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SASKATCHEWAN
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SASKATCHEWAN
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HIGHLIGHTS:

- Mrs. Whitecalf was 85 years old when interviewed. Born in the Medicine Hat area in 1890, she was brought up in the traditional ways. She has been twice married. At 85 she is still in good health and is an excellent storyteller. (For complete biography, see IH-089, p.14)
- Story of a camp that was attacked by a lion-spirit and saved by an old medicine woman.
- Sun Child; how he rejected a reserve and brought suffering and death to his people.
- Interactions of Indians and Metis.
- Wolf-hunting.
- The old days: ceremonies, dances, burials.

Littlepoplar: We are now ready to start telling stories. You just go ahead and tell your stories, just as if the recorder was not there.

Whitecalf: My mother used to tell of the time they were really frightened. Six lodges of Cree were in camp. This happened before I was born.

One evening, my mother gathered in the chokecherries that she had spread out in the sun to dry. This was the season of the chokecherries. She heard strange sounds coming from the north; sounds she had never heard before. They came from across the river. Her sister-in-law, who was also gathering chokecherries, was nearby. Mother called out to her, "Do you hear those sounds coming from across the river?" Her sister-in-law straightened up and listened. "You are right," replied her sister-in-law, "that is the sound of some wild animal and the men are not yet back. The men will not be home till very late tonight." In later years, Mother saw elephants in zoos and fairs. She used to say the noise they heard across the river sounded to them like elephants trumpeting. "If whatever we are hearing comes across the river to our camp, we will be eaten up," her sister-in-law said very quickly. Mother gathered their chokecherries and the dried meat, and hauled them into their lodges.

About this time, my sister-in-law's husband arrived at the camp. She was married to an old man. Also, there were two other very old men in camp at the time. There were now three old men in camp. Everybody in camp now heard the sounds, and they were coming closer. Mother said, "We were all very frightened."

As it grew dark, and then dusk, the men began arriving. By this time, the animal who was making the sounds is now in the water and coming this way. The splashing of water can now be heard. My mother's father then lit a pipeful of tobacco, and asked another old man to smoke the pipe and said a prayer, to see what it was that was coming upon us. "Do what you can," he said. "We have women and children who are very frightened. We must protect them." The old man held the pipe to the four winds and then took a few puffs. Then he sang a few religious songs, as he held a rattle in his hand. After this, he took a few more puffs on the pipe. Then he said, "What we hear coming across the river towards us is what is called a lion. There are no lions here; this one is being sent to us by some bad people in the north. This lion is Wah-kin-ah-kahn. A Wah-kin-ah-kahn is a tree that grows in the north, and is used when

people practice bad medicine." "I do not have the power to fight this lion," said the old man. "I am hoping there is another man in camp whose medicine is strong enough to beat the Wah-kin-ah-kahn, who has been sent to us in the form of a lion. Lions are dangerous. They have a shaggy head and shoulders, and are shaggy at the tip of their tail. If we do not beat him, he will destroy us all."

Other old men in camp tried to beat the lion. All failed. All agreed it was Wah-kin-ah-kahn, sent to destroy them. The women, all very frightened, had been bringing cloth offering to the spirits for help. When the old medicine men had failed, they too became very frightened.

My mother used to say it so happened her grandmother was in camp with them at the time. Her name was Koo-sah-poo-sih-

kahnit, and she was an old medicine woman. When the medicine had failed, they appealed to her for help. A pipe was brought to her along with red cloth to offer to the spirits. While she was making the pipe smoke, the lion was heard again. It had crossed the river and was now in the area behind the camp. Women wailed and children cried; they were a badly frightened bunch of people. "Do not be afraid, I will defeat the Wah-kin-ah-kahn, if someone will find an axe, one so old and worn as to be no longer usable." A woman in camp had such an axe, and very quickly it was brought to the medicine woman who held it over the sweetgrass to clean it. Then she got some leather thong five hands long. While she was doing this, the lion was heard again. It was so close to camp they could hear its nostrils. "The Wah-kin-ah-kahn will enter our camp," said the old medicine woman, "but I will defeat it." Then chanting a spirit song, she picked up the old axe and raised it four times. When she raised it the fourth time, she held a new axe in her hand. Then with the axe in one hand and the thong in the other, she went out to meet the lion which had been sent to destroy them. It was not long before the people in the lodge heard a commotion outside. It was the old woman defeating the lion. Women and children fainted as the lion and the old woman fought it out behind the camp. Above the roar of the lion could be heard great claps of thunder. The thunder birds had come to help the old medicine woman. Before long all was quiet again, and in a little while the old woman walked into the lodge. "I have killed the lion," she said. "But we will go to bed and go see it in the morning."

Early next morning, the whole camp went to see the lion who was killed the night before. Where the fight had taken place lay a pine log, carved into the shape of a lion. Then with the help of the people, the old woman, Sah-poo-sih-kahnit, gathered

eighteen different kinds of medicine. Then she spread them on the log Kahnit and burned it. As the log burned, people could see the legs and claws move. Whoever sent them the lion had strong medicine, but not strong enough. The log burned to ashes.

This is a story my mother used to tell. She told many stories but I have forgotten most of them. I am very old and times have changed. Let me think awhile and maybe I will remember another story to tell.

Littlepoplar: I'll shut the recorder off, Auntie, while you think, and also have a smoke and a cup of tea.

Whitecalf: A long time ago, we lived in the south and we lived by hunting. We made good money killing wolves, and we had very good ponies for hunting. Hunters would down wolves with ponies. The wolves were fat and very tough. They were long distance runners and it took good ponies to run them down. They would use the ponies in relays; when one pony got tired, another was there to replace it.

Littlepoplar: Weren't there any trees or bushes where the wolves

could run and hide?

Whitecalf: There was no bush anywhere there at the time. There were a few bushes along the river, but boys would be left here to scare the wolves away. In the evenings, dens of wolves would be located by the hunters. Early next morning the men would dig out the young wolf pups, usually twelve to a den. They would get paid for these too. The white men, ranchers in particular, were glad to have Indians in the district to hunt wolves.

West of Drumheller is a place called by the Cree, Wintering Place. A little past this place is a creek called Saskatoon Berry Creek. Along this creek there is very good land. It is all flat and very good. All the way back to Wintering Place, the land is good. There are hills and ravines, and very much flat land. This was the place Sun Child was told he could have for a reserve, but Chief Sun Child did not want a reserve at the time. Chief Sun Child led his followers to the foot-hills around Rocky Mountain House, where a lot of them died and the rest scattered. Today nothing remains of Sun Child's band. Had they stayed at Wintering Place, Sun Child's band would still be there. I think they would be well away today. They were offered implements if they wished to farm the land. The ranchers wanted them close by so they could hunt wolves, but they would have nothing to do with

treaty. And so they left and never returned. My first husband, Hot Sun Man, used to tell me that. He was a nephew of Chief Sun Child.

Littlepoplar: Was this land they were offered for a reserve right at the place called Wintering Place?

Whitecalf: Yes, my son, it was right around Wintering Ground, and south to the river. They were also shown much hay ground that they could have had. Old people died, babies were born, others grew old, children grew up and became adults and more are born. They would be there today, and would be living decently had Chief Sun Child taken the offer.

Littlepoplar: Auntie, was Sun Child a great chief?

Whitecalf: Sun Child was not even a chief. He was just a leader of a band of wandering Cree. Had he taken a reserve at Wintering Place, he would have become a chief. As it was, the place was called Sun Child's Reserve. Apparently they lived there for some time. Then they moved to the foothills, where his son transferred to an Indian reserve, and later became chief of that reserve.

Old Sun Child did not like treaty; that is the reason he did not stay. He was told he could stay and live at Wintering Place without signing treaty. But they left, and a lot of them died. And the rest scattered and the band became nothing. My oldest son's father used to tell about this. He knew Sun Child and his band well.

Littlepoplar: What is the Indian name for Drumheller? And is it near Wintering Place, where Sun Child was offered a reserve?

Whitecalf: The Cree called it Drum Hill, like we have called our hill Drumming Hill. It is not far from where Sun Child would have had a reserve.

Littlepoplar: Was drumming ever heard on the hill at Drumheller?

Whitecalf: I have never heard the story of how Drum Hill or Drumheller got its name. But when we first arrived here at Sweet Grass (1912), an old man named Mimikiwas claimed drumming used to be heard on Drumming Hill at Sweetgrass. An old man named Nay-woo-kaschopinase, Four Thunder Sky, used to leave cloth offering at Drumming Hill, right where he thought the drumming was coming from. In those early days when we first arrived here, we used to pick berries around Drumming Hill, and one day I noticed some cloth offerings hanging on a post driven

into the ground. When I asked about it, an old woman named Ooh-mah-me-qwayo told me, "Four Sky Thunder comes and leaves the cloth offering for the spirits."

Littlepoplar: Did Four Sky Thunder die soon after that?

Whitecalf: No, I don't think so. My first-born was a boy; he was born when I was twenty. If my first-born were living, he would be the same age as Gray Sky Man. They were born a month apart. Gray Sky Man's mother and I sponsored a Powwow, because our boys were born so close together, at the same time my first-born arrived. We had no calendars, so I therefore, do not know his birthday. If he were living, he would be the same age as Gray Sky Man.

When my second son was born, Ugly Bear, I noted the date was January 20, and my older son was born February 1. We had calendars then.

I had trouble getting the old age pension because I did not know my birthday. A councillor brought me forms to fill out and sign. The councillor knew no English and could not read or write, but he had his wife with him who was well-educated. But at the time I did not know my age, and so did not sign the forms. I was told by my mother that I was born north of Medicine Hat, when the moon was almost full. So the councillor left with his application form.

A year later, I was baby-sitting at my son's when an uncle of mine came up to the house. That time we lived in log houses. The day was hot and we ate dinner outside on the shady side of the house. My uncle had eaten and was having a smoke when he said, "Niece, I have been sent by the chief and council to try to find out when you were born, so you may receive a cheque every month. A few people I know are getting a pension who are not old enough. The Indian agent would also like to see

you get a cheque every month," he said. "But nobody knows their age. Nobody can prove they are not old enough for a pension. I know your parents well," said my uncle. "I stayed with them when I rode in rodeos in Montana, when I was young. I visited their camp many times when you lived in Medicine Hat. They had two children; you and a boy younger than you. You must have heard old people mention something that happened a few winters before or after you were born." When my uncle said this, I at once remembered something my mother used to say when I was a young woman. "Yes," I said to my uncle, "now that you mention it, I will tell you something my mother used to tell me many years ago."

We were camped somewhere in the south, my mother did not say where. My little brother and I were playing outside, when we heard people; women and children wailing. I took my little brother by the hand and we ran home to our tipi. I told my mother of the wailing women and children and asked, "Is someone dead?" "No," replied Mother, "no one is dead. The police are rounding up the people and taking them back to Canada. That is why they are crying. You take your brother and go play outside. We will be all right." I do not remember this. My mother used to tell it to me. She did say I was five years old at the time.

All this I told my uncle as we sat smoking and drinking tea in the shade. After a bit, my uncle got up to leave. But before leaving he said, "Niece, this information you have given me, I think, will be a great help. I will pass it on to the Indian agent, and also to the chief and council." A few days later some white men came to see me. They asked me many questions, like the names of my father and mother, and also the names of my grandparents, which I did not know. And where I was born, and many more questions. Everything I told them they wrote down and then they went away. But before they left, they said I was 66 years old. One day, a week or two later, my son, Tommy, came to see me. He said, "Mother, I went to the store today, and the postmaster wants to see you. You are to go there tomorrow. They are holding a cheque for you."

Littlepoplar: Did they give you back-pay? Did the cheque come retroactive one year?

Whitecalf: I do not know, son. The postmaster opened the letter and said, "The cheque is for \$150.00". He also said to me in one week I would get another one for \$150.00 Then the cheques would be smaller and come every month. The cheques then came once a month. They were \$50.00. Today they are quite a bit larger.

Littlepoplar: Before you came here to Sweetgrass, you were living down south. Were there many Metis people there?

Whitecalf: Metis people were there and there were many of them. They were one of us. They spoke no English, only French and Cree. They acted like us Indians; they took part in our dances

and feasts and rituals. These halfbreeds used to tell us never to put an X on any documents unless we were sure of what we were signing. One Metis girl, who was very young and not married, had a baby. The father of the baby was to be taken to court, but the grandfather of the girl would not put his X on the sheet of paper when he was asked to, and so nothing came of the case. There was no court. Today I still sign my cheque with an X. Sometimes I am with one of my granddaughters. They are allowed to write my name, but they are not allowed to write an X. I must write it myself.

It took a long time to get my pension, and had it not been for my uncle, Atcheynum, it would have taken even longer.

Once, when I was a young girl, someone walked into our lodge and said to my mother, "Where did you get all the meat?" Mother replied that Atcheynum had come to visit, and while there, had killed a deer and left us the meat. My uncle, Atcheynum, was a good man in many ways. There were many deer and antelope where we lived.

Littlepoplar: Auntie, you speak of hunters killing wolves. Did they get good pay for killing them? And did they have to give the hide to whoever was paying them?

Whitecalf: The pay was very good, my son. We made a good living, and the hides we were allowed to keep. Women would tan them and make all sorts of things, like mitts and caps, and also rugs we could put on the floor to sit on. Some even made knee-length coats with the pelts.

Littlepoplar: In the event of death, how did people go about burying the body? Was there a wake for the dead? And was there a feast four nights after death, like we have now?

Whitecalf: When there was a death, friends and relatives would have a wake for three nights. Not only friends and relatives, but whoever was around would come to the wake. After the wake, a grave would be dug on the nearest hill. Then the diggers would go back to the camp, leaving one man at the grave site. Graves were never left alone in those days. Then the body would be taken out of the lodge, but not by the door. The pegs would be taken out of the ground and the tipi raised a little, just enough to take the body out. If it was winter, and people lived in shacks, the body would be taken out the window. The day after burial the camp would have a feast. Then we would all move to a new camp some distance away. Exactly one year later, people would go back to the grave, clean up the grave and have a feast.

Littlepoplar: No doubt we have relatives buried all over the south; Cypress Hills, Maple Creek, and Medicine Hat.

Whitecalf: Yes, people were buried where they died. They did not die so often; people were tough then. What we ate may

have had something to do with it. We then lived mostly on pemmican and berries; dried meat and chokecherries.

Littlepoplar: Did the people on the prairies have dances and things like that when you were young?

Whitecalf: The people had many dances, both winter and summer. The women made beautiful clothes to wear to these dances. Things were cheap. A string of beads cost 25 and a good heavy Hudson's Bay blanket cost \$3.00. Last year I bought a very light blanket. I was charged \$20.00 for it.

One night my grandson came to my house and said, "Grandma, come to our house and see some Indians on TV." I have a small TV in my house, but only get one station. My grandson said he would put something on the roof to make the TV get more stations. He hasn't done so yet. He is very busy. He is a carpenter. He built my new house, and his wife painted it. His wife is a very good worker. All winter, she shovelled a path from their house to my house. She also kept a path open to the wood pile.

Camping day for the Sundance this year is July 17th. My grandson came over and said, "I will move you to the Sundance early in the morning of the 17th, because I have to go to work." I explained to him it was the custom for the man making the Sundance to be there first. After his camp is there, then the rest of the people can move. He then said he would move me on the evening of the 17th, which I agreed to.

Littlepoplar: Was it the custom, long ago, for the man making the Sundance to preach a sermon to the people? I have heard that it was done a long time ago. Is that true, Auntie?

Whitecalf: It was not done as far back as I can remember. It may have been done a long time ago, before my time. When I was young, a man making his first Sundance did not eat or drink for four days. And the dancers would dance all night, and not go home till morning. People made themselves suffer as a penance for their sins.

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