

Crown Prince of the Métis

By DON JAQUE

In 1978 the *Slave River Journal* was sold to a family and run for a time by their teenagers. It did not have much future promise. My wife, Sandra, and I started a second newspaper in Fort Smith called the *Fort Smith NEWS*. We ran 'The NEWS' for several months and then a third newspaper sprang up, the *Fort Smith Journal*. The publisher was Joe Mercredi. He was born and raised in Fort Smith. His father, the late Louis Mercredi, was one of the last of the river pilots. He was said to have run the formidable Rapids of the Drowned on the Slave River in a York boat - a large wooden scow. Joe must have inherited that sense of daring and adventure for he showed no fear in his editorials. He had experience in other community newspapers and knew how the industry worked. He could spin a good yarn, was never without his Pentax camera and had a particular sense of history. His features on the old days were always a great read. Those days a newspaper had to publish for eight months before it was eligible for NWT government advertising - really the only way to make money. Having three newspapers competing in such a small community was a tough go. The *Slave River Journal* was over two years old and the brother and sister who ran it after they finished their high school homework were doing quite well. My wife and I and Joe Mercredi were basically working for nothing in our two publications.

That winter, the nights seemed particularly long and cold, and Joe's publication did not make it through. It folded after about five months. We managed to keep going and eventually bought the *Slave River Journal* (the mother of the teens had had enough). It was an interesting and challenging time. Out of it, Joe Mercredi became a good friend.

Joe was always a bit of a rogue, part of his charm. We purchased a house on St. Anne's Street (immediately dubbed the "Sesame Street House") and thankfully moved the newspaper from our basement to its new home. Built by the Roman Catholic brothers on the current site of Wally's Drugs and moved later to St. Anne's Street, the house was originally used as a nun's residence and then later to house nurses. Joe was in the office one day and he took me up the stairs to the landing. He pointed out the sliding window, how it exited onto

the roof with a gradual slope. See, he said with a twinkle in his eye, I would sneak in here and chase nurses and if one of the nuns caught me I would scoot out the window, slide down the roof, drop to the ground and be gone.

Joe had a sense for promotion on a grand scale and he was always chagrined by the poor job the NWT government did promoting the territory for tourism. Every year he would organize an NWT float in the Grey Cup parade. Each time he would go to the government for money and get turned down, but he would put something

Joe would invite friends to come along and I was fortunate to make it on two of those Grey Cup adventures with him. At one, in Edmonton, I had one of my most unforgettable evenings, ever. Joe always had an "NWT hospitality suite" arranged in a hotel and there was always a giant bowl with a special Northern drink he dubbed "moose milk." It was a concoction with several types of alcohol; brown, milky, tasty and very potent. The Klondike Cuties visited the hospitality suite, resplendent in their green and gold satin shorts and halters, fishnet stockings and high heels. There were not

went on any of those adventures with him, but in hindsight, I should have. It must have been some experience!

Joe had a number of causes and one that was dear to his heart was recognition of Aboriginal war veterans. He championed the fact there is a class of Canadians who fought and many died or were maimed fighting bravely for their country, yet were never duly recognized and do not receive appropriate benefits. He took that cause to Ottawa, helping to give it prominence on the national stage.

Joe was proud of his Métis heritage and referred to himself as the "Crown Prince of the Métis" - even had that written on his business cards. In his younger years he always figured prominently at Métis assemblies and often joined in the talent contests. He was a crooner with a deep, mellow baritone and his signature song was *Blueberry Hill* ("I met my thrill, on Blueberry Hill.") At one point he decided NWT Métis needed to have a sash and brought one of the colourful Red River sashes to my wife. Sandy was a weaver and started producing the colourful sashes on her loom. She and Joe worked out a design for a unique NWT Métis sash - mostly green for the Boreal forest with traces of blue for the rivers and lakes and of course red for the blood of the Métis. That sash design was not a hit but the traditional red motif was and soon it proliferated in the NWT. Thanks to Joe it became a gift given for elder recognition at Métis Assemblies. Later he worked with another weaver to create a red shawl to be given out to honour elder Métis women. That tradition continues today.

Joe was always a writer and loved to spin a good story. After he left Fort Smith he moved to Fort Simpson and started another newspaper. There was not sufficient revenue from the community to keep it going, however and without government advertising support, it too had to shut down. He then began writing a book - a historic perspective on Métis women, which is still a work in progress. He also had another book on the go about his experiences in the residential school system. Joe was one of those unique individuals who had the courage to tell it like it is, regardless of consequences. He was one of those rare individuals who stands out among the rest of us, and because of what they do, life is more interesting.

Joe Mercredi
May 12, 1938 - Feb. 23, 2009

Photo by Don Jaque

Joe Mercredi, June 1980, with the Métis sash he commissioned from a very pregnant weaver, Sandra Jaque. He was responsible for bringing the tradition of the sash to the NWT.

together anyway, getting a few donations from friends and manufacturing something using his wits and his compelling way. Often the 'float' would be a boat on a trailer donated by a marine company, pulled by a big convertible. It would have a big Northwest Territories banner. And always the television commentators would mention "the Northwest Territories float." It was the best possible publicity for the NWT, and he did it all on his own. Of course he would sit in the car in the parade waving to the whole world, proud and happy. Joe was the man.

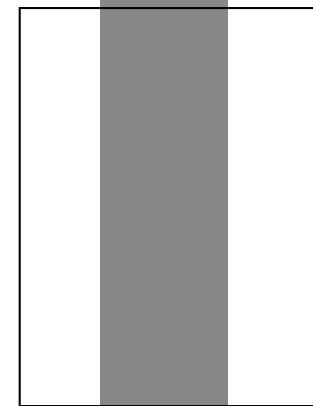
Everyone in the Grey Cup organization knew Joe and welcomed him. He hung out with the football players. He had access to the games, the socials, the functions. He was an intrinsic part of the event. It was an amazing accomplishment.

many chairs to go round and they had to share or sit on laps. They were very nice. The moose milk flowed. Before they left, a Roman Catholic bishop and two priests, all ardent football fans, arrived in full frock and joined in the Grey Cup revelry. It was an eclectic mix. The moose milk flowed even more. I will never forget sitting for a long time deep in conversation with the bishop, sharing views on the future of the Roman Catholic church and the direction it must take. Needless to say, when you hung out with Joe, different things happened.

Joe also found a way to get the NWT represented at the Miss Canada beauty pageants. After all, Northern women are beautiful too. He would ask for applicants and after due process, select the best entrant, then take her to the national event. I never

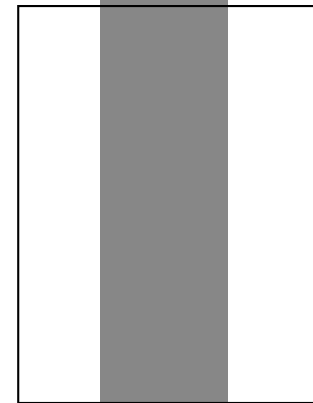
Word on the Street

What's your favourite animal to hunt?



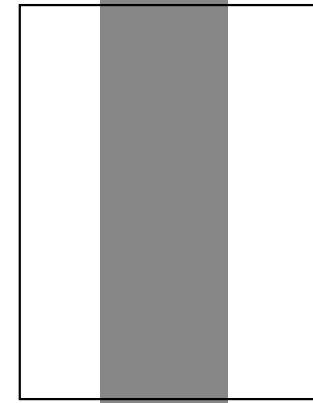
Weldon McPhail

Rabbit. There's lots of them around, and no limit. And they're fast, so there's more sport in hunting them.



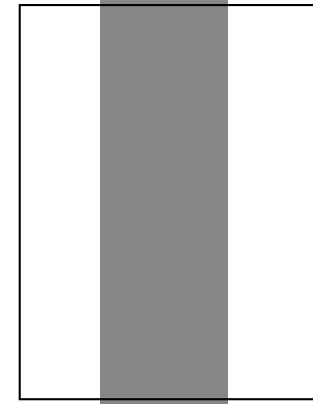
Sean Maitland

Rabbit. Nothing beats rabbit stew.



Myles Esau

Ducks, because they're easy to get.



Cody Loe

Moose, because they stick around rivers and marshes that are easier to get to. They have more meat, and taste better than caribou or bison.

FORECAST

Fort Chipewyan

Fort Smith

Today

Today

-19



-33

Low

-21



-33

Low

Wednesday

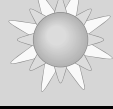
Wednesday

-21



-36

-20

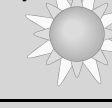


-36

Thursday

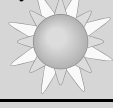
Thursday

-7



-28

-8



-26

Norms: -5 and -19

Sunrise: 7:58

Sunset: 19:12

Norms: -7 and -21

Sunrise: 8:02

Sunset: 19:14