

Aboriginal Neighbours

A settler from Ontario in the early 1880's could be forgiven for arriving in this new land with a bit of apprehension regarding the Aboriginal People who called the region home. Those settlers, in most cases, were not well informed about the process by which this huge territory had, quite suddenly, become Canadian territory. The Canadian West had largely escaped the decades of highly publicized "Indian Wars" that had taken place south of our borders, not far from Southern Manitoba. But settlers were well aware of those battles. There were lots of stories about Indian raids on settlers, but not so many about the massacres perpetrated by the US Army. So, given the way those "Indian Wars" were reported, the new settlers couldn't help but have a very negative view of the people who were, in fact, the former "owners" of their new homesteads.

Knowing that, it is rewarding to read through the many first-person accounts of the relationships between settlers and Aboriginal people. To be sure there are plenty of hints of a subtle and not so subtle racism, but there is also lots of evidence of goodwill and understanding. We present here just a few representative recollections from family histories.

There were many Indians around at that time and the younger boys would often spend time with them, learning many Indian customs. They hunted wild animals and fowl and learned to cook the food over the coals of camp fires Indian fashion. The Indians were always moving They never did any harm but often startled the settler's wife by popping up very quietly on her doorstep, ask for something they wanted and when given them went away peacefully. Indians were well liked by the settlers and in turn the Indians liked the people. (Fox)

... sometimes Indians passed, but they were friendly and Mother used to give them home-baked bread and once a fruit cake. She gave them a large pitcher of milk when they had a sick boy with them. The Indians insisted that they have some of their food out a big pot, and after they had eaten Father made the mistake of asking what was in it - and when heard that it consisted of badger and black snake, Mother was sick. (McCool)

Over on Uncle's quarter there was a huge buffalo stone, a deep hollow worn round it where the buffalo had walked in to rub themselves. Near it, every spring grew masses of prairie crocus. There grew, also, a quantity of Seneca root. Mother told of her fright, when, soon after she came to the farm some Indians came to the door asking permission to pick the root. They wanted it to sell for its

medicinal qualities. Permission was given, and they returned for several years to gather Seneca. They asked to buy bread, and Mother baked and sold it to them. (Priestley)

“During those troublesome times on the prairies (1885 and The Metis Resistance in Saskatchewan), the relation with the Indians was of prime importance. Robert Church and his family did not fear the Indian, but preferred to make friend of them. In 1885 when every settler was given a rifle and a hundred rounds of ammunition, with which to protect his home, Robert Church refused to accept the rifle. The fact that he trusted the Indian seemed to have a sobering effect on them. The Indian said, “No gun” meant a friend, a “gun” meant an enemy. The Church home was often a halfway house for many an Indian who soon learned that food and rest could be obtained there. At no time did any Indian ever betray that trust.