

Through the entire winter, of 1877-78, across the Canadian and US Prairies, there was virtually no snow. Not only was it a black winter, it was also very warm. It remains the warmest winter on record. The roads were reportedly a mess from rain. And sleighs were no use at all.

Farmers kept working their fields throughout the month of December as it felt more like Spring. There were even mosquitoes! Some residents held a Christmas tea party on the frozen river, with tent, and buffalo robes and a stove to take off the evening chill.

Humans were not, though, all joyous and bright through that peculiar weather. Farther west, in what is now Saskatchewan and Alberta, the Canadian government was putting pressure on First Nations to sign treaties and to settle onto reserves. The Blackfoot and Cree Nations were negotiating for better treaty provisions. Unfortunately, a three year drought was brewing and the bleak winter of 1877, without moisture, was devastating.

Bison were scarce. With little rain or snow north of the 49th, the herds remained in the south. In the US, any remaining bison were being exterminated by hired, and cavalry, guns. Why? A year earlier, Dakota warriors under Sitting Bull had beaten Custer's forces at Little Big Horn. Eliminating the bison as the primary food source, was the government's chosen way to weaken and defeat the Dakota. After Little Big Horn, Sitting Bull moved north to Cypress Hills with 5,000 followers, putting pressure on any available game in the region. Prairie fires became common on the prairie, due to the drought, which drove away even more game animals.

First Nations leaders knew big changes were afoot. Their people were hungry and the Canadian government was determined to clear the plains to make way for farmers and ranchers. Through a drawn out treaty-making process, Cree chief Big Bear negotiated hard for famine relief to transition his people to an agricultural economy. He was successful. Treaty 6 included food relief provisions. At least in theory.

Canada was determined through the early 1880s to build the cross-continental railway, to facilitate export grain and beef economies. First Nations already settled were being forcibly moved north, out of the way of the chosen southern route for the CPR. Prime Minister

John A. McDonald is quoted to have said about the First Nations who were holding out "We cannot allow them to die for want of food. But, we are .. refusing food until the Indians are on the verge of starvation." By the end of 1882 Big Bear signed on to Treaty 6 in exchange for food for his people, even though, by Treaty, they were entitled to rations to **prevent** starvation.



*Big Bear - a song advocate for his people.
Photo from the City of Edmonton Archives*

This story may seem distant from southwest Manitoba. But next week we'll look at how the pattern was continued as the Canadian government put in place restrictions to deliberately hinder otherwise successful Dakota farmers, just to our north. Sometimes history is hard to hear.

Bleak Winter was adapted from an acclaimed 2013 book by James Daschuk entitled "Clearing the Plains. Disease, Politics of Starvation and the Loss of Aboriginal Life".

Vantage Points Flashbacks were written by David Neufeld with help from Betty Sawatzky. They were originally aired on CJRB Radio out of Boissevain, Manitoba in the early 2020s.