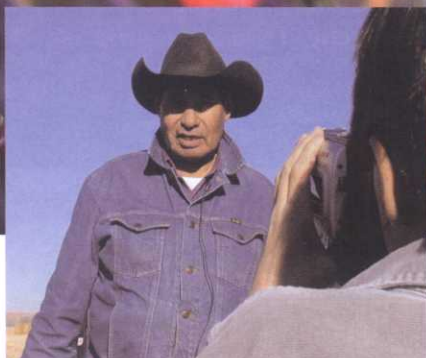


New Ways of Learning Old Ways of Knowing

by Barbara Dacks



Nitsitapiisinni—Stories and Spaces: Exploring Kainai Plants and Culture is about learning and remembering traditional ways of knowing. But it is also very much about teaching young children to value their culture and heritage and, by mastering today's digital technology, to keep the traditional ways of knowing alive.

Alvine Mountain Horse teaches Grade 4 students in the Blackfoot immersion program at Aahsaopi School on the Blood Reserve in southern Alberta. She remembers going out on the land as a child with her grandmother to learn about traditional healing herbs. She was concerned that her young students "wouldn't have the opportunity to learn about them [the

herbs] because the Elders are passing on and there aren't too many people who know about the plants anymore." Then she and her husband, Red Crow College instructor Narcisse Blood, met with staff of the Galileo Educational Network and together they planted the seeds of Stories and Spaces.

This remarkable project took root, blossomed, and bore fruit. From September to March, eight Kainai Elders between the age of 55 and 80 worked with the students in their classroom and took them out on the land, to teach them about the plants. "Now they are more aware of the land and their surroundings," Mountain Horse says.

Top: Rose hips contain the seeds of the Wild Rose, [*Kinii* in Blackfoot] as it grows on the Kainai Reserve.

Left Top: Elder and spiritual leader Pete Standing Alone explains to Noah Fox the significance of Cottonwood trees in the Kainai culture.

Left Middle: Elder and teacher Agnes First Charger tells Sommer Chief Moon and Kendra Day Rider (at the camera) about using native plants like a first aid kit when you are out on the land.

Left Bottom: Brenda Gladstone of Galileo Educational Network shows the web resource to Elder and spiritual leader Adam Delaney and his grandson Slade in Adam's home on the Kainai reserve.

And, best of all, she says, Nitsitapiisinni provided validation for something that is relevant to their education from the Elders and the herbalists' teachings that have been practised over the centuries. "This project has given them more confidence," Mountain Horse says, "and they are really proud of who they are."

With the skills and new confidence they acquired, these eight- and nine-year-olds contributed to the recently launched the *Nitsitapiisinni: Stories and Spaces* Web site, with images and information about indigenous healing plants, Aboriginal stories, historical photographs, student art and music, and video interviews with Elders—all translated from English into Blackfoot and French. These once shy children gave a formal presentation of their accomplishment to chief and council on the reserve and to an audience of 200 on the University of Calgary campus.

Galileo's Sherri Rinkel Mackay reports that they've also received kudos from ethnobotanists who have viewed and been impressed by the site—a unique primary source of information about traditional Blackfoot native plants, in the Blackfoot language.

"We tried to replicate how it would be to walk on the land with the Elders," Rinkel Mackay explains. By including an awareness of the total environment on the Web site—the sound of the wind, animal calls and birdsong—"this work bridged the gap between the Kainai ancestors' ways of knowing and the future," she adds.

The experience has made them more excited about school, Mountain Horse says. "You allow us to explore and be creative," they told me."

Stories and Spaces is a collaboration among the Galileo Educational Network, Kainai Board of Education, Red Crow College, University of Calgary Information Resources, and the Kainai Elders who shared their traditional knowledge about 62 of the native plants on their land. With funding from Canadian Culture On-line, Galileo designed the project and helped the students in Mountain Horse's class use digital technologies to record Elders' knowledge. Red Crow College advised them about the cultural authenticity of the presentation and staff of U of C's Information Resources digitized 41 books as additional resources for teachers.



Pasture Sagewort [common name Woman's Sage, Blackfoot, *Aakiika'ksimii*], growing near Eagle Plume's on the Kainai reserve.

Carolla Calf Robe is one of the Elders whom Mountain Horse invited to participate in *Nitsitapiisinni: Stories and Spaces*. Like Mountain Horse, she remembers helping her own grandmother dig for

roots. Today, she collects medicinal herbs with her own grandson. After meeting the young students in Mountain Horse's class, she joined the project. "I shared some of my herbal medicines with the children and gave them some teachings," she says. This unique project, she agrees, honours the past and, importantly, ensures a future for traditions. "These young people will know the natural medicines are out there." *

IN THE GALLERIES

THE LIVES and LEGACY of PETER and CATHARINE WHYTE

HOLY DOG: *Karen Whyte*

JOURNEYS IN THE LANDSCAPE: *Brad White*



Peter Whyte, *Lake O'Hara*, 1930, oil on canvas, collection of the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, gift of the Catharine Robb Whyte Estate, 1979

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