

Harry Daniels

Harry Daniels was a Métis activist, political leader, writer and actor. He was born in Regina Beach in 1940 and died in Regina on September 6, 2004. Charismatic, passionate and utterly dedicated to advancing the rights of Canada's Aboriginal peoples, Harry Daniels spent over 40 years working to improve the lives of Canada's Aboriginal peoples in national and international venues.

Through a varied and accomplished career, he was one of the most prominent leaders in Aboriginal politics. Like other Métis leaders of his generation, Harry Daniels was heavily influenced by organized labour, the American Indian Movement and the African-American Civil Rights Movement. As a result of these eclectic influences, Harry Daniels fought injustice wherever he encountered it.

Recognizing that women were perhaps the most marginalized segment of Aboriginal Society, he was a strong supporter of Aboriginal women in their fight to gain recognition both from their male counterparts in the Aboriginal political movement and in the larger society.

Harry Daniels also had a pan-Aboriginal approach in his fight to restore Aboriginal rights and Aboriginal peoples place in Canadian society. He founded the Native Council of Canada. The Métis National Council and the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples were formed afterwards. From 1976 to 1981, he was the Native Council of Canada's first president. Near the end of his career, from 1997 to 2000 he served as president of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples.

However, Harry Daniels' primary commitment was to his own people: the Métis. He was one of the founding members of the modern Métis Society of Saskatchewan and of the Métis Association of the Northwest Territories and he served as vice president of the Métis Society of Alberta.

His most prominent achievement occurred in the early 1980s, as the president of the Native Council of Canada, when he was the person responsible for putting the Métis in the repatriated constitution. He shares this distinction with Louis Riel, who through *The Manitoba Act*, also had the Métis' rights enshrined in the constitution. During the process to have the Métis included in the constitutional negotiations, a government official asked him: "Who are the Métis?" His defiant and much-quoted response was:

"We know who we are; we know the generations of discrimination that we have endured; we don't need anybody to tell us who we are...we self-identify, just like everybody else in this country".

In addition to these achievements, Harry Daniels also had a distinguished career and among many other things:

- ❖ He served as the chair or a commissioner on several distinguished commissions including the Canadian Aboriginal Justice Council, the Métis and Non-Status Indian Crime and Justice Commission and the Métis and Non-Status Indian Constitutional Review Commission.
- ❖ He was also an author and scholar: he wrote extensively on Métis rights including three books, and held a Masters Degree. He taught Native Studies classes across Canada, including at the Gabriel Dumont Institute.
- ❖ He was the recipient of many honorary awards including the “Order of the Métis Nation” by the Métis National Council and a honorary doctorate of law from the University of Ottawa.
- ❖ He was also a stage and film actor and appeared as “Louis Riel” and a Métis free trader from the 1840s in his film appearances.

A friend to many, his passing was met by both sadness and a fond appreciation of his personality and his many achievements. Maria Campbell said this at his memorial on September 16, 2004: “the Métis community has lost its most able statesmen and courageous warrior”. Many remember Harry Daniels for his witty, keen sense of humour. Others remember him for his kindness. When Pope John Paul II came to the Canadian North for the first time in the 1980s, Harry Daniels greeted him on behalf of Canada’s Aboriginal peoples. In a touching gesture, Harry took off his coat and gave it to the Pope. After talking to Harry Daniels, the Pope then publicly chastised the Government and people of Canada for not working to end the social, economic and political marginalization of Canada’s Aboriginal Peoples. When Harry Daniels passed away, Paul Chartrand wrote this about his friend:

“Those who knew Harry will remember his unsurpassed ‘joie de vivre’, his sartorial elegance, his great depth of knowledge, his fondness for a good turn of phrase. An unsurpassed raconteur, he was an actor, a teacher and a linguist”.

With his passing in 2004, the Métis Nation lost a great leader and friend in Harry Daniels.