

Sundance Camp at Blackfoot Crossing: Perpetuation of a Pioneer Narrative

Halena Jauca



Sundance Camp, Blackfoot Crossing, Alberta, 1927

Photographer: WJ. Oliver

Glenbow Archives, NA-3331-1

In September of 1927, W.J. Oliver of Calgary, Alberta took a landscape photograph of a Sun Dance Camp at Blackfoot Crossing. One of several photographs taken by Oliver on the occasion of the unveiling of the Treaty Seven monument that marked the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Treaty, this photograph shows a circle of teepees in an otherwise vacant wilderness. Virtually void of any indication that this site had changed from a known Native space into a reserve governed by Canada's Department of Indian Affairs, this photograph suggests a narrative of peaceful relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Western Canada. However, the post-treaty experiences of the Aboriginal groups who signed on to Treaty Seven tell a different story. From the time of the signing until its commemoration half a century later, Aboriginal groups in this western region experienced suffering and hardship brought on by poor living conditions, disease, residential schools, and economic constraints. That being so, then one must wonder why the signing of this Treaty was being commemorated with a monument, what message was being sent by this and other photographs taken at the time, and who was the intended audience for these photographs. Determined to perpetuate the 'frontier myth', that European colonizers moved into vacant lands unoccupied by any civilized group of people, Canadians in the 1920's began to commemorate historic sites and in doing so contributed to a Eurocentric Canadian narrative

of a history of peaceful and just relations with Aboriginal populations.

Different perceptions of history found within Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups can be traced back to the signing of Treaty Seven in 1877. Treaty Seven is one of what is known as the 'Numbered Treaties', conducted in the prairie region during this period in history. After Canada's acquisition of the North West in 1870, the federal government initiated the process of establishing treaties with Aboriginal groups in the region in accordance with the Royal Proclamation of 1763 which stipulated that lands be ceded to the Crown through treaties with Native groups prior to settlement. Essentially, the federal government wanted to extinguish title to Indian land as quickly as possible in order to facilitate the arrival of settlers. Before the annexation of the North West, Aboriginal groups in the region had participated in the fur trade for approximately two centuries, but never before had they been required to cede their lands. During the years immediately preceding the signing of Treaty Seven, several factors placed the five First Nations involved- the Kainai, Pikani, Siksika, Stoney Nakoda, and Tsuu T'ina- at a disadvantage. The buffalo populations, which had sustained the Plains Aboriginal groups for centuries if not thousands of years, had declined dramatically, and people were beginning to experience severe food shortages. In addition, the liquor trade had moved into the region, resulting in increased occurrences of conflict. Under these circumstances, with

decreased economic autonomy and increased episodes of violence, the signing of a treaty held the promise of government protection and support. The Siksika understood Treaty Seven as “a commitment to peace in return for government assistance” and the introduction of a period in which in which the whisky trade, warfare and smallpox would end and the Mounted police would watch over the Native people.¹ Evidence provided by Treaty Seven elders indicates that the Aboriginal understanding of Treaty Seven was that it was a peace treaty, and not a surrender of land.² Differences between oral and written traditions contributed to the lack of mutual understanding of the meaning behind Treaty Seven, as did the treaty commissioners’ lack of knowledge of Aboriginal law and title.

Despite government promises of protection, the years between the signing of Treaty Seven and the unveiling of its monument fifty years later did not turn out to be years of peace and prosperity for the First Nations involved. Native people were placed on reserves that operated under the authority of the Department of Indian Affairs and their Indian Agents, restricting indigenous autonomy and access to resources. Underfunded mission schools were set up for the purpose of the assimilation and Christianization of Aboriginal children, separating them from their parents and reducing their exposure to Native customs, languages, and traditions. The Canadian government imposed a transition to an agricultural economy through a series of

policies, intending both to ‘civilize’ and encourage self-sufficiency. Duncan C. Scott, Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs in 1913, wrote the following in his instructions to Indian agents:

The Indians should be encouraged to settle on their reserves, and, where feasible, to engage in farming, stock-raising, etc. ... In whatever occupations the Indians are engaged they should be encouraged in habits of industry and thrift”³ ... “ Agents in the West should in every way possible discourage gatherings which tend to destroy the civilizing influence of the education imparted to Indian children at the schools, and which work against the proper influence of agents and farming instructors.⁴

Although the Treaty Seven First Nations opted not to rise against the government in the 1885 Rebellion, out of respect for Treaty Seven, a series of measures were implemented after 1885 that constituted, essentially, a “war upon what was called the ‘tribal’ system.”⁵ These measures included the implementation of a pass system restricting off-reserve movement and the introduction of peasant farming which reduced the amount of land Native people could farm, limited herd sizes to one or two cows per family, and allowed only the use of basic farm implements in order to curtail production and reduce potential competition with non-Native farmers. The cultural ceremony of the Sun

¹ Treaty 7 Elders and Tribal Council with Walter Hildebrandt, Dorothy First Rider and Sarah Carter, *The True Spirit and Original Intent of Treaty 7*, (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996), 116.

² *Ibid.*, 323-324.

³ Duncan C. Scott, *General Instructions to Indian Agents in Canada*, (Department of Indian Affairs: 1913), 7, Blackfoot Indian Agency fonds, M-1785-15, Glenbow Archives, www.glenbow.org.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵ Sarah Carter, *Aboriginal People and Colonizers of Western Canada to 1900*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 162.

Dance was banned, since it was perceived as standing in the way of the 'improvement' of Native peoples and was considered an "unmitigated nuisance, always occurring at the time they should be working at the crops."⁶

These were turbulent times for the First Nations people who had signed on to Treaty Seven. The Annual Report of The Department of Indian Affairs for the year 1885 indicates that a group of seventy-five Stoney Nakoda people out on a hunting expedition were found in a state of starvation and the lowlands the Stoney normally used for trapping were flooded. The Department of Indian Affairs reported difficulties keeping Native people on their reserves, and stated that the rations of any Indian found off the reserve would be stopped. Hunger was prevalent in the post-treaty years. Food rations were promised to Treaty Seven tribes, but the government altered this promise by making rations contingent on work performed. Treaty Seven elders later recalled that "in spite of the promise of rations the people were always hungry. Babies died of malnutrition... people would go to each other's camps in search of food."⁷ A high death rate at industrial schools due to tuberculosis combined with malnutrition, overcrowding, and poor sanitary conditions on reserves, reduced Aboriginal populations on most reserves in the region by 30% to 50% from the mid-1880s until the 1890s.⁸

Despite the challenges faced by the Treaty Seven First Nations, the Department of

Indian Affairs in its Annual report of 1927 summarized the half-century following the signing of Treaty Seven with the following statement:

Remarkable progress has been made during the last half century by the Indians of the plains. After the disappearance of the buffalo in 1878, it was necessary for the Government to issue rations of beef, flour, and so on, to support the Indians who had lost their native food supply. ...ample reserves were set aside for the Indians; annual cash payment provided and assistance given for the promotion of agriculture, stock-raising, and other pursuits. In addition to this, the Government undertook the education of their children as in other parts of the Dominion. The treaties have been fulfilled and the Government has in fact gone far beyond their terms in its efforts to care for the Indians and advance their welfare.⁹

This statement reflects the official non-Aboriginal view of the fifty years that followed Treaty Seven. From a Eurocentric perspective, the Canadian government had fulfilled its promises to the First Nations involved in Treaty Seven, and had even 'gone far beyond' its commitment to the well-being of Native people.

Shortly before the telling of this narrative of success in fulfilling treaty promises, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada was created. Around the turn of the century, the Canadian government began to

⁶ "Dominion of Canada Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs for the Year Ended 31st December, 1885." *Indian Affairs Annual Reports, 1864-1900*, (Department of Indian Affairs), 138, www.collectionscanada.gc.ca

⁷ Treaty 7 Elders et al, 162.

⁸ Carter, 166.

⁹ "Dominion of Canada Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs for the Year Ended March 31, 1927," From *Indian Affairs Annual Reports, 1864-1900*, (Department of Indian Affairs), 9, www.collectionscanada.gc.ca.

take an interest in Canadian heritage and initiated a process of establishing national parks and historic sites. In 1919 the Board met for the first time, and in 1925 they designated Blackfoot Crossing as a National Historic Site, finding its heritage value primarily in the fact that the original signing of Treaty Seven took place at that location.

At this point in history, commemoration of a historic site usually took the form of a bronze plaque on a stone cairn, which is precisely what was unveiled at Blackfoot Crossing on the day when W.J. Oliver took the photograph of the Sun Dance camp in September 1927. The plaque, which is still there to this day, reads:

Faced with the decline of the buffalo and the imminent incursion of white settlers into their territory, the people of the Blackfoot nation gathered here in September, 1877, to meet with the representatives of the Crown. After long discussion, in which Isapomahksikawa (Crowfoot), the Blackfoot Chief, took a leading role, the chiefs and leading men of the Blackfoot, Blood, North Peigans, Scarcee and Stonies signed Treaty No. 7 on 22 September. In return for reserves and the promise of livestock, farming implements and other considerations, they surrendered to the Crown some 50,000 square miles of what is now Southern Alberta.¹⁰

Although fifty turbulent years had passed for the First Nations of the region since the signing of the treaty, the narrative on the plaque is one of peace and mutual agreement between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. No

¹⁰ "Designations of National Historical Significance," *Parks Canada*, www.pc.gc.ca

mention is made of the difficulties and struggles experienced by the Native people whose lives were impacted by the treaty. The Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, was the "chief institutional tool for official commemoration" and represented a "special interest lobby of a few prominent male heritage enthusiasts from Eastern Canada."¹¹ This board, as historian Veronica Strong-Boag explains, was and continues to be "very much a creature of its time, place and politics... most often narrowly associated with elites who privilege their own storylines."¹² The commemoration of the signing of Treaty Seven was, therefore, the presentation of a selective view of history, that perpetuated the pioneer narrative that non-Native Canadians had justly and fairly expanded westward into Native space, and had done so without any resistance from or negative consequences to Aboriginal people.

In determining the meaning behind the photograph of the Sundance Camp at Blackfoot Crossing, it is helpful to examine other photographs taken at the 1927 commemoration. Looking at these historical pictures, one can see that R.B. Bennett, Duncan Campbell Scott, and a Mrs. J.F. MacCleod were present at the unveiling of the cairn. Aboriginal people also attended, including Crowfoot's daughter and grandson. During the commemoration, the group visited Crowfoot's grave, also located at Blackfoot Crossing. One can only suppose that this event was widely publicized throughout the rest of Canada, and assumes that at least some of these photographs were viewed by a largely non-

¹¹ Veronica Strong-Boag, "Experts on Our Own Lives: Commemorating Canada at the Beginning of the 21st Century," *The Public Historian* 31, No 1 (Winter 2009): 61.

¹² *Ibid.*, 62.

Native audience, especially those that included images of prominent individuals of the time period unveiling the historic monument.

The photograph of the Sun Dance camp stands out from the rest, as it is a purely landscape photograph. Whether or not it was widely published is difficult to say, but it present some specific messages. Firstly, it perpetuates the myth that Treaty Seven did not cause a great disturbance to Native ways and traditions, as it shows Native customs, in this case the Sun Dance camp, existing after the treaty process. The photograph also suggests that Native space has not been impacted by settlement, since a vast and virtually empty landscape surrounds the Sun Dance camp, without any signs of disturbance or change brought on by western expansion. This photograph seems to indicate that Native ways have not been altered, a suggestion that cannot be accepted as truthful to anyone who had knowledge of the history of the fifty years between the signing of Treaty 7 in 1877 and its commemoration.

Images can convey powerful messages. In the case of W.J Oliver's photograph of the Sundance Camp at Blackfoot Crossing, a circle of teepees surrounded by vacant wilderness landscape presents a narrative of peaceful relations between Native and non-Native people. Although the signing of Treaty Seven was followed by years of struggle and hardship for the five First Nations involved, its commemoration was celebrated in order to perpetuate the frontier myth, and to overlook a history of displacement and assimilation of Aboriginal peoples in Southern Alberta.

Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park.
www.blackfootcrossing.ca

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