

Pemmican Press

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Pemmican Publications, Canada's only Metis publisher, offers Native writers and illustrators an outlet; it also brings young readers — Native and others — unique images of the life, the interests, the problems, and the achievements of our Native peoples.

In October 1980 Pemmican Publications was incorporated as a publishing house. Its history however began long before its incorporation. In 1972 the Manitoba Metis Federation began the MMF Press. In 1976 they also formed L'édition Bois-Brules. Their mandate was to publish books that could educate the Metis people about their own history and their own culture. At that time books were published only when funds were available. Volunteers did most of the work. In 1980 it was felt that a publishing house that could operate more as a business should be established. A local Employment Assistance Program (LEAP) grant was applied for and received and in October 1980 Pemmican Publications became incorporated as a non-profit organization with a seven member board of directors.

The mandate under the LEAP funding leaned heavily towards providing employment for people. The grant was to enable Pemmican to hire freelance writers, artists, and craftspeople to produce articles, stories, artwork and learning materials related to the needs and interests of the Metis communities. The overall aims of the project were to make available reading and other materials which presented positive images of Metis culture and history. At the same time they were to support the educational, vocational, employment and developmental needs of the Metis.

The *Pemmican Journal*, a quarterly magazine, was to be their priority publication. It was for children in urban, rural and remote Native communities. Its structure was to include creative and informational material related to the various subjects children study in elementary and junior high school classrooms. Space also was allotted for children's contributions and information specifically for teachers.

Pemmican had published about four books and seven journal issues when the LEAP grant was unexpectedly cut. They were forced to make some decisions regarding what could realistically be accomplished in terms of the financing and publishing of materials. It was felt that although the journal was an extremely effective and immediate tool in helping to create

a more positive image of Native people, books could offer longer term permanency. Thus it was decided that the journal would be ended but the publishing of books would continue and become the prime publishing product of Pemmican.

Now Pemmican's primary mandate is to publish books concerning Metis culture, historical, social and economic issues; concerning the various aspects of Metis life; creating a better understanding of the Metis; and demonstrating Metis participation in Canadian society. While Pemmican is a Metis publishing house their mandate does allow for flexibility in publishing books which deal with Native concerns in general. They perceive the Metis as strongly identified with the Indian as Native and therefore they feel there is a need to understand the similarities and differences between the two groups. Pemmican does not refuse manuscripts from non-native authors but does attempt to employ native writers and encourage them whenever possible. Their purpose was and still is largely educational.

To their credit Pemmican can boast a string of books published for adult and academic use. Many are currently used as texts in universities and others can be found on the curriculum of school divisions across Canada. Not until 1983 did they begin to publish material that was meant specifically for children to read.

Their first attempts to publish for children began in 1983 when they published a series of books written by Dianne Common which were directed at a grade 6 reading level. (*Marie of the Metis*, *Little loon and the sun dance*, and *Little wild onion of the Lillooet*). Although they were meant to be both educational and entertaining, they appealed mostly to educators who were seeking material of this nature to supplement their curriculum. These books lack some of the vital elements necessary to make them attractive to kids for recreational reading. The black and white illustrations appear amateurish and the content is structured much like a social studies text book. The entertainment aspect appears to be completely lost.

Pemmican was new at the business of publishing children's books and it showed. Their staff were not trained and they had limited funding. Constant staff turn over made quality publishing a serious challenge. In 1982 Pemmican hired Beatrice Culleton to be the marketing and promotion person for their company. One year later she became the manager.

Several improvements have been attributed to Culleton's arrival at Pemmican. These are especially noticeable in the area of children's books. The first two books Culleton published were an illustrated children's book, *Nobody* by Meguido Zola and Angela Dereume, and a cartoon book for juvenile readers, *Buffalo & Sprucegum* by Keirin Guiboche. That year they also published *Kyles' bath* written by Peter Eyvindson and illustrated by Wendy Wolsak. Wolsak was also responsible for the illustrations for *Nobody*.

Buffalo & Sprucegum held its own as a humorous book of cartoons. *Nobody* was a wonderful humorous story. But though Wolsak's illustrations were warm and humorous depictions of the characters, they lacked definition and the overall appearance of the book lacked professional design. *Kyle's bath* fared worse: not only did it have the design problems of *Nobody*, it also suffered from a weak story line.

Even though Pemmican recognized the appeal of color illustrations they simply could not afford them. In order to minimize the risks of publishing books for children they kept costs down by using black and white illustrations, limiting the color used on the covers and keeping the initial print runs low.

In 1985 Pemmican published three children's picture books and a juvenile book. *A friend called "Chum"* and *I can't have bannock but the beaver has a dam* were written by Bernelda Wheeler. *A Friend called "Chum"* is written in verse. It appears stilted and lacks sophistication in writing style. Her second book however, shows a maturing in style that is continued in her book *Where did you get your moccasins* published in 1986.

Murdo's story, written by Murdo Scribe and illustrated by Terry Gallagher, was proof of Pemmican's efforts to improve the quality of their books. For her illustrations, Terry Gallagher won the 1985 Canada Council Award for Illustrations. Further improvement can be seen in the change of physical format that Pemmican introduced. They began to use an 8 x 9 format instead of the smaller 9 x 6 format and obviously paid more attention to the cover design. These improvements resulted in a much more attractive product.

Spirit of the white bison by Beatrice Culleton was written specifically for a juvenile audience. Its success has been limited, not because of the author's literary talents but possibly because the topic is not appealing enough to the young reader.

In 1986 Pemmican increased the number of children's books they published to five. They continued to print their illustrations in black and white but for the first time they printed a cover in full color (*My mom is so unusual*). Bernelda Wheeler's book *Where did you get your moccasins* is an excellent example of quality publishing about contemporary Native people. It is well illustrated and sensitively written with a delightful touch of humor. Herman Bekkering is responsible for the illustrations in this book as well as Wheeler's earlier one, *I can't have bannock but the beaver has a dam*.

Zola and Wolsak combine their talents again in *My kind of pup. Old enough* written by Peter Eyvindson was also published. Terry Gallagher is back illustrating *The big tree and the little tree* a story told by Mary Augusta Tappage and edited by Jean E. Spear. And *My mom is so unusual* is published by a new author Iris Loewen.

In these five books Pemmican demonstrates its increasing maturity as a publishing house. The publishers confidence in themselves as they experiment with new designs and formats. The stories they publish often have a universal theme but the illustration portray people of Native ancestry. This broadens their focus and gives their books a wider audience.

In addition to children's books, Pemmican has continued to publish for an older age bracket and a higher reading level. Since these books are not relevant to this topic they have not been mentioned here; yet one such book, not originally intended for young readers, has become very popular in the young adult category and deserves separate attention.

In 1983 Pemmican published *In search of April Raintree*, a novel by Beatrice Culleton. It is the story of two Metis sisters growing up in Manitoba. They have been separated from alcoholic parents and given into the custody of the Children's Aid Society. This is a compelling story of the hardships they endure as members of a minority. The book deals with many social issues that affect Native people today. The story tells of the sisters' search for their identity and their struggle to overcome degradation and exist in harmony with two vastly different worlds.

This book has become a best seller. It has been reprinted three times, was runner-up in the Young Adult Caucus of the Saskatchewan Library Association award in 1984, and a revised edition has been printed for Manitoba schools. In addition, Metro International Films of Vancouver has bought a two year film option on the book and a screen play has been written. The success of *In search of April Raintree* has contributed greatly to the success of Pemmican Publications.

Like any other small publishing house in Canada, Pemmican has its share of problems. But as a Native publishing house Pemmican faces some rather unique ones. Their market is limited even though they have attempted to publish on a more universal theme. There is a shortage of professional Native writers, illustrators and editors. Few native people are trained in the business aspect of running a company for profit. And they must compete with other well established publishing houses who have their own mandate but also publish Native content materials.

As of fall 1987 Beatrice Culleton is no longer the manager of Pemmican Publications. She has given up the position so that she can devote more time to her writing. In spite of the problems Pemmican faces they continue to publish books. Virginia Maracle, present manager at Pemmican, says that Pemmican has never been better. Their books have been listed in *Our Choice/Your Choice*, an annual Canadian list of children's titles that deserve special attention. They are in high demand in Indian Band controlled schools and urban schools with high Native enrollment. Pemmican has gathered a small stable of authors and illustrators together whom they publish regularly. They provide opportunities for new authors and illustra-

tors to get published. The only other Native publishing house in Canada is Theytus Books Inc. located in Penticton, B.C. They share similar goals and objectives and operate in a similar fashion. Since there is a shortage of professional Native writers and illustrators, these publishers are offering an extremely useful outlet for the Native literary community.

Iris Loewen is a student at the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies at the University of British Columbia and is the author of *My Mom* is so unusual.

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