

# Mister Bristles by Graham Ducker

It was a cursory glance at the local map of Minden that stirred a long-forgotten memory. Long before cars used Tennyson Road, we kids would bicycle down the long grassy trail to visit Mr. Bristles at his house by the lake.

We went there to listen to his many stories, which seemed to flow from his large hands and were carved into his face.

Mr. Bristles wasn't his real name. We had nicknamed him that due to the stiff hairs sticking out from his ears, his nose and his eyebrows. After a while all you noticed were shiny black eyes twinkling above the gentle smile.

His place was more shack than house. It seemed to have been built from the bits-and-pieces gathered from around Bob Lake. In a way it was a perfect representation of his life and the continuous patchwork of stories coming from Mr. Bristles' past.

We were an eager audience, watching his old chipped pipe punctuating important points as the current adventure progressed.

Sometimes my mom suggested I not bother the old man. "He's had a hard time, you know, and would probably like some peace and quiet."

When I asked her what she knew about Mr. Bristles, she ran her fingers through her hair. "I'm not sure. Nobody seems to know much about him. I heard that he was a sailor during World War One. Some say he is part Ojibwa. Folks just leave him alone. You should too."

I'm glad I did not take her 'advice'.

I have forgotten all the stories he told us except the legend of how the beaver stole fire from the gods, and gave it to humans to use properly.

Don't know why that particular story is etched in my head.

What I do recall is how Old Mr. Bristles always seemed to reflect something from his past back into our time. He made us think of how we should view life and each other.

Another thing he did was to show how Mother Nature – that's what he called the outdoors – is there for our enjoyment and health, as many ailments can be treated from certain trees and bushes.

I can't remember the names of all the medicinal plants he showed us and what they did. The only one I do recall was from the day we were sitting around a small campfire – he always had one going – and trying to make birch bark baskets using spruce roots.

When I complained about having a headache, he made a tea by scraping the inside of a willow branch into some hot water.

"Here," he said. "Drink some of this a bit at a time."

It wasn't long until I felt a lot better.

The visits became less frequent as high school and other interests occupied my life.

It was during second year of post-grad studies I learned about the passing of Mr. Bristles.

I wish I had learned his real name.

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