

# CHIEF PEYASIW-AWASIS'S DAY SCHOOL: A STORY OF RESISTANCE



Chief Peyasiw-awasis (Thunderchild), ca. 1910 - 1919, Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan//R-A-17725

In 1876, Chief Peyasiw-awasis (Thunderchild/Kapitikow, 1849 - 1927), joined Mistahimaskwa (Big Bear) with a number of other chiefs who rejected Treaty 6.<sup>1</sup> However, in 1879, "after a winter of desperation"<sup>2</sup> without buffalo for sustenance, Chief Peyasiw-awasis' headmen signed an adhesion to Treaty 6. Peyasiw-awasis was revered as one of the most knowledgeable storytellers on the plains, and as a warrior and hunter.<sup>3</sup> Edward Ahenakew recorded his stories in 1923 while he was recovering from a nervous breakdown following three years of medical school. His notes were published posthumously in 1974 in *Voices of the Plains Cree*.

Chief Peyasiw-awasis, by not participating in the North-West Resistance, and thereby having more sway with the government, was chosen by his people to negotiate permission to hold a Sun Dance. The annually held Sun Dance had been forbidden after the North-West Resistance. Peyasiw-awasis found his opportunity to make the request while in a meeting with the Indian Agent, who wanted him to purchase a stallion. Peyasiw-awasis negotiated for the Sun Dance: If the Agent would give permission for the Sun Dance, Peyasiw-awasis, would purchase the

stallion. Being certain that no religious official would approve of the Sun Dance, and wanting to end the discussion, the agent agreed to allow the Sun Dance if Peyasiw-awasis had permission from the clergymen. The next day, Peyasiw-awasis showed up with letters from both clergymen denying that they disapproved of anything in the dance.<sup>4</sup>

In 1897, Peyasiw-awasis, with four other Cree men, were jailed at Battleford for participating in a give-away dance (Mahtah-e-to-win).<sup>5</sup> Many years later, Peyasiw-awasis spoke of this injustice: "*It is heartrending. [...] Can things go well in a land where freedom of worship is a lie, a hollow boast? To each nation is given the light by which it knows God and each finds its own way to express the longing to serve Him. It is astounding to me that a man should be stopped from trying in his own way to express his need or his thankfulness to God...*"<sup>6</sup> In early 1900s, Peyasiw-awasis, along with others such as O-ka-nu, Charles Fineday, Joe Ma-ma-gway-see, Chief Red Dog, Blackbird, Chief Ermineskin, Chief Matoose, Chief Day Walker, demanded First Nations rights to freedom to participate in traditional cultural practices. In 1921, the League of Indians of Canada held an important conference at Thunderchild Reserve to discuss the promotion of Aboriginal religious freedom and the best means of educating children.<sup>7</sup>

"Thunderchild's Band originally was located on good farmland west of Battleford in what is now Saskatchewan. To make the land available to Euro-Canadian settlers, early in the 20th century, the federal government began to pressure the band to agree to relocate. The pressure created divisions in the band, which eventually agreed to be relocated to Brightsand Lake, Saskatchewan, in 1909. This relocation left the band without a day school."<sup>8</sup>

Chief Peyasiw-awasis was against having a Roman Catholic school on his reserve,

(though Bishop Vital Grandin believed he was a minority, and that the majority on the Reserve were Catholics)<sup>9</sup> and eventually led a movement to tear the school down. He had negotiated for one school and one missionary in the treaty. He was not against having a school, but he wanted it to be within First Nations control. However, under government pressure, he allowed the Catholics to re-establish the school.<sup>10</sup>

"In 1910, Chief Peyasiw-awasis requested that the government live up to its Treaty obligations and build a school on the reserve. Thirteen years later, there was still no school. This led him to write a lengthy letter to Deputy Minister Duncan Campbell Scott:

*My people find it very hard to part with their children to have them go to school. It is not that they do not desire to have them educated but they are not favourable to Boarding Schools and I must give you their reasons so that you do not think this is some idle fancy. I am not going to touch on the side of sentiment, that part of it you will readily understand, knowing the Indian as you do. A spruce tree taken while young from a low lying moist soil when transplanted into light soil dies in most cases. If it lives, it will be but short and stunted, where it would have been tall and straight had it been left in its natural soil. It will be like this despite the greatest of care. It is not because it has no capacity for growth, it is because it is taken out of its natural environment where it would have done well. I have no education but my hairs are grey. I have seen and observed life. I have learnt the ways of nature and I see that the Boarding Schools and their effect on our young can be explained by this parable. The system is not natural, it seems artificial and the fruit of it, so far as I can see it in my Reserve and elsewhere has been very poor. Many a pupil has come home to die, being in the last stages of consumption. The strict discipline, the changes of environment, the close confinement, the different food, has lessened the vitality of our young and made them susceptible to the germs of tuberculosis with which the Buildings are always in time saturated. I learned this from the Boarding School that was in Battleford when it was taken over by the Seventh Day Adventists*

<sup>4</sup> Jefferson, R. (1929). *Fifty Years on the Saskatchewan*, pp. 40 - 41

<sup>5</sup> Backhouse, C. (1999). *Colour-Coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada, 1900-1950*,

<sup>6</sup> Backhouse, C. (1999). *Colour-Coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada, 1900-1950*,

<sup>7</sup> Huel, R. J. A. (1996). *Proclaiming the Gospel to the Indians and the Métis*, (p. 220). Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta Press; McHugh, R. (2003). *First Nations and Métis Milestones*. Western Development Museum/Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre, p.

<sup>8</sup> "One delegate at the conference, John Tootoosis Sr, would later become very much involved with the Indian political process including the eventual formation of the League of Indians of Western Canada (LIWC)."

<sup>9</sup> The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 178

<sup>9</sup> Huel, R. J. A. (1996). *Proclaiming the Gospel to the Indians and the Métis*, (p. 183). Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta Press.

<sup>10</sup> Backhouse, C. (1999). *Colour-Coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada, 1900-1950*, (p. 89). Osgoode Society for Canadian Legal History. .

<sup>1</sup> The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 178. (Supplementary reading)

<sup>2</sup> Ahenakew, E. (1974 posthumous). *Voices of the Plains Cree*, p. 2

<sup>3</sup> Backhouse, C. (1999). *Colour-Coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada, 1900-1950*, (Note 49). Osgoode Society for Canadian Legal History



Chiefs' conference at Thunderchild Reserve, ca. 1922, Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan/R-A10196 (Rev. Edward Ahenakew sitting in front)



"Indian children in front of log school at Thunderchild Reserve," n.d., Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan/R-A7674 (1)-(2)

they were obliged to pull down almost the whole building because in order to insure against infection from the germs that had played havoc among the Indian children. From the Indian point of view that school, although in very capable and trustworthy hands was a long history of sorrow because of the disease in it. Then we found that the continual supervision in everyday work meant the killing of all initiative in the pupils. They came back with good records, knowing English well and other things taught to them but they were neither white men nor Indians. They don't seem to know how to make the start. They had lost the ordinary Indian mode of livelihood and were unable to do as the white man did. They were victims of their educational opportunity. The sense of ownership and the desire to increase what is owned is a thing that should be developed in childhood stage. All this is lost to the child in the Boarding School while there he works at cows, horses, cleans rooms, plows and helps in harvest but he feels that he is getting nothing in return. I myself know he is actually working for himself, but he does not see it that way. He has no chance therefore to couple work with its reward. This teaches

him to look upon work as a drudgery and in many cases this idea pervades through life."<sup>11</sup>

He wrote to persuade Scott that a day school on the reserve would allow parents to "have the children in our care which is natural." They would learn both worlds: "to read and write at school, and learn from their parents 'the way of rustling around for a living.' Living among their own belongings would teach them to care for them. If boys, for example, had their own cows or horses, they would 'develop a sense of ownership and that means a great deal.' As well, [Peyasiw-awasis] wrote, the student would be 'growing up and developing in his own natural elements.'"<sup>12</sup>

Peyasiw-awasis reminded Scott that he was one of "the last of the old chiefs who took part in the first treaty. To me there personally was promised a school in my Reserve if I and my people desired it. Having this Treaty promised fulfilled would 'give to my grand children at least one heritage which would be of real

and lasting value to them and my one remaining and consuming ambition. If I can do this item I can leave the world in peace."<sup>13</sup>

However, Peyasiw-awasis's arguments did not persuade Duncan Campbell Scott. So Peyasiw-awasis (Thunderchild) "built the school with his own band's funds, essentially shaming the government into paying for the teacher."<sup>14</sup>



"Crowd in front of school on Thunderchild Reserve..." ca. 1937, Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan/R-A7677

<sup>11</sup> The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, pp. 178-179  
<sup>12</sup> The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 179

<sup>13</sup> The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 180  
<sup>14</sup> The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 180