

Young Chippewayan Indian Reserve No. 107 and Mennonite Farmers in Saskatchewan

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Good afternoon and welcome to this session on examining Aboriginal-Mennonite relationships in Saskatchewan. My name is Leonard Doell and I will chair this portion of the afternoon. I work for Mennonite Central Committee in Saskatchewan and co-ordinate the Aboriginal Neighbours Program.

There will be two presenters besides myself this afternoon. I will provide a brief historical overview of the events that led up to the Young Chippewayan people losing their land and how it came to be that Mennonites acquired it. Then Albert Angus [currently advisor on treaties and land rights to Assembly of First Nations Grand Chief Matthew Coon Come in Ottawa], a descendent of the Young Chippewayan Band will talk about how the displacement of his people has affected him and his people and where their land claim is today. Ray Funk [a consultant from Prince Albert and a former Member of Parliament], a descendent of Mennonite settlers who have lived on that property since the 1890s, will then share [and oral presentation] about his family's settling on this land and some of the issues that he has wrestled with as a result of this experience.

This afternoon we will be focussing in on the Young Chippewayan Reserve # 107, which is located approximately fifty miles north of Saskatoon, north and west of the town of Laird. In 1876, under Treaty Six, thirty square miles of some of the best agricultural land in Saskatchewan was granted to this Plains Cree Band. Chief Chippewayan, who signed the

Treaty, died in 1877 and his son Young Chippewayan became the hereditary chief.

Following the signing of the treaty, many bands like the Young Chippewayan Band remained quite nomadic. The buffalo had virtually disappeared, leaving many Native People starving or dying of malnutrition. In 1879, the land at Laird was surveyed with hopes that the band would settle down. Rumours that buffalo had crossed the border into the United States in 1881 prompted Young Chippewayan and his people to join the exodus of Battleford Indians to the Cypress Hills. Unfortunately, the rumours proved to be false. This, coupled with the government's determination to get the Indians settled on their respective reserves, led Young Chippewayan to return to more familiar territory. But only three families made the trek back to Battleford with him. It seems likely that some band members joined other bands, while others died from starvation and disease.

These conditions prevailed up to the time of the 1885 [Metis] Rebellion at Batoche [Saskatchewan]. The transition from hunting to farming was a difficult one. An oral tradition says that the federal government feared that the Indians would take part in the Rebellion, so guns were taken from the Native people: 1) to force them to farm, 2) to eliminate the possibility of them fighting with [Louis] Riel's forces. Rations were also cut back and Reserve life became unbearable. Some members of the band apparently joined Riel and others fled south and lived with other bands.

To the Native People the reserve land at Laird was chosen as their home and was occupied from time to time. The Carlton Trail, leading from Prince Albert to North Battleford, crossed this land and was bustling with activity. The site known as Stoney Hill was and still is considered a sacred piece of land, and is still held in high regard by the Young Chippewayan descendants. There are also sacred burial grounds located on this property.

In May 1897 this land was taken from the Young Chippewayan Band by the federal government. With the influx of settlers looking for a chance to homestead, the government felt a need to open up every inch of available land. Agricultural settlement was more in keeping with the government's idea of proper land use at the time.

The problem was that this land was never surrendered by the Young Chippewayan Band. These people were never contacted and asked if they wished to dispose of this land. Under Section 38 of the Indian Act, and I quote, "The land in question cannot be sold or otherwise alienated until the same has been released or surrendered in the manner provided by the Act. This section positively forbids, subject to certain exceptions which have no application to the present case, the sale, alienation, or lease of any reserve or portion of a reserve without such release or surrender," unquote. On May 11, 1897, the Department of Indian Affairs, through an Order-in-Council, relinquished this land, thus dispossessing the Young Chippewayan Band.

The Hague-Osler area of the Saskatchewan Valley was opened as a Mennonite Reserve on January 23, 1895. This Mennonite Reserve was soon filled up so that in October of 1898, Township 43 and 44 of Range 5 were added to it. So the former Young Chippewayan Reserve, now became a reserve for Mennonite farmers. It is doubtful that these Mennonites were aware of the relationship of the government and the Young Chippewayan Band. But it is possible that they were aware it was a former Indian Reserve.

The Mennonites who came to this reserve were poor and landless. They had left their homes in Russia and southern Manitoba with the hope of obtaining land. It was the intention

of the initial Mennonite settlers to re-establish their religious communities and to establish a simple farming way of life. To own land represented a place for them to live as a separate people, to live their values of peace and of nonconformity to the world about them. Without land, they were forced to labour in towns and cities with the potential loss of Christian values. "For many it was sufficient that their homesteads were built and that their endeavours prospered. In terms of work, they needed to produce enough land and resources to continue the traditions of their forefathers. The Canadian government was also interested in the successful settlement of its colonists, but it was equally concerned that the colonists would prosper in ways that would be useful to the country. This meant that useful crops, livestock, and industries should be established to develop the region and the country. The Mennonites were regarded as ideal colonists."

An injustice occurred in 1897 when the land belonging to the Young Chippewayan Band was taken from them without their consent. Mennonites became the beneficiaries of this transaction and acquired some of the best agricultural land in the province. The Mennonite people now have 103 years of history on this reserve where they have lived, worked, and raised their families - and have a legal right to do so. The government has erred and created this injustice.

In 1976, the [Saskatchewan] provincial government decided to honour land claims to bands who still had land owing to them from the Treaties. The Young Chippewayan Band is one such band. The descendants of this band have become refugees and as a result, they are classified as squatters on the reserves on which they reside. The one hope they have to begin again is that the government will honour their claim and that they will be given land somewhere as an economic base. The band would prefer to have its own land back but does not want to dispossess the Mennonites who now reside on this land.

Mennonites have no legal obligation to intercede on the Native People's behalf - only a moral obligation. Mennonites also know the feeling of being dispossessed, a people without a home, pilgrims in many lands. Native People and Mennonites do not view land from the same perspective in terms of use, but both recognize that land represents life and hope. Without good land there is spiritual and physical health. We as Mennonites should be best to understand these alienated Native People.

The land claim of the Young Chippewayan Band is before the federal courts. The wheels of "justice" are moving ever so slowly, while those who are directly affected seek to be patient. the role of MCC has been to build a bridge between the land owners at Laird and the descendants of the Young Chippewayan Band. MCC has tried to keep the dialogue alive between these two parties, as well as to encourage the federal government to act justly and quickly in responding to this injustice. If Mennonites will stand with the Young Chippewayan people, it will give them hope in seeing that true justice will be done. This in turn will also free Mennonites from the weight of an unwanted burden. Efforts need to be made in this direction and hopefully it will be possible to arrive at a peaceful and just solution, to a problem which both peoples did not choose.