

Mistahimaskwa (c1825-1888): Biography

Mistahimaskwa, or Big Bear, was a Cree chief who was involved, albeit not by choice, in the 1885 Resistance. He is perhaps one of the most misunderstood figures in Canadian history. Little is known about his early years. He was born around 1825 near Jackfish Lake and Fort Carlton, which are now in present-day Saskatchewan. His heritage was Saulteaux through his father, Muckitoo or Black Powder, a minor chief of a mixed Cree-Saulteaux band and Plains Cree, through his mother, whose name is unknown. Although his father was Saulteaux and he could speak Saulteaux, Mistahimaskwa considered himself Cree.

Mistahimaskwa was a traditional spiritual person. His Manitou spirit was the bear: in his youth he received a vision from the Bear Spirit – the Cree’s most powerful animal Manitou. His name, song, and power bundle were a result of the visitation. His power bundle consisted of a skinned-out bear’s paw with its claws intact, which was sewn onto a scarlet flannel. Mistahimaskwa believed that when he wore this power bundle around his neck nothing could harm him because the Bear Spirit’s power rested against his soul. First Nations Oral Tradition maintains that Mistahimaskwa wore this bundle during times of danger. The bundle gave him great courage. Near the end of his life he became a baptized Catholic.

In his early years, Mistahimaskwa spent most of his time hunting bison. His mixed Cree-Saulteaux band traveled throughout the remaining bison hunting grounds of what are now Saskatchewan, Alberta, and Montana. In other parts of the year, his people camped in the woods of what are now

north-central Alberta and Saskatchewan. He also went on raiding parties and took horses from rival nations such as the Blackfoot. He made war too: in October 1870, he took part in a battle between the Cree and the Blackfoot at Pelly River (near present-day Lethbridge, Alberta). This was the last battle fought between two First Nations in Canadian history.

By the 1860s, Mistahimaskwa had become a headman and then chief of a small Cree band, made up largely of his extended family. His early interaction with Euro-Canadian traders and missionaries confirmed that he had an "independent spirit". He always tried to work for his people's best interests and did not like others telling him how his people should live. For instance, in 1873, he clashed with Gabriel Dumont, the Métis leader, over how the summer bison hunt should be conducted. On another occasion, in 1875, prior to the signing of Treaty 6 among the Cree, Saulteaux and Nakota, Mistahimaskwa declared that the proposed treaty was not good for First Nations:

When we set a fox-trap we scatter pieces of meat all round, but when the fox gets into the trap we knock him on the head; we want no bait; let your chiefs come like men and talk to us.

This speech only reconfirmed to Euro-Canadian government officials that Mistahimaskwa was a troublemaker. The government wanted all the First Nations to sign treaties, in large part because they wanted to control their movement, and then assimilate them before the Prairies became flooded with non-Aboriginal farmers. Mistahimaskwa felt that having First Nations people spread-out on reserves throughout the region would lead to the decimation of First Nations culture. He therefore advocated for a large

Cree reserve to preserve their culture and improve their chances to make a livelihood.

Mistahimaskwa also wanted to have a treaty process that was more beneficial to First Nations. He felt that the numbered treaty process that began in the 1870s kept the First Nations hungry and curbed their spiritual practices and left them open to disease. The late 1870s to mid-1880s were a trying period for all Aboriginal nations on the Prairies. The bison had effectively disappeared by the mid 1870s, and famine and disease, most notably smallpox and tuberculosis, were decimating the First Nations. The government also failed to live up to the terms of the treaties: individuals and bands were not receiving their full treaty payments, nor was there adequate food on reserves, and government employees, such as Indian Agents and Farm Instructors, were negligent and abusive to First Nations individuals.

At Fort Pitt on September 13, 1876, during negotiations for Treaty 6, Mistahimaskwa indicated his concerns to the assembled Cree, Saulteaux and Nakota: "Stop, my friends...I will request (Lieutenant Governor Alexander Morris) to save me from what I most dread – hanging; it was not given to us to have the rope about our necks". Since Mistahimaskwa (and the Cree) believed that a person's soul resides in their necks, he did not want to see the spirit of his people crushed by treaties that were not in their best interests. As a result, he did not sign the treaty – the first major chief on the Prairies to do so.

From 1876 until December 1882, he refused to sign Treaty 6. During this time, he gathered a following of Cree and other First Nations disgruntled with the treaty process. In the late 1870s, Mistahimaskwa and his band spent their time hunting the few remaining bison in what are now Montana and southwestern Saskatchewan. In the 1870s, he tried unsuccessfully for the creation of a large First Nations reserve in the Cypress Hills region of what is now southwestern Saskatchewan.

Realizing that the bison-hunting way of life was gone, Mistahimaskwa relented and signed an adhesion to Treaty 6 in late 1882. By this time, his starving band dwindled to 272 members. Despite finally signing the treaty, Mistahimaskwa was still viewed as a troublemaker by government officials. He was advocating for the development of a large Cree reserve in central Saskatchewan. In June 1884, he met with other chiefs at Pitikwahanapiwiyin (Poundmaker)'s reserve near present-day North Battleford, Saskatchewan to discuss this and other matters.

During the chiefs' council, Mistahimaskwa held a Thirst Dance. The government outlawed this dance. During this sacred dance, a farming instructor was roughed-up and the North-West Mounted Police (NWMP) arrested the First Nations warrior responsible for the beating. This angered the warriors who threatened violence, only to be stopped by chiefs Mistahimaskwa, Pitikwahanapiwiyin and Minahikosis (Little Pine). Once again, government officials saw Mistahimaskwa as an agitator.

Mistahimaskwa's reputation as a troublemaker would prove disastrous once the 1885 Resistance broke out. News of the Métis' victory over the NWMP and the Prince Albert Volunteers at the Battle of Duck Lake on March 26, 1885 soon reached Mistahimaskwa's band. By this time, Mistahimaskwa had lost control of his band to the Warrior Society. Years of frustration, neglect, disease and famine had taken a toll on his people. The warriors in particular were angry.

The Métis uprising provided the Warrior's Society with the excuse to take matters into their own hands. On April 2, 1885, the war chief Kapapamahchakwew (Wandering Spirit) and Mistahimaskwa's son Ayimisis (later known as "Little Bear") came upon a Catholic church in Frog Lake in what is now east-central Alberta and forced out all those inside. The band had little food all winter and was angry that the local Indian Agent, Thomas Quinn, had once again refused them rations. Kapapamahchakwew gave Quinn four warnings to leave Frog Lake before shooting him. Following that eight more men were killed, including two priests, only two Euro-Canadian women were spared. A Euro-Canadian fur trader was able to escape. Mistahimaskwa pleaded with the warriors to stop the killing, but they would not listen. His band had little to do with him now as Kapapamahchakwew and Ayimisis took control.

On April 13, 1885, Kapapamahchakwew and Ayimisis decided to take the NWMP's Fort Pitt. Armed with 250 warriors, they issued an ultimatum for the police to surrender the fort and to leave the civilians behind. Inspector Francis Dickens and his twenty-five men did so the following day,

leaving behind twenty-eight civilians. The Fort was then looted and burned. The fact that Fort Pitt was taken without bloodshed was largely a result of Mistahimaskwa's quiet diplomacy. He wrote a note to an old friend in the NWMP telling him that he and the rest of his men should escape as the warriors "are wild and (are) hard to keep in hand". Mistahimaskwa did his best to ensure that the Fort Pitt captives would be unharmed.

Mistahimaskwa's band was not very successful in their engagements with the Canadian military. On May 28, 1885, the Canadian militia under General Thomas Strange attacked Kapapamahchakwew's men near Frenchman Butte. The battle ended in a draw: the militia was repulsed, however, the Cree also withdrew. During the battle Mistahimaskwa stayed with the Elders, women, children and captives. On June 3, 1885, Samuel Steele's Scouts eventually defeated Mistahimaskwa's band at the Battle of Loon Lake. The Oral Tradition of the Poundmaker First Nation maintains that Mistahimaskwa wore his power bundle during the battle to protect his retreating warriors by stepping between them and the advancing police. On July 2, 1885, Mistahimaskwa surrendered at Fort Pitt.

For his role in the 1885 Resistance, Mistahimaskwa was charged with Treason-Felony. Despite his and other testimony that indicated that he did everything in his power to prevent bloodshed and that he tried to protect Euro-Canadian captives, he was nevertheless convicted and sentenced to three years in Manitoba's Stony Mountain Penitentiary. He took up carpentry, but became gravely ill in prison. He was released and on January 17, 1888 died on the Poundmaker Reserve.

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