

In Memory of My Cochoom Madelaine O'Soup Acoose (circa 1890–1979)



By Janice Acoose

*Department of Indian Affairs regis-
tered her*

O'Soup.

*The Oblates baptized her
Madelaine.*

*We called her
Coochum Paul.*

*She was adopted
Her Irish ancestry...
erased.*

Became ANISHNABE.

*Flaming red hair, hung
Down the length of her back.
Warm, sun, kissed brown eyes
Could melt your soul.*

*An angry word
She never spoke.
A stranger
She never turned away.*

*Quite unlike anyone
I'll ever know.
My Coochum
May she rest in peace.*

*(For Coochum Madelaine ... one of my
teachers)*

Prior to the signing of Treaty Four, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate made several attempts to set up a mission school among the Anishnabe and the Nehiowak of Crooked Lake. During this time, our elders tried to show these first blackrobes our ways. They taught them our language, our customs, and our values.

Once the Oblates learned our languages, they told us that we had to give up our "pagan" ways and become Christians. The blackrobes tried to persuade the Elders to give up their children, assuring them that they would raise them up to be good Christians.

O'Soup, the Chief of the Anishnabe at O'Soup Reserve, answered them. He told them "if you want our children, give us yours in exchange. We will raise them up to be good people."

Although exchanging children was a common practice among Indigenous peoples in North America, the Oblates were unfamiliar and uncomfortable with Chief O'Soup's proposal. They didn't understand that the exchange of children secured peace, built alliances, and formed sacred trusts between nations. However, anticipating a lengthy and co-operative relationship with the Anishnabe and the Nehiowaks, the blackrobes agreed.

It took them some time however to offer their own children. A Winnipeg orphanage subsequently produced three children.

The Oblates received these children at Crooked Lake in 1886 and they offered them to Chief O'Soup. Gaddie, O'Soup's distinguished headman, opened his home to the young brother and sister of Metis descent. Chief O'Soup accepted the baby girl the Blackrobes called Madelaine.

Like all good Christian Indians she was baptized; she was christened Madeline O'Soup. Like all Indians she also became a ward of the Canadian government and thus, in accordance with the Indian Act, the Department of Indian Affairs registered her with Chief O'Soup's band. She was registered as Madelaine O'Soup of O'Soup's Reserve.

She spent the first eight years of her life on the reserve learning the ways of her people. In her ninth year, the missionaries came for her. Like many school-age Indian children, her home became the Qu'Appelle Industrial School. At school Madelaine simply became Number 382.

At Qu'Appelle, 382's basic education, combined with domestic and industrious training, produced the appropriate Indian farmwife. From the strict teachings of the principal, Father Hugonard, she also learned obedience, order, and politeness to God, father, and husband.

While away at school, old O'Soup had arranged for her to marry young Paul Acoose, a descendant of the powerful and respected Acoose family from the neighboring Sakimay Reserve. Acoose

and O'Soup had great hopes for the union between Madelaine and Paul.

Prior to the birth of their children, Acoose and O'Soup had witnessed starvation, malnutrition, and hundreds of agonizingly painful deaths from tuberculosis when they settled on reserves. Their people, once strong and healthy, were reduced to infected bodies, oozing green puss. The dreaded disease plagued many reserves and only a few healthy people remembered their ways.

Strangely, the blackrobes were not affected. Seeing their strong power, the Indians abandoned their own medicine people and turned to the missionaries for protection and relief from the wretched sickness. Acoose and O'Soup, witnessing the physical and cultural devastation of their people, proposed an alliance between their two families.

As was the custom, old O'Soup brought horses to Acoose. Acoose, accepting the proposal, nodded his head and took the reins. The alliance was secured.

Chief O'Soup's red-headed beauty, Madelaine, was to be joined to Paul Acoose. He was the son of Samuel Acoose, a very prominent and esteemed buffalo runner from old Sakimay's band. Quewich, old Acoose's father, had travelled for many years with Waywayseecapo and his prowess as a runner was well remembered in the oral stories of the Anishnabe.

Many whispered that young Paul had also been blessed by the Creator with strong medicine to run. Indeed, he carried the power in his name – Acoose – Man Standing Above Ground.

The old people wisely predicted Paul would inspire many of his people. In later years, as a councillor to the chief, a committed member of the grass dance society, and an annual participant in the Raindance, he earned the respect and loyalty of the band members. As a runner he set a world record in 1909 acquiring the title 'redskin running champion of the world.'

Madelaine, as the two old men had arranged, properly became Mrs. Paul Acoose. She bore him nine children: five dark and healthy sons and four fair and sturdy girls. When their children married, Paul would boast that he possessed one hundred and five grandchildren. We saw

Madelaine as only an extension of her husband, so we called her Coochum Paul.

She lived in his shadow for seventy-five years, celebrating his achievements and suffering his failures. In drunken stupors he lashed out "you white Irish bitch," punishing her for all the things he suffered under white rule. Never one to give in to self-pity, she silently endured his cruelty and humbly asked God's forgiveness for making him angry. When she suffered, Madelaine believed that she had to try harder to please others. She never allowed anyone to go hungry or tired from her door. She encouraged others with a pleasant smile, tea, and polite conversation. Never tiring, Madelaine tended the house and farm chores, many times until late into the evening.

Sometimes, by a dim light, I secretly watched as she unbraided her beautiful hair. Slowly and methodically she'd brush and brush, starting at the top of her head and stopping just below her waist. Her hair was like nothing I had ever seen before, but I imagined there were many fiery red-headed Irish women where she came from.

Just when I thought she was ready to turn out the light and sleep, she'd turn to me: "Good night *noosisim*."

In the dark I'd think about how her eyes held mysterious secrets of a foreign land. As I dozed off, dreamily I'd envision her homeland while I silently vowed to someday locate the remains of her family in Ireland. Many times I desperately wanted to ask her about her 'real' family. But just before blurting out the words I'd remember her tearful answers "wahwah mister, I don't even know this Irish" as she defended herself against my Mooshum's angry words.

Even as she lay dying, many years later, I thought she'd magically become Irish. Hanging on to each precious moment at her deathbed, I waited for her to mouth the Irish words or recall colorful and exciting stories from her homeland.

She didn't disappoint me. Her last words came from the language of her people – the Anishnabe. In her last senile moments, Madelaine O'Soup Acoose, Number 382, my Coochum Paul, said "*Amo anint wapos, minihkwen nihiti*," as she motioned for us to gather around the imaginary fire.



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