

DOCUMENT NAME/INFORMANT: WILLIAM OKEYMAW 1  
INFORMANT'S ADDRESS: SUCKER CREEK RESERVE  
ALBERTA  
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ALBERTA  
TRIBE/NATION: CREE  
LANGUAGE: CREE  
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INTERVIEWER: RICHARD LIGHTNING  
INTERPRETER: RICHARD LIGHTNING  
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HIGHLIGHTS:

- William Okeymaw was 12 years old at the time when he attended the Treaty #8 negotiations.
- Describes taking of Treaty #8 and his understanding of the promises made.
- Role of the missionaries.
- Talks of some of the Indian agents.
- Abundance of buffalo in Lesser Slave Lake area at one time.

Richard: I'm going to talk with this elder from Sucker Creek. I'm going to ask him of his knowledge of Treaty 8 when the Indians negotiated with the Commissioners.

William: According to my mother, two days ago was my birthday (March 25). I think I am now 87 years old. But there are signs that I'm definitely getting older and I won't be good for anything else. I was born here. We used to live close to Sucker Creek, toward Joussard. I think I was born around there because I can recall my childhood days from there until just prior to treaty and then we moved to this area. We stayed there where most of my relatives are on the reserve but now we have moved to this place not too long ago. The knowledge I have about the treaty is what I'm about to relate to you.

I was about 12 years old and we travelled by foot or by boat. We crossed the river here in a boat, then we walked the rest of the way. When we arrived the commissioners were

already prepared. Alongside them were about 22 North West Mounted Police (NWMP) troops. I was frightened because I was only a child. I even held my dad's hand I was so scared. That is one thing I have in me is long memory. I can recall many things of long ago. I can recall a huge tent at the time with many people all around it. They were from different places far and near but they travelled for that special day, the treaty. They discussed it for three days to find out how it would work best, how the Indian would make his living when he accepted treaty.

There are many things we didn't see, only a few such as the rations, very little of it. The main thing we are missing is the promises which were made to us. For example, Mustus, Key no say oo and Twin and Daniel Ferguson - he was with the Metis and he was thought of as a spokesman for the Metis. All those people were listening to the discussions and especially to one item. Like in my situation at my age I'm becoming concerned about that. A person who had a family and children growing should be able to get an extension of reserve. This applied to the whole band, in case they become farmers or raise livestock or any other way of livelihood or any other occupation such as the white men are doing, to be able to show something by which they make their living, such as gardening. I'm not talking about the way of life nowadays. We are overcrowded on the reserves all over, and we are being crowded by white people who are very close to the reserves. It would be very nice if something could be done about it. It appears that before, the Indians were being looked after. It was stated that the Indian agent would look after the people if they became destitute. I'm not saying we are now in that state at the present time. But something should be worked out because our reserve has

potential for moneymaking. The Indian people are not looked after well enough, as compared to the Metis people - they receive a good share of assistance when they are old. Not so for the treaty Indian. In fact they get less. Especially now with everything getting so expensive, with a family it makes enough with the little assistance he receives.

I don't know why they forgot the promise which they made to us. They have forgotten about that in Ottawa. These are the items we are wondering about and in need of. That is the reason a treaty was signed and our chief accepted a reserve, because there was a lot of persuasion and it sounded so realistic. I was listening there at the time. There is also another thing. If the Indian had anything of value on the reserve, it was his. It was only 6 inches of the surface of the ground that the commissioners were requesting. All the treaty Indians in the north and to the eastern part of Canada should be entitled to resources discovered underground. That should still be in effect. Even today the people expect these things because they are not being properly looked after. The timber wasn't sold and today I can see 20 trucks a day hauling logs from many different places. During the time of the negotiations nothing was asked about timber, so why is it they are taking the

timber? It would have been better for the Indians to make use of it.

The Indian people still have other promises coming to them yet. The government still owes them a lot and he should get more help. We cannot say how long this earth will last. The commissioner said, "This will be in effect as long as the sun shines and the rivers flow." He used these two in sincerity. Today the river still flows and when we get up each morning we see the sun. I heard many things that time that the people could depend upon in the future for a living. We were not persuaded for nothing, like the white man was receiving assistance. He could settle any place. He would get help from the government, but whose money is it they are using? Maybe it belongs to the Indians. The Indian who gave up his land and prior to that made his own living should also get some type of help. He is entitled to it more so than anybody else. If they were not encouraged into treaty, the chief even today would not have consented because they were tricked. The Indian people were not like that. They would not say something and not do it. They didn't lie to one another or cheat. I haven't seen any of that and I'm an old man. Many times I've seen people who lost something but whoever found that would hang it up. The Indians thought a great deal of one another and they shook hands any place.

Today they greet one another like the white man and very little of the native language is spoken. We are experiencing that today in our part of the country. I don't speak English and my grandchildren are confusing me with English. This makes me feel bad. It was better the way it was long ago when we cared more for each other, even the commissioner shook hands with the people as they entered his tent. It would have been nice if he had accepted the Indian people like that all the time. So I think there is still a great deal missing and today we are experiencing difficulty. We will never stop thinking of our land because it had so much to offer. Today the white man makes the most out of our land to make his living. Why is it that we have to pay for traplines? They have to pay to build a cabin on their line. Also fishing, it wasn't mentioned that we had to pay for license to fish for a living in order to feed our children. We were not desperate. There was plenty of food around. I was hunting ducks long ago. I came upon an old man who had his tipi close to the lake - he just sat in his doorway of his tipi pulling in his fish. I'm just saying how plentiful the food supply was long ago. There was also all kinds of game animals, but there is an overpopulation of white men. It was difficult to hunt big game and feed my children years ago.

Today the game is scarce and they are shot from the roadside when they come out. Even the white men are doing that - they are the people who will kill off the big game. Now if the people who make the legislation don't make any changes we will be in worse condition than what we are now. It will be especially bad for the older people. Long ago a person my age

could make his living with two traps, but now the animals are becoming very scarce. If somehow this could be stopped it would be much better. Today the young people get all the traplines and there are none left for us older people. It has been about 20 years since I had a trapline and I can say I'm one of the people who had spent much time in the bush making my living - today this is not so. I guess I've told all I know of the treaty.

Richard: Did the Indian people want a treaty when it was first introduced to them?

William: The commissioners were very persistent. They worked on the Indians for three days. They were talked into taking it. They wouldn't pay for anything. They would travel any place free of charge if they accepted treaty, "until the sun walked." Many times during the present time we still fall into the traps and we were promised that we shouldn't have to fear

anything. If many of these false statements had been revealed to the Indians, chances are that they would not have signed the treaty.

Richard: Did they know what they were doing when they were negotiating with the commissioners?

William: That is one thing I don't know about. It appeared that Albert Tate, a Metis, was fluent in English. He was an interpreter at the treaty. He also spoke fluent Cree.

Richard; Was he from around here?

William: He was here for a long time and I think he grew up somewhere in the St. Albert area. But he was with us for a long time and he stayed for a while after the treaty, until his father died.

Richard; Did the missionaries in any way help the Indians or did they influence them in the wrong way?

William: My way of thinking is perhaps the missionaries were detrimental towards the Indians. One priest thought he was the leader, placing himself in front of anybody else. I forget his name, but he still stands at St. Albert in the form of a cement block. I think it's Lacombe. He was the one who was pushing the Indians. He told the Indians "take the treaty, take the treaty." But now it is obvious why he was really encouraging the Indians, because there was only one church at the time at Grouard. There would also be a school there. So what he had in mind was money, to try and make the Indians accept the money. That is the reason of his encouragement. So there was only one Indian school in the area. The people often said that he was doing us wrong.

There was a minister across the lake from here, it's called Buffalo Bay, but he didn't say very much. He tried to

keep in touch with the Indians, he didn't keep them away. His intention was to teach some of the treaty Indians - his name was Holmes. He taught some Metis children. They were taught well. He even gave clothes to the Indians. I myself never did hear the priest ask any Indian to come into his house or offer him tea, the minister did. I think that they were responsible for messing up everything, and I heard older people saying the same thing. We felt he was a father to us but on the other hand that wasn't so. Maybe if we had worked together I would not be talking the way I am today. Maybe what I'm saying sounds derogatory but that is not my intention. I am just stating facts to these people who approached me.

Richard: In 1942 many treaty Indians were removed from the treaty Indian register. Do you have any knowledge of what happened there?

William: I can only comment on the case I know of. It was one of my mother's relatives. The husband of this family was working hauling supplies from Athabasca. While he was away his wife was approached by this man and it came time for these people who took scrip to leave the reserve. When that happened the man still held his treaty rights. His two sons had to be taken off treaty. One was raised here. He was treaty once. His name is Henry Prince. He lives in the north. He is now getting old and he regretted losing his treaty right. This older brother Richard Prince also lost his treaty status so we were defeated there already. I spoke up as I was a councillor. I questioned why they couldn't be put back on treaty because the mother was placed on treaty again. There is another man, Robert Walker and several others. So we never found out why this happened.

Richard: Who was the man removing names from the treaty list?

William: I don't remember his name but Richard Prince would know. He would remember and he also speaks good English.

Richard: Do you recall any of the agents' names?

William: There was one agent here for a long time, his name was Laird. He married a woman from here. Two of his children are still alive. The next one was L'Heureux, a Frenchman. The other one was Mr. Lapp but he went to Edmonton.

Richard: Did they get along well with the Indians?

William: The first one, Mr. Laird, was very friendly and got along well with the Indians. He took into consideration what the Indian requested, but during that time everything was different, such as trapping - it was restricted. The Frenchman was very strict. He was the agent at the Driftpile. The other one was fairly docile.

Richard: Were there any buffalo around here long ago?

William: Yes, there were many. That is why they called that

place Buffalo Bay. How that happened was, I'm now telling you a story...there were two people who left the Alexander reserve or someplace close by the reserve. They made a boat from trees at St. Albert and made their way north and finally came upon the Lesser Slave River. When they came ashore they were at a

place which is now Grouard. When they were at this point they heard a rumbling noise and upon investigating the noise, they discovered a herd of buffalo over the hill, many of them. We often find bones and skulls. On their way back they stopped at an island on Slave Lake and found some people there. These people didn't have any rifles so they had no trouble capturing them. That is where Slave Lake got its name. Some of these people were killed there and the rest of them fled from there and went north to Great Slave Lake. I forget their names but one was Sewapegaham.

Richard: How did the buffalo disappear?

William: I think they left and went up north to the Fort Chipewyan and other areas up north.

Richard: When the signing of the treaty took place did the Indian know of money? Had they used it before?

William: No, they weren't familiar with it. I once travelled north with my father and my uncle Mustus who was the headman - we came across a road building gang. This was before the treaty. They were white men. That is when I saw them trading. They gave us some money and told us we could trade it at the store. There was another case where a white man wanted a pair of moccasins; the old lady was not convinced that she was paid. She said, "What am I going to do with this piece of paper? I want to get paid." So, from this experience it can be said that they didn't know money. Even during the treaty, the Indians were asking what it was they were receiving. It was Albert Tate, the Metis, who knew money. Albert Tate knew money because he had worked in the store but from that time on the Indians became familiar with money.

Richard: How did the Hudson's Bay people get along with the Indians?

William: They must have gotten along well together because the Hudson's Bay manager didn't hesitate when he sold a rifle to an Indian. The Indian stacked pelts from the floor until they measured up to the tip of the rifle barrel. That was his payment. You could say that the Indian was cheated because the pelts were valuable. If they weren't, he would not have taken them.

Richard: That will be all. Thank you for talking to me.

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