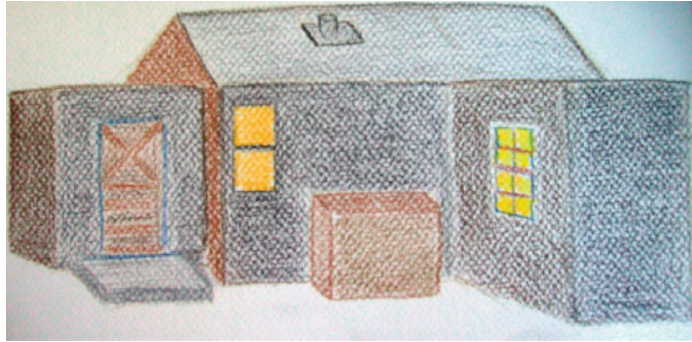


## Nikis Memory Map: A Cree Girl Speaks from the Past

*Brenda Wastasecoot*



I dedicate this to my mother Maria, who devoted her life to ours, her husband and children, and to my brother Frank (Blondie) Wastasecoot.



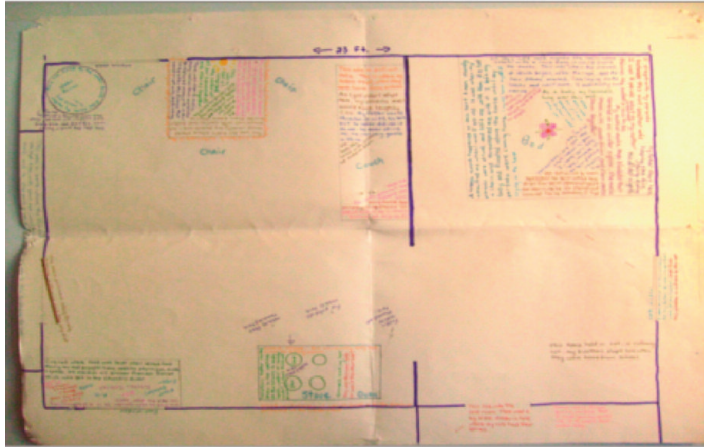
This was my house in the sixties. I grew up here just outside the town of Churchill until I was ten years old. After that, in 1973, we moved to town into a brand new house: two stories, electricity, running water, a bath tub, shower, stove, refrigerator, and three bedrooms. In town we had a front door and a back door. Each door had a doorbell. You wouldn't know how miraculous that was until you saw my old house.

I want to talk about this house, the one that stood down the Flats by the Churchill River. Our house was at the centre of the small Indian village. It had one door, a wood stove, an oil lamp, a table with three chairs, and one bed and one pull out sofa. In this drawing of the house or Nikis (Cree for my little house) you can see a wooden box; this is a coal bin. Some nights I hid in this coal bin, I slept in it.

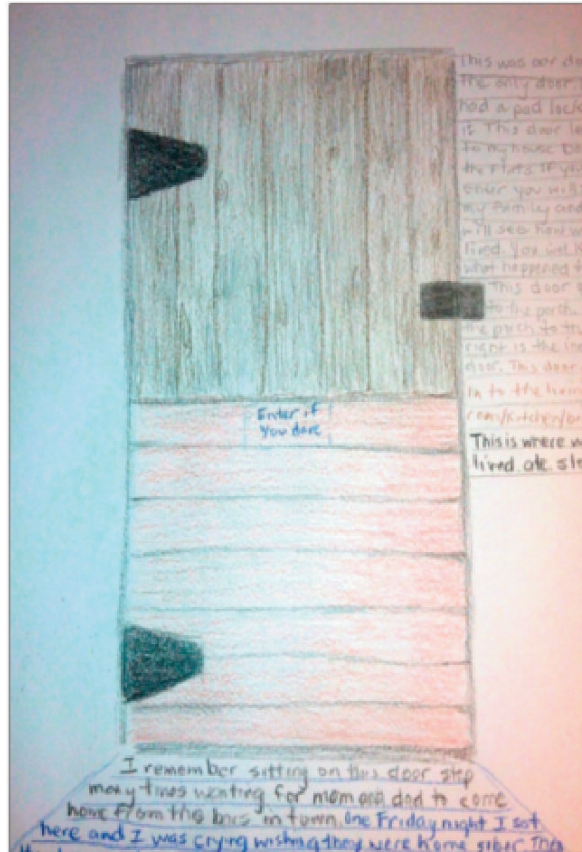


For a long time I did not have a photograph of Nikis. Our family did not have a camera to take any photos of it. I do not have any photos of myself as a child. Photographs have been scarce and hard to find. So I just drew pictures of Nikis, my little house. I have always remembered it, and all of its contents, and everything that happened in this house I have held in my memory for all this time.

I lived here with my mom and dad. I was their youngest child, and their only child who did not go to Residential school. All my older siblings, nine of them, did go to a Residential school. They came home every summer, and this is a story about the times when they were away and the times when they were home. Like that book says, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."



I constructed a memory map of Nikis, and wrote stories in each piece of furniture. What developed was a journey back to a time and place I had long survived and cherished as my birthplace. Memories of my mom skinning rabbits to make rabbit stew. Memories of her blankets and pillows on the bed, which she had made with her own hands. There were other memories as well, ones I did not want to remember but could never forget. I wrote all of these memories into the lines on this map of Nikis. I told these stories out loud in the Arts Informed class at OISE. Tears trickled down some of their faces, and I knew I had to continue with this memory-mapping project.



One of my favourite memories from back then in the sixties, was about this door. It tells the story of a miracle that happened on a Friday night, the scariest night of the week for a child living down the Flats. When I thought everyone was in town at the bars getting drunk my mom and dad were home. They were home sober on a Friday night, which never ever happened to me before. Just when I sat on the front step and began to cry out in despair, the door opened, and it was my dad!



This is a door I found on the mound of rubble, which used to be the Brandon Indian Residential School. It was a very heavy steel door! I wanted it to tell its own story about the children who lived there and what they would remember about their school if they did their own memory maps.

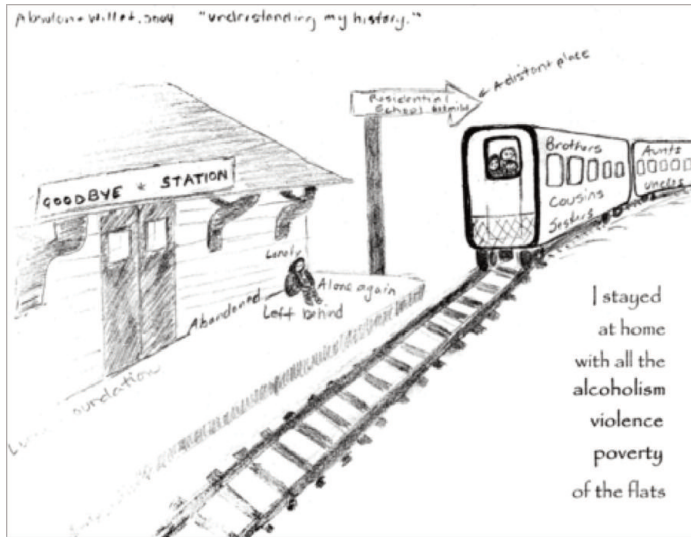




One time, the windows were smashed by my brothers and sisters; they smashed everything that time. They even tipped the water barrel over, and water was all over the floor. They were very angry at the world, and it seemed they were angry at our mom and dad the most.

This time in the sixties was a very confusing time. I missed my sisters and brothers especially when I had to face tough situations alone. But when they were home from school in the summers, they also frightened me with their violent outbursts and destruction of everything in my house.





This train took my family away from me to the residential schools. I was left behind to survive alone. I felt alone a lot of the time, and I was targeted by sex offenders because I was alone. My parents were not always there for me when I really needed them to be.



Another favourite memory of growing up down the Flats was playing with my cousins, we always played outside together, making mud pies, swimming in the river, picking goose berries, and we even found a rare wild strawberry patch. I had my cousins when I did not have my siblings, they replaced my sisters when they were away at residential school.



Source: University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections,  
Winnipeg Tribune Fonds, PC 18 (A81-12).

I never had any photos of myself or of my house.  
This is why I had to draw it from memory and this  
is why I chose to do arts informed research.

This is my house as it stood down on the Flats  
in 1968. It is how I remembered it all these years.

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