

HOW DID FIRST NATIONS RESIST THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT?

During the 1880s, First Nations from the West were facing old and new challenges. The buffalo had almost disappeared and the Métis were protesting how they were being treated. At the same time, First Nations peoples were starting to move onto reserves after signing treaties with the federal government.

NEGOTIATING TREATY TERMS

As you learned in Chapter 3, the federal government approached First Nations peoples in the West to sign treaties. The treaties ultimately led them to surrender their land rights and forced them onto individual reserves. The reserves would not border each other. The Cree, Saulteaux, Assiniboine, and Dene nations (who lived in present-day Alberta and Saskatchewan) signed Treaty 6 on August 23, 1876. The terms included land and farming equipment for every family, annual cash payments, and a school for each reserve. Leaders also asked for ammunition and hunting, trapping, and fishing rights. One month later, Cree Chief Poundmaker negotiated more terms, which were unique to Treaty 6. The additions included food rations in times of famine and medical care for each reserve.

Some First Nations leaders resisted signing treaties, largely because they did not trust the federal government to keep treaty promises. Two of these leaders were Cree chiefs Big Bear (Mistahi-maskwa) and Little Pine (Minahikosis). They refused to sign Treaty 6 when many others signed it. Chief Big Bear was known as a peaceful leader, but he did not trust the government to protect First Nations reserves from settlers. Read **Figure 4.13A**, a quote from Chief Big Bear (**Figure 4.13B**). What is his perspective on what the government was offering in Treaty 6?

Which treaty terms do you think would be most valuable to First Nations peoples?

“When we set a fox-trap, we scatter pieces of meat all round, but when the fox gets into the trap we knock him on the head; We want no bait; let your chiefs come like men and talk to us.”

— Chief Big Bear, Plains Cree First Nation

FIGURE 4.13 (A) A quote from Chief Big Bear in 1875 in response to treaties the federal government had planned for First Nations. (B) A photo of Chief Big Bear taken in 1888. **Analyze:** What is Chief Big Bear comparing the federal government treaties to?



PLANNING A UNITED GRAND RESERVE

In order to protect their way of life, Cree Chief Piapot (Kisikawasan) joined Chief Big Bear, Chief Little Pine, and the Assiniboine Nation to create their own united reserve. The vast reserve would extend from what is now southern Alberta and Saskatchewan to the United States border. Read **Figure 4.14**, which is an excerpt from Treaty 6. Does the wording support or challenge a united reserve? Additionally, the Plains Cree wanted to join up with the vast territories of the Siksika in southern Alberta and the United States. The Siksika were not only strong in numbers, but were also well armed with repeating rifles. Repeating rifles can fire multiple rounds of ammunition without reloading.

SECRET MEETINGS

To form the united reserve, Chiefs Big Bear, Little Pine, and Piapot held secret meetings with the Plains Cree, Assiniboine, Saulteaux, and Siksika nations in the late 1870s and early 1880s. Some of these meetings took place during **powwow** celebrations, such as the one shown in **Figure 4.15**. The bands shared ideas about how to pressure the government to fulfill treaty promises. Why do you think the First Nations bands felt the need to keep their meetings secret?

In 1881, leaders of the Plains Cree and Siksika held secret meetings in the United States. When the United States army discovered the meetings, they put a stop to them. They also took away the Cree's weapons. When the Cree arrived back in the Northwest, the federal government ordered them to move north to Alberta's Battle River area. This meant they would have to settle away from the Siksika and the United States border. The North-West Mounted Police refused to provide food to the Cree until the Cree moved north. The Cree chiefs did not want to move north, but they had no weapons to hunt with. Now they were dependent on government food rations.

“The Chief Superintendent of Indian Affairs shall depute [appoint] and send a suitable person to determine and set apart the reserves for each band, after consulting with the Indians ... as to the locality which may be found to be most suitable for them.”

— Treaty 6

FIGURE 4.14 An excerpt from Treaty 6 detailing the promises made to First Nations regarding reserve land. **Analyze:** According to this excerpt, who decides where reserves for each band are located?

POWWOW a traditional First Nations gathering of individuals, who danced ceremonial dances, taught, shared, traded, healed, and celebrated together

FIGURE 4.15 This is an 1893 photo of a powwow in Gleichen, North-West Territories (present-day Alberta) taken by Richard H. Trueman. **Analyze:** What evidence in this photo suggests powwows were effective in keeping the meetings a secret?



“We’re doing all we can by refusing food until the Indians are on the verge of starvation to reduce the expense.”
— Prime Minister
Sir John A. Macdonald

FIGURE 4.16 A quote from April 27, 1882, by Macdonald on why famine relief was not given to First Nations people. **Analyze:** Why did the government hold back this treaty promise?

famine an extreme shortage of food

THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT DENIES FAMINE RELIEF

Along with pushing First Nations northward, the federal government continued to withhold many treaty promises, including supplying farming equipment. The government also adopted a “no work, no food” policy. This meant that if First Nations people who had signed treaties did not farm their reserve land, they would not receive food rations. However, without seeds and tools, First Nations people could not work or produce food. Though many First Nations people were starving, the government refused to provide **famine** relief. Read **Figure 4.16**. How could the government’s actions affect Chief Big Bear’s vision of a united grand reserve?

CHIEF BIG BEAR’S REFUSAL TO CHOOSE A RESERVE

Since Chief Big Bear had not signed a treaty, his people were not receiving food rations. With his people facing starvation and a long winter, in December 1882, Chief Big Bear signed Treaty 6. However, he delayed choosing a new reserve location for his people. The federal government said that famine relief would only be provided once Chief Big Bear picked a reserve to settle on.

In the summer of 1883, Chief Big Bear visited small reserves in northern Saskatchewan. Farming on the reserves was not producing much food or income, so First Nations people were suffering. Still convinced that a united reserve would protect the interests of First Nations people, Chief Big Bear urged other Cree chiefs to create a united reserve farther north. By April 1884, Chief Big Bear and his people began moving toward Chief Poundmaker’s reserve near North Battleford.

Chief Big Bear continued to ask the government for famine relief, though he had not chosen a permanent reserve for his people. Read **Figure 4.17**, an excerpt from a speech made by Chief Big Bear in August 1884. What reasons does Chief Big Bear give for why he has not chosen a reserve yet?

FIGURE 4.17 An excerpt from a speech Chief Big Bear gave in August 1884 to other First Nations in northern Saskatchewan. **Analyze:** What is Chief Big Bear saying he will lose if he takes one of the reserves offered by the federal government?

“My friends, I am trying to grasp the promises which [the federal government] made me. I see my hand closing again and again, but I can find nothing in it. They offered me a spot as a reserve, but since I see that they are not going to be honest, I am afraid to take a reserve. They have given me to choose between several small reserves, but I feel sad to abandon the liberty of my own land when in return I will not get half of what they have promised me.”
— Chief Big Bear, Plains Cree First Nation

By early 1885, the government had cut off all supplies to Chief Big Bear’s people. In the hope that his people would receive much-needed famine relief, Chief Big Bear finally settled on a reserve in the Frog Lake area. The reserve was located about 200 km north of Chief Poundmaker’s reserve.

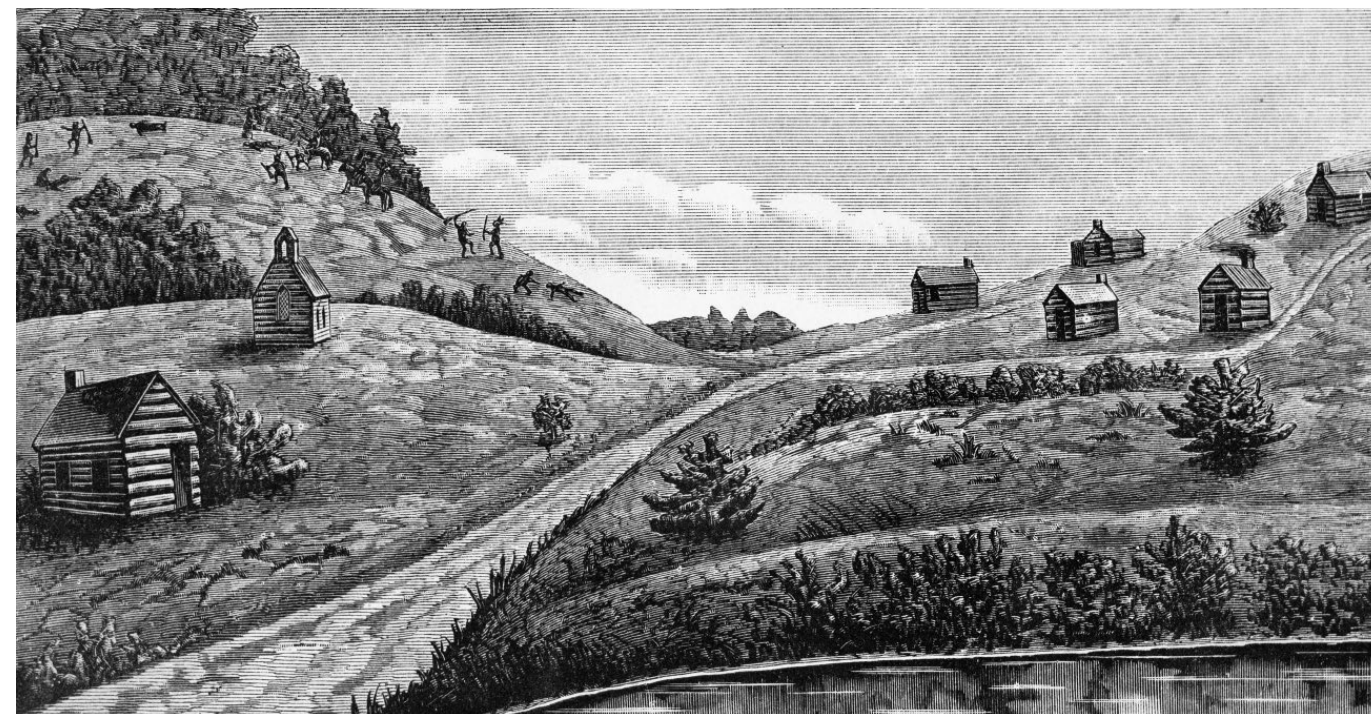
FROG LAKE MASSACRE

On April 2, 1885, at the Frog Lake supply post, a group of Cree men from Chief Big Bear’s band shot and killed nine white male settlers. Among the dead was government agent Thomas Quinn. What could have led to such violence?

Frustration between the Cree and the government agents had been growing for some time. Read **Figure 4.18**, an exchange between Quinn and three Cree men: Little Poplar, Chief Big Bear, and Miserable Man (Kitahwahken) in October 1884. What does this exchange tell you about the relationship between the Cree and the government?

Motivated by hunger and the Métis defeat of the government at Duck Lake, some young Cree men led by War Chief Wandering Spirit (Kapapamahchakwew) decided to take over the Frog Lake settlement on April 2, 1885. When the Frog Lake settlers, including Quinn, refused to leave the area, the deadly shootout broke out. Examine **Figure 4.19**, which shows a scene from the massacre. When Chief Big Bear arrived, he tried to stop his men from shooting the settlers, but failed. Nine months later, eight Cree men, including Wandering Spirit, were hanged. It was the largest public hanging in Canadian history.

FIGURE 4.19 An 1885 illustration entitled *Scene of Frog Lake Massacre, Alberta*, by an unknown artist. **Analyze:** What details of the Frog Lake massacre can you see in the background of this illustration?



“[Little Poplar asks Quinn] ‘It is long since the buffalo went away. My people are hungry and would like to eat fresh meat again.’ Quinn [replied] ‘The government gives cattle to the Indians for work and milk.... There’s no beef for you.’ ... [Big Bear responds] ‘When the governor made the treaty with us, we were told we should have beef to eat at every payment.’ [Big Bear] placed his hands, fingers extended, on either side of his head and turned fiercely on [Quinn]. ‘You want my head—take it!’ he cried.... [Miserable Man said] ‘When I am hungry this winter and ask for food, if you don’t give it to me ...’ Quinn smiled good humoredly. He had heard Indians talk before. He did not mind such trifles as their threats.”
— William Bleasdel Cameron,
Hudson’s Bay Company clerk

FIGURE 4.18 This account was written by Cameron in his memoir, *Blood Red the Sun*, published in 1926. Cameron was a clerk with Hudson’s Bay Company and a survivor of the Frog Lake massacre. **Analyze:** What are the issues identified by the Cree?

INTERPRET AND ANALYZE

After gathering and organizing information based on your inquiry question, you are ready to interpret and analyze your findings. This step involves making sense of information. Ask yourself what your information means and how the evidence fits together. Examine what the evidence reveals about events and the perspectives of the people involved.

When you interpret and analyze information, you need to

- think about your evidence in different ways using the historical thinking concepts
- try to uncover new details and perspectives
- look for ways that different pieces fit together
- try to find patterns
- put the evidence you have found into your own words

CASE STUDY: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE NORTH-WEST MOUNTED POLICE AND FIRST NATIONS

As you learned in Chapter 3, the federal government created the North-West Mounted Police in 1873 to enforce Canadian law in the Northwest. As you read through the case study, consider the following inquiry question: How did the relationship between the North-West Mounted Police and First Nations peoples change?

One of the main tasks of the North-West Mounted Police was to mediate conflicts between white settlers and First Nations peoples. In order to be successful, the police established friendly and trusting relationships with the Cree, Siksika, Assiniboiné, and other First Nations peoples in the region. Read **Figure 4.20**. What does this quote tell you about the relationship between First Nations peoples and the North-West Mounted Police in 1874?

“My brother, your words make me glad. I listened to them not only with my ears but with my heart also. In the coming of the Long Knives, with their firewater and quick-shooting guns, we were weak and our people have been woefully slain and impoverished. You say this will be stopped. We are glad to have it stopped. We want peace. What you tell us about this strong power which will govern good law and treat the Indian the same as the white man, makes us glad to hear. My brother, I believe you, and am thankful.”

— Chief Crowfoot, Siksika First Nation

FIGURE 4.20 A quote from Chief Crowfoot to Commissioner James Macleod after Macleod outlined the goals of the North-West Mounted Police during a meeting held in December 1874. **Analyze:** What expectations does Crowfoot have of the North-West Mounted Police?

For a while, relations between the North-West Mounted Police and First Nations peoples were positive. First Nations and Métis people were hired and consulted as guides and scouts. The North-West Mounted Police protected First Nations peoples from violent whisky traders and provided food to those facing starvation. The positive actions of the North-West Mounted Police helped the federal government persuade First Nations peoples to sign treaties. The North-West Mounted Police began to build posts throughout the Northwest region. **Figure 4.21** shows officers and a First Nations man at Fort Walsh, Saskatchewan. This fort is at the site of the Cypress Hills killings, which you learned about in Chapter 3. Fort Walsh eventually became the headquarters for the North-West Mounted Police. Examine **Figure 4.21**. What can you infer about the relationship between First Nations and the police from this photo?



FIGURE 4.21 North-West Mounted Police officers and an unidentified First Nations man pose for a photo at Fort Walsh, Saskatchewan, in 1879. **Analyze:** What is the significance of the two officers wearing First Nations clothing?

During the late 1800s, the number of North-West Mounted Police grew. In 1874, there were 300 North-West Mounted Police officers spread across present-day Saskatchewan and Alberta. The force grew to 500 men in 1882 and to over 1000 men in 1885. During this time, relations between the police and First Nations peoples in the Northwest became less friendly.

The North-West Mounted Police began enforcing unpopular government regulations. For example, the government amended the *Indian Act* to create the Potlatch Law in 1884. The potlatch was an important gift-giving feast celebrated by many First Nations on the Pacific Coast. The law banned all potlatch celebrations, making it illegal for any First Nations person to attend or host one. You will learn more about the Potlatch Law in Chapter 8.

In 1885, the government introduced a pass system. Under the pass system First Nations peoples could only leave their reserves with the permission of a government agent. This was used to keep track of and restrict the movements of First Nations peoples. The pass system violated the treaty promises of no restriction on First Nations movement. Though the pass system was never made into law, the government expected the North-West Mounted Police to enforce it. Read **Figure 4.22**. What does it tell you about possible consequences of enforcing the pass system?

“Should an illegal arrest be attempted and resistance offered there would be no protection to us. Such a result would be disastrous to our prestige with the Indians.”

— Unnamed police officer

FIGURE 4.22 An excerpt from a letter written on July 8, 1896, by an unnamed police commanding officer in Regina. The letter was written in response to a request to enforce the pass system. **Analyze:** What does this excerpt reveal about how this officer views the relationship between the police and First Nations?

The police also fought against the Métis and First Nations during the North-West Resistance in 1885. How do you think their involvement in the resistance may have changed their relationship with First Nations?

TRY IT

1. Compare the sources in the case study to other sources in this chapter section. What patterns do the sources reveal?
2. Choose a historical thinking concept and apply it to the case study to help you make sense of the information. What does all of the information mean?

SEEKING NEGOTIATIONS AND FIGHTING BACK

The lack of government help was affecting the survival of many First Nations. By March 1885, Chief Poundmaker had seen more of his people die of starvation following another harsh winter. After hearing of the Métis victory at Duck Lake, Chief Poundmaker decided that First Nations were in a good position to speak with government officials about better famine relief rations. Chief Poundmaker travelled east to Battleford, with a group of 60 Cree and men, women, and children from the Stony First Nation. Hearing that a group of First Nations was approaching the Battleford settlement, the settlers panicked. They had heard about the battle at Duck Lake and the Frog Lake massacre. They fled to nearby Fort Battleford, which was protected by the North-West Mounted Police. On March 30, 1885, Chief Poundmaker arrived at Battleford, only to find the settlement deserted. Chief Poundmaker’s men raided the empty homes for food before they left the next day.

BATTLE AT CUT KNIFE HILL

The Battleford settlers remained at the fort until 500 troops arrived on April 24, 1885, under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel William Otter. The troops were eager for military action and the settlers were also demanding that action be taken. Although Otter had been ordered by Major-General Middleton to stay at Battleford, Otter decided to disobey Middleton’s orders.

Otter led 325 government troops in an attack on Chief Poundmaker’s camp at Cut Knife Hill on May 2, 1885, as shown in Figure 4.23. Was the government justified in carrying out this attack? Led by War Chief Fine Day (Kamiokisihkwew), the Cree and Assiniboine hid in bushes and trees. Chief Fine Day used signals from a hand mirror to direct his men to attack Otter’s troops from all sides. The government’s guns quickly broke down and Otter’s troops became targets in the open field. The Cree and Assiniboine men forced Otter’s troops to retreat. Chief Poundmaker, who did not participate in the fight, stopped his men from pursuing the defeated troops.



FIGURE 4.23 This lithograph, entitled *Battle of Cut Knife Hill, 1885*, was published in the *Canadian Illustrated War News*. It shows the government troops attacking Chief Poundmaker’s camp at Cut Knife Hill. **Analyze:** How does this representation help you to understand the events of the battle?

Were Chief Poundmaker and his men justified in raiding the Battleford homes?

“Everything I could do was done to stop bloodshed ... Had I wanted war, I would not be here now. I should be on the prairie. You did not catch me. I gave myself up. You have got me because I wanted justice.”
— Chief Poundmaker, Plains Cree First Nation

FIGURE 4.24 A quote from Chief Poundmaker during his July 1885 trial. **Analyze:** What is Chief Poundmaker expressing about his belief of being labelled a traitor?

SEEKING PEACE

A week after the battle at Cut Knife Hill, the Métis were defeated at the Battle of Batoche. After Batoche, the government wanted to remove any threats of resistance in the Northwest. In May 1885, Chief Poundmaker wanted to meet with Middleton and his troops to discuss a peace settlement. However, the meeting ended with the arrest of Chief Poundmaker and some of his followers on May 26. On July 2, Chief Big Bear surrendered voluntarily to a North-West Mounted Police officer. The two chiefs were blamed for the violence even though they wanted peace and had tried to stop their men from fighting. Like Riel,

Chiefs Poundmaker and Big Bear were charged with treason. Read Figure 4.24, a quote from Chief Poundmaker during his trial. How does Chief Poundmaker describe his actions and beliefs? Figure 4.25 is a photo taken during the chiefs’ trial in 1885. What message do you think the photo sent to Canadians and would-be immigrants in eastern Canada?

Chiefs Big Bear and Poundmaker were both found guilty and sentenced to prison. Within three years both had died of illnesses they caught during their time in jail.



FIGURE 4.25 This photo, taken after the arrest of Chiefs Big Bear and Poundmaker, was carefully composed by the photographer. Alex D. Stewart, chief of Hamilton police, sits between the chiefs in the first row. Chief Big Bear’s son, Horse Child (Mistatim-awâsis), sits to Chief Big Bear’s right. **Analyze:** What does this photo reveal about the government’s attitude toward Chiefs Big Bear and Poundmaker at this time?

CHECK-IN

- 1. **INTERPRET AND ANALYZE** Was peaceful resistance by First Nations more effective than violent resistance? Explain why, or why not.
- 2. **GATHER AND ORGANIZE** Create a timeline to help you organize evidence showing the challenges that the First Nations faced in the 1880s. What types of evidence might help you better understand their challenges?
- 3. **CAUSE AND CONSEQUENCE** What were the intended and unintended consequences of the “no work, no food” policy?
- 4. **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE** Consider the timing of the events at Duck Lake, Frog Lake, and Battleford. What do you think John A. Macdonald believed was happening at the time?