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SASKATCHEWAN  
INTERVIEW LOCATION: SWEET GRASS RESERVE  
SASKATCHEWAN  
TRIBE/NATION: CREE  
LANGUAGE: CREE  
DATE OF INTERVIEW: JULY 24, 1974  
INTERVIEWER: ALPHONSE LITTLEPOPLAR  
INTERPRETER: ALPHONSE LITTLEPOPLAR  
TRANSCRIBER: JOANNE GREENWOOD  
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HIGHLIGHTS:

- Mr. Lonesinger was born in 1888 on the Red Pheasant Reserve. He later moved to the Sweet Grass Reserve. Known as a great storyteller and singer. Has great command of the Cree language. (For complete biography see IH-052, p. 11).
- Legend of Cut Knife Hill
- Story of Black Rock, a Stoney warrior
- Story of Chokecherry Wood, a Stoney warrior

Now and then, small bands of Cree would leave this part of the country to go to Beaver Hills and Edmonton to trade. The storekeepers there would tell them of a young Sarcee Indian brave who had a reputation for fighting. Blackfoot, Cree, Stoney, Blood Indians, he had fought them all. Many girls were given to him as wives, but he refused to take a wife and he became a middle-aged man and still had no wife.

The storekeepers also said this young brave spoke a little of the Cree language. His name was Kees-kih-koonan, Cut Knife. It is said that one day, when Cut Knife was a middle-aged man,

he organized a war party. He selected twenty-two young braves, one of which was not a brave but was a very good runner and had very good eyesight. Because of this, he had gone on several raids. This was the reason Cut Knife wanted him in his war party. When Cut Knife asked him along, the young man asked, "Cut Knife, what more do you want?" Cut Knife thought this over, then replied, "I want a Cree woman and Cree children." "If we go we will not come back," said the young man. "The Crees have stronger medicine than we have. They are also smarter than we are, and they are better fighters." Others in the party also asked Cut Knife, without success, to call it off. "Cree Indians are braver, stronger and smarter than we are," they said. "We will not come back. But we will go with you."

Before they left for Cree country, Cut Knife said to his father, "If I am not home within a reasonable time, you set some prairie grass on fire. If it burns fast, I am on my way home."

The war party, with Cut Knife as their leader, headed north toward Cree country. They arrived at Sounding Lake with their food nearly gone. Further on at Manitou Lake, they were hungry and they were scared. From Manitou Lake they went east to about where the town of Neilburg is today. Then they went north to the Battle River, then east again to a place called Wolf Dung Hill. Here a buffalo was killed for food. Cut Knife ordered his braves to take the meat to some bushes and cook it, and also cook more to take with them. Then he climbed Wolf Dung Hill to scan the countryside. From the top of Wolf Dung Hill he could see another hill to the east. This hill was later to be named after him. As Cut Knife watched, he saw what he thought were wolves on the side of the other big hill in the distance. Scrambling down the hill, he went to where his boys were preparing the meat, and asked the boy with the good eyesight to come with him. "Bring your spyglass," he told the boy.

Together they crawled up Wolf Dung Hill. After the boy had taken a good look, he said to Cut Knife, "What you saw were not wolves. They are people skinning buffalo." When Cut Knife heard this he was very glad and became very excited. He rushed down the hill and told his men to drop everything. "We are leaving now. We are going to the other hill where we have just seen people," he said. "We will follow the river till we are opposite the hill. Then we'll go south," he told his boys. Here I think Cut Knife made his first mistake. I think he should have stayed on Wolf Dung Hill long enough to find out which way the people went to go home. Here, he was already beaten.

And so the band of raiders, led by Cut Knife, went east toward the hill where they had seen people. They followed the Battle River, then headed south to the hill. What time of the night or morning they arrived is not known. They made camp at the foot of the hill, and later Cut Knife climbed the hill to have a look around. He knew there was a band of Cree here, but

he did not know where.

The Cree, meantime, having skinned the buffalo, returned to their camp with the meat. Their camp was located a short distance north of the hill, where a man named Wah-sap lived until a few years ago. The Cree camp, however, was not visible from the top of the hill.

A man named Sweetgrass had a lodge in the Cree camp. He was being visited at this time by a young boy, twelve or thirteen years old. The lad was eating meat when a man stepped into Sweetgrass's lodge. He accepted a piece of meat Sweetgrass offered him. I guess that's what we call lunch today. "Very early, I am going back to the slaughtering grounds," Sweetgrass told his guests, "to get the calves that come looking for their mothers." "I will go with them," the young lad thought to himself as he walked home. Early next morning, the boy caught his pony and sat outside their lodge as he watched Sweetgrass's lodge. In a short time, Sweetgrass rode off and was joined by the man who visited him last evening. The boy then followed them.

They rode south toward the hill. When Sweetgrass and the other man were about to where Pah-chee-win now lives, the boy caught up with them. "Ah, you have come to dine with us," said Sweetgrass to the lad. "I have come to help," replied the lad. "Perhaps you will spare me a calf hide, so I may have a robe to cover me when I sleep this winter." "You can have two calf hides if we are lucky and make a good kill," Sweetgrass told the boy.

In those days, it was the custom to slaughter all the orphaned calves. The milk in the second stomach of a calf was also very delicious.

As the three rode on, they came to the crest of a hill. One of them at once noticed someone laying on top of the big hill. "You two go back to camp and report this," said Sweetgrass. "I will keep watch on him." The two left at once, and Sweetgrass loaded his gun which accidentally went off with a bang, waking the sleeping stranger.

It so happened there was in camp a very beautiful woman, a widow, whose husband had been killed by raiding Blackfoot Indians. She turned down all offers of marriage, saying she would marry the first man to bring her an enemy scalp. There was also a very useless and lazy man in camp, who had his eye on the beautiful widow.

When the shot woke up the stranger on the hill, he did not have time to look around. He just rolled over and over to the side of the hill. Then he got to his feet and made a run for the camp, saying something to his boys as he ran. Sweetgrass knew it was Sarcee, and from descriptions given by the trader at Beaver Hills, knew it was Cut Knife. Sweetgrass rode up the big hill and picked up a spyglass that Cut Knife had forgotten in his haste to get away. Then he shouted at Cut Knife who was

running down the north side of the hill. "You are going in the wrong direction," he shouted. The man shouted back, "You are a lying dog," in Cree. Sweetgrass then knew for sure it was Cut Knife, the great Sarcee fighter. Again Sweetgrass called, "You are going towards our camp. You will all be killed." The man stopped long enough to call back, "You are a lying dog," in Cree. Sweetgrass then knew for sure it was Cut Knife, the great Sarcee fighter. Again Sweetgrass called, "You are going towards our camp. You will all be killed." The man stopped long enough to call back, "You are a liar dog. My name is Cut Knife, and today I will claim the best fighters you have in camp."

Meanwhile, the camp had been informed of an enemy near by and the braves were not long in getting ready to take up the chase. When the lazy man who had his eye on the beautiful widow heard this, he had a brain wave. "Now's my chance. Perhaps I can get an enemy scalp, and get to marry the widow after all," he thought, as he started walking in the direction the braves had gone. He had not gone far when his uncle came by, riding a racer. "Get on the horse behind me, nephew," he said. "Maybe you can get a scalp today and marry the beautiful widow." The lazy man got on the horse, behind his uncle, and said nothing.

When they caught up with the braves, Cut Knife and his men had already thrown up earth-works and were surrounded by Cree warriors. The lazy man, whose name was Red Feather, told his uncle he was thinking of jumping into the trenches and trying to get the scalp of Cut Knife, or even his head, so he could marry the beautiful widow. His uncle agreed with him. "That is the way I got to marry your aunt," he said to Red Feather. But it seems he had competition; several braves were dangerously close to the earth-works, no doubt with the same thing in mind. Red Feather crept up to one of them who told him he would sing four times, then jump into the trench. Before he could start to sing, Red Feather jumped over him and into the trench, stabbing away with his knife, while braves fired into the trench, careful not to hit Red Feather. In moments Red Feather had beheaded Cut Knife, and was running back to his uncle carrying the head of Cut Knife.

"We will now go back to the camp," said the uncle. They both got on the horse and started for the camp. They had not gone far when the uncle saw a woman wearing a buckskin coat. I believe the woman was standing about where Snake Child is now living. "There," he said to his nephew, "is your future wife. I will now start calling her 'daughter' since she is going to be your wife." They rode up to the woman, and the uncle did the talking. "Daughter," he said, "I will now call you 'daughter' because you will be marrying my nephew. He was the first to jump into the trenches and has for you the head of the great Sarcee fighter, Cut Knife." The woman had been crying, but stopped crying and accepted the head of Cut Knife, wiping away her tears with the hair. All three of them then left for the camp.

At camp, the widow took home the head of Cut Knife to skin it and dry the scalp. Red Feather went to the lodge of his uncle to have a wash as he was covered with blood, and also to have breakfast as this was still early in the morning. After skinning and stretching the scalp, the beautiful widow went to the lodge of Red Feather's uncle. "You may come home now, Red Feather," she said. "Go, my nephew," said the old man. "You are now her husband, and I will be visiting you from time to time." The lazy Red Feather did not need much coaxing. He went home with the widow. The head of Cut Knife was there, and Red Feather thought a victory dance should be held. "A victory dance is to be held," said his wife. "It will be for four nights in a row. I will take the scalp of Cut Knife to these dances while you stay home and keep the lodge."

Littlepoplar: That must have ruined the plans of Red Feather for the night.

Lonesinger: And so the wife of Red Feather enjoyed four nights of dancing, then came home to Red Feather to become his wife. Ever since then the big hill on Poundmaker's Reserve has been known to the Cree as Cut Knife's Lookout. Two years ago I had occasion to pass by Cut Knife Hill. I walked to where Cut Knife made his last stand. A slight depression in the ground can be seen where they dug their trenches.

Littlepoplar: Is it the place where Red Feather beheaded Cut Knife?

Lonesinger: Yes, it can still be seen. It is said that afterwards, Red Feather used to say he would never go on the warpath, for fear he might get killed. He would, however, go on horse-stealing raids.

That brings the story to an end.

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This is another story that happened a long time ago. It is the story of Black Rock, a Stoney Indian who was not so young any more but had been a great warrior all his life. He had never taken a wife.

One day Black Rock heard of a war party being organized and decided to go along.

It so happened that a man in camp was in mourning. His twelve-year-old boy had just died, and he told his wife he was so sad and lonely that he thought he would also join the war party.

Another young man and his pretty wife also joined the war party. This man and his wife had no children. They had not gone far when this man began hitting and beating his wife. He thought his wife and Black Rock were up to something. And so it went on; whenever the party was near some bushes, the man

would take his wife into the bush and beat her up. Black Rock knew nothing about it.

After much travelling the party came to a river. After crossing the river a stop was made and the party sat on the grass to rest and to discuss their position. Black Rock thought if they went southwest one camp they should reach Blackfoot people. The older man in mourning said Black Rock was wrong, and said he was going straight south. The man with the beautiful wife agreed with him, and said he and his wife would go south too, no doubt glad of the chance to get away from Black Rock.

So the party went two separate ways, five going south and Black Rock and his party going southwest.

Next day, Black Rock and his party came upon some travois tracks which they followed. After a time they came upon a Blackfoot camp in a deep ravine ringed heavily with willows. Five of the enemy's horses grazed not far from where Black Rock and his men lay watching the camp. The boys were all for catching the horses and taking off for home but Black Rock refused, saying, "We must get together with the rest of the party first." It was midday and the sun was hot. They crept to a small slough to hide. The slough had a ring of willows and was spring-fed.

Without knowing, they were being watched by the enemy. Within a short time they were being fired upon by Blackfoot Indians. Many Blackfeet were killed as the Stoney's had better position. The Blackfeet then returned to their camp. But Black Rock and his men could hear more firing in the distance. No Blackfeet were in sight. Black Rock and his men took this opportunity to make a getaway.

They had not gone far when they saw a woman come running toward them. As she came near, they recognized her as one of their own. It was the woman who had been getting beatings from her husband over Black Rock. "Did they kill your husband?", they asked. "No," she replied. "He ran and left me behind." They ran on and on, till at dusk they arrived at the river. The woman then told Black Rock of the beatings she had been getting from her husband because her husband was jealous of Black Rock. Black Rock then got very angry and asked her if she loved her husband. "No," she replied. "He is too mean." "Will you marry me if I killed him tomorrow?" asked Black Rock. "I will marry you," she said.

Later, Black Rock and his men and the woman crossed the river. Going a little farther north they stumbled on the camp of the woman's husband. All but he and another man had been killed. Early next morning, the woman's husband climbed the hill and sat there, singing a victory song. "We have lost many good men on this raid," said Black Rock. "He has no right to be singing a victory song." Black Rock then sneaked up behind him and shot him through the head, killing him instantly.

That is all. That's what happened there.

This story is about another Stoney fighter, named Chokecherry Wood. He had a great reputation as a fighter and was known far and wide. He could be compared to the great Sarcee fighter, Cut Knife. Blackfoot Indians knew Chokecherry Wood and were very much afraid of him. Chokecherry Wood was not a big man, being short and wiry. He had tremendous strength and was also a great runner.

One day, he showed up at the lodge of his brother-in-law. "A war party is being organized," he said. "They are almost ready, and I am being left behind because I am short of shoes." His sister gave him several pairs of new moccasins. He was then ready to join the party of braves. There were thirty-two braves besides himself. But when he went looking for the braves, nowhere could he find them. They had sneaked away from camp without him. Apparently he was not wanted. The braves, thirty-two of them, wanted to outdo Black Rock and did not want any help from Chokecherry Wood. On hearing this, Chokecherry Wood decided to follow them.

He stayed a safe distance behind them as they travelled south. After many days, as they were nearing Blackfoot country, Chokecherry Wood caught up with the party. They were not glad to see him. They wanted to do something by themselves. They wanted to outdo Black Rock and did not want help from Chokecherry Wood. They, however, had no choice but to let Chokecherry Wood tag along.

As they travelled south through the night, Chokecherry Wood began to recognize the country, having been there many times before. Close to daylight, he said to the braves, "Not far from here, east of here, is a large camp of Blackfeet. It is the season of the berries. They are working with berries now. We could get a bunch of horses from their camp and go home from here." But the braves did not believe him, and told him so. They wanted to go, they said, further south. And so, as they argued back and forth, it became daylight. As they stood there talking, a band of horses came into view. They were not long in rounding them up and picking the horses of their choice. Chokecherry Wood picked himself a young mouse-coloured horse which he passed on to the boys and said, "Here, take this horse home for me. I am staying here and will be home later." The boys lost no time in getting started for home, as it was now broad daylight.

Chokecherry Wood watched as they disappeared over a hill in the distance. Soon after, Chokecherry Wood saw a rider on top of a hill to the east. Shortly he was joined by another and

then another. Now there were three of them. They were all looking west and Chokecherry Wood feared they might see him. But when he looked to the west, he saw some buffalo on the side of a hill. They were what the three Blackfoot riders were

looking at.

A little later the three Blackfoot riders went riding west and Chokeycherry Wood hid himself in some bushes on the north side of a ridge. After a time he saw the three riders coming towards him chasing three buffalo. The Blackfeet killed the buffalo right beside the bushes where Chokeycherry Wood was hiding.

In those days it was the custom to strip naked when skinning buffalo so as not to soil one's clothing. Chokeycherry Wood looked on as the three hunters stripped and began skinning. The one nearest him was a fast worker and soon had one side of the buffalo skinned. Noiselessly and very quickly, Chokeycherry Wood stripped himself naked and very quietly came up behind the Blackfoot nearest him. Very quickly he grabbed the man's hair and cut his throat. He then shoved the body under the buffalo hide and started skinning. They had not made a sound. Presently the one next to him looked his way. He pretended not to notice and continued skinning. After changing his position, he now had his back to Chokeycherry Wood. He waited a little, then ran up behind him and slit his throat. But he had timed it wrong: the third Blackfoot looked up just in time to see Chokeycherry Wood covering the body with the buffalo hide. He lost no time jumping on his horse and racing toward the camp, shouting that a stranger had killed his friend.

Chokeycherry Wood thought it would be a good time to leave the country. He ran north as fast as he could run, and he was a good runner. He ran and ran, but when he looked back he could see three riders fast catching up on him. On top of a small hill Chokeycherry Wood sat down and cried. The first rider came up, then the second rider rode up, and then the third. All were very surprised to see a brave crying. Then a strange thing happened. In sign language the Blackfeet told him to go home and do his crying. "Do not come back here," they said. "You are a cry baby and a coward. You go home and do your crying over there." Then one of them took off his shoes and gave them to Chokeycherry Wood. Another gave him his pants, and the third gave him his shirt. Then after he had put on their clothes, they told him to go.

Chokeycherry Wood got to his feet and tossed them his knife,

and said to them in sign language, "Why I was crying is that I did not like the thought of having to kill three of you. My name is Chokeycherry Wood, and my medicine is very strong. My boys left early this morning with a bunch of your horses, and I have killed two of your hunters. They are laying under buffalo hides and my clothes are there too. You can pick them up on your way home. You can have them." "And you," he said to the one who came up to him first, "I know you are a chief. Don't ever come to my part of the country. If you do, I will kill you. Chokeycherry Wood does not like being called a coward and a cry baby. I hope you will remember this." Then he ran north

towards home. He never looked back and the Blackfeet did not bother him.

Three nights after his boys got home Chokecherry Wood arrived at the camp. For a few days after his arrival in camp Chokecherry Wood rested at the lodge of his sister and her husband. Then he went to get his mouse-coloured horse which he trained as a hunting horse and also a fighting horse. Chokecherry Wood kept hearing rumors that, when the boys arrived in camp with many horses and without him, the boys had said that when the fighting got hot Chokecherry Wood had run. Chokecherry Wood said nothing, since he was alone and they were many, but worked hard at training his horse.

Two summers later a lad was sent out on the prairie to see why some hunters chasing buffalo had not returned. He came back with news that they were being attacked by Blackfoot warriors. Chokecherry Wood got his horse and with others went at once to the scene of the battle.

When they arrived they saw that the Blackfeet had dropped their bows and arrows and had offered to knife-fight the Stoneys. Chokecherry Wood at once saw that the chief who had called him a coward and a cry baby was there, and he took after him. When the Blackfoot chief recognized Chokecherry Wood, he got scared and dropped his knife and offered to hand-fight him, with the loser being killed. Chokecherry Wood dropped his knife and accepted the chief's challenge. The chief was a big man and no doubt very strong. Chokecherry Wood knew he had a fight on his hands. And so the big strong man and the little strong man fought the fight to the death there on the prairie as Stoney and Blackfoot spectators looked on. After a long period of fighting Chokecherry Wood felt the chief was beginning to tire and weaken. He had anticipated this and had conserved his own strength. Now Chokecherry Wood went to work and in short order had the chief thoroughly beaten. After Chokecherry Wood got his breath, he said to the chief, "You tell your men to

leave for home now. I am not going to kill you." This the chief did. Now Chokecherry Wood said to the chief, "Tell my people here exactly what happened two summers ago when we raided your camp. Most of the boys I was with are here now." This also the chief did, making barefaced liars of the men who were with Chokecherry Wood. Then he told the chief to take his horse and go home and not to come back, adding, "You may not be so lucky next time." The Blackfoot chief was glad to go.

I neglected to mention at the start of the story that Chokecherry Wood's grandmother, as a child, was taken by Blackfoot Indians and spent several summers with them and could speak the Blackfoot language, and escaped as a young woman and returned to her people, the Stoneys. She taught her grandson, Chokecherry Wood, the Blackfoot language.

And that brings an end to this story.

(End of Tape IH-050)

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