



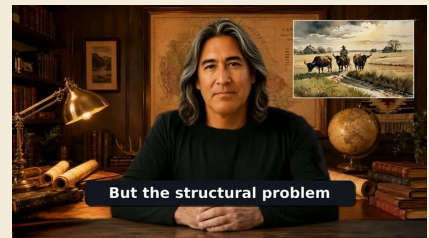
THE LAND BENEATH US ◆

What the West Was Promised

Season One · Before Canada · Episode 24

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

There is a cheque that still goes out every year to some families in Manitoba — five dollars per person, as agreed. Not adjusted for inflation. Not renegotiated in a hundred and fifty years. Five dollars. That is what Treaties One through Five promised, and five dollars is what their descendants receive today.

SAM CARDINAL

That number is a kind of compressed history. It is not just what was offered — it is what was never revisited, never honoured in the fuller spirit of what was spoken at those fires. And when you lay all five of the first numbered treaties side by side, from Treaty One in eighteen seventy-one to Treaty Five in eighteen seventy-five, that gap between what was spoken and what endured — that is the real story this first wave leaves us.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

We have followed each of those treaties separately this season. Tonight we are stepping back and looking at the whole map at once. What did these five treaties, taken together, actually do? And what did they open?

SAM CARDINAL

Together, Treaties One through Five covered a vast corridor — the Red River country, the Qu'Appelle valley, the lake routes north, the eastern edge of what would become Saskatchewan. Five separate agreements with many different nations: Ojibwe, Cree, Saulteaux, Swampy Cree. Each negotiated in its own place, with its own character. But all five sharing the same basic structure, and the same basic problem.



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What was the structure?

SAM CARDINAL

The written treaties offered reserves — one square mile per family of five — an annual payment per person, some farming implements, and the right to continue hunting and fishing on unoccupied Crown land. In exchange, the nations agreed, in the written text, to cede their claim to the land. That is what the paper said. Clear, finite, transactional.



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And what did the Crown's commissioners believe they had accomplished?

SAM CARDINAL

The commissioners reported back to Ottawa that they had extinguished Aboriginal title clearly, permanently, and inexpensively. They believed they had purchased land — purchased it outright — and opened the corridor for settlement and the railway. That is what Ottawa read, and that is what Ottawa celebrated. The title was clear. The West was open.



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But the nations carried a different account of what had been agreed.

SAM CARDINAL

They did. The elders held memories of promises spoken aloud at those fires — commitments that never appeared in the written text. Detailed assurances about farming help that would actually arrive. Guarantees that hunting and fishing rights would remain secure even as settlers came in. And above all, an understanding that what was being created was a shared relationship — not the end of a transaction, but the beginning of an ongoing one, meant to last as long as the sun shines and the rivers flow. The gap between those two understandings did not close after the signing. It widened, year by year, as the settlers arrived and the bison vanished from the plains.



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So we have three records for each of these treaties — the written page, the commissioners' reports, and the oral memory — and they do not match.

SAM CARDINAL

They do not match in ways that matter enormously, and they do not fail to match by accident. The written text is silent on many of the specific promises. The commissioners' reports emphasize clarity and finality — their job was to assure Ottawa the title was clean. And the oral record, carried by the elders and eventually documented by researchers working alongside the nations themselves, describes commitments that were central to why the nations agreed at all. When two very different understandings of what a treaty is — a living relationship on one side, a legal conveyance on the other — sit across a fire from each other and produce the same signature, you do not get one agreement. You get two, bound in the same document.



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The nations understood a treaty as a relationship. The Crown understood it as a transaction. And both sides read their version into the same ink.

SAM CARDINAL

That is it exactly. And once the ink dried, the two versions moved in opposite directions. Canada read finality. The nations read continuity. And every dispute over treaty rights that has come before a court or a negotiating table in the century and a half since has been, at some level, an argument about which reading was the right one.



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What did those years after the signings look like on the ground?

SAM CARDINAL

The reserves were surveyed — often smaller than the nations believed had been agreed, sometimes placed in locations not of their choosing. The farming implements were slow to arrive, and when they did arrive, they were often insufficient for the scale of agriculture the people were being asked to adopt almost overnight, without the generations of practice that farming requires. The annuities came, but the five dollars per person never grew. The right to hunt and fish on unoccupied Crown land stayed on paper, but the word "unoccupied" changed its meaning with every new homestead. What the nations had understood as a shared future began to look, on the ground, like a managed dispossession — and a slow one, which in some ways made it harder to point to and harder to resist.

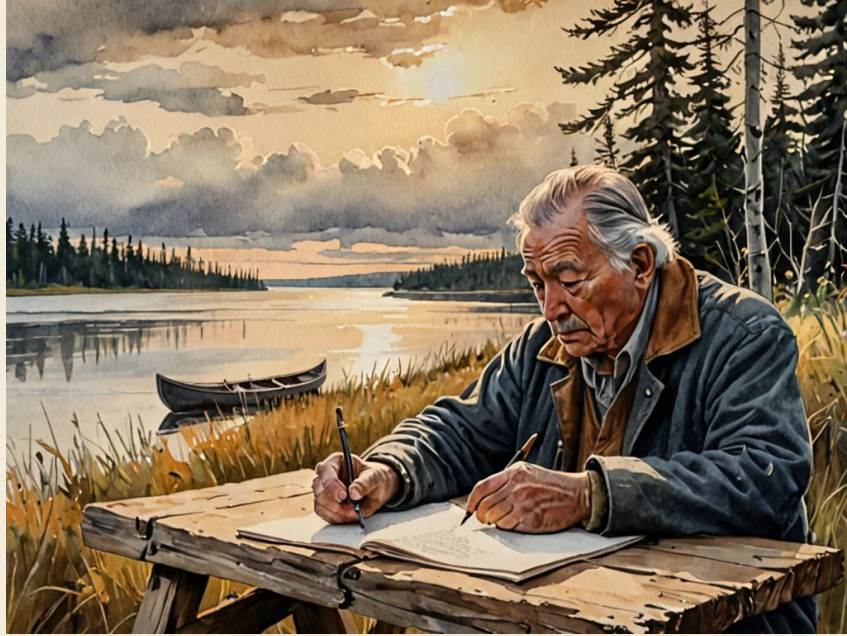


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And yet — these treaties are still in force today.

SAM CARDINAL

That matters enormously, and it is worth saying clearly. The reserves established under Treaties One through Five still exist as recognized land. The annuities are still paid. The rights to hunt and fish on unoccupied Crown land are still protected — and the courts, over many decades of litigation, have interpreted those rights more broadly than the Crown originally intended. The nations have used the written treaty, alongside their own oral record, to hold Canada to account. These are not museum pieces. They are living legal agreements, and their terms are still being worked out — in negotiation, in court, and in the ongoing relationship between Canada and the nations who signed.



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Which brings us to the door this first wave opened. Because Treaties One through Five were not the end of the numbered treaty process. They were the beginning.

SAM CARDINAL

They were the template. Imperfect, contested, but the template. By eighteen seventy-five, the method was established: a Crown commission would travel to the nations, a negotiation would be held at the fire, a printed treaty text would be presented, and Canada would consider the land available for settlement. That method was then carried west and north — to Treaty Six in eighteen seventy-six on the North Saskatchewan River, to Treaty Seven in eighteen seventy-seven with the Blackfoot Confederacy and their allies, and on through Treaties Eight, Nine, Ten, and Eleven, Treaty Eleven signed in nineteen twenty-one, reaching all the way to the Mackenzie Valley. The first five numbered treaties were the proof of concept for the rest of the West.

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A proof of concept that carried its problems with it.

SAM CARDINAL

Every one of them. The oral-versus-written gap that first appeared at the stone fort on the Red River in eighteen seventy-one would appear again at Fort Carlton, at Blackfoot Crossing, at every fire where a later treaty was made. The nations who came to those subsequent negotiations had often heard, from the ones who had signed before, what to expect — and what to watch for. Some pushed harder. Some won more favourable terms. But the structural problem — two understandings of what a treaty is, pressed into one document — traveled with the commissioners wherever they went.

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So when we look at a reserve today, or read a court ruling about treaty rights, or hear of a land claim — we are looking at a conversation that started at those first fires in eighteen seventy-one and has never really stopped.

SAM CARDINAL

The land beneath us in this part of the country is treaty land — not as a slogan, but as a legal and historical fact, with specific terms, specific promises, and specific obligations that still bind both sides. What this first wave of numbered treaties did was put those obligations into writing — imperfectly, incompletely, but into writing. And the nations have used that writing, alongside the memory the elders carried forward, to hold Canada to account ever since. The account is not closed. The promises are not settled. The relationship the nations understood themselves to be entering is still, in the deepest sense, waiting to be honoured. I'm Sam Cardinal.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

The treaties made between eighteen seventy-one and eighteen seventy-five are why the map of western Canada looks the way it does today — where reserves sit, where cities were built, where the railway ran. They are also why First Nations people are at the negotiating table and in the courts right now, making the argument for what was actually promised at those fires. The elders kept the memory. Their grandchildren are still carrying it forward. The account is open. And so is the West.

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