



A bull moose being brought down with stone-tipped arrows.

Chapter I

Split Lake Cree Early History

Pre-Contact

AT THE TIME of the first contact with Europeans, the Cree occupied the boreal forest region of northern Canada from present day northern Quebec into Saskatchewan and Alberta in the Lake Athabaska area. There is reliable, archaeological evidence that there were Cree in what is now northern Manitoba more than 1,200 years ago, a presence which has continued through to this day.

The forefathers of Split Lake Cree were hunters and gatherers who lived off the rich resources of the lands and waters. Their way of life centred around the lakes and rivers where wildlife and plant resources could be harvested. Fish were a particularly important source of food and were abundant. Northern

Cree harvested fish with nets made from willow and birch roots. Moose and caribou were also valuable as they provided large quantities of meat, their hides could be used for clothing and shelter, and their bones fashioned for tools. The illustration above shows a bull moose being brought down with stone-tipped arrows. Beaver, muskrat, geese, ducks, bear, porcupine and hare were also important sources of food. Caribou was a staple. The ancestors of Split Lake Cree developed a rich array of tools and technologies to harvest these resources. They also developed a system of beliefs and customs to conduct their lives.³

The Cree were a water people. Living along the shores of the lakes and rivers, they hunted and fished, and gathered herbs and berries from along the shoreline. The lakes and rivers were the roads by which they travelled. The waters, the shorelines, the shallows, the marshes, the riverbanks and willow thickets supported the fish, plants and animals that fed and sheltered them. The hundreds of miles of shoreline along Split Lake and the banks of the Nelson River, and the rivers and creeks running into them, provided the Cree with their sustenance. Centuries of occupation and use of the lands and waters enabled the identification and selection of the most useful and fruitful areas for residence and harvesting, in keeping with the rhythms of the seasons. Prior to contact with the white man, Cree people were living in and around Split Lake – which in Cree is called *Tataskweyak*, meaning ‘the place of tall trees’ – and throughout the whole Split Lake resource area, as they had undoubtedly done since time immemorial.

It is reasonable to assume that many of the so-called ‘Home Guard Cree’ who lived around York Factory until the late 1800s, and who then came to live at Split Lake, were descendants of the Cree who had lived in the Split Lake area for centuries. It can also be assumed that both before and after Hudson’s Bay Company forts were built at York Factory and Churchill, many Cree continued to use the traditional area of the Split Lake Cree. Because of its extraordinary richness in all that was central to the traditional way of life, Split Lake itself was a central gathering spot for the scattered hunting clans of Split Lake Cree in the pre-contact era.



Lay reader Chief William Keche-kesik preparing a sermon before church. Early 1900s.

Early Settlements

Early contact with Europeans had been made by the 1650s when the French arrived and encountered the Cree settled around Hudson Bay. In 1668, Radisson and Groseilliers sailed to James Bay and conducted trade with them.

In 1670, the Hudson’s Bay Company was granted a Royal Charter over the vast territory of Rupert’s Land, including what is now northern Manitoba. The Royal Charter gave the company sovereign ownership of the land, with enormous powers of local government including the right to

appoint governors and make laws, as well as the authority to conduct trade and commerce, including, of course, the fur trade. However, no powers were given to interfere with the Aboriginal way of life, except as needed to protect forts and factories, and to maintain peaceful trade.

While there is scholarly disagreement about the effects of the fur trade on Aboriginal life, it seems that indigenous land use and traditions continued substantially independent of the demands of the fur trade. A large measure of autonomy was maintained until the mid to late 19th century when



*Split Lake and Nelson House York boat brigade leaving Norway House.
 – Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Provincial Archives of Manitoba*

government and religious institutions began exerting their influence. Rather than establishing the dominance of one culture over another, the fur trade relationship has been characterized as one of interdependence, carried out for the mutual benefit of both the Aboriginal people and the fur merchants. The Cree acted as middlemen between Aboriginal fur gatherers to the south, west and east, and Hudson's Bay Company representatives. As a result they were able to exert control over other tribes and to expand their range. In addition, as the Elders point out, the materials and equipment obtained by the fur trade with the company, contributed to a better life for the people within their traditional lifestyle.

The first permanent Hudson's Bay Company trading post in what is now Manitoba was established at York Factory in 1684 at the outlet of the Hayes River on the western shore of Hudson Bay, approximately 240 kilometres northeast of Split Lake. It was the most important source of European trade goods for the Aboriginal people in the central and southern areas of the region. In 1717, the company established Fort Prince of Wales trading post at Churchill. However, the furs traded there were never half as many as those at York Factory. After its destruction by the French in 1782 and subsequent re-establishment, Fort Prince of Wales lost much of its significance to the Cree. Other smaller trading posts or supply depots in the vicinity appear to have included Flamborough Head and Seal Island slightly southwest of

York Factory, and Paint Lake, Chatham and Sipiwesk Lake Houses in the upstream area of Split Lake.

The Cree who took up residence around the York Factory trading post were known to the traders as the 'Home Guard Cree'. It is important to note, however, that this term is not how the Cree saw or described themselves. The Cree word for the Cree people is *Ininewuk* (plural) or *Ininew* (singular), and that is how the Split Lake Cree have always described themselves whether at York Factory or at Split Lake.



*Split Lake mission and trading post, on the shore of Split Lake due north of the peninsula. Early 1900s.
– Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Provincial Archives of Manitoba*

The Cree people were instrumental in the York Factory post's operation, providing meat for Hudson's Bay Company workers, haying, rafting wood, loading and unloading ships, and transporting goods and furs between York Factory and Norway House, 500 kilometres to the southwest. These Cree were some of the ancestors of present members of the Split Lake, York Factory, War Lake and Fox Lake First Nations, all of whom reside within the general boundaries of the Split Lake Cree traditional resource area.⁴

It is almost certain that neither the 'Home Guard Cree' nor their forefathers originated at York Factory, but came to live there from different locations over a number of years. Many of these people may have originated from the Split Lake, Fox Lake, and War Lake areas and other places in the interior. York Factory was like a boom town to which some Cree people had migrated. Their presence at York Factory was a mutually beneficial arrangement with the Hudson's Bay Company.⁵

Community Establishment

In response to increased competition from the Northwest Company, the Hudson's Bay Company established a post on Split Lake in 1790. While the post was located on the Nelson River route to York Factory, the Hayes River was the main travel route to York Factory used by the Cree. Therefore, the post's utility depended upon the use made of both routes. As a result, the fortunes of the post at Split Lake, Split Lake House, fluctuated, but it remained in operation off and on for almost 100 years.



Confirmation class at Split Lake with Reverend A. Dewdney. Anglican Church and bell tower are also shown. Before 1929.

A new post was established in 1886 to meet the requirements of Norway House and Cross Lake Cree who hunted in the area. It was located at the north end of Split Lake near the outlet, close to the mouth of the Assen River. This new trading post, located within the traditional summer gathering area of the Split Lake Cree, facilitated the establishment of a more permanent community at Split Lake, as well as encouraging an influx of 'Home Guard Cree' from York Factory during the 1880s. These latter were suffering from a scarcity of caribou and game in that area and could no longer depend upon assistance from the declining York Factory trading post.

When the many families of York Factory Cree settled at Split Lake in the late 1800s, it was necessary for them to re-establish themselves within the resource area which provided them with a year-round source of fish and was a good place to hunt caribou and moose. Another reason for the York Factory Cree settling at Split Lake was that it was easier to reach from Norway House than from York Factory. After York Factory became redundant, material, equipment and food stuffs, that used to come from York Factory, began to be shipped north by steamboat on Lake Winnipeg to Norway House. Norway House then became the transportation hub for much of the north.

The Split Lake Cree faced some very challenging times in the transition from having a close relationship with York Factory, when it was the port for the Hudson's Bay Company in Rupert's Land, to living at Split Lake near a small outpost of the company. The changes resulted from the growth of Canada westward as a nation and other forces over which the Split Lake Cree had no control. However, these were changes with which they could cope, as they had with the many other changes experienced over their centuries of life in the area. It meant re-affirming their linkage, and turning inward, to primary reliance again on the Split Lake resource area. Their relationship continued to the land and waters which had always existed for them, since long before the coming of the white man.

In 1896, Anglican Archdeacon J. Lofthouse visited Split Lake which had no church, no school and no resident missionary. At that time, he estimated that there were 75 families living all around Split Lake, 45 of whom were from York Factory or Churchill. These figures would suggest that the 30 families who were not from York Factory or Churchill were indigenous to the Split Lake area. As well, other family groups were then inhabiting the further northern reaches of the vast permanent tribal homeland.

In 1897, native catechist Joseph Keche-kesik arrived in the community and stayed for two years. Together with missionary Lofthouse, he built a log school house. The Reverend Charles Fox came to Split Lake in 1898 and ministered to the community until 1916. He spearheaded the construction of the first Anglican church and mission house in Split Lake in 1906.⁶

Joseph Keche-kesik, must have been an extraordinary servant of the Lord for, by working with the Reverends Lofthouse and Fox, he was able to help establish the Anglican Church in Split Lake in such a way that had real meaning for the Split Lake Cree. Reverend Charles Fox learned Cree, and how to travel by dogteam from camp to camp during the winter months. The Elders say that he was taught to do these things by the Split Lake Cree.

It is a tribute to these early Christians, both Indian and white, that they were able to establish such a strong Christian presence at Split Lake, a presence which exists up to the present time. It is not clear whether or not some or all of the Cree who had moved from York Factory were already Christians.



Arecha and Chief William Keche-kesik at treaty signing ceremony in early 1900s .

Treaty 5 Adhesion

In the late 19TH and early 20TH century, the Canadian government was looking to the north in order to develop and exploit its resource potential. The government, therefore, believed it necessary to extinguish Indian title to the land, in the same manner it had in other parts of Canada. The vast area of Rupert's Land controlled by the Hudson's Bay Company was transferred to Canada in 1869. This helped to foster the negotiation of treaties in order to pave the way for white settlement and development.⁷

In 1875, Treaty 5 was signed between representatives of Canada and the Saukteaux and Cree tribes of central-eastern Manitoba. In exchange for ceding title to their traditional lands, the First Nation signatories were promised reserve lands based on 100 to 160 acres for each family of five, gifts and annuities, ammunition and nets, agricultural implements, and maintenance of on-reserve schools. The right to hunt and fish was also promised but, in the words of the treaty, was subject to government regulation and to those surrendered lands required for settlement and development.



Early Split Lake settlement in 1925 showing Hudson's Bay Company buildings and residences.

By the early 20TH century, Split Lake Cree First Nation, with the assistance of Anglican Church representatives including the Reverend Charles Fox, had communicated its desire to make treaty. The federal government prepared to sign treaty adhesions with several northern Manitoba Cree First Nations. Federal agents knew that the Split Lake Cree made their living entirely by trapping, hunting and fishing, and as boatmen for the Hudson's Bay Company, freighting goods down the Hayes River to Norway House. Their harvesting area was described in 1907 as follows:

The population [of the First Nation] is about 250... Their hunting grounds may be described:

(1) Draw a line from the point where the Little Churchill River junctions with the larger Churchill south westward to the Wintering Lake.

(2) Draw a line from Wintering Lake northeastward to Fox Lake including all the Lake.

(3) Draw a line from Fox Lake northward to the junction of the two Churchill Rivers, the point of starting.⁸

Apart from their desire to preserve their traditional way of life, Split Lake Cree were particularly concerned about protecting their fishing activities. Next to Split Lake itself, the most important site for this was Waskauiowaka Lake located at the head waters of the Little Churchill River. The First Nation was starting to become alarmed by the potential infiltration of southern fishing companies, which had crept up to the southern boundary of the Treaty 5 area and were killing off sturgeon, a traditional country food.

In 1908, representatives of Split Lake Cree – William Keche-kesik, Charles Morris and Albert Spence –

signed an Adhesion to Treaty 5, relinquishing title to 133,000 square miles of traditional lands in exchange for the benefits of Treaty 5, which included hunting and fishing rights. A gratuity of \$5.00 per person was also paid. This surrender covered all of the area included in the current Split Lake Resource Management Area. Joseph Keche-kesik was elected at this time as the first Chief of Split Lake Cree First Nation although he is not explicitly mentioned as such in the treaty.

The Split Lake Cree felt strongly that by signing the treaty with the Crown, they were asserting, affirming and guaranteeing their relationship to their permanent tribal homeland. The Cree did not view their relationship with the land and natural resources as a right, as the white man interprets a right. Rather, they saw it as a reciprocal relationship in which respect and responsibility flow both ways. Their hope and belief that they could preserve this relationship with their land, waters and resources, was the main motivating factor which induced them to sign the treaty. They knew that their brothers to the south at Cross Lake and Norway House had signed Treaty 5 with the Queen, who had promised them protection and the right to hunt and fish and trap in their tribal homeland as long as “the sun shines and the rivers flow”.

The testimony of the Elders reflects the view that the Split Lake Cree had of their way of life and its relationship to the land and waters and the resources that flow from them. The Elders described a way of life that was a continuation of a way of life that had sustained them for centuries, in which they fished, hunted, and trapped, and gathered berries, roots, and herbs from the land. The Split Lake Cree as a group had established themselves in a vast area of land where family groups utilized particular areas. This, however, was not done by any strict type of regulation or enforcement. Their right to hunt in a particular area was determined by consensus and mutual respect. There were instances where people would venture into another area but this was the exception rather than the rule.

At the time of the first survey of the reserve in 1913, the population was 326, entitling the Split Lake Cree First Nation to 10,432 acres. In fact, the amount of reserve land surveyed exceeded this, as indicated below:

<i>Reserve 171 Split Lake</i>	<i>3,608 acres</i>
<i>Reserve 171A Split Lake</i>	<i>7,390 acres</i>
<i>Reserve 171B Split Lake</i>	<i>335 acres</i>
<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>11,333 acres</i>

The legal creation of these reserves was only confirmed by federal Order-In-Council OC/PC 1958-1062, dated July 31, 1959. This would not be the last time that the reliance of Split Lake Cree on the good faith of the Crown, to act promptly and in accordance with its promises, would prove to be unwarranted. It is beyond the scope of the present study to determine to what extent the belated action by Canada to deal with the ‘legal niceties’ respecting the creation of the reserves, was related to the Kelsey Hydro development that was taking place at the same time.