

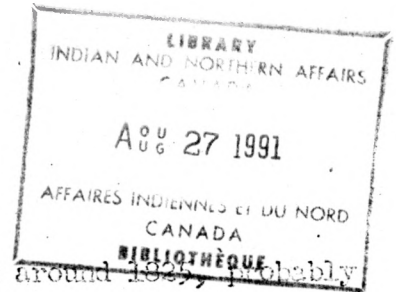
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BIG BEAR

by O.L.A.N.O.



Little is known about Big Bear's early years. He was born around 1825, probably in the vicinity of Fort Carlton near Batoche, Saskatchewan and was trading into that Port when he first came to public attention. There is even some doubt as to his tribal origin; however, most historical records identify him as a Cree Indian. Indian Commissioner Edgar Dewdney called the Cree chief the most influential Indian on the plains and reported:

"I have not formed such a poor opinion of Big Bear as some appear to have done. He is of a very independent character, self-reliant, and appears to know how to make his own living without begging from the Government".<sup>1</sup>

The fact that Big Bear was never recognized as a chief by the Hudson's Bay Company indicates his position of independence. Not only was he reluctant to concede any authority to the Company or other white men, but also refused to stand in awe of the Métis. Because of his reputation for independence, Big Bear attracted a large following of Cree people, many of whom were aggressive and belligerent. For this reason, his band soon came to be regarded with disfavour by the Blackfoot, Hudson's Bay Company and missionaries.

At the Government's request, Reverend McDougall made a preliminary tour through the mid-west in 1875 to inform the Indians that a Commissioner would arrive the following summer to negotiate a treaty. McDougall refers to Big Bear as a troublesome Saulteaux chief whose followers were a minority among a group which

was well disposed toward the Government's proposed treaty. According to McDougall, Big Bear stated he wanted none of the Queen's presents which he considered bait in a Government trap designed to eventually subdue the Indian; he demanded that the Government leaders journey west and speak with the Indian leaders. The Government commissioners under Lieutenant-Governor Morris first met with the Indians in the vicinity of Fort Carlton in the month of August 1875 and succeeded after "difficult and protracted negotiation", in effecting a treaty with several of the Cree bands. The Government officials arrived at Fort Pitt in September and Governor Morris describes Big Bear's arrival at the conclusion of the treaty negotiation and the subsequent discussion. Although it is not clear exactly what Big Bear's feelings were, he initially expressed some dissatisfaction to the assembled chiefs and the Governor in his words "Stop, my friends. I never saw the Governor before; when I heard he was to come, I said I will request him to save me from what I most dread - hanging; it was not given to us to have the rope about our necks".

When the Governor explained that the punishment of hanging could not be abolished, Big Bear wished that the buffalo might be protected. Big Bear was invited to sign the treaty the following year and according to Governor Morris the chief accepted the treaty in principle but wished to first consult his people.<sup>2</sup> He became the undisputed leader of all the non-treaty Indians on the northern plains and unavoidably, his lodge became the rallying point for the disaffected, some of whom were simply troublemakers.

Annual attempts by the Government to persuade Big Bear to adhere to the treaty were met with many excuses. He did not think that the buffalo would disappear as quickly as expected; he was afraid that the treaty did not furnish enough for the Indians to live on; he wished to see if the Government would honor the existing treaties. The chief sought to postpone as long as possible the break with the past hoping to secure better terms than the Government had been willing to grant other bands;<sup>3</sup> however, in December 1882 he signed treaty six.<sup>4</sup> Big Bear arrived at Battleford in the summer of 1883 and although he refused to take a reserve, his band supplemented the food obtained from hunting with Government rations. His defiance of the Government insistence that he settle on a reserve created unrest among the Indians who had already taken reserves. Big Bear did not, like many of his people, entertain the idea that the white man could be driven out by force. He adopted the only approach consistent with reason, a concentration of all Indian bands of the north-west in a united demand for better treaty terms and to this end runners were despatched to all reserves throughout the territories inviting Indians to a gathering in the spring of 1884.<sup>5</sup> Although strong in his convictions, Big Bear's influence upon the activities of his band were declining as noted in the Indian Affairs Annual Report of 1884: "Big Bear, who is now getting old, and who is ruled by the bad spirits in his band, has made repeated promises that he would go to a reserve and as often broken them". The Government also surmised correctly that the Indians were gathering in force to "discuss their relations with the Government and make larger demands;" it was in view of this

that the agencies requested an increased police force.<sup>3</sup> In the summer of 1884, Big Bear and Poundmaker began the council and annual thirst dance.<sup>5</sup> Government farm instructor Craig in attempting to enforce the Government policy not to supply rations to Indians except in exchange for work,<sup>6</sup> pushed an Indian who had demanded a supply of food and in return the Indian beat the instructor about the body with an axe handle.

A confrontation and "mélée" ensued as the police attempted to arrest the Indian from his place of refuge among the large assemblage of excited, Plains Indians;<sup>7</sup> in the heat of activity Big Bear reportedly made verbal pleas for peace. The Cree chief apparently did not want the incident to flare into an Indian uprising,<sup>8</sup> and fortunately the accused Indian was successfully arrested without a shot being fired. The assembled chiefs were frightened at the explosive nature of the situation; however, Agent Rae reported "Big Bear is not going to be starved out and there is no doubt they are hard up. The Department should become more lenient or be prepared to fight".<sup>9</sup>

Big Bear probably played a prominent role in the long planned council held in the summer of 1884.<sup>10</sup> The Indians presented a list of grievances to the Government Agent and further warned that the young men would only "wait until next summer to see if this council has the desired effect, failing which they will take measure to get what they desire".<sup>11</sup>



The Indian Affairs Department in Ottawa feared that increasing the distribution of free rations would discourage the Indians who were working and ultimately lead to apathy.<sup>12</sup> The Government maintained this policy despite pleas from the Police officials for more leniency with regard to the issuing of rations with the explanation that the Indian could not be expected to change his way of life "overnight".<sup>13</sup>

In the spring of 1885, as the Métis rebellion stirred along the North Saskatchewan River, a group of young Indians incited by a strong rebel faction of Big Bear's band, arrived at the Hudson's Bay Company store near Frog Lake. Big Bear's band was in a wretched condition, destitute of both food and clothing. No game was to be found at Frog Lake and to satisfy the barest needs of existence, the Indians were compelled to submit to the Government's dictum of "no work no food".<sup>14</sup> The young rebels clearly intent upon pillaging, were warned by Big Bear not to take goods which had not been given to them. The aging chief proceeded to warn the settlers of the possible danger at the hands of his uncontrollable band members. As the first shots of the massacre were fired, Big Bear rushed to the scene shouting "stop! stop!"; he was however powerless to prevent the wanton killing.<sup>15</sup>

Led again by rebel factions, Big Bear's band advanced on Fort Pitt with the intention of subduing it. Big Bear initially held back, perhaps in an attempt to dissuade his people from what he believed to be a dangerous, ill-conceived

plot; failing in this he resolved to follow the band to Fort Pitt and attempt to save as many inhabitants of the Fort as possible. He was instrumental in effecting a bloodless capitulation (a police scout was killed attempting to escape) of the Fort and it is felt that through his influence the Fort Pitt prisoners were later released virtually unharmed.<sup>16</sup> The evidence regarding Big Bear's alleged participation in the pillage of Fort Pitt is inconclusive; the white prisoners released from his camp had not seen stolen goods in the chief's possession.<sup>17</sup>

In May 1885 Big Bear's band left Frog Lake and proceeded in the direction of Poundmaker's reserve; they camped at Frenchman's Butte, a prominence 12 miles east of Fort Pitt. An armed force under General Strange unsuccessfully attacked the Indians who had taken up defensive positions on the Butte.<sup>18</sup> The Indians decided to cut a hasty retreat through heavily wooded, marshy country;<sup>19</sup> the pursuing Government forces soon bogged down and decided to withdraw.<sup>20</sup> A witness at Big Bear's trial stated that the chief had been several miles from the engagement at Frenchman's Butte and could not have participated in the fighting.<sup>21</sup> The Indian band demoralized in the inhospitable terrain chosen for their retreat, released their white prisoners and resolved to forsake their rebellious course. Big Bear surrendered himself at Fort Carlton on July 2, 1885.<sup>22</sup>

Big Bear was accused of treason -- felony (see attached) for his alleged participation in the North-West Rebellion and particularly for the role he played in the incidents at Frog Lake, Fort Pitt and Frenchman's Butte. The Cree chief was tried along with the other participants in the rebellion, declared guilty and sentenced to three years in Stony Mountain Penitentiary.<sup>21</sup> The evidence against Big Bear was not conclusive nor was account fully taken of the authority vested in an Indian chief by his people; an authority which rested mainly on his powers of eloquence and persuasion and without the non-Indian mechanisms of "law-enforcement". Big Bear was sentenced in September 1885 and released for reasons of ill-health in February 1887.<sup>23</sup>



TREASON - FELONY

Whosoever after the passing of this Act within Canada, or without, compasses, imagines, invents, devises or intends to deprive or depose our Most Gracious Lady the Queen, her heirs or successors, from the style, honor or royal name of the Imperial Crown of the United Kingdom, or of any other of Her Majesty's dominions or countries or to levy war against Her Majesty, within any part of the United Kingdom or of Canada, in order by force or constraint, to compel her or them to change her or their measures or counsels, or in order to put any force or constraint upon, or in order to intimidate or overawe both Houses or either Houses of Parliament of the United Kingdom or Canada as to move or stir any foreigner or stranger to invade the United Kingdom or Canada or any other of Her Majesty's dominions or countries under the obedience of heirs and successors and such compassings, imaginations, inventions, devices or intentions, or any of them shall express, utter or declare by publishing, printing or writing, or by open and advised speaking, or by any overt act or deed, is guilty of felony and shall be liable to imprisonment in the penitentiary for life.

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