



Legend of Rat Root (Wacaskwamecison)

Woodland Cree are told that once there was a time when this land we are on was not ours. We are told that at one time this land belonged to the Dogrib people, otherwise known as Athapascan. Dogrib roamed the northern parts of what is now Woodland Cree country, and the southern parts were home of the Blackfeet. Both Blackfeet and Dogrib were known to be fierce in battle and were powerful tribes here in Alberta. We the Cree lived mostly in the plain's country throughout Saskatchewan and Manitoba. But that changed kayas, long ago....

Back in the days of MistahiMuskwa and Payipwat, Big Bear and Hole-In-The-Sioux, there were many tribes being pushed westward as colonizers came into the plains. Many tribes sent scouts west to try to find new lands, free of colonizers where they could be left to live in peace.

Chief Big Bear and Chief Hole-in-the-Sioux formed an alliance and decided to send their own scouts west into Alberta to look for a quiet area with good hunting that the Cree could move to, away from the colonizers. The scouts entered what is now Alberta just north of Fort Edmonton at that time.

The area at that time was mainly claimed as Dogrib territory and the scouts were careful to avoid them, as they were known to have an alliance with the Blackfeet.

The scouts found good hunting lands in and around what is now the Frog Lake area. The area had good hunting and fishing, so the scouts decided to head back into Saskatchewan to let the chiefs know they found a good area.

As they made their way back east, not far from Fort Edmonton, they were spotted by a Dogrib hunting party, and they gave chase to the Cree scouts. The Dogrib sent a runner of their own to alert a nearby Blackfoot hunting party about the Cree invaders and the Blackfoot hunting party joined them in trying to run down the Cree.

The Cree were greatly outnumbered and ran for their lives. They were overtaken by the Dogrib and Blackfeet near what is now the Cooking Lake area in a swampy location. The Cree scouts were surrounded and took refuge in a large slough, hiding in the reeds submerged in water. It was a moonlit night, and the Cree scouts could hear their enemies fully surrounding the slough, knowing they were hiding somewhere in the reeds. They settled in for the night, waiting to attack the invading Cree at first light.



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The Cree scouts awaited the expected attack, still crouching in the reeds and water. As they waited, one of the scouts tried to keep his mind off the coming battle and noticed a little muskrat lazily swimming nearby in the moonlight. He watched the little creature closely to calm himself.

He noticed that, at first, the muskrat swam slowly and looked lazy as though he just woke up or was just getting ready to go to sleep. It stopped on a nearby pile of mud and reeds and looked as though it was searching for something in the pile. It finally reached in the mud and pulled out a strange looking root that was greenish and had an almost diamond pattern of blackish fibers on it. The muskrat cleaned the mud off the strange root and began chewing on it.

Shortly after eating some of the root, the Cree scout noticed that the little muskrat seemed to get a burst of energy! Moving and swimming more quickly now and beginning to dart here and there searching the slough for more food. The scout noticed some of the root the muskrat had eaten was floating nearby and looked closely at it. It had a bitter, musky smell to it and it appeared to be soaked with water.

Thinking about how the root made the muskrat come to life with energy, the scout slowly took a small bite of the root, curious if it would do the same to him. It tasted just like it smelled,

bitter and musky but he chewed on it anyway. A few minutes passed and suddenly the scout could feel his heart beating faster and he felt more alert than he'd ever been in his life. He could focus on the situation they were in without fear, and he felt energetic enough to take on all the enemies nearby with the energy the root had given him. He quickly motioned to his fellow Cree to come near, and he explained to them what he had just experienced.

His allies tried the root themselves and were excited to find that they too felt a new energy, even though they had been tired and worn down before eating the little plant. They immediately came up with a plan to fight their way through the enemy line that now had them surrounded. They would make their move at first light. They set about gathering as much of the root as they could and packed it away in their packs for use when they felt they needed a boost of energy.

In the early hours the next morning, while their enemies were still groggy from watching the slough all night, the Cree scouts sprang into action. They carefully made their way to the east side of the slough, making barely a sound or ripple in the water.

Once in position, they carefully crept up on the Blackfeet and Dogrib attackers guarding their escape. Once in position, they let loose and quickly dispatched their enemies and started running toward the east once they were on solid ground.



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Although their enemies were taken by surprise, they quickly recovered and sounded the alarm to chase the escaping Cree. Both the Blackfeet and Dogrib were shocked at the energy and speed the Cree had and later reported that they seemed to have unnatural energy and looked as though they were running so fast their feet never touched the ground. No matter how hard the Blackfeet and Dogrib tried to catch up to the small group of Cree, the Cree steadily gained ground, putting more and more space between them.

The Blackfeet and Dogrib chased them for days before finally giving up near the Saskatchewan border as they knew they were entering Cree territory, and the Cree were fierce warriors who greatly outnumbered both the Blackfeet and Dogrib put together.

The scouts rested once they knew they were no longer being chased before moving on to report that they found good territory in the Frog Lake area although the area was claimed by the Dogrib.

Chief Big Bear and Chief Hole-in-the-Sioux decided they easily outnumbered the Dogrib and they weren't afraid of the Blackfeet so they decided to send a large group of Cree to claim the area and settle there. The group was led by Chief Big Bear's son, Upci-Muskwa, Little Bear. The scouts also told the Chiefs about the experience in the slough and how the root had helped them escape. The Cree were taught about this root and claimed it as their medicine. Even today, the Cree hold this medicine in high regard and use it for many different purposes. It was named Wacaskwamecison, Rat-Root, by the Cree.

From here, history records that Little Bear and his group settled in the Frog Lake area of Alberta with a group heading further west into northern Alberta into the Lesser Slave Lake area, pushing the Dogrib further north and claiming the territory as Cree territory. Little Bear and his clan were part of the Frog Lake Massacre. Although Canadian history records those events in their way, the Cree oral history records those events very differently. But that's another story.

Ekosi Maka