

The Story of the Rabbitskin Blanket

TOLD BY SARAH KEESIC OLSEN

After much discussion, we, the daughters of Sarah Keesic Olsen, decided to submit an oral Anishinaabe story. We thought about the wisdom of this act, and decided that, yes, other people should see what the writing system which our People use looks like. Another plus in having this oral story published is that, as our oral histories and oral traditional ways are being eroded and lost, we can have a way of preserving our stories, lessons, histories and events.

However, a word of warning: oral stories are changed by writing them down. We tried to articulate what the effect is on oral tradition when it becomes written. We said that somehow the stories seem more static, not interesting, almost like, “Well, so what?” or “Ho-hum.” They seem so much more shortened, not full of life (and Life) and colour and imagery (vim and vigour) as when told orally. It’s like the “oomph” is gone out of them — even though they are written down just as the stories are told, word for word. How does it work that the “magic” is gone, is taken out of the oral stories when written down?

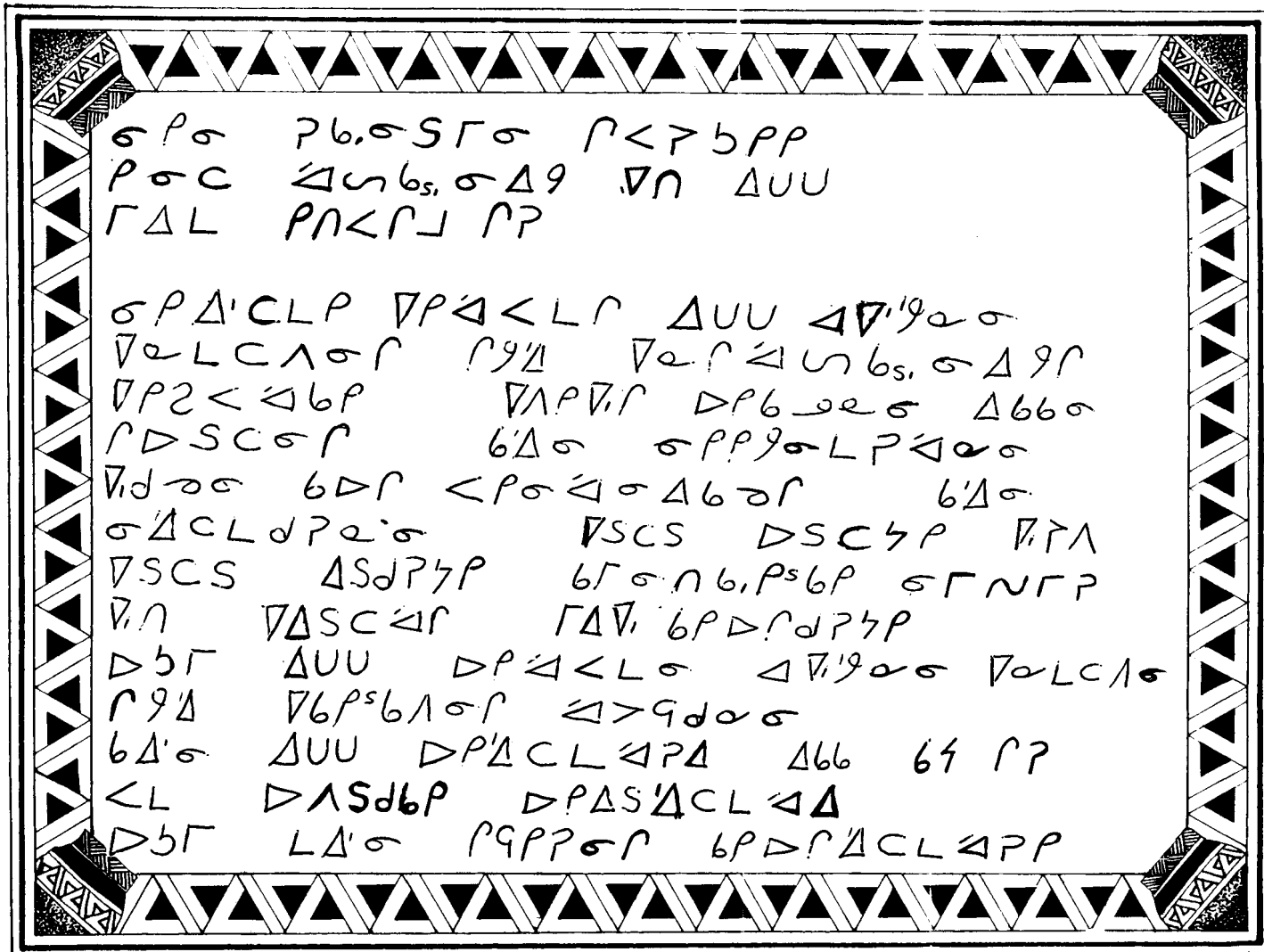
We came to the conclusion that putting on paper “oral” stories changes them already. An oral language also uses all the facial expressions, voice changes and gestures to show fear, ridicule, humour, shame, which is used in the telling of this story, but is pretty void in the reading. When we read it, we still see and hear the telling of it, so to us, it’s in no way naked-sounding.

This oral “story” actually happened in Trout Lake in the 1930s. It happened within the lifetime, the memory, of someone who is still living today. This woman is Sarah Keesic Olsen, born in Trout Lake, Ontario (not a reserve) in April 1922. Up until her marriage at the age of 22 to a Norwegian Canadian, she lived the migratory way (not “nomadic,” as “nomadic” implies wandering aimlessly, willy nilly; “migratory” implies specific moves, well-planned, organized travellings). Indians did have home bases for different times of the seasons, following the life-styles and life habits of the beings (animals, birds and fish) they “pursued,” (for example, geese are migratory). They have two home bases — one

up North and one down South. We all travelled from one place to another in a clearly defined path, allowing for the climatic and temporal changes of the weather and the seasons. This was the life-style of her relatives and most Anishinaabe people of that time — although by that time it had already been disrupted by the encroachment of the white settlers and their value system.



THE RABBITSKIN BLANKET



(above) Syllabics

(below) English Alphabet Orthography

ninkii' nitaa siikwanishimin Chiipayi Saakiink.
 kii' nitaa washashkawani' ike weti intete.
 mii' imaa kii' tipaachimo Chiins.
 nikii' wiintamaak e ki waapamaach
 intete awekwenan e' namatapinich chiikew
 e naachi washashkwani' ikech e kishepaawakak.
 Epikiwech okiikanoonaan inkaakaan chi' oshiitaanich.
 Kaawiin ninkii' kikenimaasiwaanaan
 wekonen ka' onchi pakiniwani' ikanech.
 Kaawiin ni windamaakosiinaan.
 eshitash o shiitaayaank weyiip.

eshitash ishikosiyaank Kaaminatikwashkiikaak.
 nimishoomis weti e ishitaawaach.
 mii' iwe kaakii' onchi koosiiaank osaam
 nintete okii' waapamaan awekwenan
 enamatapinich chiikew e' kashkiikapinich
 waapoosekonan.
 Kaawiin intete oki' wintamawaasii' inkaakaa
 kaye Chiins.
 Paamaa Opishikokank okii' ishi wintamawaa'.
 Osaam maawiin chisekisinich kaakii' onchi
 wintamawaasik.