HIGHLIGHTS:

- Mr. Pooyak was born in 1919 on the Sweet Grass Reserve. He has worked as a trapper, farmer and carpenter. He is an excellent singer and storyteller. (For complete biography see IH-080, p.2.
- Story of the escape of some Cree warriors who were surrounded by Blackfeet.

Littlepoplar: This story you are going to tell must have happened a long time ago.

E. Pooyak: It has been said that a man named Mah-tak-kuhp (Old Campsite) was the leader in this particular party. They were camped, at the time, north and west of a lake called Manitou Lake.

Late one evening, the camp crier walked amongst his people shouting "Old Campsite invites young men to go to his lodge and smoke the pipe." As it grew dark, one by one and in pairs, young boys entered Old Campsite's lodge. "Ta Ta Wow, have a seat," Old Campsite would say as the boys walked in. Eleven boys sat in the lodge and when it was apparent no more were coming, Old Campsite filled his pipe, lit it, and took two puffs. Then he held it over sweetgrass smoke, took four more
puffs and passed it on to his guests. Among his guests were Musinas (Stripe), and Cha-chow-sin (Falling Through The Ice), and Kah-pay-twaymat (They Come When He Calls); the others, their names I do not remember for the moment. After all had smoked, Old Campsite said, "For some time now I have been thinking of going away. I have been seriously thinking of going west into the enemy territory and bringing back some horses. I do not ask any one of you to come with me, but if any of you want to come along, I will not ask you to go back." "I will go with you," said Musinas. "So will I," said another. All eleven boys agreed to go. "Four nights from now," said Mah-tak-kuhp, "we will meet at dusk, at the big hill west of our camp. That should give all of us time to get ready."

Four nights later, at the time Old Campsite agreed on, the boys began arriving at the hill. In a short time all eleven boys were there and Old Campsite said that it was time to go. They went straight toward the sunset, travelling all night long. At daybreak they found a thickly wooded ravine, where they slept all day. It was almost sundown when Old Campsite woke the boys up and reminded them that they were headed for Blackfoot country, and that several nights of travel remained. "We must make the best of the short nights," he told them. In a short time all were up and walking across the prairie, toward Blackfoot country. They ate the dried meat, and I suppose pemmican and flaked meat as they walked, drinking only when they came to a creek or slough. All night long they walked and ran uphill. They walked downhill and on level ground, they ran.

Toward morning, they had covered much ground and were a tired bunch of boys. Walking across a large coulee, they came upon some wolf willow. It grew very thick among some tall weeds and grass. Here they spent the day sleeping. Again they awoke when the sun was very low in the west. No time was wasted. They got up and started eating as they walked. They were now not too far from Blackfoot country and the boys exercised caution, climbing hills and looking the land over before going on. At daybreak, they found themselves in hilly country, without bushes or sloughs. They kept on walking, hoping to find water and bushes in which to spend the day sleeping. The sun was quite high when they came upon a small spring-fed creek. Here they drank and washed themselves. No bushes could be seen, but here they agreed to spend the day sleeping, as they were very tired. One boy climbed a hill nearby and watched for enemies, while the others slept on the bank of a small creek. After watching for some time the boy on the hill woke up one of the others, who took over the watch while the other slept, and by watching in relays, all had a good sleep. At dusk they were again ready to travel.

They walked fast, and where the going was good, they ran. In that way, they were far away when day began to break. Then they thought they heard dogs barking. They stopped and listened, but a light wind was blowing and they could not be
They had not gone far when they heard singing. A breeze was blowing and it made listening difficult. They kept going and the singing became more clear. It was coming from the south. At once the boys changed their direction and headed south toward the singing.

They had at last found a Blackfoot camp. The boys were all smiles and happy. The thought of robbing the Blackfoot camp of horses and food made them happy. Going on further, they topped a small hill and could see a large ring of campfires in the distance. The boys were wild and it was all Mah-tak-kuhp could do to control them. "Ah Pih," he told them. "Sit down, do not get excited; it is best we talk this over and plan our strategy. Look," he told them, "a light wind is blowing and the night is dark; all this is in our favour, and we must be very cautious. We are twelve and there are probably hundreds of warriors there; one mistake and we could all be killed."

"How do you think we should go about that?" asked Falling Through The Ice. "We will wait till the campfires go out and the people are asleep," said Mah-tak-kuhp. He then outlined his plan to the boys. "Later tonight," he said, "we will all go to the east end of the camp. We will then split up into two groups. Then we will creep along the north and south side of the camp and meet on the west side." This they did, without seeing any horses. They met on the west end of the camp, and agreed the Blackfoot kept their horses further away from their camp. The Cree then returned to the east end of the camp, this time walking some distance away from the camp. No horses were heard or seen in the dark. They again met on the west end of the camp. While they were discussing their next move, they heard a horse blow its nostrils. Inside the circle of lodges, on creeping closer, the boys saw the tipis were touching one another, making it impossible to take horses out between the lodges. Looking further they found two lodges spaced a little apart, and a make-shift gate between them. Two posts were driven into the ground and several lodge poles lashed across them with rawhide thong. This was where the Blackfoot took their horses in and out. All agreed it was going to be a chore getting the horses out. "It would not do to go back empty
handed. We should at least steal six horses so we can ride home double," said Old Campsite. "Who will come with me to open the gate?" "I will go with you," said Tah-kah-see.

Littlepoplar: I have heard Tah-kah-see was a very silly, and also a clownish character.

E. Pooyak: Mah-tah-kuhp and Tah-kah-see then crept to the gate and began cutting the thongs. They had not made a sound. As they cut the lodge poles loose, they placed them beside the lodge of some sleeping Blackfoot people. They had two poles to go when Tah-kah-see tripped and fell with a loud crash on the lodge poles they had piled beside the lodge. Instantly, the camp was alive with barking dogs, snorting horses and braves yelling war cries and firing their guns in the air. The camp crier could also be heard, shouting, "Crees, Crees,". Mah-tah-kuhp ordered his braves to run west; "Stay in a bunch and do not scatter," he shouted. Behind them they heard dogs bark, and braves shouting war cries. As the Crees ran on, Old Campsite stayed at the rear shouting war cries and encouraging his boys. As they ran, Mah-tah-kuhp noted water to the left, and further on he saw water to the right. "Stay in a bunch and do not scatter," he shouted, "whatever happens, we will not be short of water." Without knowing, they had run down a peninsula of a large lake. They were trapped. As the Cree ran, the strip of land became narrower, and finally there was none. They had run down a blind alley. They threw up earth works with their knives and reinforced it with stones they found in the shallow water. It was now becoming daylight and the Cree knocked over a few Blackfoot who dared to come close. To make sure the Cree did not escape, the Blackfoot pitched several lodges at the mouth of the peninsula. All forenoon the Crees sat there. They were safe for the moment.

Some time when the sun was high in the south, an old Blackfoot rode down the peninsula and stopped out of gun range. Then he shouted in broken Cree, "We have relatives to the west of us who have very strong medicine. When they get back here... some of our boys have gone for them... then we will deal with you. Likely, we will tomahawk you all to death." He then rode back. The Cree did not answer. Tah-koh-see, it is said, forgot to act like a clown. He was very frightened.

The Cree had nothing to do but sit and wait. And this is what they did. When night came, the Cree could see fires here and there around the lake. Several more Blackfeet were shot that night as they tried to sneak up to the Cree in the dark. All night long they heard drumming in the Blackfoot camp. "The Blackfoot have no way of fighting us, and have now resorted to the Kee-sgway-tim (crazy horse), a man made bullet-proof by medicine." The drumming came closer, then stopped and very soon after, a man carrying a lash appeared. He was whipping a man in the direction of the Cree. They came down the peninsula toward the Cree, then stopped. "Do not shoot," Mah-tah-kuhp told his boys. "He is bullet-proof, and will not kill us yet." The man with the lash and the Kee-sgway-tim went back. "He
will come four times," said Mah-tah-kuhp. "The fourth time he will club us to death, or stab us to death." "You chase him and shoot him," the boys told Tah-kah-see, but Tah-kah-see was in no mood to clown. He was a very scared boy. Two more times the Kee-sqway-tim danced toward the Cree, followed by the man with the lash, and two more times they turned back. "The fourth time he will come alone and kill us," Mah-tah-kuhp told his men.

Chaw-chaw-sin then took his pipe out and filled it and passed it to Musinas, who refused it, saying he had no power against Kee-sqway-tim. It was then passed to a second man who also refused it, and then it was passed to a third man, whose name I do not remember. He took the pipe and lit it, and held it to the four winds, while saying a prayer. He asked the lightning for help in their time of need. Then he took his gun, put powder in it and some rotten wood and bark. Then they waited for Kee-sqway-tim to come kill them. In a short time the Cree saw him coming. This time he was alone. He came dancing and singing war cries and he carried a tomahawk. Right behind him were many Blackfoot men, women and children. The Cree who had loaded his gun got ready. As the Kee-sqway-tim came near, he jumped out and shot the Kee-sqway-tim in the chest. The Kee-sqway-tim, supposedly bullet-proof, went flying and landed some distance away with a thud, much to the dismay of the Blackfeet who scurried back to their lodges in fright. The Kee-sqway-tim lay where he fell. He did not move. He was very dead. The Cree medicine had been stronger than the medicine of the Blackfoot. As the Cree sat there, they could hear wailing in the Blackfoot camp. Blackfeet never were good losers.

Soon it became dark, and the Cree were still trapped. They sat and waited as it grew darker and later. Then, as they sat and waited, they heard a woman speak Cree to them. This must have been a woman captured by the Blackfeet in some previous raid. She spoke perfect Cree as she said from some distance away, "I know you are Cree. You are my relatives. I come to tell you, do all you can to escape. The Blackfeet have just held a council and have decided that at daylight they will attack you, and at the expense of a few lives, club you all to death." When the Cree heard this they discussed their situation and all agreed it was indeed grave.

Musinas was asked to light his pipe and ask for spirit help. After he had smoked his pipe and having held it to the four winds, Musinas prayed and asked the spirits for help. After this, he sat thinking. Then he said to the others, "We are going home. We will travel in single file till we get across the lake. I will lead the way. The one behind me must not look anywhere; only at the calves of my legs. The one behind him must do the same, and so on down the line."

In a very short time, northern lights began to appear. They were very thick that night, and came to where the Cree were trapped. It was like fog, and Musinas said it was time to
go. He got up and walked straight north. Walking on the water, the others followed in single file, not looking anywhere, only at the calves of the men ahead. In this way they crossed the lake safely. After they were across, the northern lights even went away.

The happiest man in the bunch was Tah-kah-see, the clown. (I just remembered - Coming Day was one of the boys in the party.)

After they crossed the lake, the Cree walked away north and climbed a high hill to watch the camp. Soon after daylight, the Cree watched from the hill, as a large number of Blackfeet charged the earthworks they had made. There was no one there, and the Cree started north for home. Again, they had defeated the enemy in medicine. After camping four or five times, they arrived home, without horses, and with many blisters on their feet.

My uncle used to say their camp was just a little ways south of where the town of Lloydminster is now.

That is the way I heard the story.