

Case Study Overview — Poundmaker

The Problem:

Was Poundmaker truly guilty of treason-felony, the charge of which he was convicted on August 17, 1885?

The Situation:

1. People Involved:
 - Crowfoot
 - Robert Jefferson
 - Little Pine
 - Marquis of Lorne
 - General Middleton
 - Mosquito
 - Lieutenant Colonel Otter
 - Poundmaker
2. Locations Involved:
 - Battleford
 - Cutknife Hill
 - Poundmaker Reserve
3. Events Leading up to Poundmaker's Trial:
 - a) Poundmaker expressed concerns at the negotiations of 1876, but was supportive of Treaty Six.
 - b) Poundmaker made great efforts to develop agriculture on his reserve, but was interfered with by Indian Agents.
 - c) Poundmaker hosted a Thirst Dance for several Bands on his reserve. The ceremony was broken up when the North West Mounted Police attempted to arrest two men, and fighting nearly erupted.
 - d) Upon hearing of the troubles breaking out around the country, Poundmaker, accompanied by a large number of Indians, went to Battleford to reaffirm his loyalty and request increased rations. The people of Battleford had barricaded themselves in the North West Mounted Police barracks on March 29, 1885.
 - e) After burning and looting started at Battleford, Poundmaker lead his followers back to his reserve, where they remained camped at Cutknife Hill until attacked in the early dawn of May 2, 1885 by Lieutenant Colonel Otter's military forces.
 - f) Poundmaker, forced against his will to go to Batoche, tried several times to escape or delay the march. As the Indians drew near Batoche, they received news that Louis Riel's forces had been defeated.
 - g) Poundmaker surrendered to General Middleton at Battleford on May 26, 1885.

The Analysis

1. Did Poundmaker have an unfavorable attitude toward Canadian authorities before the Resistance?

2. Did Poundmaker lay siege to the town of Battleford on March 29, 1885?
3. Did Poundmaker, in the words of the court, "assemble and meet together ... to raise, make and levy insurrection and rebellion against our said Lady the Queen" at Cutknife Hill?
4. What could have been the consequences if Poundmaker had not resisted the move to Batoche, and the Indians had arrived before General Middleton's attack on May 9, 1885?
5. Did Poundmaker support Riel and the 1885 Resistance?
6. Was Poundmaker guilty of an intention "to levy war against our said Lady the Queen" and to "conspire, consult, confederate, assemble and meet together with diverse disposed persons ... to raise, make and levy insurrection and rebellion"?

Early Life

Poundmaker was born near Battleford in 1842 to an Assiniboine medicine man and his Metis wife. Poundmaker's father died a few years later, so his mother took Poundmaker and his younger brother, Yellow Mud Blanket, to live with their Plains Cree relatives. While Poundmaker was still a boy, his mother fell ill and died, leaving her two sons to grow up as orphans.³⁰



Poundmaker (*Pīhtokahanāpowiyin*) (Public Archives of Canada)

Poundmaker was born in an era of intense warfare between the Plains Cree and the Blackfeet. Animosity between the two nations had grown out of territorial conflicts caused by the fur trade. Every year, raids and counter raids occurred. It was dangerous adventure, but one which paid richly in bestowing status on the young warrior and adding prized possessions, such as horses, to his wealth. Poundmaker took part in such forays, the likes of which were not to last many more years.

As an orphan, Poundmaker had shared the lodges of many of his tribesmen, and learned to be independent and to fend for himself at an early age. He had become a skilled hunter, learning the ways and lessons of nature. Before Poundmaker had a family of his own, he could generously share the bounty of his hunt with others. He was well-liked for his generosity and his ability to listen and sympathize with the problems of others, qualities which no doubt developed because of his background.

The healing powers of the spirits responded to Poundmaker's call, and he was frequently asked to pray for the sick. He also had a wide knowledge of the use of plant medicines.

Eventually, Poundmaker took two wives and was selected as a Headman of his Band. It was as a Headman that Poundmaker visited the Blackfeet in 1872 and started one of the most notable relationships of the time.

Crowfoot's Adopted Son

Crowfoot, influential leader of the Blackfeet, was tired of the warfare against the Cree. A son, whom he loved greatly and whom he hoped would succeed him as Chief, had been killed in one of the many skirmishes.

In 1872, when Poundmaker visited the Blackfeet, Crowfoot saw in him some of the qualities of his lost son. As the two men got to know each other through further meetings, Crowfoot was increasingly impressed, and eventually asked Poundmaker to become his adopted son. Such adoptions were not uncommon in Indian tradition.

One of the great mutual interests shared by the two leaders was the establishment of permanent peace among Indians. The relationship between Crowfoot and Poundmaker would become important in maintaining such a peace.³¹ They were to become important leaders of a growing Indian peace movement, a movement meant not only to end intertribal warfare, but also to ensure peaceful relations between Indians and the white newcomers. Such peaceful intents were fundamental to the Indian adherence to the various Treaties soon to be signed on the prairies.

A Time of Change

The leading Chiefs of the prairies realized that times were changing and understood the threat that disease, starvation and intertribal warfare posed to the survival of their nations. Now the immigrants were coming in greater numbers. The common concerns of all Indian people were beginning to override their differences.

The 1860's had seen increasing efforts to establish peace between the Cree and the Blackfeet. A famous Cree Chief, Maskipitoon, had been a peace emissary between the warring groups, but he fell victim to a Blackfoot warrior's bullet in 1869.³²

A last fierce battle occurred between the Cree and the Blackfeet during the summer of 1870. Almost 300 Cree warriors were annihilated by Blackfeet armed with American repeating rifles.

During the early 1870's, the problems facing Indians mounted. Central to these was the declining number of buffalo. Providing nearly all the essentials for Indian livelihood on the Plains, the buffalo was regarded as the "ally and "sustainer" of the Indian people.

By 1875, American extermination of the buffalo had caused the buffalo to dwindle to less than 1,000,000 from an estimated original 60,000,000. Finding it increasingly difficult to locate buffalo, Indians from Canada journeyed more frequently into American territory to hunt. This led to complaints and conflicts. In 1873, thirty Assiniboines were massacred near Cypress Hills by white American wolf-hunters who believed the Indians had stolen their horses.

The Indian people, year after year during the early 1870's, expected some response from government authorities on negotiating a Treaty, and each year were disappointed. Finally, in 1875, messages were sent calling for a meeting the following year.

Supporting The Treaty

Poundmaker, then a Headman in Red Pheasant's Band, was influential enough at the Treaty Six negotiations to be among the first to speak. He said:

We have heard your words that you had to say to us as the representative of the Queen. We were glad to hear what you had to say, and have gathered together in council and thought the words over amongst us. We were glad to hear you tell us how we might live by our own work. When I commence to settle on the lands to make a living for myself and my children, I beg of you to assist me in every way possible - when I am at a loss how to proceed I want the advice and assistance of the Government; the children yet unborn, I wish you to treat them in like manner as they advance in civilization like the white man. This is all I have been told to say, now, if I have not said anything in a right manner I wish to be excused; this is the voice of the people.³³

Poundmaker was referring to one of the main concerns of the Indians; that of starvation. Mistawasis, a chief highly regarded by government officials, explained:

It is well known that if we had plenty to live on from our gardens we would not still insist on getting more provisions, but it is in case of any extremity, and from the ignorance of the Indian in commencing to settle that we thus speak; we are as yet in the dark; this is not a trivial matter for us.

We were glad to hear what the Governor was saying to us and we understood it, but we are not understood. We do not mean to ask for food every day but only when we commence and in case of famine or calamity.³⁴

There was a misunderstanding. Morris thought that the Indians were asking to be fed unconditionally all the time. This was not so. The Badger, one of the Indian spokesmen, tried to explain further.

I do not want you to feed me every day; you must not understand that from what I have said. When we commence to settle down on the ground to make there our own living, it is then we want your help, and that is the only way that I can see how the poor can get along.³⁵

Finally, Morris agreed to provide rations in order to get the Treaty signed. A section not added to any previous Treaties was now included:

That in the event hereafter of the Indians comprised within this Treaty being overtaken by any pestilence, or by a general famine, the Queen, on being satisfied and certified thereof by her Indian Agent or Agents, will grant to the Indians assistance of such character and to such extent as her Chief Superintendent of Indian Affairs shall deem necessary and sufficient to relieve the Indians from the calamity that shall have befallen them.³⁶

Poundmaker, however, wanted greater clarification:

I do not differ from my people, but I want more explanation. I heard what you said yesterday, and I thought that when the law was established in this country it would be for our good. From what I can hear and see now, I cannot understand that I shall be able to clothe my children and feed them as long as the sun shines and the water runs.³⁷

In his reply to Poundmaker's speech, Morris said "What I offered does not take away from your living, you will have it then as you have it now, and what I offer now is put on top of it." His tone was one of benevolence and goodwill. "All I can promise you is that you will be treated kindly, and that in extraordinary circumstances you must trust to the generosity of the Queen."³⁸

Poundmaker, at one point frustrated by what he felt was acceptance of the Treaty without adequate forethought, exclaimed:

The governor mentions how much land is to be given to us. He says 640 acres, one mile square for each family, he will give us. This our land! It isn't a piece of pemmican to be cut off and given in little pieces back to us. It is ours and we will take what we want.³⁹

Poundmaker, although one of those to question the substance of Treaties critically, eventually accepted the Treaty as the right way for his people. However, Big Bear recognized by Indians as the most important spokesman for the Plains hunters, had not appeared before the agreement was reached.

Chief Sweetgrass echoed the sentiments of those who assented to the Treaty:

I thank you for this day, and also I thank you for what I have seen and heard, I also thank the Queen for sending you to act for our good. I am glad to have a brother and friend in you, which undoubtedly will raise us above our present condition. I am glad for your offers, and thank you from my heart. I speak this in the presence of the Divine Being. It is all for our good, I see nothing to be afraid of, I therefore accept of it gladly and take your hand to my heart, may this continue as long as this earth stands and the river flows.⁴⁰

Reserves would not be surveyed immediately, and Poundmaker and his Band returned to their normal pattern of hunting. In fact, the Indian understanding of the Treaty was that it would not restrict them to the reserves, a concern which they had sought to have clarified.

Things did not look good for Poundmaker's Band, however. Sitting Bull's Dakota, after

having accomplished their victory at Little Big Horn, were now refugees near Cypress Hills. The Americans were burning grasslands south of the border to prevent the buffalo from getting into Canada. The Dakota were now competing with the Cree and the Blackfeet for the few buffalo to be found.

Meeting with Crowfoot and Sitting Bull confirmed Poundmaker's convictions about the futility of war and the need to settle down to a new way of life. By 1879, the buffalo herds had become a thing of the past on the Canadian prairies. Starvation was now widespread throughout the Indian Nations.

Edgar Dewdney, appointed Indian Commissioner in 1879, took on the task of administering the Treaties. When he arrived in the west, he made a tour of the Indian Bands, consulting with Indians and non-Indians. He found Indians in a desperate state. He reported that Indians were selling horses for a few cups of flour, and had been reduced to eating gophers and mice. Dewdney was astonished at the suffering Indians were experiencing. As Commissioner Macleod of the North West Mounted Police reported, "Hungry men are dangerous whether they be Indians or Whites, and I think it is a wonderful thing how well the Indian has behaved."⁴¹

Dewdney immediately ordered widespread distribution of rations, and distribution centres were set up at various locations, including Fort Walsh, Fort Qu'Appelle and Fort Pitt. Over the next few years, the cost of rations and assistance to destitute Indians would escalate to become the largest portion of the entire Indian Department budget.

Poundmaker Tries Reserve Life

When Poundmaker, Sweetgrass, Red Pheasant and other Bands settled on reserves, they began making attempts at farming. At the site for his reserve, Poundmaker selected a thirty square mile tract of land on the Battle River, overlooked by Cutknife Hill. The hill, a reminder of past Cree glory, was named after a great Sarcee Chief and warrior killed in a battle with the Cree years earlier. From Cutknife Hill, one could see 30 miles distant on a clear day.

The soil of the reserve was poor and sandy. There was quite a lot of wood, though not of very good quality. While Poundmaker could not speak English, he learned how to build log houses by observing local settlers with whom he had become friends.

Poundmaker was disappointed at the rations received during the first winter on the reserve. Was it not supposed to be more, as he understood in the Treaty? He also found the Indian Agents suggesting that his men chop wood, something they were not experienced at doing, to sell in town for a dollar a cord. This was part of the Indian Department's directive that if Indians were to receive rations, they would have to work for them. Already, misunderstandings were beginning to develop over what the Treaty promised and what the Indian Department was doing.

Farm Instructors were later appointed to help the Band, but there were a great number of problems. The equipment provided was inadequate. Plows given to them were not big enough to break the sod. The oxen given to them were old, run-down, and unfit for work.

When Poundmaker's oxen arrived, the Band was anxious to try them on the plow. They had been freight animals before, so were not used to plowing. Though the virgin ground was hard to break and roots would sometimes knock the plow and men over, the Band

members continued enthusiastically until a small field was ready for seeding. It was their first experience with farming.⁴²

That summer, hunters scoured the surrounding countryside and were astonished to find not a single buffalo. The Indians wondered if they were being punished by the Great Spirit for having sold their land to the whiteman. Not finding the buffalo caused a painful feeling of loss which whites could not understand.

There were other problems as well. Tuberculosis, introduced by the whites and made worse by poor diet and the poorly constructed mud houses of the Indians, affected nearly everyone. One could tell which Indians had houses, because their eyes were red and sore from smoke caused by poor ventilation. That didn't happen in tipis.

Poundmaker became more and more anxious about the approaching winter. His men had not found enough game to store any meat. The grain had done fairly well, but the vegetables were destroyed by dry spells, insects, and moles.

Poundmaker approached the Indian Agent and indicated that the Band would need more rations that winter, but the Agent told him he did not have the authority to order more. Moreover, Poundmaker learned that the Agent would not permit his Band to sell their grain to buy food.

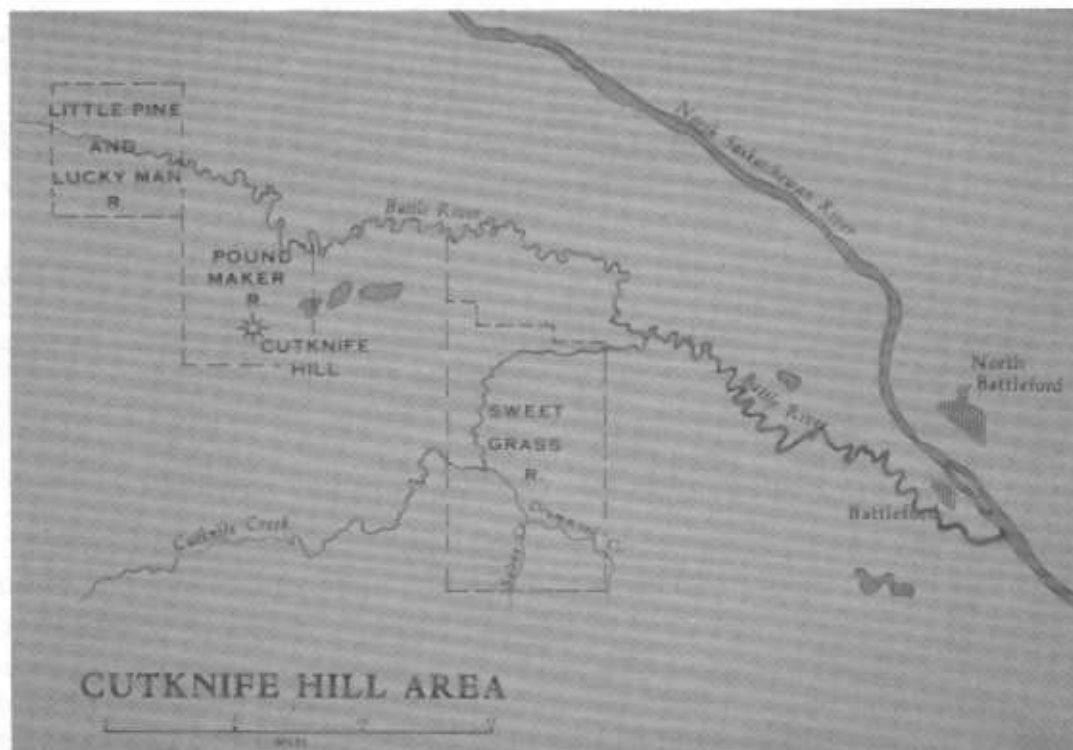
That incensed Poundmaker, who could only listen helplessly as the Interpreter spoke. The government's helpers were not able to ensure a bountiful harvest, and now they could not even ensure him rations for the winter. One half-pound of bacon and one pound of flour per family twice a week was not enough for survival. The rations were sometimes tainted and people believed it was making them sick. As he left the meeting Poundmaker was beginning to question whether the whiteman had only deceived him into believing he could live off the ground by farming.⁴³

Many suffered during the winter of 1880-81. Lodging was poor, with some, including Poundmaker, still living in skin tents. The Chief was often the last in the Band to have the necessities. On bitterly cold nights they would crowd into their tiny houses. To relieve their hunger and desolation, some would drink heavily of tea mixed with tobacco or painkiller from the Hudson's Bay Company store. They would have a "Tea Dance" and sing and dance until dawn to forget their misery.

Hunger and poor health made them lethargic and not very able to do the work demanded by the Agent. They were also finding the government's policy hard to understand. Now, when a person began to work for his own living, he would be cut off rations. Was this the help that government intended in the Treaties?

Sometimes the Chief had to order the killing of an ox for food. This was illegal for Indians, since the ox was not owned by the Band, but instead by the government. A Chief risked being deposed or otherwise punished for such acts.

Farm Instructors and Indian Agents also watched helplessly as things deteriorated. Government employees were expected to be "obedient servants". Indian Department officials knew there could be no straying from government policy, and some of the men who ran Indian Affairs were the toughest of all. Lawrence Vankoughnet, Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, the highest official only under the Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, Sir John A. Macdonald, was known to be a man whose main priority was to account for every penny spent and not to spend over what the government budget allowed.⁴⁴



Poundmaker's Reserve in the Cutknife Hill area. Big Bear wanted his reserve between Poundmaker and Sweetgrass, but the government refused. (Beal and Macleod)

Death became common on Poundmaker's reserve. He realized that he had to do something to ensure the survival of his Band and to avoid mounting dissatisfaction due to inactivity and frustration. He heard that there were buffalo south of the border, and determined he would take his men there. This raised the ire of the Indian Agent, who had been ordered to keep the Indians on their reserve.

Poundmaker became desperate to tell someone important about the problems of his people. He was soon to get his opportunity.

In the summer of 1881, Poundmaker was honored to play a special role. The Marquis of Lorne, Governor-General of Canada and son-in-law of the Queen, was touring, and Poundmaker was invited to act as guide and Cree-Blackfoot translator on the way from Battleford to Calgary.

Lorne's arrival in Battleford on August 13, 1881 was an occasion for great festivity among all area residents. On the trip to Calgary, Poundmaker had an opportunity to tell the Marquis more about Indian life. It was apparent that most whitemen thought that all Indians ever did was hunt and fight. They listened in fascination as Poundmaker explained the finer details of Indian customs and the Indians' desire for peace.⁴⁵

Poundmaker was invaluable to the entourage, leading it through territory which still didn't have well-established wagon trails, and which many whitemen avoided because of Indian warfare. Poundmaker was able to explain the difficulty Indians were facing in coping with the new lifestyle. He reassured Lorne that his Band was committed to adopting the new way of living, but that they could only do so with adequate government help. Lorne gave Poundmaker a gold watch in appreciation of his efforts.

In the summer of 1882, Poundmaker met his adopted father, Crowfoot, at Fort Walsh and they renewed their friendship. Both Crowfoot and Poundmaker had an opportunity to meet with Edgar Dewdney. Poundmaker related his frustration with farming to

Dewdney, and requested assistance in the form of more oxen and a grist mill. The grist mill would enable them to turn their grain into usable flour for bread. Poundmaker's Band returned to their reserve that fall.

Once again, the harvest on Poundmaker Reserve was disappointing. The potatoes were like marbles and other vegetables were shrivelled. There had not been enough rainfall. It was the second disappointing try in as many years. Poundmaker was also disappointed that no grist mill materialized that year.

Poundmaker was not to be discouraged, however. He was determined to set an example for other Bands of how hard work could make a success of farming. He was once warned that if he didn't give his oxen more of a rest, they would die. He urged his Band members to plant more gardens, plow and seed fields, haul logs and build fences. That year, over the protests of his wife, he agreed to send his eldest son to the Indian School at Duck Lake so he could get a better education. Poundmaker became an example for Indian Department officials to point to with pride.

Poundmaker's Band had received outstanding reports for their work. This was due almost entirely to Poundmaker's personal leadership and the willingness of his Band members to listen to him. The Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs states the following:

It was refreshing to me to find this chief so busily engaged building a house with his Indians, as scarcely to have time to talk to me in passing. When I last saw him he was on the 'war path' (figuratively), at Cypress Hills; however, we did not interrupt him long, but left him to his work, asking him to come and see us in the evening at the Instructor's house - in the meantime we took a look at the farms. Considering that this is the first year these Indians have remained steadily at work, they have made great progress; the work has all been done by themselves, under the direction of Mr. Samuel Ballentine, to whom great praise is due for his good management. Two Indians were engaged ploughing their land for the next crop with oxen, each directing his own team without a driver. Their work would have been a credit to even a white man. Their land is well fenced. In the evening the chief, with about a dozen of his principal men, came down to the house and we had a talk. I was happy to find there was no complaints. His most important request was to have his reserve extended and to take additional land on the north side of the Battle River.⁴⁶

Poundmaker, however, had a well-founded concern that he didn't have any authority over the affairs of his Band. Was he not the Chief of the Band? Why was it that Indian Agents had to approve when or how oxen and equipment could be used? Certainly they were government property, but were they not for the use of the Band? Moreover, Poundmaker and other Chiefs were finding that frequently the Farm Instructors themselves did not know proper methods of agriculture. Yet, under Indian Department regulations, Indian Agents and Farm Instructors were given powers to override the Chief on any issue at any time.

It was at this point that the Indian Department's confusing and unpredictable policy was to complicate the problems. The Department was afraid that some Indian leaders, particularly those who were not converted to Christianity, were too influential.

The preservation of Indian culture and the right of Indian people to continue following their traditional beliefs had been assured to Indians during the Treaty negotiations, but now the government started a campaign to stamp out Indian traditional customs and

practices. All over the North West, the Indian Department threatened to depose Chiefs whom they perceived did not follow the wishes of the Department exactly.

Frustration and Disappointment

Poundmaker travelled to talk to other Chiefs. He heard the same stories of dissatisfaction and received promises that they would attend an upcoming meeting on his reserve.

When Poundmaker returned to his reserve he asked the new teacher, Father Cochin, to write a letter to Dewdney for him in which he complained about the failure of the Indian Department to provide proper assistance, and the trouble which interference by the Indian Agent had caused in his Band.

Poundmaker's Reserve, 10th November, 1882.

*Edgar Dewdney, Esq.,
Indian Commissioner.*

Honorable Sir, — It is Poundmaker who takes the liberty to send you a few lines. He entreats your honor to send to him the grist mill, with horse-power, you so kindly promised him at Cypress. We expected it last summer, but in vain. The consequence is we do not know what to do with our wheat, and have to starve, beside our big stacks of grain.

Please send likewise, wrenches in sufficient numbers for our ploughs.

Let me have twenty-two oxen you promised for my band. There are here sixteen or seventeen oxen, but we cannot use them as we like. Our Agent is the master of them all. If those cattle were delivered into our hands, I hope that we would show a good deal more work.

We have been always short of implements; last spring we could not even get a sufficient supply of seed in the shape of potatoes and wheat. Some Indian corn has succeeded well. Allow me to ask a little supply for next spring of Indian corn (early kind).

Please let us have a good supply of implements and we will do our best to support ourselves as soon as possible out of our farms.

There is today a great distress in my band. The rations are suspended now for 41 days, and, of course, everybody is busy roving about and hunting. It is impossible to work with an empty stomach. There will be no work during the whole winter on that account, and it will cause a great delay to the progress of our farms.

I trust the Government will be able to give us or rather to continue to give us a substantial help a little while longer, until we are able to support ourselves. It seems to me that we are as anxious to be independent as the Government are to get rid of the burden of supporting us.

In the name of my poor people. I have taken the liberty of writing to our Governor.

*Your most humble servant,
Poundmaker.⁴⁷*

The letter also reached Ottawa, where it caused heated debate on the running of Indian Affairs in the North West. It had the desired effect. Rations were reinstated and Poundmaker was able to convince his Band members to return to work.

Meanwhile, Edgar Dewdney, in addition to being Indian Commissioner, had assumed the position of Lieutenant-Governor of the North West Territories. Many were dissatisfied with the way he was handling the Indian Department. The Metis were unhappy that the government did not seem willing to recognize the boundaries of the strip farms they were occupying along the Saskatchewan River. Even whites were complaining about Dewdney's decision to move the territorial capital from Battleford to Regina, accusing Dewdney of doing this because he had land holdings there.

The winter of 1882-83 was terribly cold. From the United States came stories that a quarter of the Blackfeet had starved to death. That Christmas, Poundmaker took his Band to Battleford to perform a new ritual which was becoming more and more necessary among Indians in the North West, the "Begging Dance". In return for drumming, singing and dancing, the townspeople would give the Indians food and tobacco.

Spring came, and with it rain. It was hope for the crops. But the rain fell heavily on into the summer. Many of the fields were drenched and muddy, and the crops did not have time to mature. It looked like there would be another disappointing harvest.

Poundmaker and his Band members were beginning to have doubts. Was it possible that they had been deceived by the whiteman? Perhaps his Band would never be able to make a living off the land. Poundmaker decided to host the Thirst Dance on his reserve in the summer of 1884 and have all the Chiefs meet.

The Department now directed that the Indian Agent, not Poundmaker, assume total control over the work done on the reserve. When Poundmaker objected, the Agent threatened to cut off rations. Within a week, Poundmaker had left the reserve angrily, and Band members refused to work. Rations were cut off and people began leaving the reserve to hunt.

Indian Department officials were beginning to sense the increasing restlessness and dissatisfaction among Indians. Letters of warning from many whites working with Indians were sent to Ottawa. The following is one of those letters:

*Indian Office
Battleford, 5th July, 1884*

Private

My Dear Sir John:

I am taking the liberty of writing you a private letter on Indian Affairs in this country as they seem to be going the wrong way at present. Of course the following is only my private opinion, and as I have had some 14 years experience of Indians I should know something about it. ... If agents cannot be trusted to carry on their Districts new ones should be appointed; but it is nonsense to think that Mr. Vankoughnet or any one else can run Indian Affairs in this country without having previously had a thorough knowledge of Indians.

After new orders came out given by the gentleman mentioned above, trouble has occurred all through the country. Denny was the most sensible man, and resigned at once, saying he could not carry out the orders. The consequence is that the Blackfeet who have hitherto been quiet, are now out in small bands killing cattle everywhere they can see them. The same orders have caused the trouble both at Crooked Lake and here. As soon as Indians try to work and raise something for themselves their rations are immediately stopped. As the Indians themselves say "I don't think the Department really want us to do anything for as soon as we commence to work they give us nothing and we were far better off before especially in the South where they gave us rations of Beef, Tea, Flour, and Tobacco." ... Of course if it is the intention of the Department to follow out their Cast Iron Rules then full preparations should be made for an Indian war. If the true cause of all these late troubles gets into the newspapers it will do no end of harm to the Government.

*Yours faithfully,
JM Rae (Indian Agent)⁴⁸*

Such concerns were not welcomed in the east. The country had fallen into an economic recession. The government had gone into great debt building the transcontinental railroad and no more assistance could be given to the Indians. Instead, the Indian Department cut back its budget and granted its Indian Agents more power to deal with Chiefs who caused trouble. The Chiefs were to be arrested and punished.

In the spring of 1884, Robert Jefferson became the Farm Instructor on Poundmaker's reserve. It was a good choice since Jefferson, formerly the school teacher on the reserve, had married a relative of Poundmaker and could speak passable Cree. Jefferson was a welcome change from the previous Instructor, despite his very limited knowledge of farming. That spring, Poundmaker's Band seeded 150 acres of crop with little difficulty.⁴⁹

Narrowly Avoiding Bloodshed

Summer arrived and so did the various Bands, including Big Bear's. The Indian Department, opposed to the meeting all along, tried with the co-operation of the North West Mounted Police to order the Indians to return to their reserves. When that failed the Department cut off all rations.

The Chiefs decided to hold a Begging Dance in Battleford to obtain food. This further angered government and police officials, who were becoming increasingly upset at their lack of control over Indian movements. But the Begging Dance was held, and at one point during the drumming, North West Mounted Police Inspector Antrobus's horse was so frightened that the policeman was thrown off; the embarrassment enraged him.⁵⁰

Meanwhile, the cutoff of rations was being felt. On Little Pine's reserve, adjoining Poundmaker's on the west, Farm Instructor Craig, a man much disliked on the reserve, refused rations to an Indian requesting food for his sick child. When the Indian and his companion stood their ground, Craig began to push them out of the door. One of the

Indians replied by grabbing an axe handle and striking Craig on the arms and shoulders. Craig was more frightened than injured, but he fled to Battleford to report the incident to the Mounted Police.

Word came that the two offenders had joined the Thirst Dance gathering on Poundmaker's Reserve. Thirty Mounted Police were dispatched to make the arrests.

When the police arrived they entered the Sacred Lodge, a holy place respected in the way Christians respect their churches. The participants had fasted for days in preparation. The police searched the Sacred Lodge for the fugitives, and the atmosphere created by this intrusion was unfriendly. Some of the young warriors viewed the act of the police with hostility.

The police interrupted Poundmaker in the Sacred Lodge. They wanted the Chief to help them, but Poundmaker refused to disrupt the ceremony, saying that he would help only after it had ended. The police withdrew from the Lodge, realizing they could do little without Poundmaker's co-operation. But they prepared for possible trouble.

As night came, the police were ordered to gather all of the rations stored on the two reserves, and to herd as many cattle as possible to the ration house on Poundmaker's Reserve. As several loaded wagons began moving through the reserve, the night suddenly erupted with war cries and rifle shots. The wagons were surrounded. For several frightening minutes, the commotion continued. Miraculously, none of the police were shot, no shots were fired in defence, and the wagons were allowed to continue.⁵¹

For many of the men, it was the longest trip of their lives. Before leaving the reserve, they were forced to struggle with wagons mired in axle-deep mud, and at one point, they were forced to unload the carts and carry the rations by hand. In the dark they were utterly vulnerable to attack from any tree or bush; yet no attack occurred.

The next day, police reinforcements were brought to the reserve and defensive barricades were hastily thrown up around the ration house. The operation was turning into more than simply an arrest of two Indians. The authorities now wanted the Indian gathering broken up.

The ceremonies ended, but the two Indians responsible for the trouble refused to surrender to the police, fearing they would be severely punished or even hanged. They vowed not to be taken alive. To try to avoid further trouble, Poundmaker and Big Bear decided to approach the police themselves and, if necessary, be taken into custody until matters were settled. Superintendent Crozier pressed forward into the gathered crowd, however, determined to make his arrests.

Poundmaker's self-restraint had worn out. The tension of his hand on his warclub had made its four embedded knives dig into his skin, and blood trickled down his leg. Suddenly, Poundmaker swung his arm at a nearby policeman and took the man's rifle away.

Shoving, pushing and shouting broke out. A policeman was pulled off his horse, and rifles on both sides were raised. Big Bear, Poundmaker and other Chiefs shouted at their men not to be the first to shoot. Then, fortunately, the Indians sought by the police were located. Knowing that any further trouble would be because of them, they allowed themselves to be reluctantly dragged away.

The police thought of a diversionary tactic. They released all of the rations, no doubt more than the Indians had seen in a long time. The North West had only narrowly escaped an eruption of violence over some meager rations, but there seemed to be a foreboding in the land.

The disturbance at Poundmaker's Thirst Dance forced postponement of the planned Chiefs' meeting. It was rescheduled for Duck Lake at the end of July, and this time Louis Riel would be there to address the Chiefs.

The problems of the Metis were far different from those of the Indians. They had no confirmation of their land rights by government, while Indians had their reserves. Some warned Poundmaker that Riel was a fiery leader who might not hesitate to use the government's fear of an Indian uprising to further his own political ends. Poundmaker found this confusing, as neither he nor any other Chiefs had authorized Riel to speak on their behalf.

The Indian Department, wishing to avoid more trouble, made a deal with the Chiefs. The Indian Department would provide rations to the assembled Indians on the condition that their discussions be held at Fort Carlton and be open to government observers. This provided an opportunity for the Chiefs to lay their grievances out before the government in great detail.⁵²

After the conference at Fort Carlton, the Chiefs agreed that if nothing was done, they would meet in even greater numbers in 1885. In all likelihood, even the Blackfeet would attend.

It was now nine years since the Treaties had been signed. Hardship, sickness, starvation and death seemed to have tightened their grip on Indians, and there was little sign of the benevolence and happiness the Indians had been promised during the Treaty talks. The hardship among Indians was creating bitter feelings. At Battleford in 1885, for example, for the first time in several years, Indians did not come to town to take part in New Year festivities.

The So-Called "Siege of Battleford"

The news of the conflict at Duck Lake spread quickly over the North West. When Poundmaker heard of it, he was extremely upset. He felt compelled to assure the Indian Department that he intended to have nothing to do with the uprising. He called a meeting, and it was decided that he would go to Battleford accompanied by Chiefs Little Pine and Lucky Man. Perhaps now the government would listen more carefully to him and give more rations and supplies to his people. The Chiefs would be cautious, as illustrated by the statements of Chief Little Pine:

White man's population is great in numbers. The land across the ocean, they crowd like sand. You can defeat them here, but more will arrive continuously. What ammunition do you have? 'Nothing.' What food supply do you have? 'Nothing.' Our food supply no longer exists. You will defeat them only for a short time, and there will be more arriving. The time will come when you will scatter and run, you will run in different directions. Go to work, do not fight, as it was said by Chief Little Pine to his young men.

Alex Sapp

On March 28, 1885, Poundmaker accompanied by many hungry followers began working their way through the snow to Battleford. The first night they camped on Sweetgrass's Reserve, meeting with the Indians there. The Farm Instructors, McKay and Jefferson, were aware of Poundmaker's plans, and debated whether or not they should accompany the Indians. They decided to stay out of it.⁵³

The next day, the Indians arrived at the area near the Indian Department office and the old Territorial Building, which had been converted into the Battleford Indian Industrial School a few years earlier. To Poundmaker's surprise, the buildings and town were deserted. The townspeople, having heard of the troubles at Duck Lake, were convinced that Poundmaker had come to attack them. They had all retreated to the Mounted Police Barracks on the other side of the river.

There were other incidents which caused the townspeople to be afraid. When Poundmaker was on Sweetgrass Reserve, some of Riel's emissaries from Duck Lake arrived and urged him to join Riel and attack Battleford. But Poundmaker had many women and children with him. He was still in control and his mission was peaceful.

When the Metis people were preparing to have this uprising they sent two, we'll call them scouts, eh? They sent two scouts to each reservation in the area, to meet the people at night, with no lights, right in the house because Farm Instructors were living on each reserve, and missionaries, whatever denomination was living there. So they would not know what was going on.

So when it came to all the meetings here too, as far as I can gather is they all said no. We can't support you. We signed an agreement with the Crown, with the Queen, not to fight anymore, they were to live in peace with these people. We signed a Treaty, we have to live up to this Treaty.

Because we promised in the Name of God to keep the Treaty, we will offend Him. That's the first offence, we offend God. And we will offend if we fight after signing this agreement. So they were flatly refused all the way around.

Senator John B. Tootoosis

Another incident had occurred during Poundmaker's trip to Battleford. A day before the arrival at Battleford, a small group led by an Indian named Itka had shot and killed Farm Instructor Payne on Mosquito Reserve, just 15 miles south of Battleford.

This girl's close relative used to come and visit her quite often. Every time she came, she just open the door and come in, because they didn't have this tradition to knock at the door before coming in, because they were always living in tents and tipis. As soon as they came in, they told them Ta-Ta-Wow, you're welcome, in other words. And Payne one day, he told this girl, he said, next time you come in you knock at the door. Being not their tradition, she just walked in again. He grabbed the girl, threw her out and abused her. From that day the girl was sick, and the girl died. Well, the father bottled this up. As soon as they heard of this battle in Batoche, now, he said, it's time to go see this Farm Instructor. He loaded his gun and went, knocked at the door. Payne came and opened the door. Bang! killed him there. That's how they started and then these others, the fighting Tribes, Holy Smokes, they couldn't hold them. They all went different directions. They go after the settlers and so on. That's how it started. They raised trouble up there. And after they created all this trouble these Chiefs went to Battleford trying to settle it. But the officers of that barracks wouldn't talk with them. They wanted to talk with them to find out some ways and means, Poundmaker wanted to settle this up, not to be any further trouble.

Senator John B. Tootoosis

When Poundmaker realized what had happened, he sent a messenger to Indian Agent Rae at the Mounted Police barracks stating his peaceful intentions and requesting a meeting. William McKay, the trusted Hudson's Bay Company Factor from Fort Pitt, came out to meet Poundmaker. McKay told Poundmaker of the fears of the townspeople who had heard news of the Resistance. Agent Rae, however, refused to leave the barracks to see Poundmaker.

Meanwhile, trouble was brewing. Some of the Assiniboines who had gotten into trouble the day before on Mosquito Reserve started breaking into the locked stores. Looting began and quickly got out of Poundmaker's control.⁵⁴

A fire broke out in one of the buildings. It was too late to stop things. By the next morning, the stores had been looted and several buildings burned. Poundmaker, not wishing to be part of the looting, returned to his reserve.

The Mounted Police barracks had not been attacked, nor had anyone been hurt. During the next three weeks, the citizens of Battleford were able to continue getting their water from their supply a mile outside the barracks, and were able to continue sending telegrams on the telegraph lines which had never been cut. Nevertheless, Battleford was now considered to be under siege, and Poundmaker was held responsible for the action.



This depiction of the "Siege of Battleford" was greatly sensationalized to appeal to eastern Canadian readers. (Saskatchewan Archives)

Poundmaker remained on his reserve, setting up his camp on Cutknife Hill. The Assiniboines from Mosquito's reserve, expecting retaliation, set up their Warriors' Lodge. Many Indians from neighboring Little Pine's reserve had now also joined Poundmaker's camp. Their Chief, who had shown the symptoms of temporary blindness caused by malnutrition, died during the trip back from Battleford. He had been one of the Chiefs who agreed to keep the peace in Treaty Six, and it was said that news of the Resistance was too great a shock for him.