



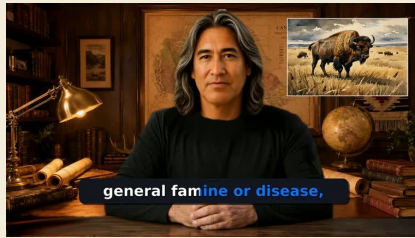
THE LAND BENEATH US ◆

The Medicine Chest

Season One · Before Canada · Episode 25

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.



TREATY SIX: KEY DATES

August 1876 — Negotiations at Fort Carlton; Mistawasis and Ahtahkakoop sign
1876 — Big Bear refuses, warns the rope may be drawn too tight
1882 — Big Bear signs; buffalo gone, famine forces his hand

A CHEST OR A PROMISE?

The distance between "at the agent's direction" and "we will care for your people"

From the episode

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Near the town of Duck Lake in Saskatchewan, there is a cluster of reconstructed wooden buildings inside a log palisade, sitting low on a bend above the North Saskatchewan River. This is Fort Carlton — a provincial historic site now, a fur-trade post then, and in August of eighteen seventy-six, the place where the Plains and Woods Cree and the Crown of Canada sat down together and made a treaty unlike any other in the numbered series.



SAM CARDINAL

What the Crown wanted at Fort Carlton was a signature — the same kind of land-surrender agreement that had already been made with nations further east and south. But the Cree leaders who arrived that August were not there to sign the same treaty. They were watching the buffalo herds that had sustained the northern plains for generations thin out and vanish, and they understood with terrible clarity that any agreement they made had to carry their people into a future the old economy could no longer support. They came to Fort Carlton not to surrender, but to negotiate a lifeline.

MEDICINE CHEST CLAUSE

Treaty Six provision unique among the numbered treaties,
negotiated by Cree leaders at Fort Carlton, 1876

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

So the question they brought to the table was not just "what land, for what price?" It was "what do you promise us when the old life is gone?"



SAM CARDINAL

That question produced two clauses in Treaty Six that appear in no other numbered treaty. The first is what we now call the medicine-chest clause, which committed the Crown to keep a medicine chest at the house of each Indian agent for the use and benefit of the people. The second is the famine-and-pestilence clause, which promised that if the people were ever overtaken by general famine or disease, the Crown would provide compassionate aid to relieve them from that calamity. These were not accidental additions. The Cree leaders asked for them, pressed for them, and made them conditions of their agreement. They are, in a very real sense, the signature of what the Cree understood a treaty to be: not a map transaction, but a mutual commitment to each other's future.

THREE RECORDS

THE WRITTEN TEXT THE CROWN'S ACCOUNT THE UNDERSTANDING

A chest at each agent's house "for the use and benefit of the Indians at the direction of such agent"

Commissioner Morris called them practical concessions to secure signatures; Cree spoke of famine and sickness

Genuine ongoing care — a partner's commitment to stand with the people when sickness and hunger came

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Now, both clauses are there in the printed text — you can read Treaty Six today, it is a public document. But on this show we lay three records side by side: what the paper says, what the Crown's negotiators reported, and what the people understood they had agreed to. What does the written text actually say?



SAM CARDINAL

The written medicine-chest clause is worth reading slowly, because one phrase does a great deal of work. The chest shall be kept at the agent's house, the treaty says, "for the use and benefit of the Indians at the direction of such agent." At the direction of such agent. The Crown placed a gatekeeper inside the promise. An appointed official — not a doctor, not a treaty partner — would decide who received medicine, and when, and how much. That qualification is buried inside what sounds like an open commitment, and it matters enormously once you see what the Indian agent system became in practice.

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WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

What did the Crown's own negotiators say about why those clauses were included?



SAM CARDINAL

Commissioner Alexander Morris led the negotiations for the Crown, and he reported back to Ottawa that these clauses were concessions — practical ones, made to secure the signatures of leaders who might otherwise hold back. His accounts record that the Cree spoke directly about famine, about sickness, about the uncertainty of what the disappearance of the buffalo would mean. Morris understood the logic: the people needed assurance that they would not simply be abandoned once the deal was done. What his reports do not capture in any detail is what the Cree understood those promises to mean in scope — the full weight the people placed on the word "care."



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

And what did the Cree understand?



SAM CARDINAL

The oral tradition of the Plains and Woods Cree holds that what was promised was genuine, ongoing care — not a box of remedies under a bureaucrat's lock, not relief that could be withheld as leverage, but a real commitment to stand with the people when sickness came and when hunger came, as a partner in the new world they were all entering together. The promise as the people received it was something closer to: we will look after you. The gap between "a chest at the agent's direction" and "we will care for your people" is not a small gap. It is the distance between a piece of furniture and a relationship.

A CHEST OR A PROMISE?

The distance between "at the agent's direction" and "we will care for your people"

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Two leaders made that agreement possible at Fort Carlton: Mistawasis and Ahtahkakoop. Tell me about them.



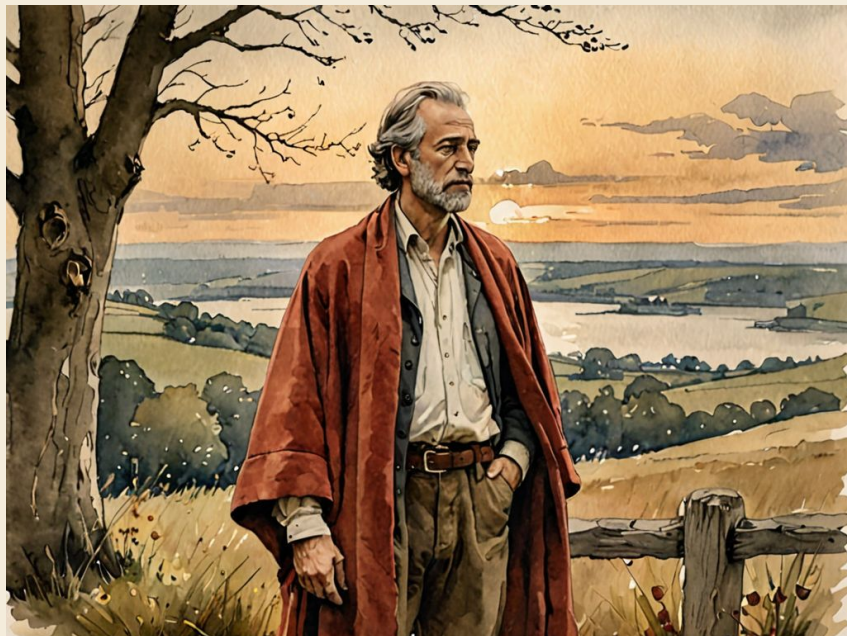
SAM CARDINAL

Mistawasis — Big Child in Cree — was one of the most respected Plains Cree chiefs of his generation, and he arrived at Fort Carlton having already thought hard about what the treaty needed to contain. He was a realist. He had watched what happened to nations south of the border who refused to negotiate — conflict, and worse terms later, or no terms at all. His argument to his own people was essentially this: the old life is ending whether we sign or not; the buffalo are going; let us bind the Crown to the best possible terms for what comes next, and let us get their signature on those terms. He was not naive about the Crown. He was strategic, and those two unique clauses are in large part a monument to that strategy.



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Ahtahkakoop — whose name means Star Blanket — was the Woods Cree voice at the table, coming from the parkland country north of the plains. He and Mistawasis stood together.



SAM CARDINAL

Ahtahkakoop led a community that had already begun experimenting with farming and new ways of sustaining life — he was ahead of many in seeing that agriculture might carry his people when the hunt could not. His position at Fort Carlton was consistent with that pragmatism: if the treaty was made honestly and the promised support actually arrived, his people could build a future. Both he and Mistawasis are sometimes described as accommodationists, but I think that misreads them. They were doing triage in a crisis. They secured the medicine chest and famine-relief clauses because they fought for them. That fighting matters.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

But not everyone at Fort Carlton agreed. Big Bear was there — and he did not sign.

SAM CARDINAL

Big Bear — Mistahimaskwa in Cree — is one of the most consequential figures of the entire treaty era, and his refusal at Fort Carlton deserves to be understood on its own terms. He was not opposed to reaching an agreement with the Crown in principle. He was opposed to signing before he understood what the terms would actually mean on the ground — how much freedom his people would retain, whether they could continue to follow the animals, whether the rope, as he reportedly said, would be placed around his neck before he knew how tightly it would be drawn. He left Fort Carlton in eighteen seventy-six without signing.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

He held out for six years.

SAM CARDINAL

He held out until eighteen eighty-two, when the buffalo were simply gone from the northern plains — not declining, gone — and his people were starving. When Big Bear finally placed his mark on Treaty Six, it was not because he had been persuaded. It was because famine had done what negotiation could not. That is a heavy thing to sit with: the very condition the famine-and-pestilence clause was written to address was the condition that ultimately forced the most reluctant leader to accept the treaty. Big Bear signed because his people needed to eat.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

There is another voice from Fort Carlton I want to name, because it tends to get overlooked. Poundmaker — Pitikwahanapiwiyn — spoke during the negotiations and raised a question the written treaty never fully answered.

SAM CARDINAL

Poundmaker's speech at Fort Carlton addressed something the document itself passed over in silence. He asked, in the recorded accounts of the negotiations, how farming the land would actually work — who would carry the people through the years of learning, who would support them through the transition from the life they knew to the life they were being asked to build. It was not a refusal; it was a demand for honest accounting of what the change would cost. That question was not answered to his satisfaction at Fort Carlton, and as the years after signing unfolded, it became clear it had not been answered honestly in the treaty either.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Because what came after the signatures is its own chapter. The clauses were in the paper — and then came the agents, and the years.

SAM CARDINAL

The Indian agent system placed a single appointed official between the treaty promise and the people it had been made to, and what followed was uneven at best. The medicine chest, in practice, was often meagre, outdated, and rationed by men who held no medical training and no particular incentive to be generous. The famine-and-pestilence clause — written precisely because Cree leaders foresaw starvation — was invoked in the eighteen eighties when that starvation arrived, and the relief the Crown provided was slow, insufficient, and sometimes deliberately withheld as leverage to push people onto reserves and keep them there. The promise was in the paper. The delivery was not the promise.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

And yet the people never stopped holding the Crown to that paper.

SAM CARDINAL

The medicine-chest clause has had a long legal life, because the Cree never stopped arguing that it meant what they understood it to mean at Fort Carlton. Courts in Saskatchewan have found that it creates a treaty right — that medicine must be provided to Treaty Six peoples, without charge, as a treaty obligation. Legal scholars and advocates have pressed further, arguing that read in its full historical context, read through the lens of what the Cree leaders actually secured in those negotiations, the clause represents a treaty right to health care — a right that predates the publicly funded health system the rest of Canada eventually built for itself in the twentieth century. The Crown has not fully conceded that argument. The courts have not fully resolved it. The conversation is live.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Which means the negotiation that began at Fort Carlton in August of eighteen seventy-six — about what the Crown owes the people when sickness comes — is still going on today.

SAM CARDINAL

It is still going on. And that, I think, is the thing to carry away from Treaty Six. The leaders who signed were not confused about what they were doing. Mistawasis and Ahtahkakoop secured language no other treaty carried, because they looked at what was coming and tried to bind the Crown to something durable. Big Bear held out because he understood that a promise is only as good as the will to keep it. And the people have spent nearly one hundred and fifty years insisting that those promises be honored — not as relics of a finished negotiation, but as living obligations between partners. The treaty did not end in eighteen seventy-six. It is still in force. I'm Sam Cardinal.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Today, when a Treaty Six member receives medical coverage through the federal Non-Insured Health Benefits program, or when a First Nation in Saskatchewan walks into a courtroom to argue that health care is a treaty right, they are standing inside a conversation that began on a river bend near Duck Lake, in August of eighteen seventy-six — when Cree leaders looked at a failing world and demanded that the Crown promise, in writing, to stand with them. I'm Willow Born With a Tooth, and 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.

A note on the record

"Mistawasis" is rendered in the script as "Big Child," a widely used gloss, but "wasis" in Plains Cree denotes a young child or infant specifically; several historians prefer "Large Child." Both translations appear in the scholarly literature and neither is definitively wrong.

The script states famine relief in the 1880s was "sometimes deliberately withheld as leverage" — a well-supported interpretation in recent scholarship (especially Daschuk 2013), but some historians characterise the failures as bureaucratic inadequacy rather than deliberate policy; the "deliberate" framing, though increasingly mainstream, remains contested.

References & further reading

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