Saskatchewan Sioux

To the white man on the American frontier, the Sioux were the archetypal 'bad' Indians. The warrior race was noted for its fierceness in combat, its expertise on horseback, its defiance of the white man's ways. This image, reinforced by countless books, TV shows and late night movies, has contributed to the lasting lore and legend of the Sioux.

That's the image. While there is some truth to it, there is also much falsehood. And, much has been left out. While great fighters, the Sioux also lived in peaceful coexistence with their Indian brothers as well as the white man. Described by some as bloodthirsty savages, others found them to be straight dealing, deeply religious, and skilled orators. In fact, the name Sioux itself is inaccurate, and derogatory to boot. Coined by the French Canadian traders and coureur des bois, *nadowessioux* is a corruption of an Ojibway expression, meaning snake-like. It was later shortened to Sioux. The proper name for the Sioux is Dakota, which means people.

Perhaps the greatest fallacy is that the Sioux was an American tribe. In reality, the Sioux comprised several different tribes, which had many and lasting contacts with Canada. Most people know that Sitting Bull, the most famous Sioux, spent some time in Canada, but few are aware that descendents of the Sioux chief's band still live in the southern part of the province. As well, there are three other Sioux bands in Saskatchewan, one near Fort Qu'Appelle, another called the Wahpeton Indian Reserve, outside of Prince Albert, and one south of Saskatoon, known as the White Cap or Moose Woods band. This is the story of how two tribes came or, more properly, came back to Canada.

In 1976, an Indian Affairs official stated that Dakota Indians came to Canada after the Riel Rebellion of 1885 and, thus, had no traditional occupancy rights.

Two years later, the minister of Indian Affairs wrote that when Treaty Number 6 was signed in 1876 the 'Sioux had been living in Canada only short while, and were not regarded as having an aboriginal interest in Canadian territory.'

Even the author of *The Indians of Canada,* considered the definitive book on Canadian Indians, said the few Dakota Sioux living in Canada descended from Sitting Bull's band that crossed the International Boundary in 1877. 'Strictly speaking, therefore, they are not a Canadian tribe and we may pass them without further mention.'

This view that the Sioux are 'American Indians'—johnny-come-latelies with no claim to treaty rights in Canada—is coming under increasing attack by Indian historians and researchers.

In fact, some are saying the Sioux have been 'Canadian Indians' for at least 700 years and probably closer to 2,000 years.

Evidence can be found in the *Dakota Documents,* a survey of archaeological and historical data on the Dakota and their contacts with Canada, by Peter Douglas Elias. Elias said the origins of the Dakota tribe can be traced back to the pre-historic Laurel culture. The Laurel existed from 200 BC to 800 AD around lake Superior and Lake Winnipeg, but the picture gets cloudy after that.

Elias said archaeological findings suggest that the Dakotas must have branched off from this earlier culture and moved south. Later on, competition from other tribes and climatic changes caused the Dakotas to divide into three distinct tribal groups, the Tetons of the Western Plains, the Santees of the Great Lakes area and the Yankton who lived between the Mississippi and the Missouri rivers.

Contact with the white man in what is now Canada dates back to the early 17th Century and continued regularly into the 19th Century. Elias maintains, 'the historic records abundantly demonstrate that the Dakotas maintained regular, intimate ties with their Canadian territory throughout their post-contact history…. There is no point in time where it could be said that the Dakotas abandoned their aboriginality in Canada.'

In addition, the British government made pledges to the Dakotas who allied themselves against the Americans during the Revolutionary War of 1776 and the War of 1812.

Instead, Elias stated, the Dakotas were met with silence or more broken promises. 'The Dakotas are correct in their historic assertion that the Crown promised and intended to protect all Dakota lands and that included lands north of what was yet to become the international boundary. Thus their disappointment when confronted by officials who knew nothing about these promises and a general population openly hostile to their interests.'

Elias's view that the Dakotas are an indigenous tribe to Canada is backed up by Bill Blackbird and Blair Stonechild of the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College. 'When you're talking about indigenous peoples, you're talking in general terms,' said Stonechild, who is head of Indian Studies at the college.

As an example, he cited the government's failure to provide adequate reserve land to the Teton Sioux who remained in Wood Mountain after Sitting Bull's departure. Instead, they were given a small plot of land, three miles by three miles. 'The government's attitude was that they (the Tetons) went indigenous. They just arbitrarily decided to give them a small parcel of land.'

Blackbird, a lecturer at the college, added that before and after contract with the white man, Indians, including Dakotas, roamed across the International Boundary at will.

'That artificial boundary between the U.S. and Canada meant nothing to numberless herds of buffalo and the Dakotas that hunted them', he said.

Alec is the last of the Buffaloes

In a small frame house on the Standing Buffalo Indian Reserve near Fort Qu'Appelle, lives Alec Buffalo, the last of five generations of chiefs of Dakota Sioux Indians.

His great-grandfather, Ta-Tanka-Nazin, or Standing Buffalo, led his Sisseton tribe north to Canada following the Minnesota Uprising in 1862. After Standing Buffalo died, Alec's grandfather, Standing Bear, brought his people to Fort Qu'Appelle where they were granted a reserve in 1878.

He remembers the day his grandfather died, the stories his father told him of Sitting Bull's visits, the dark days of the Rebellion of 1885, the early years in Minnesota.

A 70-year-old bachelor, Alec lives alone in this sparsely furnished, but tidy, home on top of the Qu'Appelle Valley. On the walls are pictures of the Queen, Prince Philip and the Last Supper, testifying to his Christian faith and allegiance to the Crown.

Alec, who retires four years ago as chief of Standing Buffalo reserve after serving for than 20 years, looks and acts like a man 10 years younger. His eyes brighten with the memory of bygone days.

Digging out old sepia-colored photos of his forebears, along with papers and documents, Alec told about how his people came to settle in the valley of the Fishing Lakes.

He still has a copy of the treaty his great-great-grandfather, the Orphan or Star Face, and other chiefs signed with the Americans in 1851. But the peace was shattered after an uprising, called the Minnesota Massacres, took place 10 years later. Although he took no part in the outbreak, Star Face's son Standing Buffalo was forced to leave the reserve in the U.S. and bring his band to Canada.

Under Standing Buffalo, 3,000 Sioux moved to Portage La Prairie and lived peacefully. The great chief demanded complete respect for the laws, which was duly noted by newspapers of the day. 'They were very careful neither to steal anything, nor indeed, do anything, to give offence."

Of course, Standing Buffalo wanted to stay in Canada and win reserve lands for his people. Bearing medals awarded to bands members from the Revolutionary War and War of 1812, Standing Buffalo argued that the Sioux were simply asking the British to fulfil promises made 50 or 100 years earlier. "And now we bring them back to the place where our people got them long ago. They told us that whenever we wanted anything, we must come and show these medals…. We are very anxious to hear from our Mother, the Queen. We want to know if she has any words for us and whether she can help us now that we have been driven from our hunting ground."

But Standing Buffalo never lived to see the reserve named after him. He died in 1869 at the Sisseton camp outside of Weyburn. His son, Standing Bear, became chief and brought the band to the northwest shore of Echo Lake, where they were granted a reserve among the Cree.

Alec recalled that his grandfather was warned by the North West Mounted Police not to take part in the Rebellion of 1885. 'My dad used to talk about it. There were eight families that were fairly well guarded by the NWMP. They told my grandfather not to get involved with those other tribes.'

Those 'other tribes' were some members of White Cap's Dakota bands south of Saskatoon and some of the younger braves leftover from Sitting Bull's four-years stay in Canada. They joined up with Riel at Duck Lake and were defeated by Middleton's superior forces.

But Standing Bear (who retained the title of Standing Buffalo, like all the chiefs of Sisseton tribe) followed the lead of his father and remained loyal to the Crown.

Alec, who was about eight at the time, remembers the day his grandfather died. 'He died on June 21, 1921. I knew him. He lived down the valley from here. When he died a lot of people came to see him.' But, Alec said, there was no Christian funeral. While he was converted to Christianity by two priests from the nearby mission at Lebret, Standing Bear never gave up the old ways.

Instead he was buried on a hill over looking Echo Lake and the powwow grounds where Sioux gather every year. 'That's where all the Standing Buffalo family is buried,' Alec said.

After that, Alec's father Julius became hereditary chief of the Sisseton tribe, adopting the title Standing Buffalo. In turn, Julius was succeeded by Alec in 1957. Alec was the first chief to be elected by the band members, who voted to continue the tradition of having Standing Buffalo descendants as their leaders. (The current chief Melvin Isnana, who took over in 1979, is also related to the Standing Buffalo family.)

During his tenure as chief, Alec said relations were good between the surrounding Cree bands and the Standing Buffalo band. 'We get along with the Crees all around here. No trouble at all, right up to today.'

The band’s population had grown steadily until recent years, when the population of the reserve levelled off at about 300. About 325 live off the reserve.

According to Isnana, the Standing Buffalo reserve wants to increase its reserve lands, which consist of three sections of mainly hilly terrain. There are only seven farms on the reserve, and even those are marginal, he said.

‘We’ve had previous negotiations with the Office of Native Lands Claims. We want to negotiate with the federal government, so they don’t put a ceiling on the claim.’ Isnana said the band wants more land to increase its economic base and meet the needs of ‘future generations.’

Critical to their land claim is proof that the Dakotas are an indigenous Indian tribe to Canada. Isnana said historical and archeological research proves beyond a doubt that the Dakotas have ‘aboriginal title’ in Canada.

Alec Buffalo too recalls debate about the ‘nationality’ of the Sisseton Dakota band. ‘When I was elected chief in 1957, people used to say ‘we’re American Indians.’ But an Indian agent replied, ‘Whoever said you’re American? Maybe I’m an American. If you’re born in Canada, then you’re Canadian.’

The King of the Sioux

A 19th Century American newspaper once depicted the Sioux as ‘the greatest cutthroats of the plains, demons whose names are written in shame and blood of the helpless and innocent, and who deserved to die a thousand deaths for their nameless crimes against decency and humanity.’

That rather florid description differs considerably from that of James Morrow Walsh, former superintendent of the North West Mounted Police. In 1890, Walsh wrote ‘it was the unkind feeling that so many Americans entertained towards the Indians that forced them in self-defense to act like devils.’

Walsh knew about the Sioux, having been Sitting Bull’s custodian for the better part of his four-year exile in Canada. Walsh characterized the Teton chief as ‘the shrewdest and most intelligent Indian living’ with the ‘ambition of Napoleon and brave to a fault. He is respected as well as feared by every Indian

on the plains. In war he has no equals, in council he is superior to all, and every word said by him carries weight and is quoted and passed from camp to camp.'

Not surprisingly, the Americans had a far different view of Sitting Bull. An American Indian agent called him 'crafty, avaricious, mendacious and ambitious. Sitting Bull possessed all the faults of an Indian and none of the nobler attributes which have gone far to redeem some of his people from their deeds of guilt… I never knew him to display a single trait that might command admiration or respect.'

These differences in opinion about the Teton chief can be attributed to the experience each nation had in dealing with Sitting Bull.

It was Sitting Bull's 2,500 to 3,000 Dakota Sioux warriors that annihilated 12 companies of U.S. cavalry commanded by Gen. George Custer in the valley of the Little Big Horn River in 1876. Romantically dubbed 'Custer's Last Stand,' between 225 and 260 officers, soldiers and civilians were killed virtually to the last man by a vastly superior force of Sioux.

However, the victory meant increased harassment from the U.S. Army, which vowed the Sioux would either surrender or be driven out of the country.

So, Sitting Bull and 3,000 of his people crossed the 'Medicine Line,' the border between the U.S and Canada, and camped near Wood Mountain, about 125 miles from Fort Walsh in the Cypress Hills.

Walsh, who was recuperating from illness in the U.S., quickly returned to keep an eye on the situation. Dispatching scouts to observe the movement of the Sioux, Walsh was determined to meet the Sioux chief and instruct him in the ways of British justice.

This now-legendary confrontation is described at length in two books, C. Frank Turner's *Across the Medicine Line* and Grant MacEwan's *Sitting Bull: The Years in Canada.*

Walsh, four members of the force and two guides entered the Sioux encampment and proceeded straight to Sitting Bull's teepee. Only minutes away were 5,000 Sioux, including 1,000 warriors.

Undaunted, Walsh halted a few paces from Sitting Bull's tent, dismounted then strode with hand outstretched to the leader of the Tetons. His gesture was received by the surprised and shocked chief with two hands.

In an impromptu powwow, Walsh informed the chief the Sioux were now on Canadian soil and as such subject to British law.

This auspicious meeting was the beginning of an unusually warm and deep friendship between Walsh and Sitting Bull, but one fraught with difficulties.

During the next several years, Walsh tactfully but persistently tried to persuade Sitting Bull of the advantages of making peace with Americans and eventually moving back. For his part, Sitting Bull protested that he would never become an 'Agency Indian' nor trust the Americans to let his people live in peace.

To his credit, Sitting Bull abided by the redcoat's laws and enforced bans against horse stealing and other time-honored practices with ruthless authority.

But his presence in Canada was becoming an embarrassment for the Canadian government, and not an inconsiderable expense. While the American government insisted Sitting Bull and his followers should be sent back to the U.S. and placed on reserves, Canadian authorities quietly wished the Indian leader would pass back over the Medicine Line—for good.

In a 19th century version of shuttle diplomacy, Walsh and NWMP mediated between the reluctant Sioux chiefs and representatives of the U.S. Army, who offered reserve lands and cattle if the Indians would turn over their guns and horses. Suspicious of the Longknives' motives, the Sioux chiefs refused the offer.

But lack of food, bad weather and perhaps homesickness gradually eroded their determination to remain in Canada. Little by little, the Sioux trickled across the line and onto American reserves.

True to form, Sitting Bull was among the last to go back. His pleas to have reserve land where his people could hunt and live in peace fell on deaf ears. The Canadian authorities had obligations with it's 'own' Indians and they feared trouble if the latecomers were given land near other reserves.

After a particularly harsh winter, which decimated the already weakened tribe, Sitting Bull had run out of time. After an ill-starred trek to Fort Qu'Appelle to visit Walsh (who had been moved to another posting), he decided to give in to the Americans.

Sitting Bull was finally repatriated in 1881 along with about 200 ragged remnants of the once mighty band.

The rest, as they say, is history. The once hostile American public treated Sitting Bull like a celebrity; a full time secretary was needed to handle the chief's fan mail. In fact, Sitting Bull did become a celebrity, touring the U.S. and Canada as part of Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show.

In 1890, a year of disease and discontent amongst the Dakota Sioux, Sitting Bull was arrested for allegedly fomenting unrest and rebellion against the government. Sitting Bull and six others, including his 17 year-old son, were killed during the botched attempt.

Upon learning of his old friend's death, Walsh wrote that, 'history does not tell that a greater Indian than Bull ever lived. He was the Mohammed of his people; the law made him king of the Sioux.'

Some of the Sioux king's people had remained in Canada, having settled in the Wood Mountain area to hunt small game and eke out an existence along with the Metis. Most settled down; others joined Louis Riel's ill-fated uprising only to be defeated by the redcoats at Batoche in 1885.

In 1956, the last survivor of the original Teton bands that crossed the Medicine Line with Sitting Bull died near Fort Qu'Appelle at the age of 90.

The above articles are from Bruce Johnstone, 'Saskatchewan Sioux', *Leader-Post* (Regina), April 15, 1983, Weekender, D10–11.