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 "LAND AND LAND SURRENDERS"
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Elders' Interviews - Land and Land Surrenders

Treaty 8 - 1899

Sixty-three elders' interviews from the Treaty 8 area were reviewed for references to land, and of these, all but fourteen contain some sort of statement about land. The most usual contexts in which land was mentioned were the surrender of land to the white man, and the setting up of reserves for the Indians and individual complaints regarding loss of reserve lands, lack of compensation for land lost to road building, etc., and the need for reserves where none exist.

On the subject of the surrender of land to the white man, the elders' statements seem to fall into two broad categories: 1. why land was given up or sold, and 2. how much land was sold. Several elders have said that when the commissioner came to make the treaty, the Indians were told that if they did not sell their land then they would not get another opportunity to do so. For example, Isadore Willier (Driftpile) says that the chief was told, "Today we're coming to buy your land, Chief. If you don't sell today, never again will they be back to buy your land." It would seem that an effort was made to convince the Indians that selling their land would be of benefit to them and that this opportunity to sell should not be missed. Another elder, Edward Willier, also from Driftpile, expresses this same view.

Other ideas are mentioned in the interviews in a way that

suggests they had a bearing on the Indians' decision to accept the treaty and give up their land. Frank Halcrow (Freeman Reserve) relates that the Indians were offered a choice between the treaty and scrip, land or money, as if making a choice between having a way to earn a livelihood with the treaty and receiving short-lived money were the only paths open to them. One might wonder if there really was a feeling that there was no real choice to be made and if so, to what extent it was encouraged by the treaty negotiators.

Another factor which helped influence the decision to surrender land was the advice of Pere Lacombe to the Indians to sign the treaty. Two elders (Pat Lalonde, Faust; William Okamau, Sucker Creek) mention this as being a factor in the decision. Mr. Okamau says that the reason the Indians accepted the treaty and "this part of the land" was that the priest had said about the treaty, "'This is your life line. It will serve you long and well, my children. Accept this.'"

Of course, what was offered in exchange for the Indians' land must have been the greatest inducement to sell or give it up. What was promised is expressed differently by various people. For example, William Okamau (Sucker Creek) simply says that land was exchanged for "help." Scotty Willier (Driftpile) feels that land was traded for "our treaty" which said that hunting, trapping and fishing would always exist for the Indians. So it would seem the exchange was made for a guarantee that the Indians could pursue their livelihood. A third viewpoint, the one most frequently expressed (7 interviews) is that the Indians exchanged their land for other land which they would be able to choose for themselves and where they would not be bothered. However the terms for the "deal" are expressed, it seems clear from the elders' interviews that the Indians felt they would be getting something worthwhile in exchange for their land.

There are conflicting views on the depth of land the Indians did "sell." However, all agree that land was sold, one man, John Marie Mustus (Sucker Creek), saying that land is the only thing the Indians gave or promised to the white man. Other opinions about the amount of land given up range from those which simply state that the Indian "gave up his lands" (Melanie Homelin, Sturgeon Lake) or that the depth of land sold was not discussed (Edward Willier, Isadore Willier, Driftpile) to those which specify that a particular depth was sold. These estimates of the amount sold include the "surface" (Frank Halcrow, Freeman Reserve; Alfred Chaterlain, Horse Lake), "a few inches" (August Sound, Swan River), "six inches" (Fred Courtoireille, Wabasca; Rosalie Tourangau, Wabasca), the "top twelve inches" (William Okamau, Sucker Creek), and "six shovels" (George Okeymow, Driftpile).

The second broad topic regarding land covered in the elders' interviews concerns the reserves, the Indians' attitudes towards them, ideas of ownership and control over them and problems with them. First, it is interesting to note

that in only two interviews is a negative opinion of reserves per se expressed. John Kaskamin (Fort Chipewyan) says that the chief at the time of the treaty did not choose land for a reserve because he did not want the people to be "confined" to the reserve. Frank Halcrow (Freeman Reserve) mentions that his grandfather felt that the reserves had divided the Indians, into treaties and Metis, and that before the treaty, "they lived all together."

Aside from these two opinions, the other interviews dealing with the idea of reserves express a positive view of them, at least insofar as the picture of reserves that the white man painted for the Indians at treaty time is concerned. Scotty Willier (Driftpile) expresses the attitude, "Reserves are good to the Indian and they should never give it away." Many elders said that in exchange for their land, the treaties promised them land where they could make a livelihood, where they would not be bothered or interfered with by whites, and where they would own everything within the reserve, including mineral rights, forever.

Any comments made by the elders about how the land for the reserves was chosen indicate that the chiefs were the ones to do the choosing and no restrictions on choice are mentioned except that several elders relate that the chiefs were told to choose land that "would provide sustenance" (Phillip MacDonald, Fort McKay) or that the people were given bush land so that they wouldn't "be bothersome to anyone" (Wally Willier, Wabasca). Where an elder mentions that a chief chose the reserve land, the basis of his choice is given as the presence of good haying area, lakes with many fish and muskrats, wooded areas, etc. One elder, Frank Halcrow, claims that when his grandfather chose his reserve, he took too little land because he did not want to hurt the feelings of the Metis. And Phillip MacDonald says that at the time of treaty, if the chief had been told about underground mineral potential, the basis of choice for reserve land would have been very different.

A question that perhaps should be looked into is whether or not any reserves were chosen on the basis of promises made by the treaty negotiators. For example, Leo Mitchell (Sturgeon Lake) mentions that horses and cows were promised to the Indians and it is a possibility that land was chosen in anticipation of raising these animals for a living. The same factor might have played a role if the Indians were anticipating farming for a livelihood, e.g., Frank Cardinal (Sucker Creek) claims the Indians were told that they "should try potato farming."

There are conflicting views expressed on the subject of the size of reserves, and there is not much agreement as to how reserve boundaries were decided upon. Some feel the reserve is too small and that it is too late to get the boundaries enlarged (Frank Halcrow); others feel that the boundaries are correct (John Felix, Sturgeon Lake) or short of what they should be (Pierre Papostis, Sturgeon Lake). Only one elder

(William Okamau, Sucker Creek) mentions any basis on which the amount of land for a reserve was calculated, 25 acres per two

persons, and he also mentions that if the reserve became overpopulated, additional land would be provided. It seems clear that there is no clear understanding on the part of the elders as to exactly what they were entitled to in terms of reserve lands.

The remaining topics concerning land which are dealt with in the Treaty 8 interviews involve specific grievances. Most of these revolve around the selling or surrender of reserve lands without an understanding of how this occurred (e.g. Green Island near Dunvegan, Swan River, Fairview), cases of non-compensation for land taken for road building, railroads, or underground cables (Horse Lake, Swan River), cases of "short boundaries" (previously mentioned), and cases involving requests for a reserve where treaty Indians now live and have been living for long periods of time (Trout Lake, Lubicon Lake, Fort MacKay, Fort Chipewyan).

NOTE: Summary re Treaty 6 see #IH-221
Summary re Treaty 7 see #IH-248

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