

My mind is spinning! I need sleep but my thoughts keep going back! The snow was coming down hard and the wind blew strong. Father and I went to open up the recital hall on the upper floor of his blacksmith shop. We built the shop in 1899, and reserved the upstairs as a community hall for Napinka. Tonight we were to host a national hero.

My name is Lela and I'm 12. Miss Pauline Johnson – poet, actress, artist – was here to perform. She's famous across the country as a woman who loves both sides of her heritage.

She arrived - early enough to miss the storm, but sadly, the blizzard kept all our neighbours away. What to do? Well, mother made dinner and we settled in to hear Pauline's stories. She's a stunning lady - daughter of an Englishwoman and a Mohawk chief, born on Six Nations in Ontario. Pauline's father was an interpreter for the Anglican mission when he met Pauline's mother.

Pauline tells history through her poetry and stories – particularly Mohawk legends her grandfather told. Father says she thrilled her audiences from the very start of her career. She both soothes and challenges her audiences. Lots of nature and love stories - but she also talks about how First Nations push back against the power of Canada.

During her performance, she'd dress in an evening gown to recite lovely poetry as a society woman. Then she'd leave the stage to change into an adorned buckskin dress she had made herself. She shares tales of the land, with her hair down, a necklace of bear claws around her neck.

(We heard the necklace had been given to her at Lake Max, on Turtle Mountain, by John Nelin, who shot the bear.)

She stood at the end of our kitchen table and recited her most famous poem, The Cattle Thief. Miss Pauline's eyes blazed as she spoke of the fierce young Cree woman who challenged the white bounty hunters in her tale:



*“She dashed, and spread her blanket o’er the
corpse of the Cattle Thief;*

*And the words outleapt from her shrunken lips
in the language of the Cree,*

*If you mean to touch that body, you must cut
your way through me.*

*And that band of cursing settlers dropped
backward one by one,*

*For they knew that an Indian woman roused,
was a woman to let alone....”*

I couldn't move. Nor could mother – or father. What an honor for her to come to little Napinka! She also performed in Deloraine, Boissevain, and Melita! I'll forever remember - the passion and meaning behind Miss Pauline Johnson. She gives me courage to share my thoughts - on stages yet unknown.

Betty Sawatzky and David Neufeld adapted Miss Pauline from a story written for Vantage Points 4.