

It's Treaty Money Time!

by
R. C. READE

ISLAND LAKE, MANITOBA
"PLANE! Plane!" shrieked the little Indian boys swarming out of hut and tepee, at the sound of a motor droning in the sky.

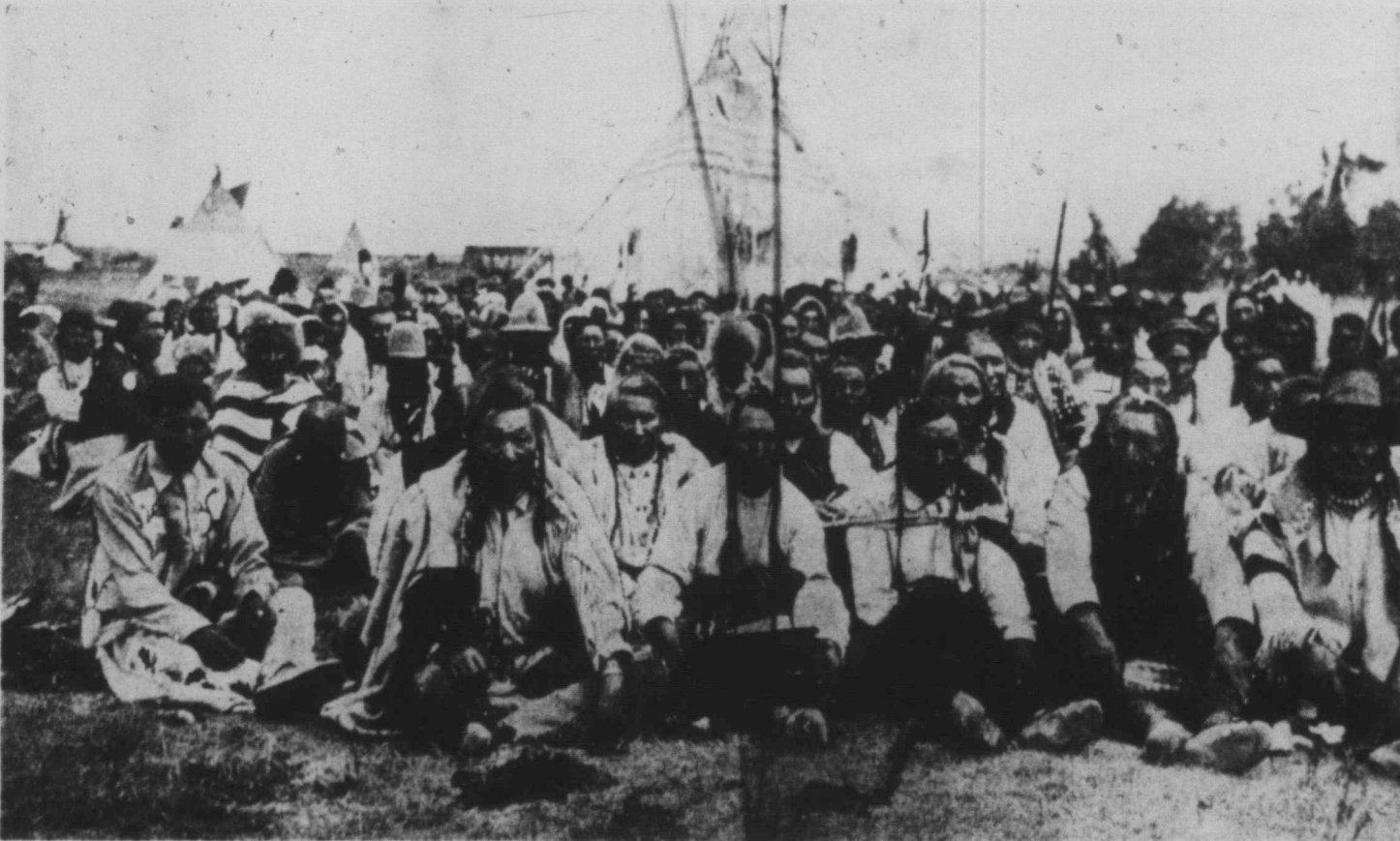
Soon, out of a low, dark bank of cloud at the tail end of a violent thunderstorm the machine appeared, circling for a landing at Maria portage at the north end of Island Lake in Manitoba.

It was not merely "a" plane, but "the" plane, the most exciting event in the year to these Cree and Salteaux Island Indians, the treaty plane, bringing gifts from Ottawa of \$5 to every man, woman and child of the nearly 1,000 residents at Maria or St. Theresa Portage, and the other Indian settlement, 10 miles away, Garden Hill or Flat Rock.

It may seem unseasonable to talk of Christmas in August, but that is the only way you can explain the suppressed excitement of the old women at the camp fires, the sparkle in the black eyes of the children, the gravity of the chief and his eight councillors in their government uniforms as they prepared to welcome Santa Claus in the person of P. G. Lazemby, the Indian agent from Norway House.

This is the only period in the year that the majority of these isolated Indians see and handle money. At other times, their financial transactions are credit transactions. They receive advances in goods from the traders and pay in furs. They celebrate Christmas, it is true, but they are then in their winter shacks in the woods on their trap lines, on short rations. Christmas is a time of cold and privation and scarcity. Treaty time is a time of warmth and gregariousness and temporary plenty, a picnic lasting a whole week.

A Star Weekly staff writer flies far into the Manitoba bush to take part in the distribution of treaty money to the Indians. It's a gala time for them, a red-letter day they wait months for—though they've spent their money before they get it!



TREATY MONEY TIME for the Blood tribe of the Blackfoot Indians in western Canada brings a colorful gathering. For Indian all over Canada it is celebration time.

money by means of cheap, worthless finery. I saw none of that. The bulk of the goods sold were staples and essentials.

A pound of lard, the Indian's butter, a pound of tea, a ~~cup~~ of baking powder, a small amount of sugar, a few packets of matches, were common orders. Only occasionally would a man buy a tin of peach or strawberry jam.

On none of three treaty grounds did I see any evidence that the northern Manitoba Crees are foolish and reckless spenders. There was no sale of lip sticks, vanity cases, silk stockings or face powder, although they did buy such luxuries as gramophone records.

The paying over of money is only one part of the work a treaty party performs. The constable, as a representative of law and order, is there to note any present and investigate any past breaches of the peace. The Indian agent has the power of a magistrate to try any case on the spot. He had no magisterial work at Island or God's Lake although there were some offenders to be tried at Oxford House.

Race Not Dying Out

"INDIAN offences," said Corporal Stafford, "have mostly to do with liquor. There is little theft or violence. An Indian is not supposed to drink, but if we are told about it, he readily confesses. If I meet with such a case on my rounds I merely ask him to report at Norway House for trial."

The corporal gave this Indian district almost a complete bill of health as far as crime is concerned. The doctor surprised me by the report he gave of health conditions, particularly in the Island Lake reserve.

"There is some tuberculosis," said he, "but the race is certainly not dying out" from it.



AT MARIA PORTAGE on Island lake this Indian family posed for R. C. Reade while their husbands went to receive the treaty money. At this treaty money gathering, it was seen that of the women, only widows received treaty money in person.

germless bills. One by one the Indians came forward, each with an identification card.

This was a census taking as well as payment of treaty money. Each was asked his age, his religion, the number of his family.

That was important, for he drew five dollars for each member. Yet one man tried to do himself out of five dollars.

"I have nine children," said he, after counting on his fingers.

"Haven't you really got 10," said the agent, consulting a list furnished him by the mission.

The Indian counted on his fingers again. Then he chuckled and a smile went around the council room. Yes, he really had 10. He had forgotten little John. One proud father had a son born the day the treaty party came. That was indeed arriving in the nick of time. The child was at once entitled to five dollars. If he had been born a few days later, he would have had to wait a year for it.

"At one treaty payment," said the doctor, "an Indian came running to the dock just as the plane was moving out. There had just been a birth in his family and he wanted us to put back and pay him the extra treaty money."

By the time you read this, this treaty party is back in Norway House after having distributed \$15,000 to the Indians. It is a safe wager that the money is still in Indian possession. Right in the council house I could see how speedily money vanishes in the north.

I had met a picturesque character, old Jacob Wood, and thought I would like to photograph him with all his money spread fan-wise. After leaving the cashier he paused to interview the chief, who took from him several bills which he added to a steadily growing pile for which he used his foot as a paper weight. That, I understood, was for some communal expense.

Even so, old Jacob, I saw clearly, still had three one-dollar bills left. I lost sight of him as he ducked around several people to reach the door. When he got out into the open, with a broad grin on his face, he held up one lone dollar bill. And the crowd guffawed.

Where Debt is Sacred

THERE was even more laughter at another Indian who held up a 10-cent piece. That was all he had left of his treaty money to squander with the traders.

"What will he buy with it?" I asked. "Matches to light the fire," he replied. "Why not some tobacco?" "Tobacco costs 15 cents."

His only pleasure from the treaty money could be a glow of satisfaction at having paid his debts. Debt contracted against treaty money, is, I was told, regarded as a sacred obligation. This tribe, at the end of last winter when provisions were low, had made a large purchase of flour from a trader, under



CREE AND SALTEUX INDIANS of the Island lake reserve in northern Manitoba line up to receive their \$5 annual share of treaty money from the Dominion government. Here they are dressed in their best for treaty money day.

They shut up their cabins and move themselves, bag and baggage, dogs and nets and papoose boards, to the treaty ground. Women gossip. Old men now have audiences for their tales of prowess on the trap line and the freighting trips. If a young man can carry 900 bags of flour, now is the time to exhibit his strength. It is also flirtation time. The treaty ground is a marriage mart. They all assemble well ahead of time, even more to meet one another than to see the Indian agent.

In the old days, I was told, when the treaty party arrived by canoe, a fleet of canoes would have sallied out to meet them. There would have been wild whooping on the water and on the banks of the lake, and a fusillade from rifles and shotguns; but in 1939, with shells at 15 cents apiece, that gunpowder greeting is too expensive a luxury.

Suitcase With \$15,000

THE plane, when it taxied to a rough dock, was welcomed in silence by a cluster of men and boys on the muddy bank. The women and girls remained in their tents cleaning whitefish, splitting logs and washing clothes. The one ceremony was the running up of the flag on the tall pole at the log council house in the centre of the treaty ground, as the plane touched land.

"If you see one treaty payment you see them all," said an expert on this subject.

That is true enough, for the three I saw, at Maria Portage, at Garden Hill and at God's Lake. All the incidents attending the arrival of the treaty party were similar. There was the same craning of necks to the sky, the same silent grouping on the bank, the same welcome committee of chief and councillors to an identical village of tents. Different Indian dogs howled at different landings, but they all howled in the same plaintive, famished key.

Everywhere, any prize for the best and most colorfully dressed male would have gone to Corporal Stafford, the watchdog of the treaty party treasury. He was in full R.C.M.P. regalia, broad-rimmed hat, scarlet tunic, breeches and jingling spurs, all ready to ride in a country where there are no horses. A poor second in male finery was

the chief of the band, although he is a peacock in this land. There was a gold band on his hat, vivid red stripes on his trousers and brass buttons to his coat. His councillors were in sober, unadorned blue, and wore black hats much like those of the Oblate fathers who conduct this mission.

When you travel by plane, even in the wildest north, you need no bush attire, if you ignore the possibility of that unlikely happening, a forced landing. So the tall and lean Indian agent, the dispenser of Ottawa's bounty, was not dressed at all like a rotund Santa Claus from the North Pole, but in a city, business suit.

To the Indians, even the resplendent mounted police corporal was drab compared to the shiny brown suitcase carried by the Indian agent's clerk, Frederick Bishop. In it was \$15,000, in fives and twos and ones. Not all of it, of course, was distributed at Island Lake. It was also for God's Lake, Oxford House and Cross Lake. And it was not all, in the strict sense, treaty money. Some of it was paid to Indians who had freighted goods for the department of Indian affairs.

But it was not money that made the most triumphant entry into this Indian camp. It was Dr. Turpil, the medical health officer for the whole Norway House district, a McGill graduate who has been 12 years in this area, knows every Indian and speaks Cree, it is said, better than most of them.

Indian crowds do not cheer like white crowds, but there was a distinct murmur of delight when the doctor landed. There was immediately a cross-fire of Cree witticisms between him and the crowd, and he moved through waves of laughter from the dock to his improvised hospital, a log cabin, especially scoured for the occasion.

There was no delay in putting the government money into circulation. While the Indian servants who travelled with the treaty party put up its tents, a brown one for the agent or "the great white father," as some call him, and white ones for the others, Mr. Lazemby promptly began disbursement proceedings at a table in the council house.

The clerk opened his registers and the suitcase with its neat bundles of brand new,

the distinct understanding that it would be paid for, when the treaty money was paid.

Before the treaty, all Island Lake hummed with speculation as to that trader's fate. It must be remembered that no Indian on a reserve can be sued for debt. His word is his only bond. If he chooses to disregard a promise to pay, nothing can be done about it. The pessimists wouldn't in advance, give a nickel for the trader's debt. Only a few optimists felt that he might be paid. But he was paid.

The real drama of this treaty payment is a shopping drama. There were in the camp two traders' tents. Across the front of their tents, poles covered with cardboard, formed a counter. Around it like bees at the entrance to a hive, small Indian boys clustered for hours at a time. The spectacle of shelves filled with soap, lard, tea, sugar, boxes of matches, tin buckets and so forth, seemed to fascinate them.

But business was not as brisk as the crush at the entrance to the booths might indicate. Prospective purchasers gazed at the shelves and went back to the tents to consult. They were far from rash buyers. Shopping is so universal a feminine interest that I was surprised that for a long time I did not see one woman at the traders' tents. A man would take away several samples of cotton print and then return and purchase a yard. Evidently he had consulted his wife. Some bought women's attire on their own, seemingly without consultation.

They Love Strong Colors

THAT was almost the general custom in the old days," said one of the traders. "The men chose the women's clothes. But each year more women are doing their shopping themselves."

The feminine shoppers were more in evidence at the end of the day. An old woman came up with a child in her arms and several "agging" at her skirts, and after looking over a collection of celluloid brooches, chose a bright yellow one and pinned it on the baby.

had been told in Winnipeg that at treaty time in the far north hordes of traders flocked in to separate the Indian quickly from his

This band has increased in numbers from 650 to 950 since I first came. At Sucker Lake, just north of Island Lake, there hasn't been an Indian death in three years. This reserve has a good health record, perhaps from the reason that it has little connection with white men.

There was no physical check over the whole population. That would be far too much for one doctor in two days. Those who had any ailment reported to him. Chief amongst these were those suffering from toothache. Those who want a tooth pulled on Island Lake with anaesthetic have to wait for the doctor's annual visit.

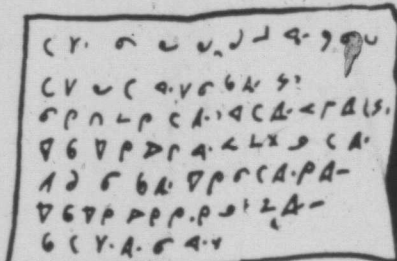
On the day after the treaty money was paid, while the doctor visited the sick, the Indian agent sat in the council house, discussing with the chief and council the economic affairs of the reserve, and also made an agricultural survey.

On Island Lake most of the Indians have gardens and there was a splendid promise of potatoes, carrots, beets, lettuce, onions and cabbage, which make an important addition to the food supply. One of the show places was that of Thomas Mamakesick, who had a very neat log house, as well as a splendid garden in which not a weed was visible.

For his cabin he had to haul the logs in from the bush by hand. To appreciate his achievement one must remember that he has been a sort of Robinson Crusoe with few mechanical aids. His planks had to be made from logs with a draw knife. That trim, neat double-storey cabin represented labor and perseverance that would have been creditable to any white man.

I applauded his horticultural and agricultural achievements genuinely and not from mere politeness. This was translated to him, and, on the way back in the canoe, he took out a notebook and wrote a message for me in Cree syllables to state how much he appreciated the fact that I admired his house and garden.

Any account of the other treaty payments I saw would in no way differ radically from this, although elsewhere it might be hard to duplicate Thomas Mamakesick.



A letter in Cree language given Mr. Reade by Thomas Mamakesick. Mr. Reade has complimented him on the house he had built and in this note Mamakesick says how pleased he is his work has been admired.