

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

We Know Who We Are: Métis Identity in a Montana Community. By Martha Harroun Foster.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8d34d09v>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 31(1)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Evans, Mike

**Publication Date**

2007

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

purloined cowboy boots to the Jumping Bull Ranch on 26 June 1975, as well as hundreds of agents who mounted a nationwide dragnet for the killers of Coler and Williams in the firefight there, of which Leonard Peltier later was convicted with questionable evidence.

As in other parts of *Unquiet Grave*, Hendricks describes the firefight with uncommon acuity, in part based on his mining of FBI records under the Freedom of Information Act. He is also sensitive to the records' limitations. At Jumping Bull's, for example, the FBI reports imagined bunkers in which there were root cellars and machine guns in hands that held old hunting rifles. The FBI was not short of firepower. When I visited the abandoned Jumping Bull house a year later, while researching my first book *Wasi'chu: The Continuing Indian Wars* (1979), the prairie wind whistled through hundreds of bullet holes in the walls, which looked like large slabs of dirty Swiss cheese.

Bad blood still is very evident, enduring throughout the years, as when, during 2000, Janklow stepped in with all his then-formidable political might (before he killed a motorcyclist in a state of drunkenness and was forced to resign from Congress) to block requests that might have led to a pardon of Peltier by President Bill Clinton. Hendricks devotes copious detail as well to the trial and conviction of Arlo Looking Cloud in the death of Aquash, concluding with questions remaining after that trial.

The principal question is: did Looking Cloud act alone and, if not, how and why? Hendricks asserts that a number of AIM leaders—no one knows precisely who—ordered Aquash shot on suspicion that she was acting as an FBI informant. But was she? "Only the FBI could separate the snitches from the snitch-jacketed," Hendricks writes, recalling that the FBI had seeded AIM with informants purposefully to create the paranoia that made such an assassination likely (361). Thus, Aquash's grave (and a number of others) remains "unquiet" to this day.

*Bruce E. Johansen*

University of Nebraska at Omaha

**We Know Who We Are: Métis Identity in a Montana Community.** By Martha Harroun Foster. Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 2006. 306 pages. \$29.95 cloth.

In this monograph Foster provides a clearly articulated and well-researched contribution to the existing Métis literature. With a few notable exceptions, very little has been written about Métis communities west of the Great Lakes and south of the forty-ninth parallel, and certainly Foster's is one of the very few full-length monographs to focus on one of these communities. The book is a major contribution that helps delineate the southern reaches of the Métis landscape. Laid out in five chapters, the monograph begins by describing the initial migration patterns of the Métis into the Dakota/Montana region and the ways in which this region was nested in the wider Métis use and occupancy patterns. Subsequent chapters of the monograph describe the history of the Métis in the region into the mid-twentieth century

and include considerations of the wider and eventually transnational linkages with the Métis to the north.

Foster demonstrates the ways that the families which would eventually form the Montana Métis communities were systematically connected to their kin north of the forty-ninth parallel and provides detailed descriptions of how these communities were separated from their cousins in what was to become Canada and from one another. Scrip, a topic of considerable interest among scholars and Métis communities in Canada, was used to treat with the Métis in the south decades prior to its use by the Dominion of Canada. Although the interaction of scrip, treaty, and ethnic identity that Foster describes varies from Métis experience in Canada, the end result was similar—the public elision of Métis identity and political disappearance of Métis communities.

Even for someone familiar with the historical and contemporary literature dealing with Métis communities in Rupert's Land/Canada there is much to learn in this work. As some of the basic themes mirror those well entrenched in the fourth-ninth parallel literature, the examples generated in the context of the Métis/US relationship flesh out the picture of Métis–Euro–North American relations. The forty-ninth parallel is fundamentally important to that relationship in that it is by locating the Métis of Montana and Dakota as migrants from above the border that Métis rights are denied. Foster demonstrates that to the contrary, there were significant communities, well entrenched (or as entrenched as a mobile community might be) in Montana prior to significant Euro-American settlement. Nonetheless the identification of these communities as Canadian Cree and half-breed (or, worse still, “breeds”) is shown to be a key element in their marginalization. The flexible bilateral kinship organization that facilitated the success of Métis communities across the Old Northwest allowed at least some Métis to remain south of the forty-ninth parallel as coherent and self-ascribing communities.

One community, the Spring Creek Band, is the central focus of Foster's monograph, although the wider context of her case study is well established. One element of the settlement patterns Foster describes is that this band is demonstrably local in origin, even though it is connected by kinship and history to other Métis in other places—including the Red River. She describes the rooting of the Spring Creek Band of Métis at and around Lewistown (on the banks of Spring Creek). Interestingly, part of the success of the Métis at Spring Creek is a mixed farming/hunting/trading adaptation not dissimilar to Métis in other places. Farming allowed for the successful patenting of lands, and alternative economic activity rendered that farming sustainable. This pattern bears comparison with other communities, and, as Foster points out, gives lie to the more typical image of Métis in Montana as “landless Indians” (this label being more appropriate to post-1885 influxes of Aboriginal peoples into the area).

Parallel to the scholarly reappearance of Métis communities south of the line is the reappearance of Louis Riel. In the literature of the Métis communities north of the forty-ninth parallel, Riel's time in Montana is often afforded remarkably little ink. It is treated as a sort of nonpolitical sojourn in an otherwise intensely political life. Foster recounts Riel's selection as

a representative of the Métis in the area, marriage to a woman from the community, and considerable work on behalf of the community. Although the relationship between the bulk of the community and Riel was not always smooth, Foster suggests that the inclusive nature of the Métis generally is demonstrable in the ways that Riel was integrated. The example of Riel's time in the region is a metonym for the porous boundaries of Métis communities generally. Throughout the monograph it is the open and inclusive nature of the Métis that is underscored. This she sees as highly adaptive but subject to tremendous stresses during the collapse of the buffalo herds and rise of cattle ranching in the mid-1880s in Montana.

The socioeconomic convulsions associated with the disappearance of the buffalo and their replacement with Euro-American settlers led to the subsequent disappearance of the Métis communities. Foster provides several detailed insights regarding exactly how this occurred. She makes some further significant contributions to our understanding of how Métis communities survived through the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Race politics mattered, and these politics played out along cultural lines. There was a systematic sorting of "mixed bloods" into white, breeds, and Indians, with the latter two categories being predictably marginalized. For example, in spite of a pervasive negative attitude toward mixed race people by the American mainstream, mixed bloods of appropriate parentage and cultural background (read English) could pass as white. For those mixed bloods with French backgrounds, there were systematic pressures forcing people to be Indians whether they were legally recognized as such or not. Foster observes that in the realm of education this meant that main Métis children were forced out of the schools their parents had built and into mission schools in which they were educated downward in social class. This is all part of a far more complex playing out of class, culture, and race politics, and Foster provides a nuanced and persuasive account.

The Métis and the Métis community effectively disappear from view by the end of the period. One of the more important observations that Foster makes in this regard is that in terms of histories of the area, this is the artificial result of an overly artifactual scholarship—that is, the lack of historical documentation and absence of Métis self-representations (with some notable exceptions) make for a misappearance of absence. This is again compounded in the imaginations of Euro-American Montana settlers in the aftermath of the 1885 Resistance when the preexisting tendency to lump all Métis with Cree took almost complete hold in an ethnic category of "Canadian Cree" associated with refugees from the north. Conversely, this association, and US government insistence that only Indians had Aboriginal rights, led to a Métis self-identification with Indian cousins (especially the Turtle Mountain Chippewa), effecting a similar elision of a Métis ethnic identity. "Breeds" were systematically marginalized, deported, and disprized, and ultimately the pressure on the half-breed ethnic category was so intense it was forced underground to the roots of the community—their family and kinship networks. The public reemergence of the Métis community in Montana is just that, a renewed public expression of an identity and community with remarkable continuity in the face of considerable challenge.

In the end, this volume accomplishes a couple of very important things. Foster provides a subtle and complex rendering of the Métis south of the forty-ninth parallel. But perhaps even more significantly she does so by recounting how the complex, pragmatic, and adaptive kinship and social networks of Métis communities were maintained. In spite of policies generated through essentialist Euro-American racial categories, it is the porous and socially inclusive orientation of Métis communities that, in the end, are responsible for community and cultural continuity. This, somewhat ironically, is most clear in an area of the Métis homeland in which the reidentification of a Métis community as such has occurred in the absence of even quasi-official support or recognition of the category Métis.

*Mike Evans*

The University of British Columbia, Okanagan

**Where Lightning Strikes: The Lives of American Indian Sacred Places.** By Peter Nabokov. New York: Viking Penguin, 2006. 350 pages. \$24.95 cloth; \$16.00 paper.

*Where Lightning Strikes* is a “big” book that draws on the author’s rich experiences, conversations, and studies to evoke empathy and a respectful solidarity with American Indians. Peter Nabokov challenges stereotypes regarding Indians, environments, and religions even as he brings together an amazing wealth of stories, ethnography, history, and personal reflections about diverse American Indian peoples and their relationships with sacred places. Nabokov uses two especially engaging lenses to focus insight and challenge understanding. First, this book is a study of “the lives” of sacred places. Second, the book is organized as a historical and legal reflection on major court cases in the United States related to sacred sites.

This book is dedicated to the Lakota lawyer and scholar, Vine Deloria Jr., who shared Peter Nabokov’s dismay at the lack of legal protection afforded sacred lands by the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (AIRFA) of 1978. This act was designed to protect the first amendment rights of American Indians, but it has largely left Native tribes still struggling to preserve sacred sites. Prompted by this concern Nabokov has expanded arguments that he sketched in his chapter “Anchoring the Past in Place” in *A Forest of Time* (2002). *Where Lightning Strikes* greatly amplifies his earlier insights regarding the historical character of sacred places. He develops new arguments about the particular relationships of American Indian peoples with sacred sites and analyzes significant court cases following the AIRFA legislation that impacts many of those sites.

Nabokov structures his book as a jurisprudential reflection on court cases from the late 1970s and 1980s. Using the four directions as a schema, Nabokov organizes his book as a trope for the legal assertion of national power over Native peoples and lands. A subtext surfaces in the book showing that although resistance by Native peoples to preserve sacred sites in the twentieth