

SOME REMARKS ABOUT THE ATHAPASCAN INDIANS

by

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These observations cover the years from 1911 to the present amongst Beaver, Sicanni, Casca, Slavi, Mountain Indians and Hare and to a lesser extent with the Dog-ribs and Carrier.

These Athapascans Indians were free (not confined to reservations). Some were pagan, some Christian. All depended for their living on hunting, fishing and trapping. In the early years they depended very little on store bought food and the hunt for food came first. Trapping was a side line as it did not take much fur to supply their needs. As big game became scarcer their need for imported food became greater and trapping took more of their time. The Liard and Mackenzie River Indians used more work dogs to cover more country; this in turn took more fish and meat for dog food. The supply of native dog food became scarce in many places and today many native trappers have to buy imported dog food.

When the first white men came the Indians had no work dogs, only small dogs for hunting. At first a dog team was 3 dogs and the driver used a pushing pole to help move the load. Today a dog team consists of 5 or 6 dogs. In a family of father, mother and three sons there may be 20 dogs. This means that the mouths to be fed have been multiplied by four. This is too much for the country to support. I think that the net result has been that work dogs have been a loss to the country, although they have been a blessing to the women as they had to do the work of the dogs in the old days.

The only Indians that openly resented the coming of the white man were the Beaver Indians. They had horses and their good range land on the north bank of the Peace River was

taken up by homesteaders. The Beaver were the most warlike. For years they had fought the Crees and until the Crees got firearms the Beaver had held their own. They were proud people. They only asked to be left alone in the mountains north of Hudson's Hope and Fort St. John. They clung to their pagan religion. Their chief, after a tribal conference, told the trader what debt to give each hunter and saw to it that this debt was paid. The 'Flu epidemic of 1919-20 nearly wiped out the Beaver that I knew.

The Sicanni on the Parsnip and Finlay Rivers were a friendly lot and helpful to newcomers. They mixed freely with the Carriers and Casca and intermarried. I doubt if many were full blood Sicanni. Despite the provocation they received from white trappers who came into their country after the construction of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railroad, they remained friendly. They hated the Chinese miners. They blamed them for bringing venereal disease. During the placer mining on the Omineca River many Chinese miners took over claims that the white miners left as too poor. These Chinese wore blue overalls and no Sicanni would buy blue jeans, they wanted black ones. The McLeod Lake Sicanni had a strain of Iroquois blood. They planted gardens and played the game of "Snow Snake."

All the Sicanni were scrupulously honest. We had unlocked cabins and caches scattered all over. Even when starving the Indians left them untouched. This also applied to the Carrier and Casca who came to the Finlay Forks Post to trade. In 1924 I told them that I was closing the store and going to the Mackenzie River. After the Spring beaver hunt they brought their furs to me and paid their debts. In some cases they paid for relatives who did not come. They said: "the other traders could wait. I was going away so I must be paid first." They were to be pitied. They had no medical aid at all and scrofula was almost universal amongst them. When able to work they were very good and learned quickly. They refused treaty money saying that they wanted to be free men. A Casca Indian that I prospected

with on the Nahanni had taken treaty money at Fort Simpson when he came there from the Pelly River. He often said he hoped we found something good so he would have the money to pay back all he had received from the Government.

These Sicanni were not awed by the Government. The young people had never seen a policeman. The last police that had been on the Finlay River were the North West Mounted Police in 1907 when the Yukon Trail had been made from Fort St. John to connect with the Telegraph Trail north of Hazelton. They were naturally decent people. They saw a priest every two or three years as one came from Fort St. James on Stuart Lake.

The Slavi and Hares on the Liard and Mackenzie were much the same: that is the people who stayed out in the bush. At the trading posts, which were larger than those in Northern British Columbia, there was usually a Mission as well as two or more traders. Around these posts were Indians who worked at odd jobs for the Missions and traders. These people looked down on the bush Indians and in turn were looked down upon by the bush hunters. Many of them were dead beats and lived by their wits. From the trader's viewpoint they were a poor risk, not so much because they meant to be dishonest as because they did not "make any fur." Civilization had spoiled them, they wanted the comforts of Post life but they could not pay for it. Outwardly they were Christians but if anything went wrong they got a Medicine Man to work to help them. The old ways of the Medicine Man still persist although it is kept hidden as much as possible.

Many thoughtful Indians have told me that they believe the coming of the white man was a good thing except for the new diseases that they brought. Steel tools made life much easier and the Mission influence has been good in teaching them kindness to their women and cleanliness in their camps. While the fur trade lasted the education given children by the Missions probably did more harm than good, especially with the boys. Ordinary

school subjects did not fit them to earn their living except as interpreters or odd-job men around the trading posts. They had missed their training as hunters and were misfits in the life of their people. Many girls wept for days when they came home, they found their people so dirty. However, things improved and today the average camp is clean except for a few old women who think that body lice are a sign of good health.

Today, with improved health measures by the Federal Government, the birth rate is exceeding the death rate. The fur market is poor, furs are scarcer, the population is increasing. Something must be done to help these people. They have not been penned up on reservations and are fairly free of dependence on government doles. They are intelligent and good workers but their way of working is different from the white man's way. The awful monotony of the average white man's life: 8 hours a day, 6 days a week, for months on end seems nothing but drudgery to them. The native way is to work day and night at a fishery, hunt or journey until that job is finished. Then comes a period of rest with gambling, dancing or visiting. Then another spurt of work. Social life of some kind is very important in their life. It is not a question of intelligence, a good hunter is as well educated in his way as the average white workman. They have a quick grasp of mechanics but it soon becomes drudgery.

Perhaps the solution will be to take children when very young into a residential school, teach them a trade so thoroughly that they can compete with the white tradesman. At present some natives are working on construction projects. Their work is satisfactory but these natives have the feeling that they still do not belong to the white man's world. The only social intercourse they have after work is with white riffraff who will gamble with them or sell them booze. There is need of educating the white man as well as the Indian. Segregation does not stop at the border of Canada and the United States. It may take several generations before an Indian family will feel that they are getting as much out of life as

they did as hunters. If a few can become outstanding men in some line of work others will follow them. They took pride in being the best hunters or travellers and it will be that way with their work once they feel that they are accepted by the white man. The Huron and Iroquois feel that way about steel work on high buildings.

It will take patient teaching and a real show of interest by employers but it must be done if we are to be truthful in saying that we are living in a democratic country. We should not have different grades of Canadians.

In conclusion I would say that the early years of the fur trade were the most beneficial to the Indians. They were left to live their old way of life and had steel tools and firearms. The teaching of the missionaries made the lot of the women easier and in famine years they received help from the white man. The lack of medical aid was the worst lack of those years. Tuberculosis spread unchecked.

After the year 1916 there came a boom in fur prices which lasted until 1929. In those years the natives became dependent on store bought food and clothing. Much of the clothing was wholly unsuitable for bush wear. They took to flashy items and it was a common sight to see a woman tanning a moose hide while wearing a silk waist and silk stockings. They also built cabins and stayed in the settlements when they would have been better off in the bush.

They lost a lot of their old independence and copied the poorest parts of the white man's customs. The young people today do not fit into the old life of their people nor into the ways of the white man. It is impossible to go back and it will take a lot of careful teaching before they can go forward. Teaching can't stop by training them for 8 hours work; it must teach them how to use their leisure time also.

In 45 years amongst Athapascans I have received much kindness and very little that was bad. I hope they can fit into Canadian life on an equal footing with other Canadians.

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