

In our hearts we know we're one family; that persons deserve equal opportunities in life. But throughout Canadian history, those of us born Indigenous, are more likely to be disadvantaged. This story personalizes this difficult theme. It's written by a young man talking about his ancestor who lived on Sioux Valley Dakota Nation (formerly Oak River) west of Brandon.

My great-great-grandfather Mahpiyaska (which translates to Whitecloud) was a Dakota farmer. He grew up in Minnesota, on traditional land protected through Treaty with the US Government. They had gardens, fields and animals. They'd transitioned to an agricultural economy. But, their treaty rights were not honoured. His community experienced constant pressure from Settlers who wanted their land. In frustration, some Dakota men mounted a rebellion, which was quickly, violently quashed.

Mahpiyaska, evaded further hostilities by returning, with about 1,500 Dakota, to southern Manitoba, the northernmost part of Dakota territory, and began farming. He was able to get a tract of land as an immigrant farmer. He may be the only Dakota to be allowed free-hold land.

Mahpiyaska quickly succeeded, becoming a commercial farmer, growing wheat and root crops. The Canadian Government offered start-up assistance to encourage Indigenous people to become farmers on Reserves. Mahpiyaska, though, was entirely responsible for his own financial affairs. But, trouble was brewing. The federal government created a system to empower Federal Agents to restrict movements of Reserve Residents. The Indian Act forced Mahpiyaska to move away from his homestead to live on reserve, but he maintained his farming activities at his homestead with frequent travel. Mahpiyaska and other Indigenous farmers at Oak River were competing toe to toe with Settler farmers.

Mahpiyaska's success should have been a win for the Department of Indian Affairs, the Canadian Public, and the Dakota at the Oak River Indian Reserve, but instead he was perceived as a threat. These Dakota farmers were not conforming to the agricultural policy of the Department, which was to encourage subsistence level farming among Reserve

Residents. They were to produce for their needs only, and not for market.

For over ten years, Dakota farmers in Manitoba had managed their own financial affairs and had been independent of government assistance. But through the early 1890s they were restricted to non-mechanized machinery, their finances were controlled and they were not allowed to sell their products off-reserve. Grain buyers were fined if they bought from Indigenous farmers, harming not only Dakota farmers but the surrounding community as well.

Reserve farmers needed a permit to sell their crops.

Mahpiyaska and two other Dakota farmers travelled to Ottawa to complain about these injustices. They were chastised for leaving the reserve and nothing came of their grievances. At the time, Indigenous persons could not vote, or, hire a lawyer. They were not considered to be equal citizens with Settlers. Mahpiyaska was willing to flaunt the new system. But he was closely watched. So, he began giving away his grain. This eventually slowed his production, as all economic motivations had been eliminated.

I'm, Hanawakan Blaikie Whitecloud, descendant of Mahpiyaska. The more I learn of my history, and the more I continue to experience setbacks because of my heritage, the more angry I become. My anger, it seems, is the fuel I need to succeed in this unjust society called Canada. Ultimately, I wish we could, together, transform it.

*Dakota Farmers is adapted from a story written by Hanawakan. He gave us permission to share it with you.*

*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.*