



THE LAND BENEATH US ◆

A Cow and a Plough

Season One · Before Canada · Episode 23

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

I'm standing in the parkland belt of what is now central Saskatchewan, in Treaty Six territory — the wide stretch of aspen and grassland where, in eighteen seventy-six, Cree and Assiniboine leaders sat down with the Crown and tried to build a bridge across the end of an era. What they were really negotiating, when you read it carefully, was a cow and a plough.

SAM CARDINAL

That phrase gets used dismissively sometimes, as if the nations were being offered kitchen scraps. But it is worth slowing down and reading what Treaty Six actually promised, because the list is careful and specific. Every family actually farming would receive two hoes, one spade, one scythe, reaping hooks. Each chief's band would receive four oxen, one bull, and six cows — and one additional cow for each farming family. There was a hand mill, a whip saw, a grindstone, a chest of carpenter's tools. And woven through all of it was something no earlier numbered treaty contained: a famine clause. In times of pestilence or general famine, Her Majesty would lend a helping hand.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

That famine clause stands out. Who put it there?

SAM CARDINAL

The Cree negotiators pushed for it — and behind that push was an anxiety that two men named Ahtahkakoop and Mistawasis had been watching build for years. The buffalo were thinning. Everyone at that council fire knew it. But a leader named Mistahimaskwa — Big Bear — looked at the famine clause and at the whole treaty and said: these words are not enough. He refused to sign in eighteen seventy-six. He held out for six years, trying to get a better guarantee for his people's survival. By the time he signed, in eighteen eighty-two, the buffalo were gone. He signed not because he had been persuaded but because there was nothing left to wait for.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

So even within Treaty Six you had leaders who signed and leaders who didn't — and both of them were reading the same future.

SAM CARDINAL

They were. The ones who signed believed they were locking the Crown into a genuine partnership — not just a list of implements but a commitment: as long as we are making this transition, you stand with us. What the people carried forward in memory from those negotiations was broader than any printed clause. The written treaty promised a school on each reserve whenever the band desired it. What was understood at the council fire, from the spoken exchange, was something more like: we will help you become what this new world requires, and we will not leave you to do it alone.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

And what did the Crown's commissioners say they were promising?

SAM CARDINAL

Alexander Morris, who led many of these negotiations, reported to Ottawa that the agreements were generous and that the nations had been given fair terms. He wrote that the chiefs had been assured the government would not stand by and watch them starve. That was not a lie, exactly. But there is a long distance between "we will not let you starve," spoken at a riverside council fire, and what that phrase looks like when it becomes a budget line in an Ottawa office.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Three records, and the distance between them. The written list of cattle and tools. The commissioners' reports of spoken reassurance. And what the nations understood they were securing — something closer to a guaranteed partnership across a whole generation of change.

SAM CARDINAL

And when you lay them side by side, the gap shows you where the trouble was going to come. Because the written text controlled the money. A government official in Ottawa could point to the printed clauses and say: we delivered the tools. He could not be held to a spoken promise at a council fire on the North Saskatchewan River a decade earlier.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

The delivery record is where this becomes hard to sit with. What actually arrived on the reserves?

SAM CARDINAL

The Indian Department's own files tell it plainly. Requests went in from farming instructors on the reserves — and some of those men were genuinely trying — and the replies from Ottawa were delays, substitutions, reductions. The money appropriated never matched the promises made. And here is the part that gets lost: the nations were farming. Ahtahkakoop's band on Sandy Lake, Mistawasis's people near what is now Shellbrook — they broke ground. They planted. Some of them were achieving real success by the middle of the eighteen-eighties.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

So the farming worked. Then what stopped it?

SAM CARDINAL

A policy decision that is one of the more painful things to examine in this history. A man named Hayter Reed, who became Indian Commissioner for the Northwest, concluded in the early eighteen-nineties that if Indigenous farmers moved to mechanized farming and large-scale grain sales, they would compete with settler farmers on the open market. And so he designed what came to be known as the "peasant farming policy." Reserves were restricted to hand implements. Bands could not acquire threshers or binders. They could not sell grain off reserve without a permit from an Indian agent. The tools the treaties had promised to build a future were replaced by rules specifically designed to limit what that future could become.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

I want to be careful here. The treaty promised tools to farm. The farming began to work. And then a policy arrived — not a renegotiation, not a new treaty — just an administrative decision — to make sure it couldn't work too well.

SAM CARDINAL

That is exactly right. No one renegotiated with the nations. The Indian Act had already closed off most avenues of legal challenge. And the men who had made the spoken promises at the treaty fires were long gone. The commissioners had ridden away; the Indian agents had arrived. Between those two moments, a great deal of what the nations had understood themselves to be securing simply disappeared into administrative practice, without any record of a change.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Chief Poundmaker was at the Treaty Six negotiations as a young man, and he spent the following decade trying to hold the Crown to what had been promised. His name appears again and again in the Indian Department's own files.

SAM CARDINAL

It does. He watched his people going hungry while the farming program ground along without adequate cattle, without enough tools, without the sustained support that had been pledged. His experience of those years is not a matter of oral tradition alone — it is documented in agent reports, in letters, in the record of a man pushing season after season for his reserve to receive what the treaty said it should. The gap between his requests and what arrived is measurable in those files.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

The school promise runs alongside all of this. What did that look like in practice?

SAM CARDINAL

The treaty said the Crown would maintain a school on each reserve whenever the band desired it. In many places the school did not come, or came years late, or came without a qualified teacher, or came without any funding to sustain it. And by the eighteen-eighties, government policy had begun moving toward residential schools — institutions off the reserve, where children were taken away from their families and their languages. That is not what the treaty promised. The treaty promised a school on the reserve. What came instead was something no one at those negotiations had discussed or agreed to.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

The ammunition and twine. I don't want to skip past those — they feel important.

SAM CARDINAL

They are. The treaties promised two hundred and fifty dollars' worth of ammunition and twine each year, for each treaty band. The reasoning was straightforward: while the farming was being established, while the seed was going in and the cattle were arriving, families still needed to hunt and fish to feed themselves through the winters. That ammunition allocation was not a gesture. In the years of the buffalo collapse, it was the difference between eating and not eating. And those allocations were cut, delayed, and disputed — in precisely the years when the hunting economy was failing and the farming economy had not yet taken hold. The people were caught in the gap between two worlds, and both sides of the promised bridge were not holding.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

What strikes me is how precisely the nations had thought this through. The famine clause. The ammunition for the transition years. The school on the reserve, not somewhere else. These weren't people being naive about what they were agreeing to.

SAM CARDINAL

They had been trading and negotiating with Europeans for two hundred years. They knew how to build an agreement. What they could not fully account for was the velocity of what came next — the settlers, the permit system, the Indian Act steadily narrowing what the treaties could be held to mean — and the fact that the men who made the promises at the council fires were not the men who would be sent to administer them. The relationship the nations believed they had created had a different character than the transaction Ottawa believed it had completed. And the distance between those two understandings is what the farming families on those reserves lived inside, year after year, sending requests for ploughs and breeding stock and seed grain — requests that are still sitting in Library and Archives Canada, if you know where to look. The people asked, and they asked again, and the gap between the asking and the receiving is the whole story of what these promises meant in practice. I'm Sam Cardinal.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Those requests are still there. The letters are still there — written in Cree syllabics, translated or not translated, filed or not filed forward to Ottawa. And the treaties are still in force. When you stand on a reserve in Treaty Six territory today, and talk to an elder who can tell you exactly what her great-great-grandfather was promised and what he received, you are not standing in history. You are standing in a conversation that has never been closed. This is The Land Beneath Us.

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