

POUNDMAKER

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POUNDMAKER

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Poundmaker was born around 1841 and spent his youth in the northwest plains where as an orphan without the normal benefits of parental instruction and material wealth, he developed with determination, superior skills and an independent judgement which he could persuasively express. There was a growing respect among the Cree people for the potential leadership which was evident in the adventuresome activities of the young man. In an unusual turn of events Poundmaker voluntarily allowed himself to be adopted son of Crowfoot, a powerful chief of the Blackfoot Confederacy and traditional enemy of the Crees. The old antagonisms between Blackfoot and Cree were in part reconciled through the strong bond which developed between the Blackfoot chief and his adopted son. Perhaps one of the most vivid profiles of the famous Cree chief was given by Hayter Reed (Battleford, 1881) "The chief is a man possessing talents far beyond the ordinary, combining the characteristic craftiness of the Indian with the sound judgement of the white man, who, if prevailed upon to permanently abandon a roving life, will become an example to others and earn for himself an independence unpossessed by many".

The Queen's representatives arrived at Fort Carlton in August 1876 with a treaty prepared for the approval of the Cree chiefs who had assembled. Poundmaker in his words to the Government men, voiced the worry which he felt for his people - "I would like to hear how we are going to feed and clothe ourselves if we have to change our whole way of life. We know nothing about building houses or farming and the help which you have promised will not begin

to see us through such a time". The Government offer however, appeared generous to the other chiefs and Poundmaker consented to follow the wishes of his people and ratify the treaty.² In the autumn of 1879 the Cree chose Cut Knife Hill near Battleford as their reserve. Poundmaker initially encouraged his people to learn the white settlers methods of house construction and farming; but they were suspicious and disappointed when the Government reduced the supply of rations which the Indians felt had been promised in the treaty agreement. They were antagonized by the Government's policy of insisting that the Indians work in exchange for the rations;³ and further, in an attempt to increase control over a potentially dangerous situation the farm instructor was directed to take over the supervision of all work on Poundmaker's reserve. Shocked, the Cree chief insisted that his people would adapt more readily to the new way of life if they were working under the direction of their own leaders: the Government's refusal was final.⁴ Reports indicate that the farm instructor assigned to Poundmaker's reserve was incompetent and the chief resolved to resist him by refusing to work. The farming progress which had been made while Poundmaker had been supervising his people, soon diminished as the band urged by their chief, refused to work under Government control.⁵

As early as 1881, Poundmaker had made efforts to secure a large Indian gathering to press demands upon the Government for concessions. Failing in this he had turned his attention to the Cypress Hills (Fort Walsh) but conditions there were worse than expected and he willingly returned to his reserve the same year.⁶ As the summer of 1883 progressed, the chief repeatedly declared that

he had fulfilled his share of the compact entered into when his people left the plains, but that the Government had not fulfilled theirs.⁷ The arrival of Big Bear added fuel to the growing unrest and the Government's reduction of rations and supplies gave force to Indian complaints. The conditions were ripe for united action. Indian runners were sent to all the chiefs of the territories with messages similar to the one sent to Piapot: "The Indian is not to blame. The white man made the promises and now does not fulfill them".⁸ The Government correctly suspected that the Indians would be gathering in force to press their demands,⁹ and as a precautionary measure requested that the police force be increased in the Battleford area.¹⁰ The Indians began to assemble in June for their council and annual thirst-dance; the place chosen was near Poundmaker's reserve.

Trouble arose when farm instructor Craig adhering to regulations, refused to submit to ration demands made by an Indian who was unwilling to work. Craig pushed the man out of the store and in return was struck with an axe handle wielded by the irate Indian. An armed confrontation occurred when the chiefs including Poundmaker, found their influence insufficient to induce the turbulent young braves to turn over the accused Indian to the police force. The troops advanced into the midst of the excited Indians and seized the man.¹² Poundmaker armed with a club made for a police inspector crying "I will kill you now".¹³ The chief was restrained but managed to strip the weapon from another policeman before the Government force withdrew with their prisoner. Fortunately, no shot was fired.¹² Reports do not indicate whether Poundmaker was among those chiefs who expressed their regrets regarding the affair.¹⁴

It was clear to the Government officials at Battleford that the demands made by the assembled chiefs were backed by the strong, volatile emotions of their people. The Government's response to the Council's proposals failed to provide the terms requested by the Indians and the climate was ripe for rebel factions among the Bands to respond to Riel's call for a united Indian - Métis Rebellion in 1885.¹⁵

Throughout the spring of 1885, Riel was in constant touch with the Indians of the North-West, and his runners were despatched to every reserve. In late March of 1885, Poundmaker and members of several bands proceeded to Battleford to make demands upon the Indian Agent. The citizens had abandoned the unprotected town and were in the safety of the police barracks when the Indians, reportedly armed and decked in war paint, arrived at Battleford. During the night a few Indians raided several of the abandoned farms and houses.¹⁶ Indian Agent Rae agreed to meet the Indians near their camp; but the Government officers were fired on as they approached and hastily withdrew to the barracks.¹⁷ The hungry Indians made known their demands to a Hudson's Bay Company official. The Government's response came too late¹⁸ for dissident Indians aroused by the unprotected stores, pillaged the deserted town of Battleford.¹⁹ Poundmaker had probably not contemplated anything more than a show of arms to force concessions from the Government; but the rebellious Stonies were already beginning to make their influence felt upon the Cree chief's followers.

In Poundmaker's camp at Cut Knife Hill dissension prevailed. The chief, like Big Bear, was by no means heart and soul in the rebellion;²⁰ but the Assiniboines, or Stoney, were inveterate in their hatred of the whites. Poundmaker had little faith in the promises and expectations communicated to him by Riel and accordingly procrastinated when asked for assistance by the Hells leader.²¹ The chief allowed his name to be placed on a letter to Riel which reported encouraging events and requested his assistance in the siege of Babblerd.²² Riel was in no position to assist the Indians and Hells at Poundmaker's encampment and in his reply indicated that he needed their assistance.²³ Riel's letter was not received until after the Indians at Cut Knife Hill had been attacked by Government troops under Colonel Otter. The attack on the Indians (including women and children) at Cut Knife Hill was a failure. Colonel Otter's troops, outnumbering the Indians approximately three to two, were driven off and it was only through Poundmaker's intervention that the victorious warriors were prevented from inflicting further casualties on the retreating column.²⁴ The witnesses of the battle who testified at Poundmaker's trial were unable to provide conclusive evidence regarding the chief's participation in the fighting.

Colonel Otter's objective had been to prevent if possible, the junction of Big Bear and Poundmaker and their eventual union with Riel.²⁵ The rebellious members among the various bands at Poundmaker's reserve capitalized on the

victory over Colonel Otter and in early May, a war party moved toward Batoche. Poundmaker travelled with the mixed band, however, it is not clear exactly what his personal intentions were or the extent and nature of his influence over the bands. The Indians intercepted a wagon train en route to Battleford, took twenty-two prisoners and were able to renew their stock of provisions.²⁶ Three days later a messenger arrived with the news that the Métis and soldiers were engaged in battle at Batoche; along with the news came an urgent appeal for assistance from Riel. Riel was defeated before the Indians with Poundmaker could join him.

General Middleton, commander of the Government troops, received Poundmaker's letter of submission requesting the surrender terms his people could expect.²⁷ The chief had long favoured negotiation with the whites but had been overruled by the war party. Middleton demanded an unconditional surrender²⁸ and when Poundmaker and his band arrived in Battleford, the General refused the chief's hand in greeting, disarmed his followers, lectured them severely, and imprisoned Poundmaker along with his head men.²⁹

Poundmaker, like Big Bear, was accused and found guilty of Treason -- Felony (see attached) despite a strong but futile plea by the counsel for the defense: "There was no way Poundmaker could have stopped the rebels from holding council in his camp or from sending the letter of encouragement to Riel. You must remember, a chief's influence is just what his personal character and a knack

for speaking may give him. He has no court of justice or means of punishment, only his own persuasive powers". The Crown prosecutor centred his case on the chief's participation in the looting of Battleford, the defeat of Colonel Otter at Cut Knife Hill and the capturing of Government men and supplies bound for Battleford. The letter sent from Cut Knife Hill to Riel which bore Poundmaker's signature, was also used as evidence against the chief.³⁰

Poundmaker was sentenced to three years in Stony Mountain Penitentiary but was released after serving seven months of his term; he returned to his home in the west and died on July 4, 1886 while visiting Crowfoot.³¹

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 overrule 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 obeisance 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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