

Journal of Rural and Community Development

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Citation:

Rich, K. A., Hoeber, L., & Weisgerber, A. (2020). The Battle of Little Big Puck: Narratives of community, sport, and relationships in rural Canada. *The Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 15(3), 45–64.

Publisher:

Rural Development Institute, Brandon University.

Editor:

Dr. Doug Ramsey

Open Access Policy:

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The Battle of Little Big Puck: Narratives of Community, Sport, and Relationships in Rural Canada

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Abstract

The Battle of Little Big Puck is an annual event hosted in Maple Creek that challenges the way we think about how sport, history, heritage, and community intersect and play out in rural Canada. The event pits 'Cowboys against the Indians' in a hockey game and symbolic performance of identity, culture, and community. For this paper, we used a participatory methodology to co-construct narratives of the event in order to explore how it is understood and communicated in and for the community. We drew from interviews, public accounts, and observations to discuss two components of the larger narrative of this event. We discuss a historical narrative of contact and collaboration between Nekaneet First Nation and local rodeo cowboys and a contemporary narrative of urban-rural difference and misunderstanding, which provides a platform for community culture, specifically the expression of 'the way we do things out here.' Collectively, these narratives provide insights into local understandings of settler-Indigenous relations in one region of rural Saskatchewan and speak to the potential of sport and recreation as sites for contact, interaction, and the expression of distinct and collective aspects of culture and community in rural areas.

Keywords: Sport and recreation, events, narrative, settler-Indigenous relations, place

1.0 Introduction

The Battle of Little Big Puck is an annual hockey game hosted in Maple Creek that takes place every February. It provides the community with an opportunity to consider how sport, history, heritage, and community intersect and play out in rural Canada. Although sport events and programs are common features in rural communities, little attention has been given to the diverse ways they are organized and implicated in rural community development.

Located in the southwest corner of the Canadian province of Saskatchewan, Maple Creek and the surrounding area, including Nekaneet First Nation, have a strong sense of heritage and pride in the region and its local history. Since its inception in 1979 (Reardon, 2005), the event has been advertised as a battle between the Cowboys and Indians, an image that draws upon stereotypical (and for some problematic) divisions between settlers and First Nation peoples. The local Cowboys (current or formerly carded Rodeo Cowboys) compete against the Indians (members of Nekaneet First Nation) in a competitive ice hockey game¹. In the first two periods, the teams play a regular game of hockey. For the third period, players don traditional Indigenous clothing, chaps, and cowboy hats. The referees wear the formal red serge of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. There is drumming to start the period, and in the spirit of competition and camaraderie, during the final minute of play all of the players take to the ice along with an entire bucket of hockey pucks. They spend this time visiting with friends and celebrating a successful iteration of the event. No goals are recorded during this minute, as the goaltenders are also involved in the camaraderie. A final score is officially recorded, and the game ends with special presentations to members of the cowboy and Indigenous communities. With a history of 37 performances, the event has become a marker of community and collaboration for people of both Indigenous and settler backgrounds. Although officially called the 'battle,' the event is more often described as a celebration, a showcase, a gala event, or a platform for cultural preservation for both teams (Dale Mosquito, as cited in Janzen, 2019). The event also serves as a fundraiser for local projects and initiatives (e.g., the hospital, a local family in need, to build a skating rink, support the rodeo, etc.), which are identified by the organizers.

In this paper, we report on a project undertaken to collect and analyze stories about the event and co-construct narratives to share with a wider audience. While the event has faced some skepticism from outsiders, within the community, it is understood as an example of how Indigenous peoples and settlers collaborate and cooperate in sport and community life. Our purpose is to explore how rural settlers and Indigenous peoples understood and communicated narratives about this sport event. Specifically, we discuss the narrative associated with the event in two parts: the first centres around a history of contact and collaboration; the second focuses on an understanding of urban-rural difference and 'the way we do things out here,' which allows for a unique expression of individual and collective identities and heritage. Our discussion explores the roles of place-based narratives in shaping ideas of rurality and relationships within communities as well as the roles of sport and recreation in rural contexts.

¹ While it is only men who participate in the hockey game, women are involved in other aspects of the game, including supporters and event staff.

2.0 Literature Review: Indigenous-Settler Relations in Rural Canada

Understanding the dynamics of Indigenous-settler relationships has recently emerged as a policy imperative and an important area of research. The Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement was reached in 2006, which among other goals, sought to acknowledge and promote awareness and public education about Indian residential school experiences, impacts, and consequences in Canada. Following this settlement and a national inquiry into Indian residential schools, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was formed. Collectively, these developments have increased awareness of Indigenous peoples' lived experiences and the historical and contemporary relationships between Indigenous peoples and settlers in Canada. Public attention was further drawn to these relationships following a National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019), the Seven First Nations Youth Inquest in Ontario (Ministry of the Solicitor General, 2018) in 2016 and, pertinent to this work, the highly publicized Gerald Stanley trial in 2018, which brought additional issues related to justice, safety, and race relations in rural communities into the national spotlight (Canadian Press, 2018; Friesen, 2018). This trial highlighted the distinctions between urban and rural life and the nature of Indigenous-settler relationships in diverse geographic regions. As noted by Max FineDay (2018):

It's important to recognize that in this era of reconciliation reports, conferences, speeches, and actions, somehow we've left out rural Canada. Access to reconciliation events, dialogues, and programs is plentiful in cities. But what is available to rural Canada?...Rural Canadians live the closest to Indigenous communities, but they might as well be a world away (para. 12-15).

Evidently, people living in rural municipalities and First Nations are in close proximity to each other and navigate complex policy contexts involving multiple levels of government as well as treaties and ongoing land-claim negotiations. As a result, multiple symbolic and spatial boundaries (Lamont & Molnár, 2002) are involved in shaping the way settlers and Indigenous peoples interact and form relationships in rural contexts.

In northwestern Ontario, Denis (2012, 2015) explored settler-Indigenous relations in a rural context. He discussed the ways in which opportunities to interact influenced the ongoing relationships between Indigenous and White people in the community. Denis (2015) noted that while contact opportunities were effective in reducing forms of old-fashioned prejudice (i.e., being overtly hostile), less salient forms of *laissez-faire* racism continued to operate within the community. Through processes such as subtyping (i.e., identifying outliers or "good ones"), homophily (i.e., associating with those who have similar opinions as oneself), and avoidance of discussing issues altogether, Denis noted that contact perhaps was not enough to change more deep-seated attitudes and beliefs about race and ethnicity. Although not central to his research, Denis pointed out that ice hockey played an important role in the enactment and shaping of attitudes and beliefs within the community. As such, sport and recreation provides an important area for future research to understand how settlers and Indigenous people in rural communities come together and build relationships.

3.0 Sport, Recreation, and Indigenous-Settler Relations

Popular understandings of sport can be traced back to Victorian ideas of morality, class, and the body (Lusted, 2014; Morrow & Wamsley, 2017). These settler ideologies inform an institutionalized approach to sport, which can marginalize or discount diverse perspectives or politics of sporting practices (Paraschak, 1995; Rich & Misener, 2019). Norman, Hart, and Petherick (2018) highlighted the implications of these ideologies for Indigenous peoples but also stressed the potential for physical activity and sports practices to constitute a form of cultural resilience and resurgence. These ideas echo authors, such as Paraschak (1997), Robidoux (2012), and Forsyth and Wamsley (2006). They have discussed the way that sports practices can be appropriated and reconceptualized outside of Western ideologies to suit diverse needs and practices of Indigenous peoples.

Although sport and recreation can offer opportune conditions for people to build relationships and influence attitudes and beliefs towards others (Denis, 2015; Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011), few have studied the ways settlers and Indigenous peoples interact through sport and recreation in rural contexts. Notably, Robidoux (2004) provided an account of the banning of a local First Nation minor hockey association from a regional (settler) hockey league. Narratives from and about both parties revealed a strong divide between the two groups. The First Nation and their players were portrayed as dangerous and not conforming to the league's rules and regulations, while settlers were portrayed as racist. Although an unfortunately negative example, Robidoux's work highlights how broader social issues and settler-Indigenous relationships are reflected and perpetuated in and through sport and recreation.

Rural sport and recreation have also received some attention as these activities reflect changing socio-political contexts of rural communities as well as offering people a chance to address these changes in collective and meaningful ways. Mair (2009) described how the organization of curling clubs and bonspiels in Canada reflected values of sociability and served many social functions within rural communities. Rich, Bean, and Apramian (2014) discussed hockey tournaments based on kin-based social structures that created ideas of heritage and nostalgia for rural ways of living. These tournaments were also described as places where typical ethics of sport participation could be rejected and re-thought to serve the priorities of the community, such as maintaining strong family ties and a sense of community. Fløysand and Jakobsen (2007) shared how a rural football club in Norway played a role in restructuring the community by constructing narratives that contributed to the commodification of sport and rural places. Pertinent to this work, Tonts and Atherley (2010) described contentious relationships between settlers and Indigenous people in sport in the context of rural economic restructuring in Australia. Unlike the narratives shared by Robidoux (2004) in which sport served to reinforce conflict between settlers and Indigenous people, Tonts and Atherley (2010) noted that although community members described instances of conflict and disharmony, sport offered a context for relationship building between the two groups who would otherwise likely have very few opportunities to interact. Similarly, Spaaij (2009) noted that sports clubs in rural Australia "facilitate[d] social connections between people from different walks of life" (p. 1139). In rural communities, sport and recreation appear to be an important context for community and relationship building that can be engaged in multiple and sometimes unexpected ways.

In summary, the literature indicates that sports practices in rural contexts can be leveraged to connect community members and build relationships between settlers and Indigenous groups. Importantly, sport is recognized as a context in which Indigenous and rural settlers interact and build relationships (Denis, 2015), which can reflect their community contexts, and potentially influence how people perceive and understand their communities (e.g., see Mair, 2009). As such, in this paper, we explore and discuss how the Battle of Little Big Puck is understood and communicated to better understand the role the event plays in shaping understandings of community and the relationships between settlers and Indigenous people.

4.0 Theoretical Approach: Understanding Community

The stories that follow are centred around one broad theme: community. The concept and how we approached it was negotiated with the local organizers we worked with on this project. It was made clear from our earliest discussions with them that this event should not be discussed through a lens of social inequality or political correctness, but rather as an example of how the people involved come together and work together. Consequently, we frame our story with a lens of community and learning about how people perceive and understand the role of the event within their community.

Community can be socially constructed or imagined (Blackshaw, 2008) as a geographical measure, a unit of identity, or as a group of homogenous and like-minded people. However, communitarians suggest that community goes beyond individual-level measures of identity and relationships and involves the acknowledgement of collective or shared attributes such as cultural symbols and pluralistic obligations (Etzioni, 2004, 2014; Frazer, 2000). Etzioni (2004) described community as the spaces and places where we learn how to walk, whereas our identities are the directions in which we walk. As such, communities are not only shared commonalities, but also webs of relationships that hold meaning, which exist within shared histories, identities, or cultures (Etzioni, 2004). Further, a community is not always a group of happy people working together; it also includes feuding neighbours, rebellious youth, and different people who struggle, resist, and negotiate their existence within a social context.

Understanding community in this way was important for several reasons. First, it allowed us to discuss both individual and collective aspects of community. Diverse identities (e.g., First Nation, rodeo cowboy, rancher, Métis² newcomer, etc.) could be articulated and explored alongside shared understandings such as what it means to live rurally or to be a member of the community. Second, this approach recognized that relationships are not inherently positive, but rather, it is the meaning ascribed to them, which are important to explore, and these meanings are likely to evolve over time (Etzioni, 2004). Third, this approach allowed us to acknowledge that the same story or series of events could be perceived differently by different individuals or groups (Jones & Jenkins, 2008). This was particularly important to make room for multiple, and sometimes conflicting, perspectives and interpretations, and as suggested by Jones and Jenkins (2008) to frame collaboration as “a site for learning from difference rather than learning about the Other” (p. 480).

² First Nation refers to first inhabitants to Canada, who are not Métis or Inuit. Métis are descendants of Aboriginal and European settlers in Canada (*First Nations & Indigenous Studies, The University of British Columbia, n.d.*).

5.0 Methodology

For this project, we employed an emergent participatory methodology, whereby we constructed the narratives surrounding the event in collaboration with the event organizers (see more below). Participatory approaches involve respectful attempts to include those who would traditionally be called ‘participants’ into various phases of research (Frisby, Reid, Millar, & Hoerber, 2005). These approaches can take on several forms but are characterized by transparency where researchers and community members are invested and participate in decisions related to the project (Frisby et al., 2005; Roche, Guta, & Flicker, 2010). Based on early discussions with event organizers (which we elaborate on later), we elected to use a narrative approach to share the stories associated with the event and attempt to respect local knowledge, perspectives, and understandings.

A narrative approach was deemed appropriate for this project as its interpretive underpinning acknowledged that many perspectives and realities exist with regards to a similar event (Jones & Jenkins, 2008; Papathomas, 2016; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). This approach allowed us to recognize diverse social and cultural framings that inform the perspectives that were shared with us (Kovach, 2010), the importance of culture or place identity, and to “tell complex tales” (Papathomas, 2016, p. 38) about human experiences. According to Tonts and Atherley (2010), local narratives can contribute to ideas of place and community membership, although there is not always a consensus on these ideas. Narratives provide insight regarding individuals (characters) involved in events, the culture and context of the community (setting), and the meaning of the event to the various groups who play different roles (e.g., protagonists, antagonists, bystanders) in the community (Papathomas, 2016; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). As Smith and Sparkes (2009, p. 4) noted, narratives are “culturally ubiquitous, they are primary instruments ... of creating meaning, communicating meanings, and filling our world with meaning.”

The Battle of Little Big Puck was described to us as a celebration of the history between the rodeo cowboys and Nekaneet First Nation and has taken place for over 35 years. Given this history, we expected that many stories about the event would exist within the community. Smith and Sparkes (2009) argued that narratives are useful for drawing attention to the importance of time, which for this game related to the historical significance of the event (i.e., learning about the relationships between ‘the Cowboys and Indians’), the longevity of the event within the community, and the contemporary moment in which the event takes place.

There are multiple approaches for using narratives in research (Clandinin, 2007; Smith, 2016). We used a dialogical approach to construct a performative narrative analysis. In this process, we worked together with local organizers to gather, analyze, and re-create narratives about the event (Smith, Collinson, Phoenix, Brown, & Sparkes, 2009; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Our approach involved us working as story analysts (Smith, 2016) and engaging in a dialogical process with organizers and various community members. A dialogical process recognizes that no single voice is self-sufficient in producing a narrative, but rather narratives are shaped by past voices, communicated through present voices, and will continue to be shaped by voices in the future (Smith et al., 2009). Next, we describe the positionalities of the authorship team and our process of constructing the narrative presented in this manuscript.

5.1 Positionalities and Collaboration

Within narrative approaches, understanding the positionality of storytellers, interpreters, and analysts is paramount. Johnson-Bailey (2003, p. 129) noted that understanding positionalities as insiders and as outsiders to the various cultural spheres that shape narratives is necessary in order to understand how power “shapes views and relations with the world.” As such, we review the positions which stood out for each member of the authorship team before outlining how this work came to be conceptualized and conducted.

Kyle lives in Toronto, Ontario. He teaches and researches the social impacts of sport, recreation, and physical activity programs with a particular focus on rural areas. He grew up in a rural part of central Ontario, playing sports (e.g., hockey and baseball) and engaging with recreational activities (e.g., fairs, festivals, hunting, fishing), through which he developed an appreciation for the social processes and outcomes of these activities. During graduate studies, he became keenly aware of the complex ways in which power operates to shape lived experiences of rural people, and also how his own positions as a white, cisgender, gay man with a rural, working-class background produced a unique perspective of sport and recreation in non-urban contexts.

Larena lives in Regina, Saskatchewan. She is a professor of sport management, and her research interests include gender and sport and contemporary qualitative research methods. Although her teaching and research is often framed from a feminist or critical perspective, in respecting the wishes of the community, she did not bring these lenses to this project. Instead, Larena was interested in how the positionalities of herself and the other authors impacted their research relationships in the community and with participants. She identifies as a white, cisgender, upper-class settler, who was raised in both rural and urban communities in Saskatchewan. While she currently resides in an urban setting, and thus was likely viewed as an outsider, she is familiar with the culture of community life in small towns, including the importance of hockey, the local rink, and community events.

Anne moved to Maple Creek in 1982 to take the position of Recreation Director. Shortly after that, she began volunteering with the South West Recreation Association. This volunteer position led to full-time work with the South West District for Culture, Recreation and Sport, where she is employed to this day. Anne was elected to Town Council in 1991 and spent the next 17 years on council, the last 7 in the position of Mayor. She was instrumental in building a new skating rink in Maple Creek, and as one of the fundraisers for the rink, worked with a group that brought Pro Bull Riding to town. Anne volunteered with the Maple Creek Pro Rodeo Association, for years, as secretary/treasurer. She has worked with the Nekaneet First Nation to apply for grants to develop sport and cultural programs and attended Pow Wows and other Nekaneet events. Anne cares deeply about her adopted home town and believes that much of our strength comes from our ability to work together and to celebrate our differences as well as our similarities.

Initially, Kyle was introduced to Anne at a recreation conference in Regina, Saskatchewan. Kyle was familiar with the Battle of Little Big Puck from media coverage he had used in teaching activities. The two briefly discussed the event and how it was celebrated and a point of pride for many area residents. Subsequently, Kyle connected with Larena and discussed the possibility of working together on this project. Larena is a senior academic with experience in participatory research in sport

and recreation. Importantly, she is based in Saskatchewan, which enabled her to provide local insights and understandings. In the summer of 2018, Kyle reached out to Anne and set up a meeting with the local event organizers: Tom and Joe (rodeo cowboys) and Dale (from Nekaneet)³. Shortly after, a call was arranged where Kyle expressed his intentions to write a manuscript that could be used more broadly (e.g., in classrooms) as a resource for discussing how diverse groups of people understand and negotiate ideas of community in rural contexts. Dale, Tom, and Joe shared their concerns about a broader audience taking up the event as a platform for discussing ideas that did not align with the intentions of the event as understood by the participants. In particular, they articulated that the event was about collaboration, community, competition, and celebrating unique identities, rather than social inequality or being ‘politically correct.’ With this feedback in hand, Kyle and Larena determined that a participatory approach to the collection and analysis of narratives would allow them to engage these organizers throughout the process and create an output that would be useful and (hopefully) meaningful for both community members and a broader academic audience. Subsequently, ethics approval was obtained, and preparations were made to visit Maple Creek and attend the event.

In February 2019, the first two authors travelled to Maple Creek, where Anne and the event organizers facilitated connections with a variety of individuals. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four individuals: Royce—a local historian (who was the Manager of Community and Economic Development in Maple Creek), the Mayor Michelle (who identifies as a Métis woman and from the town), Joe (a member of Nekaneet First Nation and a well-connected businessman in the community), and Terri (the editor of the *Canadian Country Cowboy Magazine* and relative newcomer to the community). The interviews were conducted by Kyle and were loosely structured to examine stories associated with the event. During the interviews, participants shared stories about the history of the event, their participation in the event, and the engagement of different groups in the community in the event. We also conducted participant observations in Maple Creek around the event. This involved spending time in public spaces such as the Oldtimers’ Museum, the arena, and local shops, and discussing the event informally with various people. These included local volunteers, business people, former and current players in the event, and former community residents. Some of the stories that were shared related to the origins of the event, elements of the game (in particular the performance in the third period), and how community members dealt with protesters at the event in 2018.

Kyle stayed in the community for a week (around the time of the event) to be available for interviews. Larena was in the community for the weekend to attend the event and one of the interviews. Throughout Kyle and Larena’s time in Maple Creek, they had regular check-ins with Anne (through almost daily coffee meet-ups) and phone calls with the other organizers as they were not located in town, and this was a busy time around the event. These check-ins served as updates and a chance to discuss what we were hearing and how we were perceiving the stories being shared.

In addition to the interviews, all authors attended the game in person. This allowed us to create our own narratives about the event, including observing the community coming together for the hockey game, taking photographs of the players and hockey rink, and being involved in spontaneous discussions at the rink, including at the bar. During our time in Maple Creek, we kept reflective journals (typed out daily) to

³ As part of the informed consent process, contributors agreed to the use of their real names in the paper.

document our experiences and observations. We also collected stories published in local newspapers and magazines to provide additional insight into how the event was portrayed and covered by different groups. Before leaving Maple Creek, the three authors had a final meeting to discuss our early sense of the narratives that we were hearing and confirmed if and how they might be articulated in this document.

Following the event and our many discussions, we transcribed the interviews and set out to understand the narrative about the event. Although many stories and observations were noted during the interviews and conversation, two components of the narrative were repeatedly drawn and worked to inform and communicate meaning about the event and membership in the community. We pulled examples of text from the stories and observations to illustrate and frame these two components. We then prepared an initial draft of this manuscript. Next, we circulated the draft to the event organizers and interviewees along with a series of questions to clarify the way the narratives of the event were presented and shared in the academic format. They provided feedback to us about specific details (e.g., distinguishing between “ranchers” and “cowboys”) of the narratives and our interpretations of them that we incorporated in subsequent drafts. Below, we elaborate on the way the event was understood and communicated, and the implications of the components of the narrative for the communities involved.

6.0 Findings

Through our conversations with event organizers and interviewees, we developed a broad narrative that frames experiences and stories about the Battle of Little Big Puck. Here, we have separated the narrative into two components for discussion. First, there is a historical account of contact and collaboration between the cowboys and members of Nekaneet First Nation. Second, there is a contemporary story of urban-rural difference and misunderstanding that frames the ‘way we do things out here’ and provides a context for unique expressions of culture at the event. Although expressed and engaged differently in the stories shared with us, both of these components were implicated in various ways and involve a shared understanding of place that allows for the event to take shape in Maple Creek.

6.1 A History of Contact and Collaboration

Like many annual events in rural areas (e.g., Rich et al., 2014), the Battle of Little Big Puck has a history and background that frames its significance. Although there is a well-known origin story of the event, people also acknowledged the importance of the historical context of settler-Indigenous relations in Maple Creek. As Royce stated,

The fact that those two communities have lived together, worked together, and cooperated for that long, I think [the event] underlines and punctuates that relationship. It makes people come away...with a reinforced sense that there is a friendship, and there is a history, and there is a unique relationship between these two communities which is special.

Settler – Indigenous relations in the Cypress Hills area (including the municipality of Maple Creek) has a history dating over 100 years. Treaty 4 was signed in 1874

and led to the removal of many Indigenous people from the Cypress Hills area to reservations in Southern Saskatchewan. Unlike most others, under the leadership of Nekaneet, this band stayed in the area. Their refusal to move to reservations meant that they did not receive federal government funding for many years (Maple Creek and Area History Committee, 2000; Thompson, n.d.). To make money, Indigenous people worked for settlers in the area of Maple Creek, which was established in 1882-1883. Their history of cooperation was noted later in the 1990s when a joint proposal, from Nekaneet First Nation and the town of Maple Creek, for a healing lodge for Indigenous women was presented to the federal government. One reason cited by the government for selecting their proposal was their “demonstrat[ion of] a long tradition of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cooperation” in the area (Maple Creek and Area History Committee, 2000, p. 57).

The origin story of the game itself is well known in and around Maple Creek. In short, “it started in a bar!” (Michelle). More specifically,

The roots go back to a hot summer day in July where a couple of cowboys and a couple of members of the Nekaneet band met in the old Commercial Hotel over a cold beer... And as good friends do, they got to bickering good naturedly as to who could ride the rankest horses and rope the quickest, and pretty soon it came down to, ‘We can darn sure beat you guys at hockey.’
(Joe as cited in Ehman, 2012, para. 6)

The selection of hockey as the activity is important. While both parties participate in rodeo, “rodeo is an individual sport and hockey is a group sport” (Michelle). The team nature of hockey allowed many individuals to be involved in this competition. The first match took place in January 1979 and, after a few years of hiatus, restarted in the 1980s (Reardon, 2005). The event developed into an annual celebration in Maple Creek and more recently, “it has raised money for various different charities” (Joe). Importantly, the event grew out of an existing relationship: “every year it’s been something that the community gathers around...[and] it’s gotten nothing but stronger over the years and maintained a healthy part of that relationship” (Joe).

In discussing the history of the event, it became clear that there was much more to the origin story than a simple encounter at the local hotel. Royce stated, “the fact that the Battle of the Little Big Puck happens at all, this is nothing short of miraculous.” He attributed the possibility of those encounters at the Commercial Hotel to “a dynamic in place of a community that [had] been evolving over the past century really. And I think [that’s] what makes Maple Creek different than most places in western Canada.” This dynamic emerged from a long history of groups in the community working together and learning from each other in various ways. Royce described, “here in the community of Maple Creek, it’s not just the community of Maple Creek. There’s the ranchers, and there’s the farmers, and there’s the townspeople, and there’s Nekaneet.” This was confirmed by Joe, who said “we’ve kinda got a unique situation in our community in that we are very close, our native community and our non-native community. They have always worked together.”

As a result of remaining in close proximity and having regular contact, people lived and worked together in various ways. As described by Joe, “we [Nekaneet] worked for the community, the ranchers, and the farmers doing the labour work and stuff like that. And that’s how we survived with our families.” Terri also highlighted the various roles that Nekaneet played in the ranching industry over time: “[They would] hire on for haying or they would make fence posts and sell them to the ranchers, and it was a symbiotic relationship. There was no, like welfare or treaty money system... everybody had to have a job.” Royce also elaborated on the importance of Nekaneet in shaping the image of the region during the period of westward expansion:

...on the way out to Banff when they [tourists] were going to the Rocky Mountain Park back in the day, the train stopped here to get coal and water and people got off to go shopping. Nekaneet were actively involved in tourism because they were pretty much the only opportunity people would have for an authentic Aboriginal encounter while they were going across the country by rail. They were here basically as business people: they were labourers, they were employees, they were staff.

Settlers and Nekaneet were not only in contact through work-related activities, but also in leisure time pursuits. Artefacts shared with us (by Royce) at the local museum showed how different groups participated in various leisure time activities throughout the history of the town. These activities included sports days, rodeos, community celebrations, and the organization and operation of the local Oldtimers’ Museum. Living and working in close proximity was beneficial for both groups. Joe elaborated:

We have learned from each other. We’ve learned a lot of ranching ways and stuff like that from the settlers and they’ve learned survival skills and stuff that is necessary to survive out here, you know. So it’s kind of like that whole, you know, scratch each others’ back kinda thing.

In various ways, the long history of contact and collaboration, which is established and shared through narratives, was described as a frame of reference for contemporary people to consider their current relationships. While the history of settler-Indigenous relationships in the region is certainly “not without blemish, the relationship between the communities here simply cannot be painted with the same brush as other relationships that may exist in other places across Saskatchewan or across Canada” (Royce). As highlighted by Michelle, “for forever and a day we were one. That’s just the way it’s always been.”

The longstanding relationships in the community were shaped by the politics of settlement in the region. In the late 1800s, tensions related to bison hunting and border crossing in the region were high. The Cypress Hills Massacre⁴ was one of the key

⁴ For a brief description of the Cypress Hills Massacre and the implication stemming from it, see Parks Canada (2018). For a more thorough historical analysis of the event, see Allen (1983).

events that led to the formation of the Northwest Mounted Police (now the Royal Canadian Mounted Police), who were deployed in the region. However, as described by Royce, there is more to the story. There were attempts at the time by the Dominion (federal) Government to control Indigenous people by “clean[ing] up these treaty adhesions. So there was six of them [treaties] signed at Fort Walsh, three [First Nations] to treaty six and three to treaty four” (Royce). During this time:

Nekaneet never left. They never left to come back. They just never left. They were just always here. And the Dominion Government figured they were stragglers...They lived without the benefit of treaty. They lived without them being on a reserve. They lived by their own resourcefulness here on the Cypress Hills and they were a small enough group that they were able to fly under the radar from the government's perspective. So as a result, they didn't have the same things occur... particularly after 1885 when the pass system was put into place and you weren't allowed to leave your reserve and every aspect of your life is governed by the Indian Agent and so on and so forth. Residential schools are being set up and you weren't supposed to practice your religion and your language... though, I'm sure they were not 100% immune to that. By not having a reserve you can't really apply for a pass to leave a reserve that you don't have (Royce).

This narrative was corroborated by Joe, who explained it from a Nekaneet perspective:

Thankfully, our chief was pretty adamant about sticking around the neighbourhood. And he gathered followers... our band is kind of made up of stragglers that were not necessarily left behind, but they chose to remain here. Because of the spirit that our community held with these hills, right. The history we had with these hills and the history of these hills go back, like beyond our knowledge really. Because this is as far as the icebergs came, right. So, you know we were basically sitting up on this hill here wondering where everything went and watching it recede. So these hills are so important to our people and the relationships we built with the ranchers and surrounding community.

Knowing and respecting these histories were described in various ways as an important part of appreciating each other. Terri confirmed this by acknowledging that “there has not been a break in their [Nekaneet] culture for 10,000 years...There is something that comes with knowing who you are, and where you're from, and who your people are.”

It was acknowledged throughout these discussions that relationships in these narratives were not described as we would see them today. Rather, a history of contact provided a platform on which relationships could be developed and a frame in which contemporary experiences could be understood and communicated in the community. Joe noted, “a lot of the things that our culture [First Nation] has been subjected to through colonialism...that’s part of it. And our community in and of itself has suffered in ways from that.” However, an understanding of the unique context of these relationships and the way the Nekaneeet, ranchers, cowboys, and townspeople have worked together in different capacities is present in Maple Creek, and articulated as a narrative framing contemporary lived experiences. This narrative helped to explain the way that people came together and celebrated through the Battle of the Little Big Puck. As Joe stated, “part of this game here is that it’s ... kept us together and moving forward in a good direction.”

6.2 Contemporary Urban-Rural Divide

A second and equally important component of the narrative was also shared with us through the formal interviews and casual conversations. Although this part of the story is less elaborate and has fewer details, the fact that it was shared multiple times by different people in the community reinforced its importance. This part of the narrative speaks to the differences in the lived experiences of rural and urban people as well as the meaning and value of the event to the community at a time when race relations in Saskatchewan and Canada were tense and heightened.

In many ways, the contemporary social context of Maple Creek and the surrounding area was discussed as unique, which enables an event like the Battle of Little Big Puck to take place and be celebrated. As described by Terri, “people on the outside, they don’t understand.” The context was contrasted with other rural areas as well as urban centres. Royce elaborated:

When you have that outside the community influence, I guess you can be a little afraid of what the rest of the world thinks, or tells you should be thinking or doing or behaving. And I think that's one of the challenges with, with this day in age...[with] regional differences or community differences. You know, there's a great push that “this is how things go” [emphasized with a knock on the desk]. Well, no. You know, that may be how it is in Regina or that may be how it is in Ontario, but that's not how it is here.

The annual hockey event is usually scheduled in the latter half of February. The 2018 edition happened shortly after the verdict was announced in the Gerald Stanley court case, in which Stanley was acquitted of fatally shooting Colten Boushie, a First Nation youth who had entered Stanley’s farmland⁵. The verdict was controversial and elevated, in some cases, already tense relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups in Canada. Heightened tensions were even more pronounced in Saskatchewan, as that is where the incident and court case took place. Given these conditions, there were some concerns in Maple Creek about hosting the event that

⁵ For more details on the incident and resulting court case, see Friesen (2018).

year. As Terri noted: “there was rumours flying all over that you know a lot of people are going to stay away because they figured there was going to be trouble.” There had been rallies, protests, and demonstrations at other places in Saskatchewan and the rest of Canada following the verdict. In Maple Creek, a small number of protestors, with placards, did show up on the night of the event. One of the protesters was a non-Indigenous resident of Maple Creek but also described as an outsider to the community in some ways. Royce described it as “people that were influenced by ideology from outside of town and wanting to use it as a platform. There was a little concern about it becoming quite ugly.” Joe recalled, “I was actually asked to make myself a presence there just because of my size.” It was clarified that people were not uncomfortable with act of mobilizing and making a statement about racism and systemic injustice, but rather that this activism was poorly placed at an event that was intended to celebrate positive relationships rather than accentuate or draw attention to negative ones. This situation also illustrates criticism over some counter-narratives and speaks to issues surrounding ownership and legitimacy of narratives.

The protest, however, did not last long. Accounts suggest that one or more Indigenous women came out of the arena to briefly speak with the individuals. As recounted by Royce, they “came out. Said ‘you know that's not what this event is about. You know, we don't appreciate it. We don't want you here.’” Joe added, “the community just kind of brushed it off you know and they said this is something different.” The protesters “ended up respecting their wishes” (Royce) and leaving the arena. In our discussions about this event, it was articulated that the intentions were not to diminish the importance of the message (i.e., protesting racism), but rather that this event was not an appropriate location to deliver the message.

This narrative revealed shared feelings by Indigenous peoples and townspeople about the meaning of the Battle of Little Big Puck and the perceived inappropriateness of protesting at this particular event. It was felt that “this event has been such as a shining example of how it really should be in other places” (Royce). The hockey game had a longstanding tradition of demonstrating the potential for settlers and Indigenous peoples to celebrate unity and cultural awareness. With regard to the aforementioned incident, Terri shared, “nothing had a greater impact on me than having a real sense of community when, you know, after that tragedy with Colten Boushie.” For those involved, these events highlighted the differences between the understandings in this area and those in other parts of the province or country. The game was one of the few times throughout the year where “we are here together as a community” (Michelle). As mentioned by Joe, “even in the stands, I didn’t hear anybody in particular screaming or cheering for one team versus the other. ... when one person scored, everybody cheer[ed].” It was an event that brought together residents of Maple Creek, the rodeo cowboys, members of Nekanee First Nation, and others who lived in the area. A common element of this narrative was the positioning of outsider perspectives as unable to understand the meaning of the event in the same ways that those in the region did. While race relations were tense in other parts of the province at that time, it was felt that the protestors did not understand that the event “united two cultures” (Michelle). Joe acknowledged that “there’s a lot of people that have moved beyond that racial divide and understood that ... we’ve got to look beyond that anger and hatred.” Further, Royce pointed out, “actually, any time there has been an issue with the event, it’s usually been people from outside of town.

It hasn't usually been people from in town." His point further highlighted the idea that the event was understood and respected by those within the community, despite the way it might be perceived from the outside.

7.0 Discussion

The narratives presented above help us to interpret how participants in the Battle of Little Big Puck understand and communicate the event and their relationships with others. The narrative highlights the contextual aspects of the community that have historically and contemporarily shaped the way diverse people have interacted and come together. Analyzing the narrative to share in this paper helped us to understand the salient and important aspects of membership in the community, the event, and the relationship between the two. Here, we reflect on the importance of place-based understandings, an urban-rural divide, and rural sport and recreation.

7.1 *Place-based Narratives*

In analyzing this narrative, it became evident that the social, political, and historical context of the area was extremely important in setting the scene for the Battle of Little Big Puck. The history of the event, which stretched far beyond the encounter at the Commercial Hotel, gives us insight into the conditions that need to be considered as starting points for building or repairing relationships through sport and recreation in the way that it is engaged in Maple Creek. To reiterate the point made by Denis (2015), contact and social experiences in sport may not be enough alone to change deeply held beliefs about diverse groups in communities. Given that competition is inherent in most sports, it can be problematic to pit opposing groups against each other in hopes of generating a positive social outcome. However, where a history of contact and collaboration already exist, such as in Maple Creek, sport may offer the opportunity to sustain or enhance relationships and focus community members' attention on shared commonalities such as history, traditions, or mutual understandings. While we might often expect sport to generate or stimulate social change, it may also play an important role in maintaining existing relationships and understandings of place and community. While in some cases (e.g., Robidoux, 2004), sport may be a platform which emphasizes the conflict between settler and Indigenous groups, in the case of the Battle of the Little Big Puck, participants appear to frame their engagement in line with place-based narratives that are specific to their community. These narratives then frame how community members see themselves and their roles in the community. Therefore, while the event serves to sustain a narrative and relationships in the community, it also serves the important role of constructing meaningful experiences for community members.

7.2 *Urban-Rural Divide*

By centring the perspectives of those involved in the event, we can also see how insider and outsider tensions are very much a part of the narratives which frame community life. References to ideologies, government intervention, and urban ways of living frame and justify alternative ways of engaging sport and leisure more broadly in Maple Creek. Importantly, ideas of what is appropriate or politically correct were framed as illegitimate as they challenge the ways that those in the community come together and celebrate their individual and collective identities. The significance of who is constructed as antagonists (e.g., outsiders) in the narratives speak

to the importance of rural citizens having agency within the context of their communities. The narratives also illustrated how broader social and political trends (i.e., urban-rural divisions) could be acted out and reconstructed in sport and recreation. While many rural areas, including First Nation communities, face socio-economic circumstances where power and control are largely located outside of the region (or even outside of the country) and are often volatile and/or quickly changing based on globalized industries (Reimer, 2002), the resiliency of rural people to come together and act collectively is becoming increasingly documented and evident in sport and recreation (e.g., see Mair, 2009; Rich, Misener, & The Trout Creek Community Centre Board, 2017; Tonts & Atherley, 2010). Given that sport and recreation remain largely organized and developed at the local level, these activities offer important contexts for community members to exercise agency and authorship over the narratives that are constructed. While the importance of understanding urban-rural divisions appears to be growing in Canada (Rich, 2020), sport and recreation may be one way in which we seek to understand how people in rural areas understand and construct their identities and community membership.

7.3 Rural Sport and Recreation

Although sparse literature exists which examines settler-Indigenous relations in the context of sport, recreation, and leisure, this is a growing area of interest with regard to understanding these relationships in rural Canada. Our analysis provides some insight into the way that sport events intersect with ideas of community in Maple Creek. While sport is not the only mechanism for contact (see, Denis, 2015; Spaaij, 2009), in Maple Creek it is understood as a way to showcase the positive aspects of relationships and collaboration between Indigenous peoples and settlers. Although a common narrative about Indigenous-settler relations in rural Canada is one characterized by racism, separation, and mistrust (cf. Robidoux, 2004), our analysis suggests that sport might also provide a platform to sustain or create hopeful narratives of trust and collaboration. This analysis, however, does not come without hesitation. It is also important to acknowledge that within the narrative described, certain perspectives and actions (e.g., one of protest) are policed in order to construct the event as celebratory and collaborative. From a more critical perspective, we may also question the ramifications of these imaginary boundaries of what is considered appropriate and who is provided a platform to speak, shape the event, and challenge the status quo in rural sport contexts. While much of the literature pertaining to rural sport and recreation offers a rather hopeful or optimistic perspective on these leisure practices, future research should consider the power dynamics involved in organizing sport and recreation and the subsequent social outcomes in and for ‘community.’

8.0 Conclusion

We explored the narrative surrounding the Battle of Little Big Puck in Maple Creek, Saskatchewan. We did so in order to examine the way the event was understood and communicated by those involved with it and to discuss the implications of this narrative. The narrative was constructed by drawing on a history of contact and collaboration and also framed by current understandings of an urban-rural divide. In providing this analysis, we generated insights into the roles of sport and recreation events in rural community life. Moving forward, sustained investigation into the ways that sport, recreation, and leisure practices more broadly are implicated in Indigenous-settler relationships in diverse community contexts is warranted. Future

work may interrogate the way that history and contemporary social issues are both shaping and being shaped by sport and recreation practices. In particular, critical perspectives on the way that narratives about these activities draw from other political issues and events are necessary for a more nuanced understanding of how sport and recreation both reflects and changes community life.

Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge Desirea Agar and Dr. Audrey Giles for feedback on drafts of this manuscript as well as the participants (Michelle, Joe, Terri, & Royce) and organizers (Dale, Joe, & Tom) of the event for their guidance and support of this project.

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