

Fort Carlton, Treaty Six Territory. August 21, 2026 by Mervin Weiss.

I had visited Fort Carlton twice previously, the last time ten years ago with our two older grandchildren. On both visits, we had the fort basically to ourselves, free to wander and explore the various buildings, enjoying the total attention of the guides. Treaty Six was signed here 23 August 1876, one hundred and fifty years ago. I tried to imagine the camp of two thousand Cree and other buffalo hunters of the plains who had camped here outside of the fort during the week of negotiations and consultations. I could hear the children laughing as they ran around the teepees, being chased playfully by the dogs. I could smell the campfires and the food simmering over those fires, barely disguising the smell of the many horses that must have been present.

Today, I did not have to imagine the numbers of peoples at the fort. It was the start of the 150th anniversary celebrations of the signing of Treaty Six at Fort Carlton. We arrived shortly after 11:00 am and already the parking lot was filling up quickly, and my guess would be at least 1000 people already in attendance. Soon my ears picked up people speaking a foreign language, but it was only foreign to my ears, certainly not foreign to this land where the Cree language has been spoken for hundreds of years.

By 1876, the hunters and trappers of the plains had been dealing with European fur-traders for over one hundred years. They soon learned to rely on the rifles, steel knives, pots and pans for which they could barter with their fur pelts. The first fur trade post on the territory which would later be covered by Treaty Six was established by the Hudson's Bay Company at Cumberland House in September 1774. Situated on the Saskatchewan River delta, it is the oldest permanent European settlement in Saskatchewan. Dozens of fur-trading posts quickly spread across the west in the drive to satisfy the European market for furs. Major posts were established at Rocky Mountain House (North West Company), as well as Fort Carlton (early 1800s), Fort Pitt (1829) and Edmonton House. Other significant trading posts were located at Battleford, Duck Lake, and Green Lake.

By 1876, the people native to the land understood that the world around them was changing fast. Their traditional way-of-life was under threat. After Canada purchased Rupert's Land from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1870, the

government sought formal agreements with the peoples indigenous to the territory in order to legitimize control and ownership. In particular, the Crown (aka. the federal government) needed political stability to provide peaceful access for surveyors, telegraph crews and future settlers.

The Cree, Assiniboine and Ojibwe peoples did not really understand the concept of anyone “owning” the land, but they were alarmed at the prospect of soon being overwhelmed by the arrival of European settlers. They were equally dismayed by the disappearance of the roaming buffalo herds. The negotiations which led to Treaty Six actually began with the insistence of the people who had inhabited the land long before recorded history, that their rights be defined and protected before settlers arrived. Their fears of starvation and disease (certainly justified) led to their demands for guarantees of food and health security. In this respect, Treaty Six was unique because it stemmed from indigenous pressure on the government of the day to manage the unfolding crisis of the buffalo herd disappearance, a growing Metis presence and westward expansion of European presence (ie. surveyors and the telegraph).

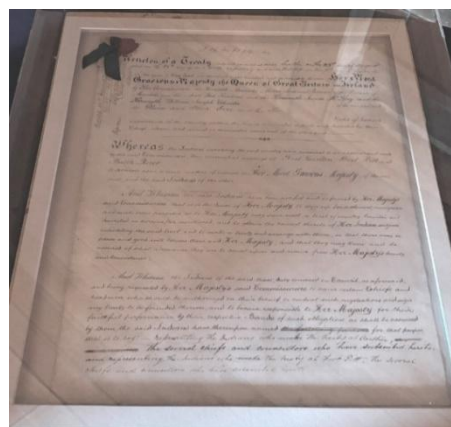
Treaty Six was unique therefore in the negotiation of guarantees not present in the earlier numbered treaties – the medicine chest clause, the famine and pestilence relief clauses, the provision of agricultural tools and assistance, as well as on-reserve education. In short, the indigenous people wanted concrete protections from the government as their traditional lifestyle was collapsing.

And so negotiations began in earnest at Fort Carlton in mid-August 1876. Alexander Morris, Lieutenant-Governor of the North-West Territories (the re-named Rupert’s Land) legally represented Queen Victoria of England, but worked under the dictates of Prime Minister Alexander Mackenzie’s Liberal government in Ottawa. Bowing to pressures from the Cree negotiators, Mackenzie often felt he was over-stepping the bounds set for him by the Prime Minister, and worried about personal repercussions. Representing the hunters and trappers of the plains in the negotiation process were Chiefs Ahtahkakoop and Mistawasis. Other chiefs like James Smith and Red Pheasant, as well as headmen and councillors provided input for the negotiators. One can imagine the constant councils and meetings on the sidelines in the Cree camp. Chiefs Little Pine, Lucky Man and Sweet Grass negotiated and signed later at Fort Pitt. Prominent Chief Big Bear

refused to sign. Of course, the chiefs were illiterate and only “touched the pen” as the clerk made an “x” for them on the document itself.

Throughout the process, Peter Erasmus acted as the prime translator and interpreter for the Crown, as well as for Chiefs Ahtahkakoop and Mistawasis. Erasmus was a Metis farmer, teacher and missionary who was born in the Red River settlement in Manitoba. He was living at Whitefish Lake (today Big River First Nations Reserve) in 1876 when he was approached by Ahtahkakoop and Mistawasis to be their translator and interpreter at Fort Carlton. Erasmus also accompanied the Crown’s party to Fort Pitt, but Father Albert Lacombe acted as the main interpreter during these negotiations. Lieutenant-Governor Morris felt that Lacombe would have more influence with the local chiefs than Erasmus.¹

The Treaty Six document itself consists of 12 parchment paper sheets, which have been carefully restored by experts at Library and Archives Canada. The twelve sheets were on display (under glass of course, and in subdued light) in one of the fort’s buildings at the 150th anniversary celebrations at Fort Carlton. There was a steady line-up of people waiting to enter the room. A guide pointed out where certain clauses were inserted later, after the recording clerk had already written out the initial negotiated terms, at the insistence of the Chiefs, a testament to the tenacity of Ahtahkakoop and Mistawais in looking after the best interests of their people. These inserted clauses are clearly evident because a different pen was used, and the writing is smaller to accommodate the smaller space.



(Author’s photo of page one of the Treaty Six document)

¹ Peter Erasmus was fluent in six Native languages as well as English, Latin and Greek. His book *Buffalo Days and Nights*, written when he was 87 years old, contains his reminiscences of the Treaty Six negotiations,

Altogether Treaty Six territory would incorporate 121,000 square miles or 310,00 square kilometres, stretching across central Saskatchewan and Alberta from the Manitoba border to the British Columbia border. There were no censuses at the time, but it is estimated that “several thousand” Cree, Assiniboine and Ojibwe people were living in the territory in 1876.² Similarly, best estimates place the number of Metis in Treaty Six territory at a “few thousand”. The European population (Hudson’s Bay employees, missionaries, North-West Mounted Police, telegraph and survey workers) would have been limited to a “few hundred”. Today, forty-nine First Nations reserves are located within Treaty Six territory.³

The significance of Treaty Six today.

Although many tragedies and injustices have shaped its history, Treaty Six continues in effect today as a legal document which guides Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples regarding education, land agreements, economic developments and reconciliation efforts across Saskatchewan.⁴

“for as long as the sun shines, the grass grows and the rivers flow” — These oft-repeated poetic words do not appear in the treaty document itself, but this phrase was used during oral negotiations, and repeated by the Treaty Commissioner (Alexander Morris), the Cree leaders, and by Peter Erasmus. For the Cree people in 1876, these words were central to their oral understanding of the intent of Treaty Six.

For sources, contact the writer.

² This estimate is based on the surviving lists of annual treaty payments made in the years following 1876.

³ My souvenir tee-shirt lists 51 First Nations on the back.

⁴ Saskatchewan became the first province in Canada to mandate treaty education from Kindergarten to Grade Twelve (2008).