

REMEMBERING OUR RELATIONS: DĒNESUĻINÉ ORAL HISTORIES OF WOOD BUFFALO NATIONAL PARK

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t'ahú tsąba nálye nı yati nedhé hólj, eyi bek'éch'á ejere néné hólj

Dėnesųłné oral traditions locate the history of Wood Buffalo National Park firmly in the context of Treaty 8. For generations, Elders and Knowledge Holders have argued that the Park always has been a violation of Dėnesųłné rights to live in, relate to, and steward their territories as they have always done—rights that are enshrined in Treaty 8. The Dėnesųłné title for this chapter encapsulates this perspective. According to Elder Cecilia Adam, it means: “When the treaty was made, a great law was made. Against that [in contradiction] the Park was created.”

In July 1899, leaders representing the Dėnesųłné peoples of the Athabasca River, Birch River, Gull River, Peace River, and Slave River met at Fort Chipewyan with Treaty commissioners representing the British Crown to negotiate and sign an adhesion to Treaty 8. Elders’ accounts of the event point to both oral and written agreements made in good faith during several days of negotiations. According to the oral histories, Dene leaders understood Treaty 8 as an agreement to peacefully share their lands and waterways with the Crown in exchange for various protections and necessities, including reserve lands, annuities, uniforms, schools and teachers, tools and equipment for agricultural activity where possible, and, most importantly, the uninterrupted “right to pursue their usual vocations of hunting, trapping and fishing throughout the tract surrendered.”¹ Crown commissioners noted in their reports on the events that they had assured local leaders these rights would remain unimpeded as long as the grass grew, the sun shone and the rivers flowed.² As Elder Louis Boucher told the Indian Association of Alberta’s TARR team in 1974:

The commissioner representing the Queen who was here to make the treaty payment picked up a blade of grass and said, “in the future, this will never be taken away from you. Don’t have

any wrong ideas about it. You will always have it. As long as the sun walks and the rivers flow. The way you are making a living in the bush will never be restricted.”³

Elder Jimmy Deranger explained the importance of this promise to protect the rights of the Dënesųhné in perpetuity:

Whose land is it? Nobody’s [i.e. not settlers’]. Ours, ours. It’s always been ours. Now the natural grass is still growing, the water at Lake Athabasca and the rivers are still flowing. And the sun is still shining. And that’s our land. And the Dënesųhné people and Mikisew people, the Métis people are still using the land as they did before contact and during contact, and to this very day. And will continue to use it. They had used it for 15,000 years, and they will continue to use it for another 15,000 years.

The *Declaration of Rights to Land Use* that ACFN Elders released in 2010 clearly articulates Dene interpretations of the Treaty: “Our parents and grandparents have told us that Treaty 8, signed by our Chief Laviolette in 1899, is an intergovernmental agreement that, in return for sharing our Traditional Lands, upholds our inherent Dene rights to land use and livelihood.” Further, “The meaningful practice of our Treaty Rights depends on having sufficient lands and resources to exercise those rights. Sufficient refers to not only quantity but quality, including what is required to fulfill our cultural and spiritual needs.”⁴ In 2010, ACFN Elder Rene Bruno recorded an oral history of the signing of Treaty 8 at Fort Chipewyan in 1899—His testimony is in the Oral History section of this chapter. Rene’s grandfather, Chief Laviolette, was a signatory—and his mother, who was present at the signing of the Treaty, told him the oral history of what happened there. He explained that it took days to negotiate and sign the agreement because “the Chief gave the commissioner a rough time,” making sure commissioners knew the area was Dënesųhné territory—“that’s why we say we own this land” he said. In signing the Treaty, Dene leaders agreed that “they were going to share it [the territory]; that’s what they told them. That’s the kind of agreement that was made. As long as the sun is shining, river is flowing, and grass is growing.” Yet, despite this promise, Rene concluded, “they [the government] are breaking it now. That is what’s happening.”⁵ As the oral histories shared in this section demonstrate, the Park’s creation and expansion, and its management throughout

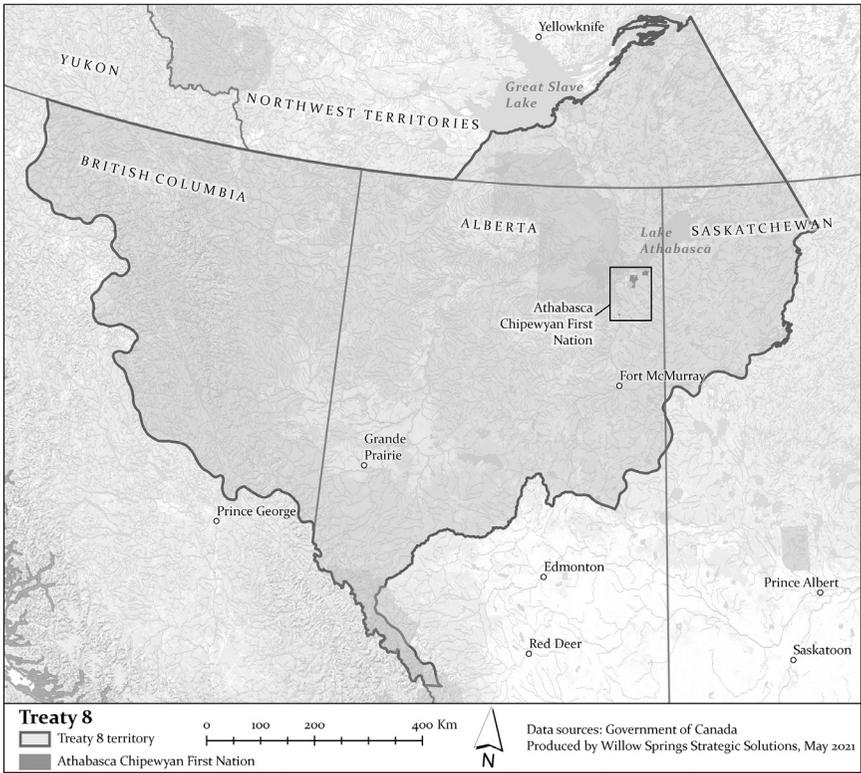


Fig. 2.1 Map of Treaty 8. Map produced by Emily Boak, Willow Springs Strategic Solutions, 2021.

the twentieth century, were among the many violations of treaty that he and the *Elders Declaration* point to.

Oral histories indicate that most of the Crown’s oral promises were broken and forgotten in the decades that followed. Furthermore, several terms and promises made orally at the time of the commission were later revoked or altered in the written Treaty document. In his extensive history of Treaties 8 and 11, historian René Fumoleau writes that the precedent for these violations occurred immediately upon signing. He explains how Pierre Mercredi, an interpreter for Treaty 8 who was present at Fort Chipewyan in 1899, recalled that initially there were two versions of the Treaty. The original version, which he witnessed and interpreted in Fort Chipewyan in 1899



Fig. 2.2 ACFN members gather for Treaty Days, Fort Chipewyan, June 2018. Photo by Peter Fortna.

for Dënesųłné leaders, contained the provision that Dene people would maintain their rights to reside, harvest, and move across the land forever. He maintained that a second version of the Treaty was sent to leaders later on; it contained the additional terms stating that the Dënesųłné rights to “pursue their usual vocation” was restricted.

That they shall have right to pursue their usual vocations of hunting, trapping and fishing throughout the tract surrendered as heretofore described, subject to such regulations as may from time to time be made by the Government of the country, acting under the authority of Her Majesty, and saving and excepting such tracts as may be required or taken up from time to time for settlement, mining, lumbering, trading or other purposes.⁶

Mercredi maintained that this clause had been added after the fact: “When the copy came back, that second clause (that they shall promise to obey whatever hunting regulations the dominion government shall set) was in it. It was not there before.” He continued, “I have no doubt the new regulation breaks that old Treaty. It makes me feel bad altogether because it makes lies of the words I spoke then for Queen Victoria.” Mercredi concluded, “The old Chief

came to me and told me that I had spoken the words for Queen Victoria and they were lies. He said that if she had come and said those words herself, then, and broken them, she would have been an awful liar.”⁷⁷ According to oral histories, the language in the written document eventually made it possible for government officials to take up Dënesų́łnė Treaty Lands as they saw fit. In this way, Parks officials sometimes justified the taking up of lands for the Park, the imposition of a suite of strict game regulations throughout the twentieth century, and the evictions and displacements of Dënesų́łnė people. Thus, the history of the Park has been interpreted by the community as a history of broken treaty promises and of violations of Dënesų́łnė Treaty and Hereditary Rights.

Because of the violations of the Treaty that have characterized the history of the Park, some community members have concluded that Crown commissioners did not undertake the Treaty in good faith, but rather, the Treaty was an intentional means of cheating the local people out of their lands and resources. Chief Jonas Laviolette wrote in 1928, “I would like my brother Indian on the outside to know how the Treaty is being cheated with us . . . I want everyone to know that the White man has gone back on us, with his bargain with us . . . we are getting so tired of asking all the time and no one takes a bit of notice of us . . . I treat my dogs better than we are being treated.”⁷⁸ Elder Alice Rigney recalled her brother, the late Elder Pat Marcel, telling her, that “they signed the treaty saying, ‘we’ll take care of you,’ when all they wanted to do was exploit all our resources. When you think about it, that’s what the Treaty was.” Alice believes that Park was part of a long process of treaty violations and an attempt to subordinate or erase Indigenous Peoples who had signed treaty and agreed to peacefully share their lands and waters. “They [the treaty commissioners] must have been real smooth talkers,” she stated. “When [the Dene leaders signed that document, everything changed—but not to our advantage. We’re a sovereign nation because we signed a Treaty with the Queen of England but we’re way at the bottom, beneath the federal government.” The creation of the Park in Dene territories, and the accompanying wildlife management policies restricting Dene lives, have in many ways taken priority over the obligations the Crown has to the Dene people.

Furthermore, the Dënesų́łnė have consistently argued that the Treaty should have been accounted for throughout the history of the Park, whenever decisions were being made about it or harvesting policy was being generated or revised. Some express the view that the creation of reserves should

have preceded the establishment of the Park, in order to protect Dënesų́hné rights, lives, and ways of life before Dene homelands were annexed for bison preservation. Whether the Crown commissioners signed Treaty 8 in good faith or not, a common interpretation emerges through the oral histories across the generations: the terms and promises of Treaty 8, especially the promise to protect Dene people's rights to move, live, and harvest throughout their territories as they had always done, were violated through the creation, expansion, and management of Wood Buffalo National Park. As Elder Victorine Mercredi succinctly said in 1998, "They broke their word long ago."

The oral histories shared in this chapter elaborate on this perspective, suggesting that the creation, expansion and management of the Park fit into a wider historical pattern of Treaty promises broken by colonial governments managing land-use in Dënesų́hné territories and across Alberta and western Canada. Oral testimony, therefore, demonstrates that WBNP became a key player in the history of colonial elimination in Dene territories and northern Alberta. Dene Elders, however, have never forgotten the original terms and intentions of the Treaty and continue to publicly voice these interpretations, challenging the infringements and violations that the Park, along with many other colonial policies, processes, and institutions, represented.

ORAL HISTORY

Alec Bruno (2015)

Just after Treaty was signed, white people, the government, the federal government, when they signed the Treaty, they promised the First Nations a lot of things. Now a hundred-and-something years later, all those promises that they had given, they are taking away from us slowly. And the people are still saying 'how come?' They promised us these things. We never asked them. The thing about, the way I understand Treaty 8 signing is the government, the federal government promised the people, we'll share the land, and the people said, 'we're not giving you this land away, we're not giving you this land, we'll share it with you.' So the government says 'ok, we'll do that but we'll give you all this, you can have this, anything you want, you don't have to pay for anything.' Now it's all changing and lot of medication that was promised to us we have to buy, you know. And school, we have to pay for, well right now the government pays but how long is that going to go on for?

You know, the law of the land is how you look at it, how you understand it and if you as an individual person, trapping out on the land, you make your own laws. You don't make them, you just live by it, that's how I look at it, you know.

Francois Bruno (1974)

The chiefs took the treaty money under the conditions that our way of life will not be curtailed by any regulations that may prevent us from living our lifestyle. The commissioner had clearly stated that no curtailment of any regulations to prevent you from the natural way of life that you now lived. It doesn't seem to be so now. There are regulations preventing us from living off the land.

Rene Bruno (2010)

ACFN Elder Rene Bruno, whose grandfather Alexandre Laviolette was a Dene Chief and original signatory of Treaty 8, shared his oral history of the Treaty in February 2010 with Nicole Nicholls (an ACFN member and staff member at ACFN Industry Relations Corporation). This oral history was related to Rene by his mother, who was present at the signing of Treaty 8. He spoke in Dënesųłíné, and Elder Arsene Bernaille translated it to English.

At the time they signed the Treaty, the missionaries were already here for fifty years. Lots of people already knew how to read and write. When the missionaries came, they taught everyone how to read and write in syllabics—they [the Old People] were pretty good [at it]. They knew that the Treaty was coming way before the Treaty was signed. All the people gathered here at Ft. Chip when it was time to sign it . . . there was a nice gathering place, high ground, a beautiful place. That's where they signed the Treaty. When they signed the Treaty, the water was really high, all the way up to here. It was 1899 in June.

The commissioner was here. It took them four days before [Dene leaders] signed the Treaty because it took them a long time. Scared they would go to jail or something like that. The Commissioner said Queen Victoria sent him to sign the Treaty with the Native people. When [my] Grandfather was going to sign the Treaty, he said everything had to be written down—not just talked about before it was signed. The commissioner's name was Conroy. His Grandfather knew how to write in syllabics—that's how he signed his name. . . .

His Grandfather was the Chief—he was the hereditary Chief: when you die, one of your family takes over. When Alexandre Laviolette died, Jonas Laviolette took over. They had the signed treaty in a box with a padlock on it, just like you keep a pipe in.

When his Grandfather died, his wife gave the document—the box with the padlock—to Jonas Laviolette [Alexandre Laviolette's brother]. Rene's mom could read and write and used to help the Chief and write letters. Mary-Anne was her name.

When they signed the Treaty, the Government made a lot of promises to the Native people, but nothing has been done. A lot has been broken—like paying tax, paying for medicine. It should not have happened like that. [My] grandfather told the Government “I don't want you to take away the land. As long as the sun is rising here, the river flowing, the lake is here, and the grass is growing, nothing will change.” That's the kind of treaty they made.

The Commissioner said: “Queen Victoria has sent me, I didn't come by myself.” When they signed the Treaty, the Commissioner told them, “you live off this land—the fish, the fur-bearing animal, the timber. You don't have to pay anything in that because this is your land. Plus, you don't have to pay land tax because this is your land.” The Commissioner told them, “we'll share this land between you and me. We'll never take away the land, we'll share. We could share the land”. The Commissioner gave them uniform—“as long as

you use this uniform you'll have power, just like government. As long as you have the uniform, you'll be just like the government of this land.”

My mom [Mary-Anne] told me everything about this. My mom had all the documents and was looking after it.

What I told you here, it's all true because my mom told him everything that happened in the past. It's not by hearing [second-hand]. My mom was a big girl already, she was there when they signed the Treaty, so she was there when they did those things.

It took them four days before they signed it. The Chief gave the Commissioner a rough time. You see the land as far as you can see, you live on that land, it's your land. That's why we say this is Dēnesųłné territory, why we say we own this land. Because the Commissioner said we would share the land because that's the deal that was made. Treaty is a powerful thing and oil companies don't know nothing about it.

There was only one Nation here at one time—only Dene people. His grandfather came here for Christmas, took seven days to get here from the south. Some trappers come from east from Saskatchewan. Some from NWT.

The Commissioner pointed to the east, the north and south and said 'you control all that land.' That's why we say we own all the resources.

In 1938, the federal government had a meeting behind closed doors and signed an agreement with the provincial government to look after the resources. That's why the provincial government says they own the land and resources. But where's ours? Where's our land? They were going to share it, that's what they told them. That's the kind of agreement that was made. As long as the sun shining, river flowing, and grass growing. They are breaking it now. That is what's happening. . . .

When they signed the Treaty, the way the Government made the promise, the government told them, "I'll promise you cows and plow, we'll give you a ration for food and all the tools for garden" but they've never seen that yet today. Over 200 years now. That's what those Native people are fighting for now.

They promised ammunition, [fishing] net—to make a living with. They put a stop to it. Years ago, people didn't need welfare, it only started thirty to forty years ago. People used to live off the bush—they didn't need welfare.

Years ago, the people never lived on welfare. They used to trap all year round, all winter. They never ran short of money. Everything was good then—the water, the land. Now everything is polluted. Lots of muskrat in

the past—people had lots of money all year round from the winter trapping. Didn't spend money foolishly. They weren't lazy, they worked hard.

Rene says he never even came close to what people used to trap. They used to work hard and there was lots of money.

Years ago, the people lived off the land. They knew everything, how to survive. No one can do things the way people used to do things. Nowadays, people go to the university, but they don't know anything about the bush life. Long ago, people knew everything, they worked hard.

The treaty was made here in 1899. We never knew the price of land nor did our Elders. We didn't have any schools then. Once when I was going around with my dad, but now I was able to think for myself, we heard about money. The Queen was sending us money. It was Queen Victoria. She was going to care for us like we were her children.

This was what the commissioner said when the first treaty payment was made at Fort McMurray. Some were not going to accept it. My uncles, they were five in the family, my father was the sixth one. One uncle was in the bush when that business of treaty was taken. My father was encouraging his younger brothers to take the treaty money. He said the understanding was that there would be no end to the money, and I recall vividly that we were paid \$15.00 including the children.

The following year they already reduced the amount to \$5.00. Long ago our land was very nice. There was no drinking. Very seldom did we see a white man. Nothing was restricted and the Indians made a good living in the bush. Then when I was a young man, I worked on the barges.¹⁰ The money wasn't that good. It was \$1.00 per day. But everything was cheaper at the time, not like today. But we were happy about it because we were young. . . .

Within this area, not one person saw the signing of the Treaty. That is the Elders who are still here. I'm probably the only one. The promises the Queen made to us, many of the people have lost. The commissioner representing the Queen who was here to make the treaty payment picked up a blade of grass and said, "In the future, this will never be taken away from you. Don't have any wrong ideas about it. You will always have it. As long as the sun walks and the rivers flow. The way you are making a living in the bush will never be restricted." That was told to us by the Queen from overseas, Queen Victoria. But now the white man is so dishonest. We have lost many things. This is the information I've been told about when I've made my visits to the outside. About the reserve allotment. I was in the Camsell Hospital [in Edmonton]

with a councillor from Slave Lake. He said, “Your uncle had forty square miles of reserve, as it was written down.” He [the councillor Rene spoke to in Edmonton] eventually became a Chief. He was selected by my father. His name was Don Boucher. That was what took place at the Treaty. Everybody shook hands. It was written that the Queen sent the money and she would care for us as if we were her children. The message was, ‘too many Indians are starving to death in the bush. I don’t want that to happen again. That is why I’m sending you money.’ This was the message brought by the commissioner. That is when we received \$15.00 per head.

From then on everything went well. There was no drinking, everybody was making a good living. People were trapping and making money. I was young, too. I also trapped. Finally, I arrived here at Fort Chipewyan. It is during this time that things weren’t going good for me. There were councillors, but it wasn’t like today where they attend meetings away from here on the outside. Usually at treaty time there was a meeting, and I too would listen in. Only the Chief and Council would talk, and we would listen. They would ask to be given ammunition for hunting, when it would be open for muskrats, when the hunting would end. These are the only things they discussed with the agent. This is what I observed when I sat in the meetings. He [the Indian Agent] also told us we couldn’t kill game of the female species. Also, the ducks, we couldn’t kill them during the summer. They would be cared for by the Park officials—that was their work. This still is in effect here in our area. We can’t kill ducks, only when it is open season when they are flying. This is the information I can give you. I still have a bit of memory at my old age and still do well for myself.

Fredoline Deranger/Djeskelni (19 March 2021)

So, to put it in a nutshell, everything began to change with the Treaty. England, France, Netherlands, and all those people were already eyeing the land from Europe. I guess the treaty was used to further their insight into our territory. Wood Buffalo is not what we expected from the newcomers, because before Wood Buffalo, the Dënesųłné, from day one, looked after all the Europeans when they came into Canada. They had poor clothing, no roads, no machines at that time. So the Dënesųłné went ahead and clothed them and fed them and looked after them for over 200 years. So that’s a common knowledge amongst the Dënesųłné people of our country.

Jimmy Deranger (24 March 2021)

It's got to start with the preamble. That there was five First Nations, five Dënesų́́né people—principles, you know? The principles of the preamble that the land was given to us by the Creator for our use, for generations, for generations, for generations. Number two, there are five Dënesų́́né groups. Barrenland Dënesų́́né, Great Lake Dënesų́́né, Great River Dënesų́́né, Bush Dënesų́́né and Birch Mountain Dënesų́́né. Three, that all over Dënesų́́né land, as the Dënesų́́né died, they buried them. And the blood went back into the land, and they recognized that through the blood, after they were buried, that it was made by Dënesų́́né blood. And that's [what] shaped the relationship to the land. Four, in Treaty 8, where it says that when the land is going to open up, that they need to consent with the 'said Indians.' And we're the 'said Indians.' Is it one sided? Or is it supposed to be together? And then, there's still in Treaty, when they regulate [i.e. impose regulations on Indigenous land-use] from time to time, the regulations had to be [made with] the consent of the said Indians. It's those principles. It applied then, it applies now, and it ties into the future. It's Dënesų́́né land. It's our homeland.

Before that, they were free. We just want to be free. That's what the motto was at the time, you could say motto but, it's a principle, eh? We just want to be free. It's right in Treaty 8, we just want to be left alone. We just want to be free. We just want to be free on our lands. We just want to be free on our traditional lands.

I mean, it's our land. Whose land is it? Nobody's. Ours, ours. It's always been ours. Now the natural grass is still growing, the water at Lake Athabasca and the rivers are still flowing. And the sun is still shining. And that's our land. And the Dënesų́́né people and Mikisew people, the Métis people are still using the land as they did before contact and during contact, and to this very day. And will continue to use it. They had used it for 15,000 years, and they will continue to use it for another 15,000 years.

Felix Gibot (1974)

The same promises were reiterated. The Indian said, 'You now have worked on me for two days, and now on the third day, I will talk to you. What you are saying is that the promises are being made in good faith. My people will now be cared for by the government. But I will tell you one thing. I don't want

my people to be sent away from our land. I want them to stay here at Fort Chipewyan. It is large enough that there is room for everybody.’

The commissioner told him that this land which now belongs to you, that is the land you can keep. None will be restricted to you. You can make your living the way it suits you best. The Chief said, ‘Yes.’ That is when they put the coat on him and he was officially made Chief. He indicated that since he was now the Chief, he didn’t want the commissioners to say no to anything he said or requested. ‘When you make promises to me and I say yes, I have given you my word to last forever. If I agree to anything again, that is my final word and I expect the same from you. The promise you have made I want that fulfilled.’

Margaret and Daniel Marcel (1998)

In this oral history recorded in 1998, Margaret and Daniel Marcel discuss some of the ways the Treaty has not been honoured. They also discuss the devastating impacts of the W.A.C. Bennett Dam and extractive activities on the waters and animals of the region—impacts that are infringements on rights to harvest that were supposed to be protected under Treaty 8.

Only \$5.00, always \$5.00, was a lot of money in them days when things were cheaper. One good thing is we get free medical.

Today, they tell us if we don’t move back to our reserve we will have to pay for our own medical and taxes in Fort Chipewyan. If we move back to the reserve everything will be paid for like taxes and utilities. We are paying our own taxes now; the Treaties are not being honored. The Cree have their own land, reserve, and we have to go to their reserve to purchase tax exempt gas and tobacco . . . The people used to pay \$10.00 a year for the trap line, now they pay \$80.00 per year. We are also taxed for fuel. The Chipewyan were told that being Treaty meant these things would be provided all their lives, as long as the rivers flow, the mountains stand, etc.

The traps they used all their lives have changed as well for muskrats, marten, and minks. There are different traps now, bigger ones. The traps today are too powerful and destroy the furs. They are only useful as a bear trap. These traps are dangerous, if a person gets caught, they would get really hurt—it could break their limbs. They caught a marten once and it died, which is unusual because they are very tough and hard to kill.

Daniel says he used to go to Old Fort Bay to hunt for meat: moose, geese, ducks in the spring when they came in from the south, and when they went

back south, they stopped there again. The geese now do not stop in Old Fort because it dried out, there is no food for them to stop and eat. Likewise, as a result of flooding and oil spills, there are no muskrats either. The meat is spoiled when we do trap animals, because of oil spills. When they find muskrat's den, they find oil in their homes and the rats are sick. They have bleeding noses.

Marie Josephine Mercredi (1998)

Alexandre Laviolette signed the Treaty, but I did not understand the Treaty. Nothing was said in front of me—I was only told about the signing of the Treaty. The Queen's representatives (the red coats) came in full dress, they had guns and shells strapped around them. A week before the signing of the Treaty, [the people] made Alexandre the Chief. He was a smart man. Alexandre thought the men in red with the guns were there to slaughter them. This is what he told the People, he also told the People, the day before the Treaty was to be signed, that he was still not in agreement and did not want the Treaty. The next day they all met outside. The RCMP removed the shells and guns from their attire as Alexandre told them and money was passed out over a few days to the Cree and Chipewyan.

Victorine (Victoria) Mercredi had told [me] that they talked for one week, questioning all the things that would have an effect on them. The people were to receive \$15.00 each and the chiefs \$25.00 or more. They were told they were to be paid later. When money was sent in they took back \$10.00 and were given \$5.00 each. They were told the \$10.00 they held back was to be saved for the future. They have never seen that money that was to be kept for them.

After the signing of treaty and allotment of money, the government gave a buffalo or two for everyone to share, to cook for the dance, everyone cooked. Everyone was happy and danced for one week. They got a lot of help for store-bought goods to use to cook the feast. People helped themselves to prepare for the feast. The people with both Chipewyan and Métis blood would be considered treaty. Métis with no Chipewyan blood were put separate.

Victorine Mercredi (1998)

They gave \$12.00 to families, the whole family with kids included. That was changed to \$15.00 per person and \$7.00 was put into a bank, into a trust for us. This is what my father told [me]. The chief asked what they wanted from us. The commissioner promised that they would not break any promises, that

they would not take even a strand of grass. They were made to believe they were friends forever. A handshake sealed the promise: ‘whatever is needed will be provided like the treaty says, we will never bother you for your land.’ There was a three-day meeting. Three days later the treaty was signed. They said the land will never be taken away. For as long as the river flows, and the mountains stand, their word will never be broken.

They broke their word a long time ago. There were two cows given. One for the Cree and one for the Chipewyan. The bands celebrated and made a feast with the cows, a roast. At that time, they were given rations for one year: tobacco, blankets, and dry goods. . . .

The government is selling land to other people. We no longer own the land. The Indians believed that they were partners after the Treaty. The Treaty is no longer honoured.

Alice Rigney (17 March 2021)

My late brother Pat [Marcel] was a spokesman for them [ACFN]. He was a chief negotiator for the ACFN industry and whatnot. And he always used the treaty as a weapon because we, the First Nations, signed a Treaty with the Queen, the Crown.

And here when you think about it, we have the Crown and then the feds and then the provincial and then the municipality and then the First Nation. So we’re way down there when we signed a Treaty with the Crown. And, I mean, that treaty promised us that they would take care of us and whatnot, why did we need taking care of? We survived thousands of years before they came. And, my brother [Pat] used to say that they signed the Treaty saying, ‘we’ll take care of you,’ when all they wanted to do was exploit all our resources. When you think about it, that’s what the Treaty was. I mean, it was a real cruel way to trick the people and trying to assimilate them into the white society.

Magloire Vermillion (13 February 1974)

Yes, they told me the way the Treaty was signed. My mother and grandmother had told me. It was then that I had first heard of the way the Treaty was signed. The commissioners had pitched a tent at Hudson’s Bay Point. That’s the site where the actual negotiations had taken place. The commissioner at the time had told us people, ‘As long as those islands are there, and the river flows and the sun shines, you people can retain your way of life from hunting, trapping,

and fishing. Our government will not make restrictions that will keep you from your traditional lifestyle. It is for your own good that the agreed terms of the agreement will be respected by our government.’

It was on the terms agreed upon, of having the people retain our lifestyle, from hunting, trapping and fishing, that no curtailment of any kind will restrict us from this way of life. It was then the people accepted the Treaty money along with the provisions of the Treaty which were flour, shots, powder, bacon.

We, at the time, didn’t know of the real intention of the government, that in later years we were going to have restrictions that would prevent us from our way of life. We had also thought that everything (hunting, trapping, and fishing) will be respected for our own goodwill. As years passed, the government has since imposed upon their agreed terms of restriction that has prevented us from trapping, hunting and fishing. Regulations that we thought would never be imposed.

In fear of further impositions to the terms of the Treaty, Pierre Mercredi, the Chipewyan interpreter, had warned the people that probably sometime in the future, there would be further curtailment preventing us from our rights to trap, hunt, and fish.

The people at this time were still using the breechcloth and living in teepees. When the Treaty was signed, it was then introduced to the people that such a garment known as pants existed. It was then the people had first worn pants. Before that, it was breechcloth. My grandfather, whose name was Cree Bear, used to use his breechcloth till his death.

Even since the Treaty was signed, we were slowly being restricted with game regulations, preventing us from trapping, hunting, and fishing. There were no such people as Park wardens.

There were some people less fortunate than us who were in need of some sort of assistance to help them because of this situation. There were also some buffaloes around then. They were not as good. Shortly after this, they [the government] have them [the buffalo] brought in from the prairies and along with these buffaloes came the Park wardens.

We were not as free to hunt and trap as we were used to because of these regulations that were made. We were not allowed to hunt snow geese and also were not allowed to use snares to snare our game. It’s not legal to use, although we had used this type of method to trap our game. We were then

not allowed to trap or hunt beyond these regulations they called a season. If we did, we will then be brought before the law.

‘Yes, it’s your right to hunt, trap in all seasons,’ was what they [the commissioners] had said to us, free to hunt ducks any time or the year.

Leslie Wiltzen (21 January 2021)

When you look at Treaty 8, when it was signed, again I go back to Treaty, our document that was signed in 1899 by Chief Laviolette, it clearly states that “the Chipewyan Indians of the Athabasca river, Chipewyan of the Birch River, the Chipewyan Indians of the Peace River, the Chipewyan Indians of the Slave River and the Chipewyan Indians of Gull River.” Now, all those rivers that I just named to you, in 1899, we were told we’d be able to hunt, carry our traditional activities, right? So every one, other than the Athabasca River, runs its boundary on the Wood Buffalo National Park—from twenty-seventh baseline all the way down to Fletcher Channel, up to Embarras. And then from there to Fletcher, and it changes. So when the Treaty was signed, that was all assigned there, saying that was ACFN traditional territory.

Then all of a sudden, speed it up to 1926, we were told to leave. Now we’re going to be excluded of all those areas that we signed treaty to in 1899. Now tell me if that’s breaking Treaty. Is that right? Was that what was negotiated in the Treaty? That after 10 years of Treaty, the federal government should be able to come and tell us “you have to leave, you’re no longer allowed in this part of the country.” No, the Treaty was broken.

And that’s been clearly stated time and time again in oral history. You know, we go back to 1926, and here we are in 2021 and we’re still talking about the broken promises that the federal government put upon the people of the Chipewyan Nation, and what they forced them to endure in the process. I mean, not only the immediate suffering, the starvation and the hunger and the lack of food and the forced to swallow your dignity and ask for handouts. But also, when you go back, you start going through all that time in history where our people weren’t allowed to try to practice their traditional history in their traditional territory, up to even you know, when I go back to the 80s, sneaking around in the park hoping not to get caught [by Park wardens]. So, I mean, that had decades and decades and decades and decades. Finally, we have a century of hardship that has occurred because of broken treaty, because of a broken treaty.

Anonymous Fort Chipewyan Elder (6 February 1974)

The Treaty commissioners had set up a tent, along with the R.C.M.P. The question of surrendering the land to them was the main question, but along with this question was the Treaty money and scrip. 'We will give you all the provisions free, forever.' All those who want to take the Treaty money could take the money as they wished, and all those that wanted the scrip could also take the scrip as they wished.

Many of the Indians took the Treaty. It was before I was born, but I am telling you of what I was told. There are other resources and people who may know of how they heard of how the Treaty was signed, like Jack Wylie, the father of Horace Wylie and Victor Mercredi.

They were talking for three days, one day for the Crees and one day for the Chipewyans. The final day was when they actually signed the Treaty with the agreements for us Indians, that all rights pertaining to our way of life will never be curtailed by any laws.

The headmen [political leaders and Treaty negotiators] for the Indians of both tribes were Janos Martin [the leader of the Cree Band], Alexander Lavolette, Julian Ratfat, and my grandfather who was one of the councillors, Incz Sepp [Lavolette, Ratfat and Sepp were leaders representing the Chipewyan Band]. It was then they started giving the treaty money to the Indians on the final day they met each other, the commissioner and the chiefs, with all the money on the table. It was then the commissioner pointed to the sun, the river and the hills looking west, that you can see from the Hudson Bay Point, about where the mission and school are today, that we will never have any laws that will prevent you from your way of life, like hunting, fishing, trapping. But today, long after the Treaty was signed, many of the words of the commissioner are not fulfilled today, since there are laws curtailing our way of life when there shouldn't be any.

In the past, before the treaty was signed, our way of life was not restricted by any laws. We never had thought there would be a day that there would be restrictions preventing our way of life.

And after these agreements were reached by both parties, they then had a Pow Wow, with a feast of two cows which were given to the party by the Roman Catholic Church for this occasion.

It should be written in the Treaty, when it was signed. Now where is this treaty? Maybe the Fathers [priests] have it. They [the government] really are

not concerned about our welfare. They never were. They had only seemed to be concerned about the money they used to get from our furs. The government, I don't think, knew about what was agreed on by our forefathers.

It has been a long time since the Treaty was signed. It never occurred to us that we would be curtailed with the regulations interfering with our way of life. The wild game that we hunted and trapped we thought in those days will always be our way of life, without restrictions of any kind. It was then the provision was given us—bacon, shots for our guns.

Yes, it was written on moosehide by the commissioners, that our way of life will remain as so.

At first, we were given \$12.00, then they took \$7.00 back for the provisions we get today. You know, our grandfathers never told us much about how the Treaty was signed. The only time they mentioned the Treaty was when it interfered with our way of life. We were always living in the bush. I think I have told you enough of all that I can remember, from what [my] grandfather told me.

Anonymous Fort McKay/Fort Chipewyan Elder (7 February 1974)

I was born in Fort McKay.

Traditionally, our people, young and old, when our people mentioned to them what concerned them as an important matter, they listened because it was a matter of importance. That is what I was taught to do is listen and when my father talked to us about the Treaty, I listened attentively to my father. 'When I first heard about the Treaty, it was from my father,' [my father] told me. The people who were white were the commissioners who came to make the Treaty with us. At that time, we didn't have an official headman of any kind since we were always not in a group, we attended to our own privileges of support for our families [i.e. people lived and travelled in smaller groups not requiring headmen and chiefs]. Yet we were able to choose from the people gathered before the actual negotiations, a man with considerable understanding of the concepts of negotiations. He was called Jonas Martin, an Elder. So the people had chosen him to represent us since we were convinced that he could negotiate our demands.

The commissioner was explaining the terms of the Treaty, if we wanted to take the Treaty money, to the Elder.

Martin said, 'If we take this Treaty money, you will perhaps eventually take away our land from us, since you are using the Treaty money as a gimmick.'

Commissioner said, 'No, we will not take your land in exchange for the Treaty money. It was the Queen who has given you this money because she had heard from informative sources that you people were desperately struggling to survive from the land with considerable hardships. She heard that the people of this region were starving. That is the real reason why she has sent this money, so you can make a living. [Your] life will not be interfered with by any outside sources that will prevent you from going about your daily activities, fishing, trapping, and hunting for a living. No restrictions of any kind will interfere with your way of life. You can trap, fish and hunt in any area you wish. You are free to go about your lifestyles.' Martin said, 'If we take this Treaty money, perhaps this money that you are so desperately trying to give us, keep us from our present lifestyle. Perhaps from this money, as a gimmick, will prevent us from trapping, fishing, and hunting. Perhaps we will not be as free to do as we wish.'

Commissioner: 'No, that's not the reason. Even if you take this money, your lifestyle will not be curtailed by any regulations. As long as the sun shines and the river flows, we will not make regulations that will restrict you from trapping, fishing, and hunting, as long as those elements that I have described are functioning, forever you are free to do as you wish. Even the migration of many white people into this country, they will not even take a blade of grass from you. They will not even chop a branch from your land.'

Martin: 'The terms that you have described to us, that there will be no restrictions of any kind to our lifestyles, no curtailment to prevent us from trapping, hunting and fishing, as you say, as long as the sun shines and the river flows and forever. Then we will take the Treaty money.'

After the Treaty was signed, there was a big Pow Wow.

After the First World War we Indians started migrating into the settlement of Fort Chipewyan. Many young Indians were placed in the mission that was run by the Roman Catholic Church. I was one of those young people. I was probably 12 years old then when my father took me out of the mission, when I was able to understand and reason for myself. It was then my father had told me of the way the Treaty was signed, and I have told you all I can recollect concerning the way the Treaty was signed.

It was shortly after this that we [the Nation] decided to take a reserve for means of trapping, fishing, and hunting. My father was then a councillor with Chief Cowie [a Cree Band Chief]. When the Treaty was made, as I told you, there was to be a migration of white people into the area. There will be probably many remembering that this is why we decided to take a reserve for our means of trapping, fishing, and hunting.

It was also said in the agreed terms, that we can set aside a reserve for trapping, hunting and fishing which pertains to our way of living. The area that we choose as land will not be bounded by miles and acres. We are free to take the territory according to our demands of taking, since we are close to nature, and the wildlife that roam the land have no established boundaries. Our forefathers were told by the commissioner to take land as large as they wish.

It was on these terms when my father was councillor with Chief Cowie. . . .

First Treaty was made in Fort McKay. My father was there when the Treaty was made. My father told me about it and also other old people. Although I was young, I listened to them talking about the Treaty. At the time when they paid the first Treaty, my father was a young man. One day the government officials were sent by the Queen to Fort McKay. There was a man by the name of Orphan (Ts'ineke) who was chosen by the Chipewyans to speak on their behalf. The government people told the Chipewyans that they brought them some money. So Ts'ineke did not know whether it was good or not, so he told the people, 'maybe if we take this money we might have trouble and we won't be free to hunt, trap, and fish as we like.' But the government men told them the Queen sent you this money because there were too many people starving to death, so we don't want this to happen again. But anyway, ever since we can remember, we went hunting, trapping, and fishing anywhere and no one stopped us. Maybe this will interfere with our rights, but they said, 'A long as the sun shines and the river flows, these promises would never be broken.' Only after he was sure that they made these promises, he agreed to sign his X on the papers. But before he signed the paper, the government men told him, 'In a short while there will be a lot of white men on this land, so before they come, choose the best places that you want to preserve for yourself to live on.' This land will be preserved for you. They did not mention how many acres or miles. They just told them to choose themselves some land. So only then did he sign his name. So that's how they signed the Treaty. Kawee was the Chief

at the time. The place where they called Peace Point was where a few of our people went to look at the land they wanted to choose. After a meeting with government officials my father chose a piece of land and claimed it. This piece of land was twenty miles long and four miles wide. With this land he claimed two lakes that he took so they would have fish for food. After he took the two lakes, it would have been ten miles wide. So the government broke his [its] promise and told them they were taking too much land, so to this day, they don't have a reserve.

I believe that the only thing the government bought was the land surface, timber and grass. As far as I am concerned, I still believe that I own the game, fish, birds, and also the gas, oil, minerals, etc. underground.

For only \$5.00 a year, I don't think he [the government] should own everything.

At that time when we made the Treaty, the government promised to give us a game warden to protect game for us. And also, the government promised us a policeman to protect us from trouble.

There were no borders on our land, as far as hunting game, fishing, etc. was concerned. We could go to Saskatchewan or any place to hunt and no one stopped us. Now things are changing against the promises of our Treaty.