Searching for Catherine Auger: The Forgotten Wife of the Wihtikôw (Windigo)

Nathan D. Carlson

In March of 1897, from the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) outpost at Whitefish Lake (now Utikuma Lake) settlement, news of a strange occurrence rapidly travelled across the Athabasca District, shocking people both there and beyond. It had been the second of two mysterious incidents within as many years. In this second event, two people—a young woman and her adoptive mother of almost the same age—were transported, most likely with their wrists bound and their bodies lashed to dogsleds, to the St. Bernard’s Catholic Mission at Lesser Slave Lake (now Grouard) in what is now north-central Alberta. At the Mission, the two women were treated by priests and nuns who fed them, provided warmth, care, and administered prayers, and perhaps also ceremonial rites that may have resembled exorcism rituals in some respects. In a letter written at Lesser Slave Lake on 9 March 1897, the Anglican missionary Reverend George Holmes reported that back at Whitefish Lake, just days before, a sister of the young woman had

dreamt that her brother, who died some four years [prior], came and offered her some human flesh in a bowl made of ice, to eat. Her mother & sister got sick then [sometime after her waking]. The poor Indians got round . . . nursed them & finished up by drumming over them. Gaudet, fearing I suppose a repetition of the Trout Lake affair, took the two girls into [Lesser] Slave Lake . . . and left them at the Catholic mission.
The incident at Whitefish Lake was deemed so noteworthy that an article written by an eyewitness, N. Brisette, appeared on 15 March 1897 in the *Edmonton Bulletin*:

Mr. Gaudet, a young clerk of the H.[B.]C. post and three Indians were bringing two married women to Lesser Slave lake to prevent their being killed by their relatives, as happened last winter at Trout lake. These two women were taken with a sudden sickness which the Indians call “Witikaw” or cannibal. The Indians of White Fish lake were frightened, and they have already sacrificed two dogs to save the two young women, but in vain... Four men watched over them for three nights. They could hardly hold them when they were taken with fits. So they resolved to bring them to Lesser Slave lake. The justice of the peace gave an order to send them to the Roman Catholic mission.4

The incident noted in the *Bulletin* was an attack of *wîhtikôw* (var. *windigo*), a mysterious sickness that frightened the Cree, Saulteaux, and Métis peoples of Athabasca and many other Native groups of the Algonquian language family across the Northwest. *Wîhtikôw* was regarded by the Native people as a type of supernatural or spiritual condition that compelled its sufferers to bouts of rage, insanity, and—if the condition went unchecked—homicide and cannibalism. Moreover, it was oftentimes believed that the only way to stop *wîhtikôw*, if cures were unsuccessful, was to execute the sufferers by beheading them and then burning their hearts over a funeral pyre.5 Fortunately, these two young women were spared this fate and sent home after they recovered, evidently days later.6

As cited in several reports, the *wîhtikôw* sickness had one year earlier impinged upon the remote settlement of Trout Lake, located approximately one hundred miles to the northeast of the Whitefish Lake community. In that incident, a woman whose maternal relations hailed from Whitefish Lake witnessed the consummation of an unfathomable tragedy. It had started with a spell of mass panic and starvation back at her home residence of Wâpôskow (Wabasca), and ended with the death of her husband who had fallen prey to the *wîhtikôw* condition. He was believed to be the human fulfillment of an ominous prophecy in which a *wîhtikôw* “monster” would arise and devour everyone on the face of the earth in an apocalyptic cataclysm of cosmic proportions.

This wife was a woman named Catherine Auger, and it was through
undertaking the research uncovering this strange, harrowing, and fascinating story that I discovered that Catherine Auger was my ancestral relative. During my childhood, my Métis grandmother, Marie Carlson née Beauchamp (1921–2002), used to tell me stories of the Trout Lake wihtikôw. (See Figure 9.1.) At the time, I believed she was relating an unsettling superstitious fable to discourage me from wandering off alone into the bush lest the ghostly wihtikôw spirit—the Métis and Cree cognate of the bogeyman—come to get me. But years later, after she passed on, I discovered that not only was the Trout Lake wihtikôw incident based on historical fact, but moreover the events at Trout Lake were the conclusion of a very unusual true story that revealed a deep-seated fear that had generated hysteria among Indigenous people in the Athabasca District of the Northwest. In essence, it was a story that, although graphic in some of its details, communicated in a literal and metaphoric way the local Native residents’ fear that their ethos, spiritual world, and, in many regards, way of life was essentially coming to an end through the advent of Euro-Canadian customs and institutions.

Because Catherine Auger was my ancestral relative—and, more importantly, because she remains nameless and faceless in the surviving historical documentation on the Trout Lake story simply as “the wife”—I chose to make known her proper name, and represent her as the central figure in this story. Countless Native women have been left out of the historical record because of the misogyny and sexism of pre-feminist, male-dominated ideologies. This essay, therefore, is intended to evoke Catherine Auger’s memory by piecing together all the clues we have about her life in an effort to ensure she is remembered. It is my hope that you will come to understand her strength, compassion for her husband, resiliency, and spiritual fortitude—in short, her ability to stay alive in the face of one of the most trying times imaginable and to skillfully adapt to the presence of new and foreign circumstances and peoples. I hope you will know and understand the strength of this woman and her will to continue on in the midst of tragedy and cultural change, and to ultimately come to terms with a rapidly transforming world.

The Trout Lake incident is perhaps the most thoroughly documented wihtikôw story. Moreover, it is apparently unique, insofar as it is currently the only known wihtikôw case study in the literature on the subject that can be placed within a meaningful socio-historical context. Not only do many documents describe the details of this strange and harrowing event, but these rich and varied sources also corroborate each other. Together
they allow us to gain a fuller sense of the historical milieu that catalyzed the chain of events culminating in the wîhtikôw incident at Trout Lake in 1896. There are records by Roman Catholic and Anglican missionaries, unique and detailed first-hand eyewitness attestations by a Euro-Canadian fur trader, census documents, “half-breed” or Métis scrip applications, newspaper coverage, stories preserved in oral tradition by Cree and Métis peoples across the Athabasca District, and perhaps even more sources yet undiscovered. No other known case of wîhtikôw has such a range of surviving information associated with it. These multiple sources allow the pieces of this amazing story to come together and shed light on the life of Catherine Auger, one of the central characters in this story who, unfortunately, had been anonymous—until now.

Catherine Auger was born on 2 July 1865, the “illegitimate” daughter of John Auger and Marie Anne Lechausseur, a woman from Whitefish Lake. “Half-breed” (Métis) scrip applications for land or money filed in the Athabasca District suggest that there was a tradition of intermarriage between the Auger and Lechausseur families. Records are contradictory with respect to Catherine Auger’s birthplace. A 1901 census document noted that she was born at Bear Lake, near Lac La Biche, where many people from the Auger clan had settled. An earlier document from 1899 states her birthplace at Wâpôskow, where she lived almost all her life except for the brief interlude during which she endured the torturous weeks while her husband’s body and identity slowly succumbed to wîhtikôw.

Although there are few surviving or apparent details about who Catherine was, it is known that she had a husband in 1879, perhaps at Bear Lake, and that they had one child whose name has not survived. The man’s name is illegible on the document he is mentioned in, and we know nothing of him other than his “Indian” (as opposed to Euro-Canadian) identity. According to the same document, their child died while still in infancy. It is uncertain what happened to her husband; he may have died or perhaps the couple’s sorrow over the lost child was too trying for them to remain together. In 1885, Catherine Auger remarried at Wâpôskow. Her new husband was a man named Felix Auger, or Napanin, as he was called by his relatives. Although we know little of Felix either, the Edmonton Bulletin reported that he was “a fairly intelligent man, about 35 years of age [born ca. 1861], and lived in a house like a half-breed, and provided well for his wife and children.” While there is no indication of his occupation, he was almost certainly employed in the fur trade, either as a labourer or through hunting, fishing, and/or trapping, or some combination thereof.
We may infer that Felix was a well-liked and resourceful man, and these may have been some of the qualities that led Catherine Auger to love and care for him and have children with him. Catherine, in her turn, must have worked hard tending to the children, undertaking the laborious work of tanning hides, smoking meat preserves, and making clothes and possibly the beautiful beadwork that was the artistic hallmark of the Native women of the Northwest.18

By the year 1895, the year that the wihtikôw story truly begins, the Augers already had three children: Pierre (or Adam Peter), born two years after their marriage; Jean (born in 1890); and François, born in 1895. But records indicate that Catherine was soon pregnant again with another child, due in early 1896. Felix’s apparent success in his endeavours and the fact that he was respected by the traders suggest that he was well within his means to provide for these four children.

While Catherine was pregnant with this last child, she and her husband welcomed the arrival of an unusual White man, someone unlike the Euro-Canadians the Augers would likely have been in contact with previously through the fur trade. This man was an Anglican Missionary known as the Reverend Charles Weaver, who arrived at Wâpôskow in or around 1895, to announce his intention of building a full-scale mission and buildings in which to convert the Native people to Christianity and school their children in Euro-Canadian fashion.19 Although the motives for the Auger family’s acceptance of this man of the cloth are unknown, it is inferred that their willingness to embrace Christianity may have been due to the influence of relatives who likely had been in contact with the Church years before, perhaps at the Lac la Biche mission,20 an area where many of the Augers had settled prior to spreading across present-day Alberta, and where many of them remain today. Regardless of the reasons, Anglican records reveal that Catherine and Felix did receive Weaver into their lives and had expressed their intent to have their two eldest children schooled at the Christian mission upon its completion.21

But Weaver’s plans to build a mission and lead the Native people to the purported “light” and “love” of the gospel came with a price. As was the case with many missionaries, Weaver seems to have been rather intolerant to the local residents’ Indigenous religious beliefs and ceremonial rites. Therefore, in a symbolic declaration of his perceived supremacy of Christianity over heathenism, Weaver uprooted an effigy of significant religious and social importance to the Wâpôskow people. St. John’s Mission, as it would come to be known, was built on the site where the effigy formerly
stood. Richard Young, the Anglican Bishop of the Athabasca District, explained this in a letter written to the “Evangelical Fathers” of the Church Missionary Society in early 1896:

It is an interesting fact that on the head-land on which . . . [the St. John’s] mission now stands, in clearing the bush, Mr. Weaver found one of their heathen “munetokans” or idols; a stump of poplar carved into the rough semblance of a head & shoulders, painted with red ochre, and with three black horizontal stripes on the breast. I brought the interesting relic back with me to the [Athabasca] Landing. 22

This effigy, referred to in the Cree language as a Manitôhkân (lit: ‘fake spirit’, or a representation of a spirit) 23 was, according to the description given above, likely instrumental in the pâhkak (skeleton) ceremony, described in 1823 by Lac la Ronge fur trader George Nelson as a rite in which food, gifts, and hide bags full of animal fat were placed before the idol and songs sung to placate the “skeletons.” 24 Many Cree and Métis people lived in uneasy fear of these pâhkak/skeletons, which they believed were the angry spirits of people who had died of starvation. If the holy people at Wâpôskow performed the ceremonies properly and with care, then the spirits would ensure that game animals and food would be obtainable for the people—an important consideration for a culture that existed in a subarctic environment that could, at times, be unforgiving and uncharitable. If food could not be found, then famine and starvation would set in, and those who succumbed would in turn become pâhkak/skeletons themselves. Others, driven mad by hunger or desperation, would believe themselves forced to violate the most serious cultural taboo known to the people at Wâpôskow—starvation cannibalism. 25 It was considered better to die than succumb to such an act, for people believed that if a person ever tasted human flesh, they would become wihtikôwak (windigos)—malevolent and unstoppable monsters who would devour their own children and families, forever cursed to live a ruinous existence of exile amongst the marshes and lonely forests; preying upon humans in an attempt to satisfy their unending hunger. 26 Wihtikôwak were believed to be so hungry they would mindlessly chew off their own lips, leaving a scowling and grotesque grimace that would harshly display their loss of human identity. 27

As is clear from the above information, Weaver’s removal of the poplar stump effigy had potentially dire spiritual, social, and economic...
ramifications based on the cosmology of the Wâpôskow people, and his actions would not come without consequences. Nevertheless, it is clear from Bishop Young’s writings in the same 1896 letter that the “heathenism” that existed at Wâpôskow would not be tolerated and would have to be (literally) uprooted: “Wapaskaw is a stronghold of heathen darkness & superstition & . . . in planting a mission there we have chosen a spot that sorely needs the comforting, humanizing, and enlightening power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

We cannot know what Catherine Auger’s emotional reaction was to the removal of the effigy, whether it was fear, indifference, or ambivalence. But her acceptance of Weaver’s religion, coupled with her ongoing trust in her husband’s ability to provide well for her and her children despite whatever negative consequences might come (such as famine), suggest the latter reaction, or at the very least that she was tolerant of this intrusion upon her community. The removal of the effigy had initiated a series of events that began what can be described as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

By November of 1895, the Anglican missionaries at Athabasca Landing, where the Anglican district headquarters were located, caught wind of an alarming prophetic movement that had emerged from this religious and social milieu. Although no direct connection can be established between the removal of the effigy and this religious movement, the evidence presented below suggests that Christian proselytization had been somehow implicated in the formation of the movement, at the very least. Bishop Young’s letter journal to the Church Missionary Society in early 1896 included the following:

We had heard last November at the [Athabasca] Landing of a Soto [Saulteaux] Indian who was practicing medicine with the usual accompaniments of drumming and pretended [communication] with the spirits at one of these lakes called Moose Lake. He foretold that a Wetego would arise who would destroy every one who did not join his religion & come & place themselves under his protection. Many families appear to have done so. He created a general terror & uneasiness [in this country]. The hunters dare not to go out to their hunting grounds with their families. The Indians have a great terror of these so called Wetigos, or cannibals. They believe that after eating human flesh their heart becomes a lump of ice and no one alive is safe from them. Absurd as all this sounds to us it is a real terror to the untutored Indian.
Searching for Catherine Auger — Nathan D. Carlson

The removal of the effigy, followed by the arrival of news of this terrifying prophecy, sent the community and much of the district into a terrified panic that ultimately resulted in an exodus and a potentially lethal bout of starvation. Although it remains unclear just how many people fled to Moose Lake (now known as Calling Lake) to seek protection from the “apocalyptic” wîhtikôw, the above account suggests that the numbers were significant. What is clear is that not everyone at Wâpôskow or other communities left.

Whether on account of news of the removal of the effigy or the declaration of the “wîhtikôw prophet,” many Native residents became so convinced that a terror was approaching that they were subsumed by their own fear to the point that they were unable to gather food, as Bishop Young noted in his letter journal. Similarly, according to the Catholic Oblate Missionaries, “Father [Jean-Marie] Dupé left Grouard in 1895 to visit Wabasca Lake. He had heard that the Indians were dying of hunger. It was true: the men were too afraid to leave their cabins to go hunting or fishing because of their fear of witigos.” The dual enterprises of the fur trade and the Christianization of the Native peoples at Wâpôskow had been notably impaired; most of the residents there had either barricaded themselves in their homes or had journeyed to Moose Lake to join the holy wîhtikôw prophet and escape the impending apocalypse.

Despite uncertainty regarding the numbers of people who fled or remained behind, one thing is apparent: Catherine Auger and her husband seem to have been unafraid of starvation or of the apocalyptic prophecy. As numerous sources attest, Catherine and her husband decided neither to barricade themselves in their home nor flee to Moose Lake to join the wîhtikôw prophecy movement. Rather, they set out on a trip to Trout Lake to visit Catherine’s father-in-law, Baptiste Auger, during a winter that was “changeable and at times severe at Wapisca, and the snow ... about two and a half feet deep.” Catherine Auger’s baby was nearly full term, and they travelled with their two youngest children, Jean and François. Although we can only speculate about the motives for this journey, undertaken at a time when both the environmental and spiritual climates were highly unstable and severe, it is possible that Catherine wanted to give birth away from Wâpôskow and at Trout Lake, the place where both her and her husband’s extended families hailed from. But perhaps Catherine also wanted to flee not the impending “apocalypse” but the rampant fear and destitution of terrified and emaciated people and the self-inflicted starvation that perhaps seemed irrational to a Christian convert who put every trust in her husband (and her God) to feed her and her children.
Trout Lake today is located in a heavily wooded region surrounded by muskeg, spruce, willow, tamarack, and thick poplars in every direction, and surrounded by lakes and expanses of hilly, sublime terrain. The journey made with dogsleds required at least three days to traverse the distance separating the Trout Lake outpost from the north Wâpôskow Lake, where the Augers most likely resided in their “half-breed” cabin. Because of the inclement weather, it is likely that the Catherine brought along a canvas tent and possibly a portable tin stove to ensure that she and her family remained warm. Her uneventful night on the first leg of the journey attests to her ingenuity and ability to survive in harsh conditions, some that modern Western urban dwellers would find difficult to endure. The lack of difficulty also suggests that nothing out of the ordinary was happening.

But this was not so on the second night of the trip. Catherine’s husband was in good health at the time and nothing so far had seemed unusual, according to the account she delivered to the *Edmonton Bulletin* via John McLeod (a resident of Wâpôskow and friend of the family):

On the second night out he acted strangely, saying that some strange animals were about to attack him. During the remainder of the trip he acted strangely at intervals, and at such times the woman for her own safety induced him to go ahead. They reached . . . Trout Lake safely, and was [sic] there for twenty days, his fits of insanity becoming more frequent.\(^3\)
Catherine’s eyewitness testimony of her husband’s strange turn of behaviour is further substantiated by an account she evidently gave to the Reverend George Holmes. Holmes delivered her report to Bishop Young, who quoted it in his letter written to the Church Missionary Society in the aftermath of the Trout Lake tragedy sometime in early 1896:

Shadowy terrors . . . amid the silence and solitudes of the woods beset them on every side . . . [A] Wapuskaw [family] started . . . for Trout Lake in January. The account of what happened Mr. Holmes had from the wife:[1] At [our] last camp before reaching Trout Lake, [my] husband who appeared quite well & ate his supper, suddenly said to [me] “See look at that!” “It is coming to me!” He cowered under his blanket and from that moment was a lunatic. He told [me] that one of the children looked to him like a spring moose & he wanted to kill and eat it. [I] sat up all night not daring to lie down lest he should kill the children or [me] . . . Fancy the poor woman alone in the solitude of those dreary woods this all that terrible night! . . . Next day [I] proposed that he should go ahead while [I] drove the dogs. He consented for awhile & then suddenly stopped, saying that something stopped him & could not let him go on. [I] had then to go ahead.33

Whatever had transpired, and for whatever reason, the Auger family arrived, exhausted, and terrified, at Trout Lake on 3 January 1896. Although it is presumed, based on surviving documentation in the Edmonton Bulletin, that Catherine drove the dogs and travelled with her children directly to the cabin of her father-in-law, Baptiste Auger, the documentation also suggests that Felix Auger, either through his own volition, or upon the request of his wife (who was evidently frightened by her husband’s strange behaviour), ventured off away from her, and ended up at one of the buildings of the Hudson’s Bay Company trading outpost at Trout Lake.34 (See Figure 9.2.) There he met Francis Work Beatton, an Orkney Scot clerk who managed the trade outpost during the year of 1896.35 Beatton, sensing something unusual was happening, began recording his impressions of Felix Auger, whom he called Napanin. These journal entries survive today as perhaps the most graphic and perplexing first-hand accounts written by a Euro-Canadian person that attests to the reality of the wîhtikôw condition:
Trout Lake January 3rd 1896. Man arrived here today from Wapus-kow Lake who seemed to me to be crazy. I saw him coming and went to meet him at the door. As soon as he came in he told us that last night he camped about 15 miles from here. I know the place, it is about that distance. He told us that after he had made camp, [he] was about to lie down. He was not asleep he said, but he saw the devil come to him, and from that he was crazy. He said that he must eat his child there. But his wife took away the child. She then took hold of him and he told her to try and pray for him and perhaps God would spare him to see this place. He said it was told him that he must eat them. He told us all what he saw and did. He said his son appeared to him like a young moose and he wanted to eat him. I did not listen to all he had to say as I thought he was starving and I was busy getting him something to eat, but he ate very little. He seemed to be getting a little better, and then he told us that he knew someone put medicine on him, and that was the reason he was going to be a cannibal. Then he began to cry at the thought of it. The man’s name is Napanin. The man’s father lives here at the end of the lake. The Indians are all terribly frightened. All the Indians think someone had done something to him with medicine. Yakwemoo is a Great medicine man, and that is why they put him here. The same night they were singing over him and the drums were beating. I expect they will try to drum the devil out of him. I hear that he told the Indians that he had to kill and eat them. He says he sees the devil often since then.36

According to Beatton’s account, Baptiste Auger’s brother, François, was present at the time that Catherine’s husband appeared at the trading post. At this juncture in the surviving narrative there is very little information about Catherine herself; what her emotional responses were to her husband, whether she visited him or attempted to administer aid, or where she stayed during the course of the ordeal.37 Catherine might well have felt a combination of guilt, terror, and shame, for the residents of Trout Lake knew of the wîhtikôw prophecy and, according to Bishop Young, they believed it was coming true right in their midst: “people left their homes & crowded into two small buildings in one of which the supposed Wetigoo was placed. They all thought that he was the cannibal the Soto Indian had been prophesying would arise. They appear to have been in a state of abject terror. He was with them nineteen days.”38
During the course of those nineteen days, several attempts were made
to cure Napanin of his *wîhtikôw* condition through a combination of prayer;
singing, drumming, and shamanic rites,39 and treatments in the Indian sweat lodge.40 According to one Cree eyewitness account, Napanin was
forced to or coerced into drinking a dose of bear grease while it was still
boiling, a medicinal cure that was supposed to cause the ice lodged in
the victim’s chest (believed to be the primary source of the *wîhtikôw* sick-
ness) to be coughed up or expelled.41 Evidently, none of these treatments
worked, and as the days passed, Napanin slipped further and further into
madness. Catherine Auger must have felt both terrified and helpless as
she watched or heard descriptions of her husband’s loss of human identity
to the *wîhtikôw* sickness. Again, the most vivid and compelling account
of his deterioration is contained in the diary of Francis Beatton, who held
a vigil over Napanin, documented the ordeal in his journal, and himself
administered treatments to Napanin:

Jan. 6. I went to see the sick man today. He is a pitiful looking
devil. They had him with about 6 blankets & still he was nearly
freezing. I can do nothing for him. Sunday 12. I went to see
him today. He looks worse than ever. I gave him a dose of castor
oil. He says his heart is freezing. He is always saying that he is
going to be a cannibal. The Indians are terribly frightened. He
told them that two men would arrive from Lesser Slave Lake in
a few days, that is[,] the devil told him so. Jan 15. The two men
arrived as the crazy Indian said. After they start back said he
you must look out for me for I think I shall kill some of you. He
wants them to kill him all the time before he gets worse. Jan
19. The sick man’s father came to see me today. He said his son
was getting worse. He said he thought they would have to kill
him or he would kill them all. I pity the old man, he was very
frightened, and he was crying most of the time he was in here. I
believe they will finish him yet. Jan 20. Francois came here and
asked me if I would read some prayers for the sick man. I went
with him. I found a great change come over him. He looked very
crazy & I asked him if he knew me & he said yes. I read a few
prayers out of the prayer book. He seemed to be getting worse
all the time. He does not look like a human being. He seems to
be terribly swollen in the body and face. I do not know how this
will end. The sight of him is enough to frighten any person. The
poor Indians slept very little here for the last 19 days. Since he arrived they have been watching him all the time. Jan 20. I am going to go & sit with the crazy man tonight & see how he is.42

At this point in Beatton’s narrative it becomes clear that Napanin was threatening to grow violent. Realizing that nothing could be done to save him from this utterly terrifying condition, those watching over him, including his own father, finally acknowledged that they had no choice but to kill him:

Jan 21. Francois came for me last night & I went with him. I told him we ought to take some ropes with us and tie him if we could. The man seemed to be getting worse. He told them to kill him or he would kill us all. The Indians are terribly frightened. When I told them that we would tie him, they said it was no use as no ropes could hold a Cannibal. The sound of him was terrible. He was calling like a wild bull. We tied him with the ropes & I left them to come & get more rope, but could not find any that was of use. I went back again about 3 am in the morning. When I got back the lines were breaking that was on his arms. The Indians asked me what we should do. They said that when he got up he would kill us all. I told them if they was to do anything to do it as I had no more lines to tie him with. The father of the sick man got up & told his brother that he saw that they could do nothing for his son. He was getting worse all the time and was too strong for us. He said what was true; that we could do nothing with him and that he could kill us all. He told them “I give him to you to do what you want to do with him.” Only he said “I do not want to see them hit him” & went out. Now the [medicine man] Yakwemoo was the only man they thought could kill him. But Yakwemoo did not want to do it. He wanted me to do it. I told him that I would not do it. . . . At last Yakwemoo said “You all want me to do this. I will try.” He then took the axe. I went to the door. . . . I seemed terribly frightened. I came back again . . . he had already struck him on the head once with an axe. He struck him again and the man was going to rise. Yakwemoo said that he would yet get up, that he could not kill him. I told him to try & put him out of suffering. He hit him again & the man did not move. . . . I do believe that he would have killed them at
last as I know they were all too frightened to defend themselves, they would have sat & looked at him. They did not have the heart to get up & try & hold him or help to tie him up. I had no ropes only cod lines and that was what I tied him with. 43

During this harrowing ordeal, there is virtually nothing to suggest what Catherine was doing during these long and frightful days and nights. One can only surmise that she was terrified, confused, and utterly depressed by the realization that all she had invested in the previous years with her husband—her home, her marriage, the raising of children, and her safety and protection—was all rapidly disappearing as her husband grew progressively sicker and more insane, to the point where he threatened to kill and devour the people at Trout Lake. But Catherine’s love for her husband must have been stronger than her fear of him and the panic produced by a world that had suddenly turned upside down for her. We know this because of the one action Catherine was described as performing at the end of her husband’s life. If this act was in accordance with everything else she did, thought, and said, then Catherine must have been staunchly defending her husband’s reputation—despite the mass panic resulting from the widespread belief that Napanin was the apocalyptic cannibal of the wihtikôw prophecy—and doing everything in her power to help him. According to the Edmonton Bulletin, she put herself in harm’s way in one final attempt to save his life:

His wife . . . said that he did not become dangerous, but other persons said that he was violent and dangerous at intervals. On the day of his death he was tied hands and feet, face down, in one of the houses. His wife did not know that he was to be killed and went to a neighbor’s house with her baby. After a while suspecting something, she returned to the house where her husband was. The door was attempted to be shut against her, but she placed her foot between the door and the jam and held the door open so that she heard the blow of an axe and saw blood on the floor. She was shoved away and the door shut. Four men were in the house at the time with her husband. 44

Catherine Auger, it appears, did not believe that her husband was a threat to the people at Trout Lake and did not believe that his execution was warranted, despite his own requests to be killed, his own admissions that he
wanted to kill and eat people, and his grotesque and inhuman appearance as he writhed violently on the floor in spastic, homicidal fits.

Catherine Auger was too late, and her desperate attempt to save her husband had only allowed her to witness his execution with an axe by the medicine man known as Joseph Yakwemoo. Despite his death, the ordeal was not over yet. According to Émile Grouard, the Catholic Bishop of the Athabasca District, another medicine man known as Perfumed Bow believed the *wîhtikôw* was going to resurrect and devour them all, for they had not removed and burned his heart of ice, the source of his supernatural power, on a funeral pyre. Accordingly, as we know from Holmes, the residents at Trout Lake hurriedly busied themselves with the task of piling rows of wooden logs and large tree trunks over his grave, to pin him under the ground and ensure that if he did come back to life, he would be trapped, at least for a time. (See Figure 9.3.) After this feat was accomplished, the residents of Trout Lake abandoned their homes and again barricaded themselves in the two main buildings, waiting for deliverance from the terror of the *wîhtikôw*. We can imagine that Catherine, in her turn, must have been even more devastated: not only was her husband dead and now lying under a huge log pile—decapitated, with his head buried some distance away—but the birth of their child was just days away.

Finally, after what must have seemed like an eternity, the residents of Trout Lake were liberated from their fear by the arrival of Bishop Émile Grouard and the Reverend Holmes, who had probably been sent for during the ordeal but had appeared (either together or separately) too late, sometime around 25 January 1896. Grouard noted in a letter that on his arrival, the Native people “began to breathe a little freely,” but he chastised
the residents, telling them that their superstitious fears had caused a horrific tragedy, that Napanin could have been brought to Wâpôskow, whence he would have been sent to Athabasca Landing and then to Edmonton to be treated. The residents, in their own defense, apparently replied that “it is easy to speak so, but it is not easy to do so.” Nevertheless, Grouard spoke on the residents’ behalf, writing that the “poor people acted all in self defence, and [that] the deceased would have done mischief, if he had not been prevented.” In view of Napanin's alarming behaviour—behaviour that seemed to confirm the words of the wihtikôw prophet—and the strange physiological changes that made his appearance inhuman and terrifying even to a White onlooker, it is understandable why a panic arose and why the Trout Lake residents chose to kill a man that seemed to them a monster. Whether or not his execution was justified, the ordeal of the Trout Lake people was over.

But this was not so for Catherine Auger. Evidently, Catherine wanted nothing more than to flee Trout Lake and escape the terror, and presumably the shame, she must have felt there. The Reverend Holmes, after hand-copying Beatton’s journal, honoured her request and travelled with her back to Wâpôskow. However, further trials were to hound Catherine. Holmes’s report, as recorded by Bishop Young in his letter journal to the Church Missionary Society early in 1896 stated:

The poor woman with her two children insisted to return to Wapaskaw under Mr. Holme’s [sic] care. [illegible], her own dogs, Mr. H lending her one of his [blankets?] to keep the children from freezing; on reaching camp that night they found that both her legs were badly frozen above the knees & they had to leave her & her children at an Indian’s house which they reached the following evening.

Despite the frostbite, Catherine finally arrived back at Wâpôskow, where she completed what may have been the purpose of the journey that had gone so horribly wrong at Trout Lake: Catherine’s water broke and she went into labour immediately upon her return to Wâpôskow. She gave birth to her last known son, Édouard Auger, sometime between 25 and 29 January 1896.

We have no record of the reaction to Catherine’s arrival back at Wâpôskow, whether on the whole she was greeted with fear and disgust or instead with compassion. But it is clear that the residents of Wâpôskow
associated her husband with the wihtikôw scare. According to the Reverend Charles Weaver, in a letter written at Wâpôskow on 11 August 1896 to Hayter Reed, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, the Wâpôskow residents believed that the wihtikôw that had arisen and been executed at Trout Lake had indeed been the consummation of the prophecy: “An old Medicine Man made the… trouble at first by saying a cannibal would come and when this poor man was taken sick at Trout Lake they immediately said the prophecy came true: and a little while since a young man in Wapuskow said it had come true as they had killed him [the wihtikôw] at Trout Lake.” We can infer from this that, however else Catherine may have been perceived by her peers at Wâpôskow, she would forever afterwards be regarded as the widowed wife of a wihtikôw. From the same letter it is evident that the fear of wihtikôwak still persisted for some time. Additionally, weeks after Felix Auger’s execution, his brother, Samuel (Dominique) Auger became troubled by dreams of his deceased sibling, and was driven from his home by his common-law wife Nancy, Catherine’s sister. Samuel Auger was apprehended two years later by the North West Mounted Police and alleged (by himself and the residents of Wâpôskow) to be suffering from the wihtikôw condition.

Two years after the ordeal at Trout Lake, the arrival of the Christian missionaries was followed by the appearance of large numbers of other White people passing through the territory on their way to the Klondike Gold Rush in the Yukon Territory. In response, the Treaty No. 8 was signed at Lesser Slave Lake on 21 June 1899 and in the late summer and fall of the same year at Wâpôskow. The “White Man” and “the Native” were to be friends “as long as the sun shined and the rivers flowed.” People of European background who before had comprised small fur-trade communities or had been infrequent visitors to the region would shortly begin to arrive in large numbers, there to stay.

During the treaty negotiations, the Native peoples were offered the choice of accepting inclusion in a collective treaty, as “Indians,” or by applying for individual allotments of so-called half-breed scrip notes, which were redeemable for land or money. Catherine Auger, still a widow, likely would have needed such money to support her four children on her own, and applied on 14 August 1899 for scrip as a half-breed, or Métis. Her application for scrip is the only known piece of historical documentation that directly tells us anything of this woman’s name or life. It is the one document that describes her, indirectly, as the wife of the wihtikôw and provides insight on her true opinion about the events that had transpired.
Searching for Catherine Auger — Nathan D. Carlson

at Trout Lake three and a half years prior. Describing herself as the widow of Felix Auger, she stated: “I had a...husband Felix Auger was married to him in 1885 at Lac Wapaskaw. He was murdered in Lac la Triete [Trout Lake] in 1896.”58 Her use of murdered indicates that in Catherine’s eyes, her husband had been taken from her wrongly. Perhaps she felt he had been killed by people who had been driven to commit such an act by succumbing to the fear of a spiritual world that she herself had abandoned.

In early 1899, just months before Catherine’s scrip application was recorded, another wihtików-related killing had been committed at the Bald Hills near Lesser Slave Lake. A man known as Louison Moostoos had been beheaded after exhibiting the same alarming behaviour that Felix Auger had: bodily swelling and violent, threatening fits. It was to be the last wihtików execution in what is now the Province of Alberta.59 Through the actions of the missionaries, police, and settlers who began pouring into the Athabasca territory at the turn of the twentieth century, many of the Native lifeways and beliefs began to be systematically dismantled and partially forgotten. The concept of the wihtików was among these, and this monster of northern Algonquian and northern Métis belief metaphorically trudged off into the subarctic forests, grew weak, and died. Afterwards, people afflicted with the wihtików sickness were variously taken to mental asylums, prisons, and hospitals.60 Eventually, references to these strange incidents disappeared from the historical record. Accounts of wihtików gradually became unverified stories that are spoken about today in closed-knit circles or are regarded unsympathetically by some as nothing more than rumour.61


243
Many years later, I was told a story exactly like that described above. Little did I know as a child that my grandmother’s folktale—a tragic story that would recall the spirit of a woman who had endured the trial of the *wîhtikôw* and survived—inoked the memory of my own ancestors. Catherine Auger is mentioned one last time in a census taken at Wâpôskow in 1901. She was still a widow. There is no further mention of this woman in any historical documentation known to me. Perhaps she left Wâpôskow because of her reputation as the widow of a *wîhtikôw*. Perhaps she took the memory of her husband’s life and tragic death to an unknown or unmarked grave. Whatever else happened during the course of her life, Catherine Auger was a woman who witnessed the foretold arrival of “flesh eaters”; literally, in the form of her own husband, who proclaimed himself a cannibal, and metaphorically, in the form of people who symbolically consumed of the blood and body of a Jewish prophet each Sunday. She had beheld the arrival of cannibals.

**Acknowledgements**

This essay is dedicated to the memory of three important Métis people. The first is Catherine Auger, née Auger (1865–?), a woman that is now given her proper place in her own story, and whose life and times I hope I have accurately described. Second, it is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother, Marie Anne Marguerite Carlson, née Beauchamp (1921–2002), who gave me the priceless gift of the extraordinary story that originally prompted my research. Lastly, this article is dedicated to Bernard Cardinal (1924–2008), who shared his warm hospitality and many amazing stories, and guided me, in June 2008, to the location of Napanin’s grave. Although Bernard is gone, this kind old man’s stories and quick wit will not be forgotten.

I would also like to thank, graciously, Patricia McCormack, Sarah Carter, Pamela Holway (for her insightful editorial suggestions), Shirley Serre, Brian Manning (for his truck!), Anne Lindsay, Jennifer S.H. Brown, Robert Brightman, Clint Westman, Don Carlson, Joyce Johnson, Wayne Beauchamp, Christian Tizya, and Jesabel Medero. Lastly, I have to thank my wife Anoch Daniels and my children, Riley, Scarlette, and “Congo,” who inspire me to no end.