



THE LAND BENEATH US ♦
Qu'Appelle

Season One · Before Canada · Episode 20
aiwrangler.ca — an illustrated companion

Every date, term, and quotation in this series is drawn from the historical record. This companion is the full episode narration, illustrated.



From the episode

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Stand at the rim of the Qu'Appelle Valley in what is now southern Saskatchewan and look down at the river threading between those hills. In September of eighteen seventy-four, this valley was the site of something almost no one expected — the nations who gathered here stopped the treaty talks on the very first day, and they stopped them with a question that had no clean answer.

SAM CARDINAL

The Qu'Appelle Valley — the Cree name for this river means the one that calls, and the French heard it and named it Qu'Appelle — had been Cree and Saulteaux territory for generations. Canada sent commissioners here to make a treaty, to settle what the Crown called Indigenous title. But the nations at Qu'Appelle were not about to sit down and discuss what Canada wanted until someone explained something first: how could the Hudson's Bay Company have sold land the nations had never given it?



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

That is not a rhetorical question. The Saulteaux and Cree leaders laid it out in council — the Company had been trading in this territory for generations, yes, but trading on the land is not the same as owning it. So where exactly did the Company get the right to sell?

SAM CARDINAL

The three Crown commissioners who came to Qu'Appelle were Alexander Morris, David Laird, and William Christie. Christie was himself a former Hudson's Bay man, which every nation present would have known. Morris was the lead negotiator, and he believed deeply in the treaty process — his written accounts of these talks are among the most detailed records we have from any of the numbered signings. He reports that the talks opened not inside the Hudson's Bay post at Fort Qu'Appelle but outside it, in a tent the nations had set up on their own ground, because several leaders refused to negotiate anywhere near a Company building. That single detail tells you something about the temperature in the valley that September.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Several thousand people had gathered near the fort. They came prepared. The Saulteaux leader known to history as The Gambler was among the most direct — he wanted an accounting before any treaty discussion could begin.

SAM CARDINAL

Morris's written report describes the opening session in careful diplomatic language, but what comes through clearly is that he was not in control of that council. The Gambler and other leaders told him plainly that the Company had been paid for something it never owned, and they wanted to know whether Canada understood that the nations themselves had never been part of that transaction. Morris's position — the Crown's position — was that Canada had purchased the Company's rights and interests, not the land itself, and that the treaty they were here to make was precisely how the land question would be settled properly. The nations heard that answer. They were not satisfied.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

The commissioners are saying: we know what the Company sold, but the real question — the land — is what we're here to negotiate right now. The nations are saying: you're asking us to negotiate on top of a transaction we never agreed to. That is not the same starting point.

SAM CARDINAL

It is not the same starting point, and this brings us to the three records we need to hold side by side — because the gap between them is the whole story of Treaty Four. The first is the written text of the treaty itself, signed on September the fifteenth, eighteen seventy-four. By its terms, the assembled nations ceded a vast territory across what is now southern Saskatchewan. It promises reserves of one square mile for each family of five. It sets the annual payment at five dollars per person, with higher amounts for chiefs and headmen. It promises farming implements, cattle, seed, ammunition, twine, and a school on each reserve. What the written text does not contain — what it is entirely silent on — is the Hudson's Bay Company. In the document, that opening confrontation simply does not exist.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

The paper acts as if the question was never asked.

SAM CARDINAL

The paper does. Now the second record: Morris's own report to the federal government, written after the signing. In that report he does describe the dispute. He tells Ottawa that the chiefs demanded compensation for what the Company had extracted from their territory over the decades — the profits taken out through trade, the goods carried away. He reports that he responded by telling the chiefs the matter would be considered by the government. That phrase — will be considered — is doing a great deal of work in that sentence, because it is not a promise, and it is not a resolution.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Will be considered is a door left open. The question is whether anyone ever walked through it.

SAM CARDINAL

The Crown's own records show that no compensation for the Hudson's Bay extraction was ever paid. But the third record is what the nations carried home from Qu'Appelle, and it is different again. Oral accounts passed down within Cree and Saulteaux communities describe the agreement not as a land surrender but as a sharing — the nations understood they were agreeing to share the land with newcomers while retaining their right to live on it, to use it, to govern their own affairs within it. The HBC grievance, in that understanding, was not set aside — it was acknowledged by the Crown and left to be resolved. In the written treaty it does not appear at all. Those are two very different things, and the distance between them is not an accident of translation.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Three records, three different stories, one valley. The paper says surrender. The commissioner's report says the grievance was heard and would be considered. The nations' memory says we agreed to share, and the debt from the Company is still owed. All three of those records exist. None of them has gone away.

SAM CARDINAL

And this is what makes Treaty Four distinct in the numbered sequence. The nations at Qu'Appelle were not simply accepting a framework — they were challenging the premise. They were saying that the transaction Canada had built its authority upon was flawed from the beginning, and that challenge is preserved in the Crown's own documents. Morris wrote it down himself, which makes it impossible to claim it was never said.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

After four days of negotiation, most of the assembled chiefs did sign. Not all — some Saukteaux bands withheld their signatures that September and only adhered in the years that followed. What brought those who signed to put their names to it?

SAM CARDINAL

Several things, and honesty requires holding them all. The buffalo across the southern plains were already thinning — not gone yet in eighteen seventy-four, but the direction was clear, and the nations knew it. Surveyors and settlers were already moving onto the land before any treaty had been made. The treaty offered reserves, farming support, and annual payments — a floor, however inadequate, under a future the nations could see coming whether they signed or not. Paskwa, a Saukteaux leader at the talks, is remembered as a man who sought to protect his people's future, and a signed agreement at least put obligations on the Crown's paper. The leaders who signed were not naive. They were making a hard calculation under very hard conditions.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

And the HBC question — the grievance that stopped the talks on day one?

SAM CARDINAL

It was never resolved. The compensation the nations requested for what the Company had extracted from their territory was acknowledged in Morris's report, discussed at various points over the years, and ultimately not paid. First Nations in Treaty Four territory have raised the HBC grievance in land negotiations and legal arguments in the decades since — it is not a footnote to the history, it is a living dispute with a paper trail that runs directly back to that tent outside the Fort Qu'Appelle post in September of eighteen seventy-four.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

That tent stays with me. The nations wouldn't negotiate inside the Company's building. They set the ground for the conversation on their own terms, even when the larger situation was not on their terms.

SAM CARDINAL

That is the dignity of the record, and it matters to hold it clearly. These were nations with their own protocols, their own understanding of what a solemn agreement between peoples required. In the Cree and Saulteaux traditions, a covenant made at a council fire was not a commercial transaction — it was a relationship meant to carry forward as long as the sun shines and the rivers run. The pipe was carried to the ground at Qu'Appelle. What was spoken there was understood to bind in ways that a printed document, translated twice and read aloud once, could not fully carry. The gap between what was spoken and what was written is not a failure of memory. It is the central fact of how Treaty Four was made, and it is why the people of this valley have spent a hundred and fifty years pointing back to that September and saying: this is not what we agreed.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Treaty Four territory today takes in most of southern Saskatchewan — Regina, Moose Jaw, Swift Current, the Qu'Appelle Valley itself. More than sixty First Nations hold treaty rights here. Many are in active dialogue with Canada about what the treaty actually promised and what remains outstanding. The question The Gambler asked in eighteen seventy-four — how could you sell what you did not own — has never received a full answer. It is still on the table.

SAM CARDINAL

The land beneath us holds all of it — what was written, what was spoken at that council fire, and what was promised and never came. The treaties are not historical records sealed behind glass. They are ongoing agreements between nations, and understanding them honestly means reading all three records, not just the one on the page. I'm Sam Cardinal.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

And I'm Willow Born With a Tooth. If you are in Saskatchewan today, you are almost certainly standing in Treaty Four territory. Look up whose land you're on — it takes about thirty seconds. And the next time someone tells you the West was settled fair and square, ask them which record they are reading from. There are three. They do not agree.

Sources & Notes

The Land Beneath Us is built on the historical and documentary record. Where that record is contested, we say so.

References & further reading