

## 1. Treaty Six and the Reserve

The first time the Canadian Government would learn of Poundmaker was at the signing of Treaty Six in 1876, wherein the government offered the Cree their own land (in the form of reserves) alongside the promise of during famine. Despite the insult of the Canadian government offering land that was not theirs, Poundmaker signed the treaty. Poundmaker, responding to the threat of starvation, was coerced into accepting a 30 square mile reserve in 1876. Starvation would persist and promises of rations were not kept: "famine was felt among the Indians in spite of the allowances distributed by their farm instructors."

## 3. "Disturbed of the news"

Poundmaker, hearing of the news about Duck Lake, sought a meeting with the Battleford Indian Agent Mr. Ray. In this meeting Poundmaker aimed to give his assurances that he was to remain loyal to his treaty promises and that he had nothing to do with the conflict. Unfortunately, this meeting would not occur and Poundmaker's move towards Battleford would be used against him in his coming trial to suggest he had militant intentions.

### "Battleford fears"

In the coming trial the prosecution aimed at connecting Poundmaker's arrival in Battleford with the residents taking refuge within the fort there. However, their fears were born from an entirely separate incident: panic ensued because of the double-murder, undertaken by the "Stony Indians," of farm instructor James Payne and farmer Barney Tremont. These murders were not connected to Poundmaker nor with the settlers' abandonment of Battleford.

At the eventual surrender of the Cut Knife Hill camp, Poundmaker "by accepting the lead for surrender, he exposed himself to being considered... as the great chief of the whole camp." This blame played a large role in the trial of Poundmaker. However, the testimony of Gray Eyes, a member of Poundmaker's Cree, paints a different picture: "[a] chief has no control over anyone when that soldiers' tent is up." The soldiers' lodge, setup after the Battle of Cut Knife Hill, was the main base of support for militant solutions and cooperating with Riel.

## 2. "Indians out of the way"

### "Along came the white man"

What brought Poundmaker to the treaty table was the disappearance of the buffalo. The buffalo was integral to the Cree and their disappearance left many starving.

Sir John A. Macdonald's promise of a country "from sea to shining sea" was the driving force behind Canadian motivations. The construction of a railroad from East to West was the promise which Macdonald aimed to achieve nation building. This railroad prompted the government to sign Treaty Six with the end goal of providing land for immigrant settlers which could be supported by the train. In signing these treaties "[t]he government expected the Indians to die out; that treaties would come to nothing; the reserves would be no more; and the government would have everything for nothing, that was the intention."

### A Métis provisional government

Whilst Canada aimed to establish a nation spanning from East to West the Métis were offered no potential for treaties, serving to disenfranchise their land claim. In response, Louis Riel declared a provisional government and "a war of extermination against all those who have shown themselves hostile to our rights." The Canadian Government would have a taste of this promise at Duck Lake on 26 March 1885 beginning the "Métis Uprising": at Duck Lake a small detachment of NWMP was routed by Métis troops. Shortly after a larger NWMP force was subsequently held back by Métis troops. Once the Métis Uprising began, the next move for Riel was to look for allies against the colonizing Canadian Government.

## 4. "Held the warriors back"

After finding Battleford emptied, Poundmaker established a camp on reserve land. This camp would eventually end up on Cut Knife Hill, fearing retribution and blame for the Riel Uprising and Battleford evacuation. Soon the camp would attract many who sought a leader. The camp swelled to over 1000 people, causing the establishment of a soldiers' lodge and concern over potential hostility. Meanwhile, Colonel William Otter, under the orders of the Canadian government, was moving a force of police and militiamen into Battleford, soon setting his sights on the Cut Knife Hill camp to bolster his career. On 2 May, before sunrise, Otter attempted an ambush on the camp. The defense spearheaded was a success after seven hours of fighting, and in the end "Poundmaker held the warriors back" despite the opportunity to counter in Otter's retreat. Poundmaker sought to defend rather than route the Canadian forces.

### "A soldiers' lodge"

## 5 “Would not be held back for long”

The warriors, after establishing a soldiers’ lodge, sought to join Riel at Batoche. However, they never made it far from the Battleford area. Poundmaker was trying to stop the warriors: “according to Cree historians it should have taken the camp no more than a week to reach Riel, but ten days later they were still in the Battleford vicinity. Poundmaker’s lack of cooperation was slowing things down.” Poundmaker attempted, on three separate occasions, to take the camp to Devil’s Lake to avoid association with Riel. Devil’s Lake was in the opposite direction to Batoche, and yet the prosecution in the coming trial implicated Poundmaker in the Cut Knife Hill camp for their slow moves toward Batoche.

### Surrender

After the Battle of Batoche, lasting four days and ending in the defeat of Riel, Metis activists left Poundmaker’s camp. Poundmaker, left now with the primary voice of the camp, led by example in surrender. He marched into Battleford and surrendered there.

## 6 “A morality play”

The trial, taking place in Regina in a makeshift courtroom on 17 August 1885, was a quickly assembled affair which aimed to save the Canadian Government from scrutiny. The Government, after the Riel Uprising, was dealing with “debate over the government’s alleged culpability in letting the situation in the Northwest reach a boiling point” and, as such, required a scapegoat. For the Canadian Government “there was a brand-new country to settle” and settler outrage boiling over: “let all Indians understand that if one white man is killed, ten Indians will suffer for it.” Thus, Poundmaker’s trial was rigged from the beginning. The defense, marshalled by attorney Beverley Robertson, was given little time or resources whilst Poundmaker himself could only speak Cree. Moreover, Robertson was responsible for defending more than 100 Metis and Indigenous people in the trials alone.

“There was a letter” The prosecution’s case rested primarily on the testimony of Robert Jefferson, the farm instructor on Poundmaker’s reserve. He was present in the Cut Knife Hill camp, and he was used against Poundmaker in exchange for his own immunity. Jefferson’s testimony itself relied on one key piece of evidence which dealt Poundmaker his guilty verdict. The letter was sent from Riel to Poundmaker’s camp on Cut Knife Hill, advising that he loot Battleford and join forces at Batoche; the letter was signed, allegedly, by Jefferson on behalf of Poundmaker.

“Because I wanted peace” With a Canadian Government and public devoted to finding a guilty verdict alongside questionable key witnesses and evidence, the jury delivered a guilty verdict to Poundmaker. Poundmaker was committed to three years in the Manitoba penitentiary, to which Poundmaker responded that he would rather be hanged immediately than spend time in the penitentiary. Regardless, Poundmaker was held in the Manitoba Penitentiary for eight months until he contracted a deadly illness, most likely tuberculosis, and “rather than face the embarrassment of having him die in prison, the government released him eight months into his sentence.”

## 7 “New way of thinking”

After his release Poundmaker spent his remaining days gathering support for just treatment of his people, going as far as to travel “200 miles on foot to Blackfoot country.” The film advocates for the exoneration of Poundmaker: “its not even enough that he be pardoned...[,] the conviction should be overturned.” This was finally accomplished in 2019 under the Trudeau Government, however the film has much more to offer than just the suggestion to exonerate Poundmaker. Serving as a reminder, Poundmaker’s dedication to peace and his treaty agreements should stand to reorient contemporary thinking towards understanding the Cree and other Indigenous nations as “not subjects of the Crown, but partners in the treaty process.” Further, the final excerpt from Poundmaker offers that “you must fight yourselves in this new way of thinking. That we are less than they are, because it is not true.” The Canadian Government in Poundmaker’s trial, the extermination of the buffalo, and the intentionally forgotten promises made during the treaty process sought to “have everything for nothing.” The exoneration of Poundmaker is only the beginning in an extended process of reconciliation and reconsidering of a fraught history.

### Sources Used:

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