

Recent Métis Voyageur Lobstick Pole Projects Funded by The Saskatchewan Arts Board

By Leah Marie Dorion

In 2011 while conducting university research related to Métis fur trade history, I discovered information about Métis Lobstick making. As an interdisciplinary artist with a passion for Native Studies and fur trade history, this discovery changed the direction of my own artistic practice. Since that time I admired this Métis Lobstick art form for its hybridity, practicality, and land-based cultural expressions. I began developing and expanding my own personal understanding of this old art form. I proceeded to revive this forgotten traditional Lobstick art form. I truly admire the creative interpretation and innovation of the Métis artists of the past and decided to replicate their beautiful creations. In 2011, I made my first experimental Lobstick pole at my home which was dedicated to my grandmother Maria Dorion [1925-1971]. In 2012, I made my second Lobstick pole at Historic Fort Edmonton it was dedicated to Métis Elder Eleanor Garneau [1851-1912] an entrepreneur and respected grandmother leader.

With funding assistance provided by the Saskatchewan Arts Board on July 21, 2013, a Métis voyageur Lobstick Pole was erected at the Métis Heartland Forest cultural heritage site in the Nesbitt Forest near McDowell, Saskatchewan to commemorate the original Métis families who resided in this community and traditionally utilized the land in the region. Likewise on August 10, 2013, a Métis voyageur Lobstick Pole was erected at the Fish Lake heritage site to commemorate the original Métis families who resided in this community and traditionally used the land in the region. The Fish Lake Settlement is located just east of the town of Christopher Lake in the heart of lake country.

Both the Fish Lake and McDowell Lobstick poles are created in the style of the territorial marking pole which was constructed by ancestral Métis to mark their territories, show homeland occupation, and to identify trade routes, or identify food caches, and other traditional resources such as berries. According to my research I discovered three main types of construction methods used by the Métis voyageurs to make a lobstick tree. In the one style, the tree is de-limbed in

an unique design with the bark left on the entire tree such as the famous Waskesiu Lobstick which was felled in 2013 after a hundred years of service in the Prince Albert National Park. In another Lobstick style, the tree is de-limbed and debarked except for the top tuft whereby the original tree is left intact such as the Moberly Lobstick located at Jasper National Park. The other lobstick style is a combination of de-limbing and debarking in which some sections of the tree have both bark on and bark off. I am grateful to the Saskatchewan Arts Board for funding which allowed me to go further in my experimental Lobstick creation and research. In the Saskatchewan River district the Lobstick custom has not been practiced here for over hundred years.

Long ago teams of Métis voyageurs would use prominent Spruce, Tamarack, or Pine trees especially those located upon the height of land where they were easily seen towering above and against the tree line. Some Lobstick makers carved symbols on the pole to tell stories or they placed commemorative names and dates upon the pole. Lobsticks were historically placed in strategic locations along fur trade routes especially near water as they helped to serve directional markers or as warning markers for voyageurs who were soon to approach falls or encounter rough rapids ahead on a river, or arrive at a branch in the river system. Additionally, these river Lobstick poles contrasted with the surrounding forest and served to warn dog team travelers to be mindful of dangerous conditions near the river in early or late winter.

The type of territorial marking Lobstick poles created at both Fish Lake and McDowell are made in the second debarked style because they are distinctly visible from the surrounding bush and presently mark the spot where Métis community members have erected cultural heritage land use facilities. The local Métis still harvest medicines and other natural resources in the area. Grandma Rose Fleury who lived near Duck Lake for most of her life remembers Lobstick poles located in the regional area. She recalls one erected at Lobstick Lake just west of the current Métis lodge that, “marked our medicine picking area, berry picking area, and identified the lake as a special inland water source.”

Lobstick poles served many purposes for our ancestral Métis community members for instance our people erected them to celebrate the accomplishments of local Métis people or to record significant community or family names as well as events. The natural highways; rivers, lakes, and streams of this land have greatly influenced the entire development of Métis cultural, economic, social, physical, and spiritual life in this country. Some leaders say the Métis were the first true Canadians. According to my research some Lobstick trees served as natural ladders and were prominent lookout points. In the spirit of healing and cultural revitalization these poles are created to serve as a reminder of the strength, practicality, and versatility of Métis families in the Fish Lake and McDowell regions along with our collective desire to continue to use and enjoy our traditional land use areas.

Building a Lobstick is a spiritual, celebratory, and a highly physical process. We used cultural practices such as making tobacco offerings, used song, and prayer in every aspect of the construction of these Lobstick poles. During Lobstick making we took risks and pushed our limits, however, we learn to work together as a team, we work efficiently, and we learned to communicate. Most importantly we learn how to reconnect with our cultural traditions and appreciate the skills of our ancestors through the revitalization of these historic art forms. In June 2014, I will be making my first bark on Lobstick pole with a natural ladder system built in and incorporate a designated limb marking the direction to the city of Prince Albert.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following individuals who helped implement my vision to build these Lobstick poles in this region. These people helped to bring our Métis voyageur Lobstick tradition back to our Métis people and our communities.

Gratitude to Mother Earth and our Creator for blessing us with such a beautiful homeland and for giving our ancestors the Lobstick.

To our community Elders present during the making of the McDowell Lobstick:
Mr. Joe Marchand, Mr. Gordon Pocha, Florence and Doug Allen.

Many thanks to John Hannikenne who fully supports our Métis cultural revitalization and healing through land-based educational experiences.

Kichi-meegweetch to Curtis R. Breaton, president of St. Louis Métis local, for helping plan, coordinate, and build these Lobstick poles.

Curtis J. Breaton for conducting the most dangerous jobs such as scaling the tree to dangerous heights and working with multiple sharp tools in order to create our Lobstick pole.

Respect and gratitude extended to our youth participants Zachary Scott and Louis Lafferty for their energy and commitment to being helpers.

Many thanks to Brian Lee, president Fish Lake Métis local, for his commitment to preservation of our cultural heritage sites and for allowing us access to the Fish Lake site.

Liza Brown for her labour and for providing her support and encouragement in bringing Lobstick making to Fish Lake. Thanks to her son (Johnny) and partner (Ray) for helping to make the Lobstick.

The Saskatchewan Arts Board for providing me with funding to research, document, and develop this historic traditional Métis art form for future generations of Métis.