

SIDNEY CASTEL: BIOGRAPHY

Sidney Castel, the Cree pop music phenomenon, community health worker and traditional story teller, was born in the remote northern settlement of Pukatawagan, Manitoba, on March 30, 1934. Aged 68, he died suddenly of asphyxiation due to natural causes at his home in Pukatawagan on March 21, 2003. Predeceased by his wife Sarah, he was the father of twelve. There were seven daughters, Linda, Mary, Rosie, Mary, Jane, Flora and Melvina. Sidney and Sarah had four boys, George, Donald, Sidney Joe and Tony, as well as one adopted son, Lorne. Sidney is survived by over sixty grandchildren. Most famous for his Pukatawagan Song and the Thompson Song, Mr. Castel had just finished recording a new CD, *Live at the Beaver Lodge*, released by Sunshine Records, when he passed away.

Always a hard worker, Sidney may have taken his cue from his father Paul, who had travelled around the traplines as a Hudson's Bay trader, exchanging flour, sugar, tea and tobacco for furs. This enterprising spirit can be seen in the anecdote of Sidney the squirrel trapper. As a child with no money, he craved the candy an independent merchant, a white man known as a "big shot," had on display near Otter Bay, where the family was staying at the time. His mother laughed and suggested that he sell his small furs, the squirrel and mink pelts. She asked him, "How do you think you are going to buy those candies? Maybe you could trade your furs. That merchant also buys furs." Sidney said he would trade his small furs. At the store he announced, "I come to buy, white man." Pointing to his shopping pouch, he asked, "Where's your candies? [Put] your candies in here, your chocolate bars in here." The merchant took Sidney's little pelts in exchange. There was even some change left over.

As a young man, Sidney learned to fish and to trap. According to Cree custom, the animals were always respected and never killed for no good reason or just for pleasure. Alex Dumas was his teacher in the bush. Prior to his urban work experiences, Sidney supported himself by means of traditional fishing and trapping.

Sidney worked on the railway in the 1950s, and then for several years he was employed as an orderly in hospitals in Swan River and The Pas. Later, he was given the title of Honorary Doctor of Pukatawagan for his work as a Community Health Representative, a post he held until his retirement. People recall the time a woman in childbirth arrived at the nursing station when there was no doctor in attendance. Undaunted, Sidney struggled to put on surgical gloves. "Sidney, get out of here," the attending women told him. The baby was born before Sidney could manage to pull on the gloves.

In spite of his familiarity with bush life, Sidney possessed orienteering skills that were less than perfect. One night in the 1980s he and his wife became lost on a snowmobiling expedition in the area around Kississing Lake near Sherridon. Realizing they were lost, they went to a shoreline and started a campfire in order to warm up and to make themselves more visible. When no rescuers came they tired of waiting and moved on. Soon, they noticed a speck of light in the distance. They approached the light, and sure enough it was a campfire. They were happy to see it, but when they stopped and looked more closely, they realized it was their own campfire. They stayed there overnight and made their way home the next morning.

Sidney was, by his own admission, “not always a singer.” He was always an entertainer, however, and often delighted listeners with stories and with his impromptu performances. A self-taught singer-guitarist whose experience was gained mainly from participation in the church choir and from listening to recordings of his favourite singer, his musical hero Hank Williams Sr., Sidney’s quirky off-key and nonstandard musical arrangements appealed especially to listeners with a generous sense of musical humour. His wife did not like his singing and broke three of his guitars. However, his daughters recall fondly how, twenty-five years ago, their father used to carry two of them at a time in his arms and sing the Ballad of Pukatawagan, composed to celebrate his return home after “twenty long years.” Sidney used to claim, “This song will be a hit someday.” Then, people would laugh. At public occasions he would sing the unlikely hit and again people would laugh.

While his musical inspiration was Hank Williams, his martial arts hero was Bruce Lee. Whenever Sidney was in mellow spirits, having imbibed a bit much, he would be seen dressed in his kung-fu outfit, challenging people to “take him on.” He would display his fists of fury and would assume a kick-boxing pose, and then people would move aside, unsure whether Sidney might not be serious in his intent. Some of Sidney’s fingers were a bit mangled from having struck hard objects incorrectly.

In 2000 the First Annual Talent Search was hosted by Pukatawagan. Sidney’s song was not expected to win, but when the CD was released in 2001, there was one constant request from the public: The Pukatawagan Song. For a month, the song was number one on the NCI radio network. Sidney was often interviewed, and he sang for the CBC and for CTV television in 2002. Sidney travelled widely, prompting him once to make the tongue-in-cheek comment, “I’m having more fun and making more money now than when I was a doctor.” “Boy, I can’t hide myself any more!” he would say. Sidney never let fame go to his head, though. A neighbour once commented, “Hey, Sidney, you’re famous!” Sidney replied, “That’s all right--I’ll still talk to you.” He meant it.

An avid outdoorsman, Sidney would often travel out in his boat on weekends, and more often after he retired at 65. Upon returning from a fishing expedition in late 1999, he was asked if he was enjoying his retirement. “No! It’s boring!” he said. Apparently, fishing was not enough, but Sidney’s final career was just about to be launched thanks to the First Annual Talent Search. Fondly remembered by his many friends and relatives, Sidney will entertain future generations through his recordings and published stories.

Sidney Castel will long be remembered for his quirky sense of humour. He loved to share a joke and make people laugh. Untold thousands of listeners throughout the North and beyond truly enjoyed his unusual singing. His community is proud of him as the man who “put Pukatawagan on the map.”

Robert J. Castel & David Westfall

Robert J. Castel is Sidney’s half-third cousin once removed, and his nephew by adoption; Robert’s mother is the adoptive sister of Sidney Castel.

Note: A news article on Sidney’s “fame by Pukatawagan Song” was published by Krista Foss under the caption “Unlikely singer takes North by surprise.” (The Globe and Mail April 26, 2002, page A3).