aboriginals. On June 9, 1990, aboriginals were again left out, despite the

promises of a parliamentary committee and the three Manitoba political leaders.

They were as outraged as they were by the engineers' racist attitudes back in the late '60s, but this time they were no longer just angry students. Mercredi was now a lawyer and deputy chief of the Assembly of First Nations. Moses Okimaw was a lawyer. Phil Fontaine was the head chief of all the province. All powerful leaders.

But none of them held Elijah Harper's position.

Harper had gone home without his degree. He had worked and then become chief of his band. Then, in 1981, he became the first treaty Indian to be elected to the provincial legislature. He was elected again in 1982 and served in the cabinet of Howard Pawley.

It was not an illustrious political career. He got in financial trouble. He was arrested for failing to take a breathalyzer test. His marriage faltered. His four children suffered.

But then, around the beginning of Meech Lake, Harper began to pull himself together. He quit drinking. And he started planning.

Chief Georges Erasmus of the Assembly of First Nations says Harper first mapped out his procedural strategy two years ago.

The moment Harper saw the Ottawa deal, he called old friend Gordon Mackintosh, now a lawyer but once clerk of the legislature. A procedural expert, Mackintosh helped refine Harper's old notion and discovered that the Filmon government had incorrectly introduced the Meech Lake motion.

Elijah Harper decided to run with it as far as he could take it. No one ever expected he would last until the end.

Before the delegation from the Prime Minister's Office arrived here on Monday, things were so tense the natives called an emergency session that turned into a double emergency when Mackintosh's wife suddenly went into labor and had to be rushed to the hospital.

The child, a boy, will carry the name Elijah.

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Harper could not make the PMO dealers understand that he was not there to deal, just to listen out of politeness. They could not comprehend why he could not be bought when everyone else they had ever encountered was buyable.

But the PMO delegation did not know that, nearly 10 years ago, Elijah Harper had been one of the Canadian chiefs who had gone to London to ask the Queen to make sure aboriginals were as fairly treated in the constitution as those who dared to call themselves the "founding" races of Canada.

They did not know that he had refused his invitation to attend the signing ceremony when the Queen came to Ottawa in 1982.

They did not know that he has been waiting 10 years for this moment.

They thought that he was in this for the short run.

Still, they did wear him down, and Elijah Harper is convinced that if it weren't for the feather, he might not have lasted.

Found feather

His older brother, Saul, a trapper and a dedicated follower of the traditional ways, felt that he was being told to walk to a clearing near Red Sucker Lake. He got there, and the eagle feather was lying in the middle of it.

Saul Harper gave it to Darryl Harper, a younger brother, and Darryl immediately brought it down to Winnipeg, where he gave to Elijah.

Elijah Harper rose to speak against the accord in the legislature, carefully holding the eagle feather. He spoke and then sat to a standing ovation, carefully placing the feather in his pocket.

The feather, he decided, would go to the young baby who was born in the midst of all this turmoil.

It will be a reminder to the child that powerful forces were at work in Canada in the second last week of June, 1990.