



ALWAYS AN ADVENTURE: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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Retirement?

When I retired, I was hardly aware of it. I had been working on *The Treasures of Glenbow* for months and from there I slipped effortlessly into my own research and writing. One of my first projects was to gather together a bunch of Native stories I had obtained through interviews and research. None was long enough for a book in itself but I thought they might make a nice collection of Blackfoot tales. I finished the manuscript before the end of the year, but it was 1994 before it was published by Prairie Books and University of Oklahoma Press under the title *The Amazing Death of Calf Shirt and Other Blackfoot Stories*. The only problem was that in the interim I had written another book, *Calgary: Spirit of the West*, that was published by Fifth House in the same year. That placed me in the odd position of having to go on promotional tours for two books at the same time.

I guess inside every non-fiction writer is a novel crying to be written. In 1992 I decided to try my hand. And to make a holiday of it, I moved into a little tree-shrouded cabin just off the main square in Sonoma, California. In the six weeks it took me to write the novel (an Indian detective story) my wife stayed with her sister about a mile away. It was a productive time but to this point the manuscript has never seen the light of day. Actually, I never really tried to market it after a couple of rejections.

Then it was back to Calgary and reality as I started research on a number of writing projects. I was also contracted by Ted Byfield to be a consultant and writer in the first of a series of thirteen volumes he was preparing on the history of the province entitled *Alberta in the Twentieth Century*. This carried on for two or three years. Meanwhile I was churning out articles for publications such as *The Beaver*, *Natural History* (New York), *Alberta History*, *Montana Magazine*,

Russell's West (Great Falls), and others. I also wrote introductions to a number of other books, and even had a short article on the Blackfoot published in *Russia*. In fact, I was doing all those things I never had time for during the last few years at Glenbow.

In 1991 I was appointed to the Stephen Avenue Area Development Society, a City-run program to improve the appearance of downtown Calgary. In an earlier study in which I was involved, we said that 1914 had been the time when Calgary's city centre had the most attractive appearance, and recommended that 8th Avenue (now reverted to its original name of Stephen Avenue) be the main area for attention. We suggested grants be given to property owners to renovate their facades, going back to the original designs which often were hidden behind chrome and plastic store fronts. In particular, we wanted to restore the old sandstone buildings that gave a definite atmosphere to the street. All of this was approved.

Over a period of ten years our group was given about \$1.5 million from the City and from the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation which we gave out in grants. Almost every building along Stephen Avenue from 1st Street East to 1st Street West was affected. Grants of \$150,000 and \$175,000 were quite common, and we had experts on our committee that could oversee the work. My input was historical but I also had a lot of opinions to offer, good or bad. I think it was a very successful committee. Janice Dickin from the University of Calgary as president, and City employee Rob Graham as secretary did masterful jobs in guiding the projects through to completion.

Our oldest restored building was the T.C. Power Block, built in 1885 by an American firm of ex-whisky traders. The most impressive restoration, in my opinion, was the beautiful sandstone Bank of Montreal on the northeast corner of Stephen Avenue and 1st Street West. Probably the most interesting was a sandstone building at 123 - 8th Avenue West, which we dubbed the "red, white and blue" building - and for good reason. It seems that some time ago, the owner who lived in Germany became angry with the City over some tax matter and got his revenge by painting the whole sandstone front red, white, and blue. It was ghastly. To add to the problem, the owner's lawyer was in Edmonton and he seemed even more antagonistic than his boss. The result was that the letters and phone calls went nowhere, or worse, seemed to feed the fires of discontent. Finally, after getting the owner to visit Calgary, the offer of \$150,000 to remove the garish paint was accepted. A good thing, too, for we were just in the process of winding down the whole program. It would have been a shame to leave the monstrosity untouched.

But in the end it turned out to be a very worthwhile program. We totally revamped the face of the area and the streetscape was declared a National Historic Site. Now, all that was needed was to bring the people back to the centre of town. When the program ended, this still wasn't happening and most of the time, except during the lunch hour, the street looked like a deserted wasteland.

A big change in my retirement career occurred in 1994 when I became involved in Indian legal matters and ultimately was considered to be an expert witness. The first call came from lawyers representing the White Bear Reserve in Saskatchewan. Two years earlier, they had studied gambling casinos that were springing up on reservations all over the United States and decided to build one of their own, the first in Canada. This step was taken in spite of the fact that the Saskatchewan government was opposed to casinos on reserves. White Bear believed that the Province had no jurisdiction on their reserve. However, twenty-one days after the casino was opened it was closed by the RCMP, citing provincial regulations, and the band was charged with unlawfully conducting a casino operation.

As part of its defence, White Bear asked me to provide evidence of the historic hunting area of the band, tribal society, intertribal relations, how its economy functioned, and the existence of gambling by Crees with non-Cree people prior to treaty. As a result, I prepared a twenty-six-page document, "Gambling, Political Organization & Trade among Canadian Plains Indians, with Special Reference on the Cree, Assiniboine & Ojibwa." After this, I went to Carlisle, Saskatchewan, where I gave my testimony as an expert witness. Except for a murder trial some years earlier, this was my first time to testify and it all went very well. The Crown tried to use some of my books against me but there was nothing serious.

Well, we lost the case but it turned out to be a win in the long run. As a result of the publicity the Saskatchewan government was forced to negotiate with the Federation of Saskatchewan Indians, and ultimately a deal was made for casinos to be operated on a number of reserves. One of these was the Bear Claw Casino, which reopened on the White Bear Reserve.

My next foray into legal matters occurred in 1995 when the Blood tribe asked me to do some research on their "Big Claim." In 1882, a total of 3,542 Bloods were given their annual treaty money. A year later, when the reserve was being surveyed, the number receiving money was reduced to 2,589 – almost a thousand people. The reserve was then surveyed on the basis of five people per square mile using the 1883 figures. The Bloods claimed that they

had been victimized and laid a claim against the federal government – a “big claim” – for the missing land. If approved, the reserve would extend far south beyond the present town of Cardston.

Initially I was given a two-month contract to find out how and why the reduction of population occurred, to determine the actual population at treaty time in 1877, and to examine the mortality rate between then and 1883. I did nothing else during that time but go through old annuity and census records. I found a lot of inconsistencies, church records that did not match government records, and doubt as to whether the big cut was made to reduce the size of the reserve, or because of the economic depression taking place at that time, or for other reasons.

I completed my two-month stint on phase one, providing population figures and other data that they requested. It then became part of a larger report that was submitted to the Specific Claims Branch of Indian Affairs. I didn't hear much more about it until 1997, when I was again asked to do research. This time my part of phase two was much broader, including locating and researching the records of early surveyors, missionaries, policemen, Indian agents, and any newspapers that might be useful for the Big Claim. I was also told to examine particular events, such as Red Crow's selection of the reserve in 1880, traditional voting procedures, and a host of other requirements.

I did a major report on decision-making methods and in the fall I reported on my travels and extensive research. I did not say this specifically in the report, for it had no legal grounds, but I was of the opinion that some political skulduggery had resulted in the loss of the southern section of the reserve. A Conservative named John Parks, head of the North-West Land & Grazing Co., had taken out a grazing lease on the piece of land south of the reserve before the 1883 treaty. His son-in-law was William Pugsley, onetime federal Minister of Public Works and from what I read, a not-too-honest individual. Pugsley was the driving force behind the North-West Land & Grazing Company, and when he learned that the 1882 survey of the Blood Reserve included his lease, he travelled to Regina, the Territorial capital. Coincidentally he arrived in the city three days before the Lieutenant-Governor, Edgar Dewdney, left the city for a trip to the Blood Reserve. This trip resulted in a land survey, a new treaty, and the southern boundary being moved to its present location.

As interesting and compelling as this information was, I never found a smoking gun to prove that Pugsley had influenced fellow Conservative Dewdney to take the action that would save his lease. I realized that the lawyers

really couldn't do anything with this information but I still have my suspicions that something unsavoury was going on.

I also found that Blood oral tradition was right regarding Standoff bottom lands. They always said this prime piece of land was supposed to be part of the reserve, but the surveys and 1883 treaty said otherwise. In the William Pearce papers at the University of Alberta Archives there is an indication that Lief Crozier, superintendent of the NWMP at Fort Macleod, bought a log building on Standoff bottom in 1882 and then leased the building to the police for a detachment. It was bringing him money and he probably didn't want to give it up. Pearce wrote, "It is stated that through the persons interested in this claim and their influence with the Blood Indians, this Reserve is considerably changed from that which the Indians asked for and where it would have been in the public interest to locate it."¹⁷³

Over the next few years I did a few more projects, such as evaluating the worth of Fort Whoop-Up. For the loss of that bit of land they got over \$1 million, but I think the Big Claim was rejected in 1999. An appeal was equally unsuccessful.

My next legal project was a claim regarding water rights. In 1995 I explained to John Ewers, "I've just agreed to undertake a study for the North Peigans in relationship to a land claim case. They are claiming that part of the water that runs through the reserve is theirs for irrigation purposes. The government says no. I think they have a strong case relating to water use in the valley of the Oldman River, to their selection of the location at Treaty Seven, and the fact that at the reserve, the river is not considered to be a navigable stream. Anyway, the research and reporting is supposed to be done by February, and court testimony following about a year later."¹⁷⁴

In the time available to me, I wrote a general history of the Peigans prior to treaty and then concentrated on their relations with the government, farming practices, and use of water. I proved that the way the reserve had been surveyed on the basis of five people per square mile, the entire river had to be included in the land allocation. That meant that if everybody took their exact share, some of them would have been living at the bottom of the river!

During the time of my research, the irrigation matter became a hot political issue and the matter was resolved by negotiation so I never had to testify. When I finished, I suggested the report could be revised and published as a history, but I never got a response.

At that time I commented to Colin Taylor, "The interesting thing is that I can earn more in consulting fees in a month with this kind of work than I

can from the royalties of one or two books – each of which takes me several months to research and write. Something’s wrong here.”¹⁷⁵

My next consulting tasks were started in 2001 for the Ermineskin and Samson bands at Hobbema. Ever since my book on Big Bear I had been approached by a number of individuals and groups seeking information about the Crees and I realized that I knew a lot more about them than just the Big Bear biography. Actually, I had been interested ever since 1952 when John Rabbit and his wife at the Louis Bull Reserve had shared some of their knowledge with me.

The first to contact me was the Samson band, through its lawyer, Priscilla Kennedy, and a short time later the Ermineskin band, through its lawyer, Barbara Fisher (now a B.C. judge), also contacted me. Here is the problem as I understood it. When the treaty was signed, Bobtail was given a reserve just south of Ermineskin and Samson. In 1885, Bobtail was angry about the treatment of his family and people during the Riel Rebellion, so he and his followers abandoned the reserve and took half-breed scrip. In 1896, the Montana authorities rounded up scores of Crees who had fled to the United States after the rebellion and forced them back into Canada. The Canadian government decided that the almost vacant Bobtail Reserve would make a good home for these refugees, so they settled there and its name was changed to the Montana Reserve.

That’s the view of the bands. The government, on the other hand, said the Bobtail Reserve had been surrendered in 1909 and thus ceased to exist. It also said the reserve had been completely vacant when the Crees arrived from Montana.

In the 1940s, when oil was discovered on the three reserves and at their fishing station at Pigeon Lake, Montana was given its share of royalties. However, Samson and Ermineskin claimed that the Bobtail Reserve had never been properly surrendered and claimed that their royalties should have gone to Bobtail’s descendants, now living on the Ermineskin and Samson Reserves.

My projects for Samson and Ermineskin were quite different. For Samson, they wanted a biography of Big Bear, not unlike my book, but more fully documented and in greater detail in certain areas. The Ermineskins, on the other hand, were looking for evidence regarding Bobtail, Ermineskin, and Samson prior to the so-called surrender in 1909. My specific tasks were to determine the relationship between Bobtail and Ermineskin, relationships between members of the three bands, Cree customs relating to band membership, and the collective use of lands.

I was always under the impression that the bands at the Hobbema Agency – Bobtail, Ermineskin, Samson, and later Louis Bull – were all one people divided into separate bands through the happenstance of the treaty-signing process. Now it was my task to try and prove it.

But I was almost stopped in my tracks when the lawyers sent me documents they had already gathered in the case. They filled about a third of my garage, box after box piled three high. I could never get that much into the house, so I had to drag in one box at a time, use the finding aids they provided to see if there was any wheat among all that chaff. There wasn't much, but what they did have was very useful, particularly the half-breed scrip records that provided data on the Bobtails who had left the reserve in 1885.

Pretty soon I was on the road to Ottawa, Edmonton, and other places, as well as to Glenbow and into my own files. I found plenty to support the belief that Bobtail and Ermineskin were brothers and were sons of Louis Piché, a Metis who could be found in fur trade records back to 1811 and missionary journals in the 1840s. After Piché was murdered in the 1840s, missionary influence became so strong that both the Methodists and Catholics promoted their own adherents as the new leader. For the Catholics it was Bobtail and for the Methodists Maskepetoon. The separation became much more apparent when they settled on reserves, with most of the Methodists being with Samson and the Catholics with Ermineskin and Bobtail.

My report, "A History of Bobtail and the Bear Hills Crees to 1885," was completed early in 2002, and this time I did have to appear as an expert witness. After it was over, here is what I wrote to Colin Taylor: "I drove to Edmonton to be prepped by my lawyers. That took a day and a half. Then I was in the witness box for another 2½ days. I was warned that the cross-examination would be tough, but I actually enjoyed it. They caught me up on a couple of things but hey! nobody's perfect."¹⁷⁶

In the following year I testified for the Samson band, and while I didn't get a rough ride, my testimony did. First, I was not allowed to testify about the unity of the three bands as that had not been included in my range of expertise when presented to the court. Then there was a fight about admissibility of some of my evidence but our lawyers got it in. After 2½ days I was turned over for cross-examination for another 2½ days of answering questions. As I commented in my diary, "There were a few rough moments but all in all I enjoyed the whole procedure. It was fun."¹⁷⁷



Over the next several years, a few honours drifted my way. I was given the Eric L. Harvie Award by the Glenbow Museum, the Contributor of the Century Award by the Historical Society, lifetime membership by the Alberta Society of Archivists, and the Lieutenant-Governor's Award by the Alberta Museums Association.

In between all the lawyer work I was still editing the quarterly *Alberta History*, and writing books. For a few years there was a virtual deluge of books after the Calf Shirt and Calgary volumes in 1994. Following them were *The Golden Age of the Canadian Cowboy* in 1995; *Tom Three Persons: Legend of an Indian Cowboy*, and *Tribal Honors: A History of the Kainai Chieftainship*, both in 1997; *Indians of the Rocky Mountain Parks* in 1998; *Firewater: Impact of the Whisky Trade on the Blackfoot Nation* in 2002; and *The Vengeful Wife and Other Blackfoot Stories* in 2003. Also, in 1999, Colin Taylor and I collaborated to produce *With Eagle Tail: Arnold Lupson and 30 Years Among the Sarcee, Blackfoot and Stoney Indians on the North American Plains*, published in London, and co-edited the two-volume *The People of the Buffalo: Essays in Honor of John C. Ewers*, published in Germany in 2003–4.

In 2007 I decided to do a book on Maskepetoon, based partly on what I had learned during my legal research. I received a grant to cover my travelling expenses and went to Hobbema, Winnipeg, Victoria, Edmonton, and Seattle to gather material. A lot of new information came to hand and, considering that the chief had been killed by the Blackfoot way back in 1869, there was quite a bit on him. Early on, I was told that Maskepetoon had no descendants, and some even questioned if his band had settled at Hobbema. Yet I soon found that he actually had plenty of descendants and that Samson, head of the Samson band, was his younger brother. It's funny, but years ago I asked Johnny Samson if he knew anything about Maskepetoon and he said he'd never heard of him. Yet he was Maskepetoon's grand-nephew. I think my mistake was in the pronunciation of Maskepetoon. At first I pronounced it the way it looked: "mass-key-petoon," but learned I should have said "mass-kep-a-ton." So Johnny probably never understood what I was asking.

The general belief was that Maskepetoon had gone to Washington, D.C., in 1832 and had met Andrew Jackson, the president of the United States. I even included this in a biography I wrote on Maskepetoon for the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. Then, much to my surprise, I learned that there had been another chief named Maskepetoon. He was leader of the Turtle Mountain Crees in northern North Dakota, and it was he, not our Canadian friend,

who made the journey. When I told this to some of the people at Hobbema, they refused to believe me. I don't blame them, as this story had always been a source of pride to them.

Yet there was much to be proud of in the career of Maskepetoon. His travels, his wisdom, and his leadership made him an outstanding figure in western history. My book, *Maskepetoon: Leader, Warrior, Peacemaker*, was published in 2010.



In retirement, there are many memories that remain with me. Here are some of them.

In 1986, while Lois was still in hospital recovering from her kidney transplant, Wilton Good Striker suggested that we get painted on her behalf. Wilton was a co-leader of the Horn Society. So Pauline, Leah, and I went to the Blood Sun Dance on the appointed day to receive their blessings. In all my years with the Bloods I had never had the courage to enter the sacred Horn Society lodge. Like others, I looked upon the society with reverence and respect.

The Horn Society lodge was in the centre of the camp and consisted of two tepee canvases joined together to provide a large enclosure. When I stepped inside I was filled with awe and wonderment. The lodge was fairly dark, with smoke and incense hanging heavily in the air. Inside we walked along a passageway created by folded tepee covers, poles, and crooks on one side, most of them holding headdresses and other parts of society regalia. On the other side was the wall of the tepee, with medicine bundles lining the route. It was like walking into the past and the atmosphere was so sacred to me that I almost faltered. In the centre of the double tepee was a fire burning in a circular rock fireplace, while next to it was an altar for burning sweetgrass. As we were led along the path we could hear the low buzzing murmurs of prayers being recited by the holy men and women. We passed places where others were being painted until we came to Wallace Mountain Horse, where I was told to kneel.

I said to Wallace that the prayers were for our daughter, and I told him her Blackfoot name, *Natoy'simyaki*, Holy Headdress Woman. He then proceeded to mix red ochre and fat in his palms and using his fingers as a paint brush, he painted my face, two horizontal lines at my eyes and mouth, and then painted both my wrists, all the time praying in Blackfoot for Lois and our family. The prayers I accepted by crossing my arms in front of my chest. When I moved aside, Pauline and Leah went through the same ceremony. Once done, I left

four gifts for Wallace, as was the custom; we then continued to follow the circular path until we reached the entrance. Never, never have I felt such solemn emotion. It was unforgettable.

Another impression, or several impressions, that stayed with me were meetings with elders as they told their stories. Bobtail Chief, Sinew Feet, Shot Both Sides, John Cotton, Jack Low Horn, and a host of others were readily willing to share their stories to me. Speaking in Blackfoot with my father-in-law interpreting, they told of buffalo hunts, wars, the supernatural, the achievements of great chiefs. Commonly the elder sat on his bed, a tin can nearby for a spittoon, and a cane not too far away. His hair in thin braids, his face lined with years of exposure to the prairies, his clothes plain and unadorned, and often with moccasins on his feet, he was a reflection of the past, a reminder of a better life when the buffalo coursed the plains. As he spoke he became quite animated, waving his hands in meaningful gestures, or laughing at some long-ago event. As I sat nearby, dutifully taking notes, I was completely captivated by the scene.

On another occasion I was driving across the Big Lease one night when I stopped the car and turned off the lights. The prairie was in utter darkness. I stepped outside, then lay on my back, and looked up into the cloudless night sky. There above me like a huge canopy were millions of stars, the great constellations, and the moon. I could understand at once why the Blackfoot considered this to be another world inhabited by Sky People. The Pleiades and Ursa Major reminded me of the stories of people who had gone to the sky to live and how the Morning Star sent his wife to earth to carry the ceremonies of the Sun Dance. Looking at the sky that night, I said, how can it not be?

Then there was the excitement of discovery while archivist at Glenbow. There was the unforgettable thrill of going into the basement of a soon-to-be-demolished house in east Calgary and finding a cardboard box containing files of correspondence of Richard Hardisty while he had been chief factor of Fort Edmonton during the 1860s through to the 1880s. Or going to another soon-to-be-demolished building and finding the glass plate negatives of a long-forgotten photographer piled on the rafters in the attic. Or seeing a collection of negatives from another pioneer photographer sitting under a man's bed, and buying them when the wife demanded that her husband get them out of the house. Or finding a William Aberhart campaign poster in the attic of a Fort Macleod building, or an 1883 CPR bill of sale for the Calgary townsite in a Winnipeg vault.

And I will always remember listening with pride while Pauline stood on the stage at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington and gave a solemn prayer in Blackfoot to the memory of John Ewers. Or seeing our children grow and blossom over the years. These were all memorable experiences.

I've always said that during my life I had the luck to be in the right place at the right time. I got into the newspaper business because of a friend I met on the street; I met my future wife and found my future career because I was sent to cover a meeting of the Indian Association of Alberta; I joined Glenbow because earlier I had met an anthropologist who became that institution's first Director; and I retired from Glenbow just before it entered its most dismal downslide. That plus a wonderful wife and family – who could ask for a better life?

