

The last stand of Robert Smallboy

140 Crees try to make it on their own in the Kootenay Plains where it's cold as hell but moosemeat keeps you warm

Last summer a small group of Cree Indians broke away from the restrictions of their reserve and the influences of structured society to live in the uncomplicated way they were intended to live.

Two weeks ago, freelance journalist W. W. P. Burns and Gateway photographer Al Scarth travelled to the Kootenay Plains to get a story on what is really happening. This is what they found.

It's cold as hell on the Kootenay Plains, but 140 people have been living here in 23 tents since July. People from the four Hobbema Cree Indian bands of Sampson, Louis Bull, Ermineskinne, and Montana followed lifetime Ermineskinne chief Robert Smallboy to this present camp in the White Goat wilderness of the Rocky Mountains.

White people think he's crazy with the forest for a home; they can't understand why, nor take time to try. They laugh at him in the nearest town and wait for him to quit—to go back to the reservation at Hobbema. Even the Department of Indian Affairs thought he would leave when it got colder. People didn't want to believe he could lead his people back to the old ways of life.

Chief Smallboy does not trust the newspaper men who have come to see him. He says it embarrasses the white man to tell the truth, and that the only time the white man is interested in the Indian is when he can make money from him. Violet Omeasoo, who serves as the chief's interpreter, says nobody was

By W. W. P. Burns

interested in the Indians when they lived at Hobbema. She wonders why they are important now.

In the nearest city a paper portrayed them as existing on welfare, huddled in tents to escape the cold, and starving. The clerk in the Indian Agent's office at Rocky Mountain House said some of the people were receiving assistance if they need it. Most payments however are coming from oil royalties on land holdings at Pigeon Lake. Besides that some of the men in the camp are working out, like those at the gas station at Nordegg.

It is understandable when Chief Smallboy says the white man looks down on the Indian. It is understandable he does not respect the journalists who have been there.

He cannot respect most of the white men he comes in contact with, because most of them are trying to exploit him. Several stories have been printed which distorted the facts to sell. Smallboy started to

charge \$100.00 for the right to take pictures after this. He uses the money to buy gas for his trucks.

Here he stands on his own ground and needs only answer to nature for survival.

He expects someone coming in to respect his way of life. Out here, you are judged on your word, not your appearance.

Here his people have a way of life where they can keep their self respect. On the reservation they can only be second class citizens. It is better out here for the children. There is no one to laugh at them or lead the young girls astray. Everything they need is here, except a school. The Department of Indian Affairs had promised to send in a trailer to serve as a school and it was supposed to arrive before Christmas. Violet Omeasoo, who is to serve as teacher, said correspondence lessons have arrived but as yet no textbooks or trailer. The Indian agent hasn't visited them since before it snowed.

On the reservation they can only be second class citizens

The road west of Nordegg is drifted over at 23 below zero, and a person becomes sceptical about going out there. If it drifts any worse, you won't get out.

Our first sighting of the camp was from the David Thompson highway, 38 miles west of Nordegg and near the White Goat River. It sits in a sheltered area, by a small lake and surrounded by mountains. The first sound heard was the laughter of children as they played on an ice slide. Dogs barked at first, then came over to get their ears scratched.

A group of men stood around a car with a fire burning under its oil pan. They said the Chief's tent was on one of the streets further west, then laughed. Joe Smallboy said his father wasn't there. The chief is 76 and was taking his mother back to Hobbema. She had come out for Christmas.

When they were told a news story had said they were starving, everybody laughed again.

One man pointed at his belly and said, "I gained thirty pounds since I came out here".

There is no lack of food as George Mackinaw pointed out. He said they had shot eight animals in the last week. The meat is then rationed out. The women say they have trouble keeping potatoes from freezing. Indian bread, known as 'bannock,' provides plenty of starch for their diet. There seems to be plenty of game around: it is easier to hunt now that the white hunters have gone. George can't understand men who come to hunt just for heads

of animals. He has a covenant with nature; he hunts to eat, not for game.

Lazarus Roan has a black silver-tipped beard and sits on a wooden stump for a chair. He gives you a stump too while he talks to you. He used to drive a school bus in Hobbema, but lost his license when he turned 60. It was too bad because he almost had his bus paid for. All he misses out here are the hockey games on television. The only way he will go back to the reservation is in a box. He speaks for the chief because he is one of the elders and the chief is away.

Through an interpreter he says, "The chief will probably speak to you if he thinks you will print the truth. The first ones who came were told true facts but did not print them."

He tells why the chief wants to charge these people to take pictures. Obviously if he was satisfied with what was being printed, he wouldn't have to charge. Lazarus Roan is given a promise that no pictures will be taken without the chief's approval.

It is the beginning of a basis of trust. Words matter out here. The children are naturally curious but do not steal. Drinking is not permitted. They left that and the other evils of the white man's way of life behind them.

Lazarus talked about the first reporter who came. The chief told him when the white man came to this country he brought no good, only evil. God put the Indians' animals on the earth for the Indian to hunt. The white man was given his animals too, but he has to keep them warm and feed them.

The chief asked him, "Why do you kill my animals and give me nothing for them. Give me back the duck you put me in jail for."

The reporter didn't print this. Like most of those who followed him he chose to exaggerate to sell a

Evils of the white man's way of life left behind them

story. That was how Robert Smallboy came to distrust reporters.

The government isn't too popular either. It seems a hydroelectric power dam is going to be built on the Bighorn River to serve Calgary Power. Scenic Windy Point will be under water. The graves of two Indian children are up there. The Indians aren't sure if the lake created will force them to move from this camp, but it is sure to affect the game. An engineer at the Department of Highways told me the vegetation put under water by the lake will rot for the first couple of years. This will drive the game back into

the hills and destroy many miles of beautiful scenery.

In twenty years the dam will be obsolete, but by then it will be too late to save the scenery or the wildlife. It is not certain whether the crown has clear title, as some of the tribes in this area have never signed a treaty. This area has long been a traditional hunting ground.

Supper is moosemeat, and it keeps you warm in the sub-zero weather. The bachelor tent turns out to be a good place to sleep in, even for these two white men. It gets cold at night, but if you get up to put wood on the fire, you stay warm.

Morning comes with the sound of an engine struggling to start, lugging, coughing, then roaring into life. The old Plymouth next to the bachelor tent starts every morning. The other cars are started periodically during the night to keep them going. Those that don't make through the night get a boost from the old Plymouth.

Diapers are flapping on a clothesline as people start to carry water from the well. A group of men take one of the trucks and a chain saw to get wood from a burned out area several miles away. When a load comes in even the kids split wood.

They brought trinkets to trade with the Indians

They had a good Christmas here. Joe Smallboy had a decorated tree in his tent and tells of the Mormons who came with gifts and Santa Claus in a station wagon. A white boy from Winnipeg named Barry has been living out here for several months. His parents sent in 300 pounds of turkey. The chief says not all whites are bad.

Chief Smallboy was splitting wood when we went to see him. Through an interpreter he explained that he would have to charge for any pictures taken. When two reporters from an Edmonton paper showed up, they were told this, but they did not respect it. While the one sat in the chief's tent, the photographer was outside taking pictures. They had brought trinkets with them to trade with the Indians.

Grateful for the hospitality shown to us, we did not take any pictures, but when some appeared in an Edmonton newspaper, we asked the chief if he had given permission. He said he hadn't. The reporters maintained they were within their rights in that the Indians were on crown land, technically just squatters, having no recourse in court.

Smallboy does not want men like this coming to see him. He does not respect a man whose word is not good. He asks only to be left alone, free from tourists and reporters without ethics. He asks only to be left in peace in this land of his fathers between these four hills.