

Early Life

Around 1825 Big Bear, the son of a Saulteaux Chief, was born in the area of Jackfish Lake, north of present day North Battleford. The Saulteaux were Ojibway Indians who had left the woodlands of Eastern Canada during the course of the fur trading activities and had adopted Prairie Indian culture. As a boy, Big Bear learned the traditional skills of hunting buffalo and other wild game.

Big Bear's early life was marked by some difficult times. In the hard winter of 1833, his people suffered near-starvation because the buffalo were difficult to find. Then in 1837, a dreaded smallpox epidemic spread into Canada from the American territories and wiped out two-thirds of some tribes such as the Blackfeet and Assiniboines. Big Bear, then only 12 years old, survived but was left with disfiguring marks on his face.¹

As a young man, Big Bear was noted for his serious-mindedness, intelligence, and his ability to laugh at himself. He also took visions seriously. In an early vision quest he went into isolation to fast and pray. In the vision, a bear spirit, most powerful of animals, offered to be his protector. He prepared war medicine according to directions in the vision. Stories of his courage and feats of war became commonplace around the campfires.

During one incident, Sweetgrass and Big Bear, who were close friends, organized a horse raid. Sweetgrass, Big Bear and a third warrior, Half Sky, were surrounded by a large group of Blackfoot warriors. For three days, the Blackfeet tried to attack and overrun them. They tried to burn them out. Half Sky, was gravely wounded. Finally, after some two dozen Blackfeet had been killed, the attackers, awed by the skill of their adversaries, abandoned the fight.

Big Bear's people were very religious. They held in reverence various sacred monuments found in their territory. One of the most important was near the Battle River. The Iron Stone, dedicated to Old Man Buffalo, was guardian of the buffalo herds and all Indians in the region. It was a meteorite weighing almost 400 pounds and was believed to have been placed there after a flood by the great Ojibway spirit Nanebozo. Offerings would be left by the Iron Stone to ensure good hunting.

In 1866 the Stone was removed by Methodist missionaries, who carried it to Victoria Mission, 100 miles away. It was later shipped to Ontario. Missionaries approved of the removal of the "pagan idol". Indian medicine men prophesied that the removal of the stone was an evil omen, and would bring the triple disasters of starvation, disease and warfare.²

When the Canadian Government purchased the monopoly rights from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1870 and assumed jurisdiction over the North West, the Indian people were still able to make a living by hunting buffalo, but the herds were already diminishing.

Smallpox struck again in 1870, killing over a hundred Cree around Fort Pitt, including many of Big Bear's band.

News travelled quickly enough on the prairies, and that year Big Bear listened to accounts of the troubles at Red River. He heard stories of Riel's execution of Thomas Scott and rumours that the Metis were now running things in the North West. Later, soldiers came from the east, and the resistance at Red River ended.



In happier days, Big Bear (the Indian on the right) traded furs at Fort Pitt. (Public Archives of Canada)

Big Bear and Treaty Number Six

Indian people were concerned about the new presence of the Canadian Government and rumours that the Hudson's Bay Company had sold their lands. That concern led to a meeting at Edmonton in 1871 at which the leader of the Crees, Sweetgrass, told the Lieutenant-Governor of the Territories: "We heard our lands were sold and we did not like it. We don't want to sell our lands; it is our property and no one else has the right to sell them. Our country is getting ruined of fur-bearing animals, hitherto our sole support, and now we are poor and want help. We want you to pity us. We invite you to come and see us."³ Unfortunately, this plea went unanswered.

Big Bear arrived late at the Fort Pitt Treaty negotiation meeting in 1876. When Indians such as Sweetgrass were out hunting, messengers were sent to bring them in. However, no messenger was sent for Big Bear or Little Pine, Chiefs known to be difficult to deal with. This was a common tactic of government to get only those Chiefs whom they knew to be sympathetic to the Treaty to dominate the meetings. Unfortunately, the assembled Indians, known to favor the Treaty, signed it the day before Big Bear arrived. Big Bear had been consulting other Plains Bands who were out hunting so he could carry their wishes to the meeting. He voiced his objections:

I find it difficult to express myself, because some of the bands are not represented. I have come off to speak for the different bands that are out on the plains. It is no small matter we were to consult about. I expected the Chiefs here would have waited until I arrived. The different bands that are out on the plains told me that I should speak in their stead; the Stony Indians as well. The people who have not come, stand as a barrier before what I would have had to say: my mode of living is hard.⁴

Unfortunately the group, having already reached agreement, was unwilling to listen. Sweetgrass tried to persuade Big Bear to sign, but Big Bear continued:

Stop, stop, my friends, I have never seen the Governor before; I have seen Mr. Christie many times. I heard the Governor was to come and I said I shall see him; when I see him I will make a request that he will save me from what I most dread, that is: the rope to be about my neck (hanging), it was not given to us by the Great Spirit that the red man or white man should shed each other's blood.⁵

At this point, a grave misinterpretation occurs. Big Bear's statement about having a rope around his neck is erroneously recorded in the official minutes as meaning a fear of being hanged.

Interpreters frequently made mistakes during the translation. Cree is a difficult language to understand, especially in its abstract usage. In this case, their usual interpreter, Erasmus, had left and Reverend McKay, a poorer interpreter, was used. He had been having trouble and became confused. He mistook "lead by the neck" for "hang by the neck".⁶ When he interpreted this to the Commissioner, Morris replied:

It was given us by the Great Spirit, man should not shed his brother's blood, and it was spoken to us that he who shed his brother's blood, should have his own spilt.

No good Indian has the rope about his neck. If a white man killed an Indian, not in self defence, the rope would be put around his neck. He saw red-coats, they were here to protect Indians and whites.⁷

What Big Bear really meant was that he did not want to lose his freedom, as an animal with a rope around its neck, but the misinterpretation stuck. Big Bear already had a reputation as a stubborn man, and now whites were also thinking he had something evil in him, or was of criminal bent. This would return to haunt Big Bear for many years, as officials used it to dismiss him as an evil, cowardly Indian.

After that, the opportunity for real discussion was lost, both Big Bear and Morris deciding to leave further discussion for another year. Before Morris left, Big Bear again attempted to clarify his intentions:

I am glad to meet you, I am alone; but if I had known the time, I would have been here with all my people. I am not an undutiful child, I do not throw back your hand; but as my people are not here, I do not sign. I will tell them what I have heard, and next year I will come.⁸

Big Bear was now more apprehensive than ever about the way things were turning out. He worried more and more about the bad portents of starvation, disease and warfare made when the Iron Stone was removed. His plains people had not been properly dealt with by Treaty.

Although he would meet again with the Treaty Commissioner the following year, Big Bear vowed to be extremely cautious. He would not allow the whitemen to "put a rope around his neck" and take his freedom away from him. Sweetgrass, the foremost Chief at Treaty, had died four months after Treaty signing from the accidental discharge of a gun he had been given as a gift for signing Treaty. Indians believed such things were not accidental but rather influenced by the spirit world. Was this then not a bad omen? With the death of Sweetgrass, Big Bear became the leading Chief of the Plains Cree. He also represented several Bands of Indians who had not signed Treaty Six.

Big Bear had been aware of the revision in 1875 of Treaties One and Two signed in 1871. It would therefore be possible, he reasoned, to get revisions to Treaty Six. By holding out from signing, he hoped he would be able to obtain better terms.

In 1877 the Commissioner did not return, but instead sent a clerk who was empowered only to pay annuities and take adhesions. He had no power to negotiate different terms of Treaty. In addition, because of their near starving conditions, Big Bear decided not to have all his followers go to the Treaty payment. Instead he came only with a few headmen. This caused the clerk to report that Big Bear did not have a large following, a falsehood which only led government officials to treat Big Bear with less importance.

In reality, Big Bear's influence was growing steadily among Indians because of their increasing dissatisfaction with reserve life. By the spring of 1878, over 2,000 Indians from various prairie Bands had joined his camp.

By the time of the 1878 Treaty payment meeting, the government had also signed Treaty Number Seven with the powerful Blackfeet Nation, clearing the last major obstacle to the government's plans to build the railroad across the prairies.

Again Big Bear came to the 1878 meeting with only a few lodges, preferring not to have the temptation of readily available Treaty money influence his followers. A new Commissioner, David Laird was there to try and convince Big Bear to take Treaty.

The Treaty Indians, now about 2,000 strong, had agreed not to take their Treaty money until Big Bear's meeting had taken place. They supported any improvements he might be able to secure.

The meeting did not go well. The Commissioner had already heard negative things about Big Bear and "came to the conclusion that he was an untrustworthy and Bad Indian."⁹ Laird also told Big Bear that he had no authority to alter the Treaty, a statement which was not totally true. With that, Big Bear departed in disgust, leaving Laird with his demands and requesting that next time the government should send someone who did have authority. Big Bear was beginning to wonder what type of government he was trying to deal with, since he seemed to be receiving little attention or sympathy for his starving followers.

Around this time, Big Bear had a disturbing vision:

I saw a spring shooting up out of the ground. I covered it with my hand, trying to smother it, but it spurted up between my fingers and ran over the back of my hand. It was a spring of blood.¹⁰

Visions were extremely important signs to the Indian people. Big Bear interpreted the vision as meaning that further actions might lead to bloodshed.

At this point, he made a decision which must have been difficult for him. He decided he would stop organizing non-Treaty Indians to press for their demands. Instead, he decided to leave things in the hands of the Great Spirit. He would wait a total of four years and see what would happen before deciding whether or not he would sign the Treaty.

He returned to see Commissioner Laird and announced that he would seek no further meetings unless the government asked him to do so. In the meantime, he told Laird, he would "watch to see whether the Government would faithfully carry out its promises to the Indians."¹¹

A Time of Indecision

Unfortunately, rumours began to circulate among the white population of the region that Chief Big Bear was trying to make trouble and could turn to violence at any time. It was a time of apprehension among whites because of discontent expressed by even the most peacefully inclined Chiefs such as Mistawasis and Starblanket.

Moreover, the roaming of Big Bear, who continued to hunt in the area of Cypress Hills and the Battlefords, worried the settlers. It was known that many of the wilder, more volatile of the younger men of the Plains Indians had gravitated to Big Bear's Band, preferring the hunting lifestyle to one of boredom on the reserves. Invariably, an unexplained disappearance of farm animals or other unusual events would be blamed on Big Bear, although there is no evidence that Big Bear strayed from his promise not to harm or disturb settlers.

When Edgar Dewdney assumed the position of Indian Commissioner of the North West Territories, one of his experiences was a chance meeting with Big Bear at Fort Walsh on July 2, 1879. With Big Bear were Little Pine, Lucky Man and Thunder Child.

Dewdney was impressed with Big Bear, saying "he is of a very independent character, self-reliant and appears to know how to make his own living without begging from the government."¹²

Dewdney was an astute man. He knew Indian resistance to signing the Treaty was weakening in the face of starvation and the desire to receive rations and Treaty money. In a persuasive speech, he played on their fears for the future and on the government's willingness to help them once they agreed to the Treaty. The Treaty, he told them, could not be changed further.

He was largely successful, as Little Pine, Lucky Man and Thunder Child, along with 472 of their followers, agreed to take Treaty. Big Bear's following had now been reduced by half, but Big Bear remained true to the pledge he had made earlier to wait four years before deciding. The government had no plans to meet Big Bear's demands.

By the fall of 1879, it was becoming harshly clear that the buffalo were nowhere to be found on the Canadian prairies. Big Bear was now faced with an unpleasant decision — whether to go south of the border in pursuit of buffalo. In the winter of 1880, Big Bear's Band camped on the Milk River south of Fort Walsh and hunted around the Bearspaw Mountains.

Here, new problems arose. The unscrupulous whiskey traders were only too willing to barter for buffalo hides. In addition, the Band was unprotected from horse thievery or other harassment, as they were regarded as foreigners.

Louis Riel, who had been in exile since the Red River uprising, invited Big Bear to visit him at St. Peter's Mission in Montana. There Riel told him that the North West rightfully belonged to the Indians and the halfbreeds. Riel scoffed at the Treaties, urging Big Bear to take up arms and fight the Queen. Big Bear rejected Riel's overtures, replying: "We should fight Her with Her own laws."¹³ But it was evident that Riel's message had appealed to some of the younger warriors of the Band. Big Bear avoided further meetings with Riel while south of the border.

By the summer of 1880, over 5,000 Indians, most preferring not to stay on their reserves, were camped in the Fort Walsh area. They refrained from pursuing buffalo on the American side of the border and lived on rations distributed at the Fort. Indian discontent and unease were being contained only with difficulty. During this time there was opportunity for discussion, and Big Bear attempted to persuade various Bands to

form one big reserve near Fort Walsh. When other Bands returned to their reserves for the winter, Big Bear once more turned south to the United States.

It was difficult for Big Bear to safeguard his Band, and he had numerous meetings with local ranchers, townspeople and other Indians whenever there was a dispute or trouble. Big Bear scrupulously made certain any property stolen by a member of his Band was returned. The property was even advertised in efforts to return it to the rightful owner. Fortunately, the problems which arose were all solved.

By June, 1881, 3,000 Indians had again left their reserves to camp around Fort Walsh. The dissatisfaction among the Bands had not lessened, and now Poundmaker was taking over leadership and calling together various Chiefs to discuss their grievances.

Indian Department officials, irate at Poundmaker's actions, accused him of "exciting sedition", and refused to pay the annuities of the Battleford Indians at Fort Walsh. Relations were so strained that Indians rode around the Fort firing their guns off and the Police feared a general attack, but no annuities were available for Poundmaker. Threatened by a cut-off of rations, Poundmaker led his Band back to Battleford.

During this time, Big Bear had remained in the United States and had been having his own troubles. Pressure was mounting to use force if necessary to drive his Band back to Canada.

An incident occurred that summer in which a detachment of American soldiers surrounded some members of Big Bear's Band who were butchering buffalo. Some of the Indians were beaten and their horses were confiscated. On learning this, some of Big Bear's warriors wanted to fight, but Big Bear overrode them and travelled to Fort Assiniboine to try to get the horses returned. But there, the commanding officer refused to do anything, telling them in no uncertain terms, "You are thieves from another land and you should be shot like dogs."¹⁴

Big Bear moved his camp north of the Missouri, closer to the Canadian border. In the spring of 1882, the United States Army carried out the Milk River Expedition to drive Canadian halfbreeds and Indians north of the border. The halfbreeds were set on first. Over 100 of their homes were burned and they were forced to relocate to Wood Mountain.

Fortunately, Big Bear's Band had caught wind of the attack. Authority over the Band was put in the hands of Wandering Spirit, the Warrior Chief. In a brilliant retreat, the Band covered any signs of its tracks so well that the army's scouts were unable to find them.

When Big Bear's Band reached Cypress Hills in April of 1882, they found that little had changed. Two thousand Indians were camped around Fort Walsh. They were living on what was frequently less than one pound of meat and one pound of flour given to families each day. But Big Bear's Band members, not being Treaty Indians, were not even allowed these meager rations. Now they were also hearing rumours that the government planned to close down the Fort completely and stop giving rations there.

A Doctor Jukes who saw Big Bear's camp late that summer wrote a report which reached John A. Macdonald. In the report he stated:

They are literally in a starving condition and destitute of the commonest necessaries of life. The disappearance of the buffalo has left them not only without food, but also without Robes, mocassins and adequate Tents or 'Tepees' to shield them from the inclemency of the impending winter. Few of their lodges are of Buffalo hide, the majority being of cotton only,

many of these in the most rotten and dilapidated condition. ... Their clothing for the most part was miserable and scanty in the extreme. I saw little children at this inclement season, snow having fallen, who had scarcely rags to cover them. Of food they possessed little or none; some were represented to me as absolutely starving and their appearance confirmed the report made of their condition. ... It would indeed be difficult to exaggerate their extreme wretchedness and need, or the urgent necessity which exists for some prompt and sufficient provisions being made for them by the Government.¹⁵



Big Bear's Camp in 1883 - on the verge of starvation. (Public Archives of Canada)

Big Bear was in a real quandary. Four years had now passed yet Big Bear was unable to decide whether he should sign the Treaty. He saw only unhappiness among other Bands. The younger members of the Band, including Big Bear's own children, were beginning to see him only as an old man who could not make up his mind and was causing needless suffering.

When Treaty payment time came, the strain was too great. If Big Bear signed, the Indians would receive this year's annuities, and they would also get back-payments for two years. One of Big Bear's daughters vehemently insisted that her father sign the Treaty. For many, it was a question of whether or not their babies would survive the coming winter.

Big Bear Accepts Treaty

By the end of the Treaty payment session, 133 members had broken away from Big Bear's Band and taken Treaty. Big Bear was now left with only 114 loyal followers.

Finally Big Bear, thinking of the needs of his Band, approached Police Commissioner Irvine in a last attempt to get better Treaty terms. Over several days, in sessions sometimes extending well into the night, Big Bear pointed out the shortcomings of the Treaty and his apprehensions about signing it, but it was of no use.

Finally on December 8, 1882, after giving a four hour speech, Big Bear realized that further attempts would be fruitless and signed his mark on an adhesion to Treaty Six.¹⁶

Big Bear had been deeply hurt by the divisions his ordeal had caused with his sons Imases and Twin Wolverine. He had done his best to bring improvements to the Treaty, but this had resulted in nothing but frustration and disappointment.

Fort Walsh was closed down in May, 1883, and Indians were forced to move away from the Cypress Hills area. Big Bear's Band was given a chest of rice, 25 pounds of sugar and shotguns with ammunition with which to make the move to the area near the North Saskatchewan River where the government wanted them to settle. The 21 day trip was not pleasant, and some of the Band died on the way. At least Big Bear's Band was able to survive the winter with their substantial annuity money and government aid.

During the years following the disappearance of the buffalo, Indians had suffered a horrible death rate. While there was no official census in 1870, a rough estimate of the total Indian population in the Northwest would be 40,000. By 1880 the total number of Treaty Indians was counted at 32,549. By 1885, this number had declined to 20,170. This meant there was an average of over 2,000 more deaths than births each year and a mortality rate of approximately 1 in 10 each year.

✓ When Big Bear arrived at Fort Pitt, he did not find things to his liking. The Indian Agent wanted him to go to a reserve site which Big Bear had never seen or selected. Big Bear heard bad stories about Delaney, the Farm Instructor in the area. There were rumours that he had mistreated some of the Indian women and had sent Indians he didn't like to prison on false charges.

✓ Even worse were stories of Agent Thomas Quinn, a part-Sioux American who had a reputation for insensitivity and offensiveness toward Indians. Quinn's father had been killed by Dakota during the Minnesota troubles of 1862, a fact which may have hardened his feelings towards Indians. Not only was he disliked by Indians, but the Indian Department was questioning the wisdom of having him in a position where he had to deal with a volatile Band.¹⁷

Big Bear knew he had the right to select the location of his reserve. He decided to camp at Fort Pitt near William McKay, the Hudson's Bay Company Factor he had become friends with over many years of trading at the Fort.

What struck Big Bear most upon his arrival at Fort Pitt were the complaints being aired to him by Indians of other Bands. He felt obligated to do something, and began sending out suggestions that the Chiefs meet in a Grand Council the following year, 1884. Poundmaker offered to host the gathering during the annual Thirst Dance at his reserve.

On hearing of Big Bear's intentions, the government decided to station a detachment of 24 North West Mounted Police at Fort Pitt under Francis Dickens, son of the famous English novelist.

The winter of 1884 was especially harsh. During his tour of the North West in 1884, Lawrence Vankoughnet, Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, highest official in Indian Affairs after Sir John A. Macdonald, threatened that if Big Bear did not move onto a reserve by November, he would cut off rations for his Band. This contradicted previous promises by Dewdney that Big Bear would receive rations if he wintered at Fort Pitt.¹⁸

That threat only had the opposite effect of making Big Bear more reluctant to take a reserve. He felt that Vankoughnet would be clearly violating the Treaty by refusing to supply rations to his destitute Band. However, November came, and the rations were cut off. Big Bear's Band was forced to survive on whatever game they could hunt.



Imases - one of Big Bear's sons. (Public Archives of Canada)

Again, Big Bear was becoming the focal point of frustration and resentment among his followers. There was growing division in the Band, with Imases and Wandering Spirit leading the dissenters. Big Bear reacted by spending more and more of his time alone hunting. He would stay away for days at a time.

✓ Frustration was mounting in the Band. Yayakootyawapos, Big Bear's father-in-law, exasperated by the lack of success of the hunt, went to Farm Instructor Delaney to beg for rations for his family. Delaney was forced to deny his request, but Yayakootyawapos refused to leave and sat stubbornly on a pile of frozen fish. Delaney grabbed him by the arm to push him out. When the Indian responded by pulling out a knife, Delaney fled, locking the man inside the ration house. The police arrested Yayakootyawapos, and he was later sentenced to two years in prison at Battleford. This was only one of the increasingly common confrontations between Indians and Indian Agents in the North West.

Leading A Political Movement

Big Bear's resolve grew stronger. He heard that Chief Piapot had invited the Treaty Four Chiefs to a meeting on Pasqua's reserve near Fort Qu'Appelle. Big Bear decided

he would ask the Treaty Six Chiefs to empower him to speak on their behalf, then travel to see Piapot. From there he would travel to Ottawa, where perhaps he could find someone who could do something about Indian grievances. On February 23, 1884, the following was reported in the Saskatchewan Herald:

He has seen and conversed with many of the chief officers of the Department but none of them seems to be 'the head' - there is always someone higher. To settle who this higher power is has now become the one object of his (Big Bear's) life.¹⁹

Big Bear had also come to a decision as to the location of his reserve. He picked the area between Poundmaker and Sweetgrass reserves.

Agent Rae and Commissioner Dewdney readily supported the idea. However, when the recommendation was forwarded to Ottawa, Vankoughnet rejected it, saying he feared it would be a "repetition of the Fort Walsh mismanagement as regards these Indians, namely a big camp composed of all the idle Indians in the country, being fed at large expense."²⁰

It was an unusual refusal, based on questionable reasons, of a choice made by a recalcitrant Chief. Dewdney had to relay the unfortunate news to Big Bear, the Chief would have to settle near Fort Pitt by June. In the meantime, rations were restored to the Band.

As the time for the large gathering on Poundmaker's Reserve grew near, rumours began to spread that Big Bear was trying to cause trouble and trying to incite Indians to rebel.

Trouble which had occurred at the Thirst Dance at Poundmaker's reserve in 1884 had bothered Big Bear, however, so he requested a reserve near Buffalo Lake so he could be away from the trouble and near his son Twin Wolverine, who had moved there. Again his request was turned down. He was to settle at Fort Pitt only.

Louis Riel's arrival in Saskatchewan was hailed with guarded optimism by many. His success in forcing the government to create the Province of Manitoba in 1870 had led many Metis, whites and Indians to think he might be able to effect some change. Big Bear decided to attend the council of Chiefs at Duck Lake in July, 1884. Louis Riel would address the meeting. Perhaps Riel's presence would make a difference.

The Indian Department, fearing what influence Riel might have, in a last minute deal offered to provide rations for the Indian meeting on the condition that they meet at Fort Carlton and publicly present their grievances.

It was the type of opportunity Big Bear had long yearned for. He spoke at length on his grievances. By the meeting's end, a list of 18 grievances had been presented.

The medicine chest for each reserve had not materialized; schools had not been provided on all reserves; oxen were too wild and either died or were killed; cattle were so wild they could not be stabled in winter and died of exposure; wagons were so poorly made that they broke down, and horses to pull them were unbroken broncos. The chiefs also said that Lieutenant-Governor Morris had promised that they should not be short of clothing, 'that they never received any and it is feared that this winter some of them will be unable to leave their homes without freezing to death.' They requested that all inferior implements and stock previously issued to them be replaced with better quality items and that more threshing mills, mowers, reapers and rakes be provided so they could

farm like the white man. Maps showing the boundaries of reserves, were requested to be sure they were not being robbed. On the subject of food, they said that 'the promises made to them at the time of their Treaty was that when they were destitute, liberal assistance would be given to them. That the crops are poor, (musk)rats are scarce, and other game is likely to be so, and they look forward with the greatest fear to the approaching winter.'²¹

Big Bear summed up by saying that if all those grievances could be met, the Indians would regard their Treaty as having been fulfilled. In addition, they made it clear that they did not think the Queen was at fault, and that only the government in Ottawa was to blame.

Soon after the Carlton meeting, Riel sent a message to Big Bear inviting him to visit at Prince Albert. On August 15th, they met above Jackson's Drug Store in Prince Albert. Little agreement was reached, however. As the Saskatchewan Herald noted, "the old man does not seem to have been favorably impressed by the prospects held out to him by Riel."²² The only tangible outcome was the inclusion by Riel in his platform of a statement saying "the Indians' rights should be protected as well as their (the Metis') own."

Now, perceiving that the government was feeling the pressure of Indian political activity in the West, Big Bear decided to wait longer before taking a reserve. It was the only bargaining advantage he had left. The grievances from the Carlton meeting had caused a stir in Ottawa. Even Sir John A. Macdonald made the effort to read the texts of the Treaties. The government decided to treat Big Bear with deference, and wait to see what would happen. Preparations were made to bolster the police forces, and attention was given to demands by some in the North West that military outposts be established there. Meanwhile, Big Bear wintered at Frog Lake to be near the Indian Department ration house.

The winter of 1884-85 was long and bitter. The Indians cut 600 cords of wood for the Indian Department in return for rations. The dissatisfaction over not being settled on a reserve continued to cause division among the Band members. Poverty was appalling and suffering was great in the tattered tents which were their only shelter from the cold.

At Frog Lake, however, the stage was being set for disaster. Some of the most volatile Indian warriors, particularly Wandering Spirit, were talking of using violence to solve Indian problems. With the presence of Indian Agent Quinn, probably the most stubborn and insensitive agent in the Indian Department, the situation was a powderkeg needing only a lighted fuse.

On March 19, 1885 Riel proclaimed his provisional government. The situation quickly became more serious when the confrontation between the North West Mounted Police and Metis occurred at Duck Lake on March 26, 1885.

The Duck Lake Fight

Rumours were rife that winter. Some said that Riel was organizing an invasion force south of the border. Many of these rumours were started by people who wished to spur the government in Ottawa into action. Many felt they could profit from a decision to station a military force in the North West.

One rumour, started by Lawrence Clark, Hudson's Bay Company factor at Carlton and

member of the North West Territories Council, built up momentum toward the Resistance of 1885. Early in the winter of 1885, Clark returned from Winnipeg and told some Metis that their continued agitation was going to be answered, not with scrip, but with bullets. He said a force was already preparing to come to the North West.²³

This caused tremendous disturbance among the Metis. They believed the army was coming to attack them and Riel. Meetings were hastily held, and Riel decided that immediate action had to be taken. Without consulting the Indian Chiefs or many of the Metis, he proclaimed his provisional government to be in power.

As a first action, the provisional government prepared to defend itself. Riel took steps to procure arms and provisions, and sent a message to Superintendent Crozier at Fort Carlton demanding that he surrender the Fort immediately or face the consequences.

Crozier was not ready to take rash action. He was prepared to wait at Carlton for reinforcements to arrive. However, some of the civilians began to taunt him, asking if he was afraid of the Metis. Crozier, to save face, decided to go to Duck Lake with 56 Police and 43 volunteers and secure the provisions in the town's store.



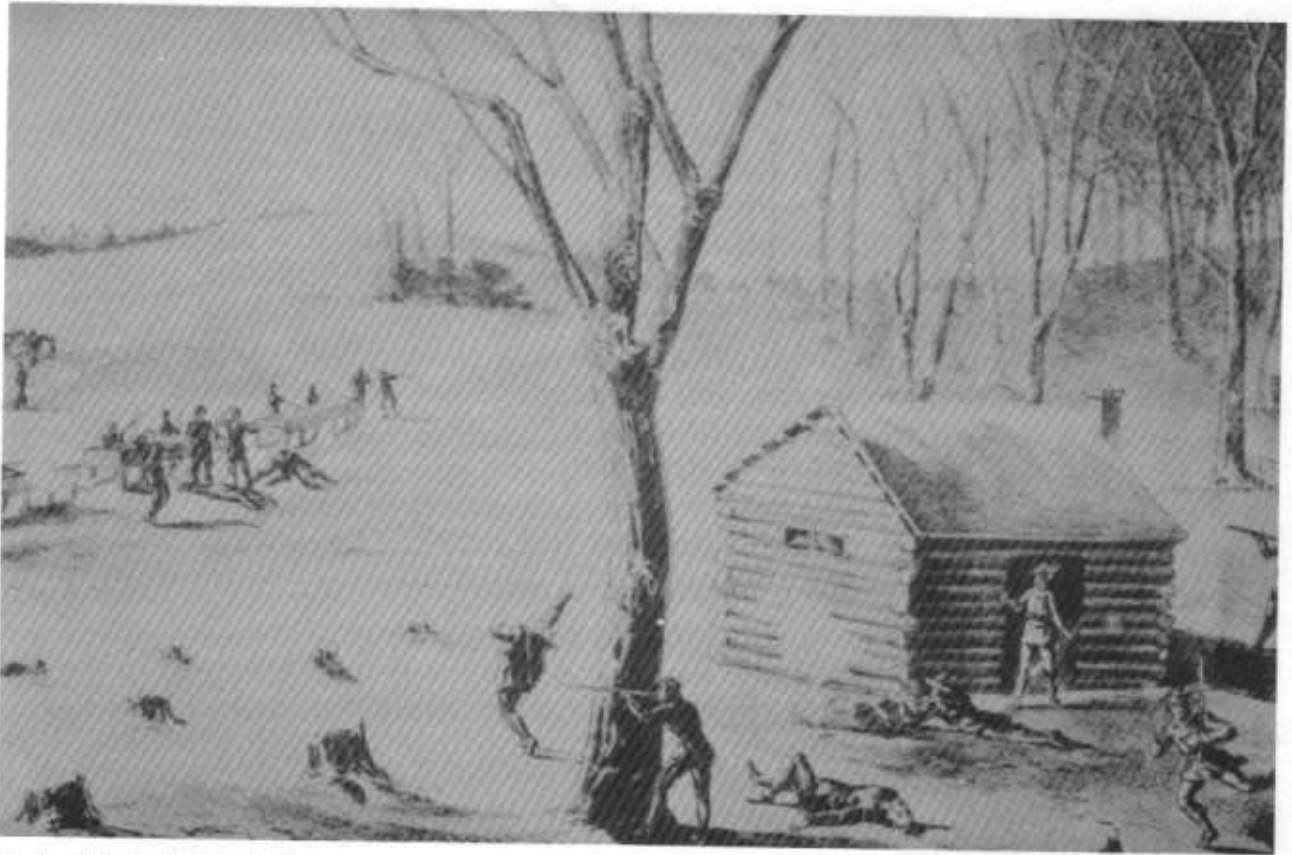
Fort Carlton in 1885 before the outbreak of the Resistance. (Saskatchewan Archives)

Crozier attempted to avoid a confrontation with the Metis by taking a trail through Beardy's Reserve, which lie directly between Fort Carlton and Duck Lake. When Crozier and his men reached the reserve, they stopped at Chief Beardy's house. Beardy was annoyed at the intrusion of the police on the reserve, but assured Crozier that he had nothing to do with Riel's actions. However, some of the restless young men of the Band, looking for excitement, had already joined the Metis on their armed patrols.²⁴

When the Police and volunteers were almost out of the reserve, they encountered Gabriel Dumont with 26 Metis and Crees. Both sides took refuge, the police and volunteers in a clump of trees and the Metis in a ditch. More Metis arrived from nearby Duck Lake and took shelter in a house facing the clump of trees.

According to history, Crozier and interpreter Joe McKay came out to meet Isidore Dumont (Gabriel Dumont's brother) and Assiyiwin, a Headman of Beardy's Band. A scuffle broke out. Assiyiwin tried to grab Joe McKay's rifle. Crozier, believing that the Metis were planning an ambush, ordered McKay to shoot. McKay shot Isadore

Dumont, who died instantly. McKay then shot the unarmed Assiyiwin, who died the following day from his stomach wound.



The Duck Lake fight marks the outbreak of the 1885 Resistance. (P. Charlebois Collection)

Following the shooting of Dumont and Assiyiwin, about 200 Metis entered the fray. Some of the volunteers tried to rush the nearby house and were shot down. The police, alarmed by their casualties, began to retreat. Riel, who had arrived unarmed, stood near the road, openly exposed to gunfire, waving a crucifix in his hands.

It was a decisive defeat for the police. Riel refused to allow the Metis to pursue the fleeing police. Four Metis and three times as many police and volunteers had died. The fight had taken place on Beardy's Reserve, however. In the eyes of many, it confirmed their suspicions: Indians had joined the Metis in the Resistance. ✓

The official interpretation of the event at Duck Lake was that Beardy's Band had joined the Resistance. The story of Assiyiwin, however, paints an entirely different picture. An older man, with poor eyesight, Assiyiwin was hardly likely to be riding with young armed fighters. Moreover, as one of Beardy's Headmen, he must have shared Beardy's disassociation from Riel's activities and Beardy's dislike of outside intruders on their Indian reserve land.

Chief Beardy was very distrubed, unhappy, over what was happening on his reserve, the shooting taking place on his reserve ... No! He was not fighting. He hated the battle on his reserve and the firing of guns on his land. . . . He did not say anything about that if any were killed. All he said was there was a lot of wrongdoing. . . . He therefore would not support what Louis Riel was doing.

Samuel Gilbert Seeseeqasis

How did an old, half-blind, unarmed Headman of the Band become involved in the fracas? Assiyiwin died a day after he was shot. What would his account have been? The following story is told by Harry Michael of Beardy's Reserve. Harry Michael's grandfather, who was the nephew of Assiyiwin, passed this story to him:

Assiyiwin had gone to town, to Duck Lake to visit a friend, a half-breed by the name of Wolfe. Over there he heard that there was going to be some trouble. Something very bad was going to happen. He had gone to town on horseback and he bought some goods from the store in Duck Lake which he tied to his saddle. He then started walking home. The town of Duck Lake was not too far from the camp.

The old man had very poor eyesight - he was almost blind. As he was approaching the reserve and the camp he noticed something. He heard a lot of voices, a lot of talking. But he could not see anything until he came near the people.

It was then a half-breed spoke to him - called in Cree and said, 'Stop! Don't you know what is going to happen?'

Assiyiwin said, 'I am blind. Exactly what is it?'

The half-breed answered, 'There is going to be a battle. Didn't you hear about it?'

Assiyiwin answered, 'Yes, I heard about it.'

The half-breed replied, 'You have walked right into it. Turn back where you came from.'

Assiyiwin answered, 'Ha! I cannot turn back. I'm home. This my reserve land. If you are going to have a battle, if you are going to spill blood, you cannot do it on our reserve land.' And he remained standing there with his horse.

The half-breed said, 'Go back where you came from.'

Assiyiwin replied, 'No, I am going home.'

This half-breed threw his coat at Assiyiwin. His name was Joe McKay. He said, 'Step over my coat ... I'll shoot you.'

That was the time when Assiyiwin heard someone saying while he was standing there, 'Don't shoot each other. Don't shoot.' It was said in Cree. It was a half-breed. He must have been very brave, coming into the centre of the two sides of the people on horseback, half-breeds and Indians on one side and North West Mounted Police on the other side. He was trying to tell the people not to shoot each other. He came running from the half-breed side. He did not know the name of this man. He was waving his hands shouting, 'Don't shoot each other! People are trying to find a way on how they can get along better. Don't try and kill each other.' He got as far as their location.

It was then Assiyiwin stepped over and passed the coat of McKay and said, 'I am going home.'

Assiyiwin witnessed the days of intertribal battles with the Blackfeet. Assiyiwin performed some brave acts when he had the strength and power in his legs. He had some scalps in a wooden

box. He had fought and killed in battles and scalped. This was a brave man. That is why he did not back out from Joe McKay's orders. He refused Joe McKay and stepped over past the coat and said he was going on home. He was not about to get frightened. His bravery must have returned to him in spite that he was an old man. The gun went off and fired. McKay shot the old man Assiyiwin down, hitting him in the stomach. Then there were blasts of gunfire coming from all directions.

They later came after the old man. He didn't die right away that night. He died at sunrise the following morning. He was the first Cree Indian killed. That's how my grandfather told this story.

Harry Michael

The government tried to prove that Beardy had been involved in the Resistance, but there was not enough evidence to bring him to trial. It later became clear that Chief Beardy had not ordered his men to support the Resistance. But since the violence at Duck Lake had occurred on Beardy's Reserve, the news spread that the Indian people were fully involved.

Chief Beardy was accused and suspected. The North West Mounted Police bothered him a lot. They kept on coming over to him - what white people call harassment. That he was getting all along. The officers failed to make him admit any wrongdoing. The Chief repeated his statement to the officers many times over again that he did not support the battles. He said to them, 'If my band members supported the battles, I did not give the order to fight.' He was so disturbed he almost became angry. Chief Beardy took off his Treaty Six medal and said, 'Take this medal. If you believe me, return it to me.' But they never returned the medal. We don't know if our grandfather made a bad deal or wrong move. He should have never surrendered his Treaty medal. What he wanted the North West Mounted Police to do was to take his word as telling the truth.

Harry Michael

The Frog Lake Massacre

Big Bear had left by himself to hunt on March 10th. He was still out on the hunt when news of the fighting at Duck Lake reached his Band on March 28th. The news did not appear to have any effect on Big Bear's Band. On March 30th, Inspector Dickens at Fort Pitt suggested that the whites at Frog Lake come to the Fort in case trouble broke out, but they declined, feeling that nothing would occur and that it would be best to carry on as usual.

Big Bear returned to the Indian camp, a short distance from Frog Lake, on April 1st, or "Big Lie Day", as the Indians called it. Nothing seemed amiss, and Big Bear visited Agent Quinn at Frog Lake and told him: "I am going to let them know and see that I am not going to rise."²⁵

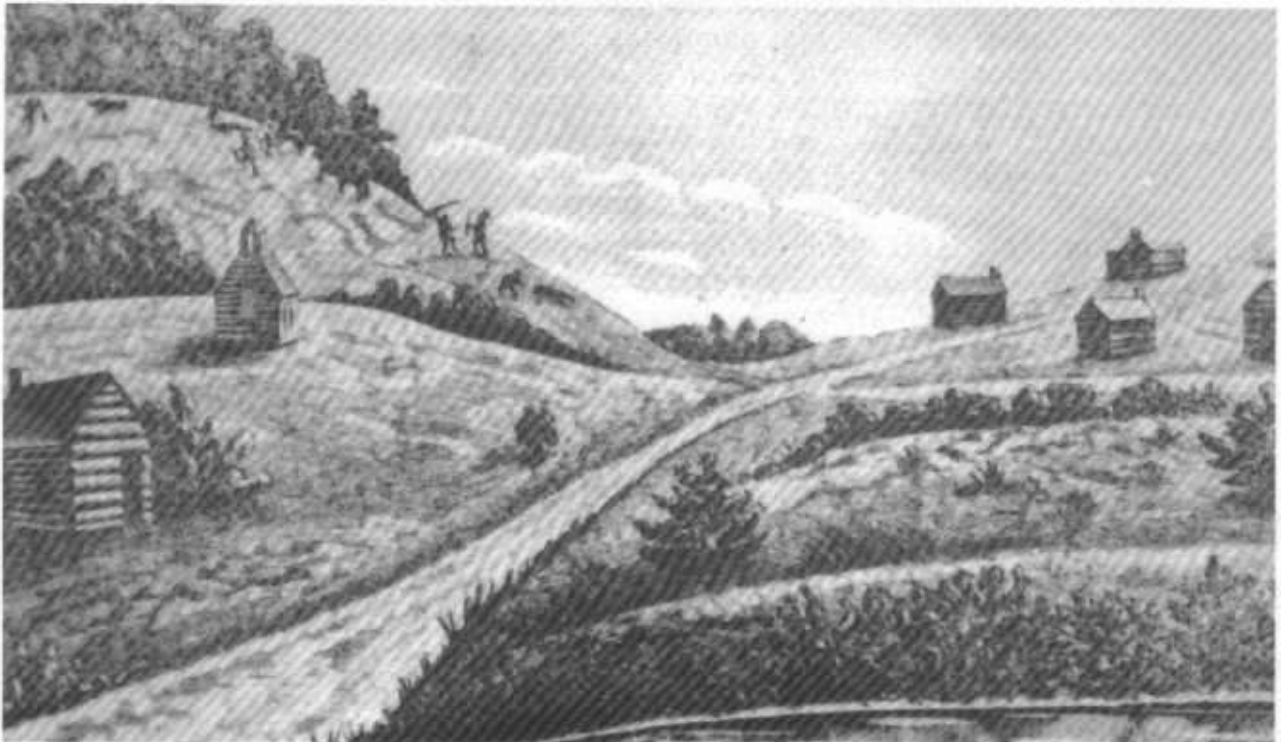
But trouble was brewing. During the night of April 1, Wandering Spirit and warriors of the Rattler Society secretly slipped away.

The Plainsmen (Wandering Spirit and the warriors) had a meeting, to discuss their next move. All those white men and white women, no one is to kill them, any of them, was the ruling made and agreed on by all. We will keep them alive. When everything settles, and nothing more happens, we will set them free. Oh! They made a good rule. No one is to get killed.

But now, very soon we will move our camp to the other end of the Lake. Everyone must move camp to that location, everyone. And now Cameron, the people came to him asking for supplies, food, the Plainsmen asked, or begged. They would not break in. And my grandfather would help in the store for Cameron to open the store. That went on all day. He was getting tired, as he would give what they asked for. As time went on, he was fed up, tired. When the Plainsmen came he refused to open the door when they came to ask for more, because they were coming too often. Cameron was tired.

They next time they came he refused to open the door of the big store. They heard the Plainsmen knocking the door down. They broke it, they broke it, ah! They started hauling supplies, rations. They were heard tramping on the floor, they took everything. It wasn't too long before they had emptied the floor of supplies.

Fred Horse



A sketch of Frog Lake in 1885. (Saskatchewan Archives)