

THE INDIANS

The name Indian was by mistake given to the natives of the New World. The first white men to land this side of the Atlantic thought they were in India. The people who were found in the new world, especially in the northern part of the United States and Canada, did not know metals. Their tools were made of stones. They were using flint to make arrowheads and spearheads, crude knives. Wooden homes, even log cabins, were not common among them. Their tepees were made of skins of animals stretched on poles. A closeable opening was left at the bottom to get in and out and another opening was left at the top for the smoke to get out. That one, too, could be closed at will. The fire was set in the center of the tepee, not too big, you can imagine. People were sleeping with their feet at the fire and their head near the wall. Skins were used for blankets and for clothing. Some tribes were using the rabbit skins cut in strips, about one inch wide and woven into blankets. They were real warm but not washable

The men were hunting, trapping and warring; the women took care of the papooses, cooking, sewing, getting their wood for the cooking fire. Among the Iroquois, there was some gardening for corn and pumpkins. So far as I know, the snowshoes were made by the squaws, too. The men did not show much mercy to their women but they did not practice fornication even with their women prisoners of war. Most of them were honest. I heard of a tribe in northeast Manitoba where an Indian traveling could leave a coat along the trail and recover it a week after.

I was a young man when I saw my first Indian. They had a reservation near Edmundston, and when I was around 20, I visited Tobique where I saw quite a few of them; they are still there. They are what is left of the Malecites who lived along the St. John River. They were friendly and helpful to the French when they came to settle in the Valley. Fr. Thomas Albert, in his "History of Madawaska", has many nice things to say about them. In 1934, when I joined the Oblate Missionaries, I visited Caughnawaga, where the Iroquois keep and venerate the relics of Kateri Tekakwita, a saintly Indian virgin who could be canonized some thy. In 1937, I was sent west to complete my studies and do some priestly work around there. Our seminary was on the south shore of the beautiful Qu'Appelle Lake in Saskatchewan. Across the lake from our school there was a big Indian School. The students were coming from many reservations in the neighborhood. In western Canada, many Indians live in the northern part of the Province in the forest. But there are also many living on reservations on the prairie, especially in Saskatchewan and Alberta. They belong to different



tribes: Assiniboines, Objibwe, Crees, and a small group of Sioux who fled to Canada after the Custer defeat. The Sioux were the best looking and biggest. They were even too big for their ponies and that gave a chance to the other smaller Indians living around them. The Crees were more intelligent and civilized. Their language was not easy to learn but it was beautiful.

When the priests came west they organized schools. The students were kept there until they were around 20 years old. With reading, writing, arithmetic and religion they were trained in some trade like blacksmith, carpenter, shoemaker or farmer. The boys could meet the girls under supervision. When a couple were old enough and decided to marry, the carpenter would go to a section of land given to the school by the government, survey a farm and build the house and barn on it to give a good start to the newlyweds. Among the Indians, the hunter who makes a kill shares with the less lucky. It is beautiful but they are tempted to carry it too far and hang around the farmer's house, if he is prosperous and enjoy themselves. A rule was made that visiting was limited. And the result: those young couples succeeded as well as anybody else. After awhile the government discontinued the practice for economical reasons. When I went west, the students were turned out after their eighth grade when they were around 16 years old. They did not have much chance to succeed. They were poor, living in little log houses, and sometimes could not even afford three meals a day. I did not visit the Indians in the forest, except once on Lake Winnipeg in Manitoba, and some of western Ontario.

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Around 1800, the fur trading companies reached the west and northwest by way of Hudson's Bay but mostly from Montreal in birchbark canoes through the Great Lakes, Rainy River, Rainy Lake, Lake of the Woods, Winnipeg River, Lake Winnipeg and south up the Red River to Fort Garry, the present site of Winnipeg. Those canoes could be as long as 30 feet and carry four men and the baggage. They were not heavy and that meant something to those who had to carry them from one lake to the other, around rapids and falls. The trip would last a couple of months. The distance was a couple of thousand miles. From Fort Garry west, barges were used. They were much heavier but could carry much more. North on Lake Winnipeg and the Saskatchewan River, they could go as far west as Edmonton and by portages, connect with the McKenzie River to the Arctic Ocean. Those barges required many more men to haul them up-river and were slower, but sometimes with the help of the wind they would make good time on the lakes. The canoes and barges would haul merchandise west and bring back furs which were bought from the Indians with guns, knives, axes, traps, flour, blankets and clothing. On the southern part of the prairie Provinces, the Assiniboine River was used part of the way. Then, two wheeled carts hauled by horses or oxen were used all the way to what is now Regina, Saskatchewan and Alberta. In 1940, tracks of those carts could still be seen on the prairie.

One day a wagon train was heading west to what is now Lebret, Saskatchewan, where the Oblate Fathers had a mission. The Sioux who had emigrated to Canada after the defeat of Custer, were hard up. They did not want to compete with the local tribes hunting and they were stan'ing. They saw the supply train and could have attacked, but they were not looking for trouble. So their chief came to see the Missionaries. He said that their squaws and children were staving; they had buffalo skins, would the fathers trade food for them? If not, he added, the young men of his tribe urged by necessity might attack and steal. The missionaries agreed and that was the beginning of a long friendship profitable to all. The pagan Indians were not without virtues. They were honest, respectful for their women, I mean not sexy, loved their children and were helpful. They had a way to be polite. When they would show up at the mission, they would come in, sit down and be silent for a while. If you talk to somebody that you respect, you think before you say something. In James Bay if an Indian was invited to eat, he was supposed to eat all that was put before him or bring it with him when he left. That was his way to tell the cook that he liked the food. At war if women were made prisoners they became slaves or if their captor wanted to have sexual relations, he would marry her and make her his permanent wife.

They had a good sense of humor, too. We were often at the school across the lake from our seminary and the young Indians would give us a name according to what they saw different or funny in our appearance; red hair, long legs, long nose, etc.

Once I was lucky enough to see a "sun dance". That was not too far from Kamsack, Sask. That ceremony took place once a year and Indians would gather from miles away, hundreds of them. No white man was allowed on the ground during the ceremony except the missionaries and the Indian Agent (representative of the Federal Government). Even the RCMP was not allowed. The missionary took me with him for a visit. What did I see? In the middle of the campground there was an enclosure made of green branches. It was round, had only one entrance about three feet wide. The walls of the enclosure were about four feet high. There was a post in the center about nine feet high. A roof of green branches was supported by posts about seven or eight feet high. At the far wall of the enclosure facing the entrance were three Indians sitting on the ground near a drum. On both sides of the entrance and about three feet from the outer wall there was a fencing about four feet high parallel to the outer wall and going from the entrance to the middle of the enclosure. Between the two walls three or four squaws were standing on one side and as many Indian men on the other side. They held a stick about the size of a broomstick and about four feet long. They had a whistle in their mouth. They were hitting the ground and blowing their whistles in time with the drum. This would go on for about 15 minutes. Then, they would stop, some would walk out and be replaced by others. The enclosure was about 12 feet across. After awhile, a chief came to the missionary and told him in Objiwe that I had no right to be there. When I asked him what the chief had said, he translated to me and suggested that I go back to the car which was out of sight. I appreciated the fact that the chief had given me time to have a good look. Moreover, when I went back to the car, one of the chiefs came with me and kept me company until the missionary had finished his business. I call that fine courtesy.

Another time, I accompanied a missionary on Lake Winnipeg, which is 200 miles long and 50 miles wide. We traveled about 60 miles in three days. The first night we slept at a mission near the mouth of a river. We stayed there for two or three days. We had no cooler and we were eating canned foods all the time. We told the Indians and they told us that someone in that little village had killed a moose a few days before. "We don't keep meat that long in summer, but the squaw may have canned a little." We checked and she had not. Then one Indian told us that they had a salt lick about a mile up-river and they usually went there when they wanted fresh meat. I could not find the place so the day after he came with

a hind quarter of deer. We were three in our party and we ate the fresh meat in three meals. It was there that I saw a young Indian about 12 years old kill a duck at 200 yards with his .22 rifle. Around there the Indians were hunting moose with .22s. The shells were much cheaper and they were so good shooters that they would bring them down with one shot.

When we reached the end of our trip, we were in another Indian village. We had to sleep on a point one night and the wind blew up during the night. When we got up in the morning our boat was full of water and the waves were four feet high and pounding our boat on the shore. We emptied it and with the oars I managed to move it to a better sheltered place. At the terminus, the Indians were fishing with nets, pike and pickerel a couple of pounds each. We asked for some and one day a boy showed up with two nice pickerels. My companion gave him a dollar. He went back home and came right back. "Mom says it is only 15 cents a fish," he said, So we told him: "Keep the money and go get some more fish." We would filet the fish and fry them in deep fat. What a treat! I never heard an Indian talk loud. It seems that the peace and quiet of the forest gets under their skin. It could be one of their hunting habits: The less noise you make, the better your luck is.

