

Napaskis = great uncle (paternal)
Ermine Skin = grandfather (maternal)

GENEALOGICAL SKETCH OF MY FAMILY

By Edward Ahenakew

In giving a genealogical sketch of my family it is perhaps in order that I should begin by introducing myself.

My name is Edward Ahenakew; I have no Indian name of my own. Born at Atahkakoops Reserve, I remember we lived, during my early childhood, in a log house, thatched with mud and hay. There was a beautiful lake close by; because of its beaches, it was called Sandy Lake. The landscape around is bold and hilly, promontories covered with tall slender spruce trees project out into the lake and on summer evenings, when the waters are calm, we hear the sad call of the diver which seems to blend with the solitude of the place, a solitude which persists, even though, now, can be seen, good sized dwellings here and there, along the higher spots bordering the lake.

My parents, Baptiste and Ellen Ahenakew, were very worthy people. My father's features, cast in Indian mould, showed much strength of character, my mother was considered very good looking, not only by myself but by others, Indian and white. They were both true to their Christian beliefs, and we their children owe a great deal to them. None of us can lay claim to anything of a saintly nature but all of us stand by and help any effort made to improve things amongst our own Indian people.

Untoward circumstances attended my birth. It was only after my father's death that I was told that my mother was alone,

in a teepee, when I was born. For reasons which I will mention later my father's mother Keeskanakwas was unable to walk at the time. She crawled into the teepee, ignorant of what was happening, just in time to rescue me from the ground where I lay. She took charge and in a few minutes, all was well. Her appearance probably saved two lives, my mother's and mine.

The abnormal circumstances which surrounded my birth did not seem to affect me adversely. However, I was a weak ailing baby and nothing could be done to make me healthier and stronger.

When about three years of age I was wasting away gradually. A time came when I could not eat. On the eleventh day of what I may refer to as my fast, a girl-cousin of mine brought me a strawberry, the first ripe one found that summer. I can remember that berry, it was not fully ripe but I wanted to eat it. It seemed tasteless but I swallowed it.

My mother having heard the story of the prophet Samuel and the prayer of his mother, thought she would act in a similar way regarding myself. She discussed the matter with my father and he was agreeable. She then prayed to God asking Him to spare my life and I would be given up to His service.

Whether it was the effect of eating that strawberry or not I cannot say; it may have reminded my stomach that it had its work to do, it may have started the flow of digestive juices, if such exist, at any rate from that time on, I began to take nourishment, first a little, but in increasing amounts as time went by.

My strength of course came back to me slowly. In time I was a normal child in every way except that I was a weakling.

When I had passed my eleventh year my parents knew the time had come when preparation for the life I was to live, should begin. My mother had made her vow, a decided effort must be made to redeem her promise to God. Looking on my frail condition, the thought of my being away from their care made the anticipation of our parting full of sadness for them.

After a great deal of discussion and planning, they took me to Prince Albert where there was a good Indian Residential School in operation. This town is sixty-five miles from my home. It was in November that we made the trip.

~~When we at length~~

When we at length arrived at the Saskatchewan River, across from the town, we found ice floating. It was three days later that we were able to cross on foot.

I was signed over to the principal. He was an Archdeacon, smallish in stature but very awe-inspiring. He had flashing eyes half shaded by very heavy eyebrows; on his chin was a large beard which always seemed to want to fork but which never actually did. He was bow-legged.

These superficial things I noticed but failed to realize that here was a man who knew Western Canada and the people living in the West perhaps better than any one else; a man of great will power, a worker who worked to some purpose and who on leaving the Earth knew that he had accomplished a great deal of what would be useful to people, ~~xx~~ specially those of the Indian race.

When I parted from my father I shed no tear but the pain in my heart was great as I watched him walking away. He never looked back once! I was very depressed and I was glad when two cousins of mine ran over and took charge of me. We joined the

group of boys who were kicking a ball around. Very soon, my troubles were forgotten.

I gradually fell into the ordinary round of school life. We had a great deal of organized play. We received a good training although our living conditions were quite poor.

My health had greatly improved and I had, during my school days won a few minor honors both on the play grounds and in the class room. The most important thing, however, happened to me when I passed my Matriculation examination because this gave me the necessary standing for admission into Wycliffe College, Toronto, to which institution I went. I transferred later on to Emmanuel College, Saskatoon, Sask., where I received a minor degree called Licentiate of Theology, I being the first student to ever have had ^{it} conferred on him by that institution, but only because my initial began with the letter "A."

Some years later (1918) I began to study medicine in order to be better equipped, as I thought, to do work amongst the Indians. Owing to a break-down in health due to ulcers in the stomach, I decided very reluctantly not to take the two remaining years needed to give me a doctor's standing.

The years I spent on the course were not wasted entirely. What knowledge I gained has come in handy from time to time. I think also, that my outlook on things has been widened and my association with the medical students was, I am sure, of some value to me.

I went back to my church work. I was General Missionary of the diocese for many years. Then because of the financial position of the Church and shortage of men the Bishop felt I should take the mission I am working now. There are over ~~xx~~

400 Indians on this parish and an equal number of Halfbreeds just outside the boundary of the Reserve. The site is along the banks of the ~~Six~~ Saskatchewan River and adjacent to the Hudson Bay land on which was built Fort a la Corne.

AHENAKEW (my paternal grandfather and his five brothers)

The name Ahenakew was my grandfather's own name. Unfortunately it has no meaning. Not all Indian names have a meaning.

In order to show how a name may be given to an Indian child, I will take an example right from this locality. About an hour ago a youngish man went out of my office accompanied by a little daughter. Her name is ~~Kaxaxaxaxax~~ Mā mā mauch. It is conceivable that some seventy years from now some one may ask the meaning of the name. Some scholar of the Indian language then will manage to work out some meaning for it, by skilfully manipulating roots of words, prefixes and suffixes. He will be wrong!

Before I go further with this name Mā mā mauch, I will try to show how easily a Cree speaker may make a mistake regarding the interpretation of Indian names.

Archdeacon MacKay, my old principal at the school I attended in Prince Albert, was perhaps the best Cree scholar we have ever had in the country. He and I were on a train together.

Some commercial travellers opposite to us were discussing the name of a village called Adanac. They thought it was an Indian name. They asked me if I could tell them its meaning. I hesitated. Archdeacon MacKay unfortunately took it upon himself to answer.

He said it probably was a corruption of the Indian word

"Ātanák." He went into an elaborate explanation of how the word was made up.

What he said was absolutely right but he was very embarrassed when another man who had been listening quietly said, "I always understood that the name Adanac was the word Canada turned backward." Of course he was right.

The name of little Mā mā mauch had its origin thus,- her little sister tried to pronounce her name, Evelyn Maud, after she was baptized. She said "Kāmā mauch." The other members of the family began to use this name. Today every one calls her that. Instead of being an Indian name, as its ^{sound} ~~name~~ would indicate, it is really English in its origin.

I have dwelt on this at length because so many people have looked either disappointed or a bit doubtful when I have had to tell them that my grand father's name had no meaning.

The first Ahenakew hit his knee against a sharp stone when he was thrown by a stumbling horse. The joint was so smashed up, that he was never able to walk with his left leg again. Moreover, the sore never properly healed up. He was a cripple on crutches for the rest of his life.

In days when men hunted and fought, a crippled leg was a most serious matter. His handicap prevented my grandfather from attaining to any prominence, inasmuch as physical competency was, at that time, absolutely essential to success; much more so than in these ~~day~~ times, when occupations can be found fairly easily for the maimed and even for the blind.

He died in 1878, so I never saw him. He did one very worthy deed. He was the first Indian on the Reserve to accept Christianity.

A young missionary, Rev. John Hines, had been sent out

by the C. M. S. to work amongst the Indians in North West Canada. I shall not go into detail about his work; it is enough to say that he settled at Sandy Lake and began his work with great zeal. He had been^e a farmer's son in England so he was invaluable ~~at~~ also in the advice he gave the Indians who were for the first time trying to raise cattle and to grow wheat and vegetables.

My people were, of course, pagan, when they settled down on the new Reservation. My grand father attended all the services which were held on Sundays. A time came when he and my grandmother were convinced that what they heard in church was the truth. They decided to scrap their old beliefs and accept the teaching of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

There was a serious difficulty in the way. Two of his older brothers were still living. They had not said anything about Christianity, one way or another. For him, to take on another religion was a big step. According to Indian custom, he, as the youngest brother, had not the right to take the initial step and thus usurp the right of his older brothers. He held back for some time.

Then Mr. Hines preached a sermon on the text, "Now ^{is the} ~~is the~~ ~~is the~~ accepted time, now is the day of salvation." It seemed a direct message to my grandfather. After talking with his wife, he decided that he would accept Christianity with or without his brothers' consent.

That evening he invited them to his house. After they had well eaten and had their ^{pipes} ~~pipes~~ going, he told them the situation he was in. He asked them to give him permission, as older brothers, to take the step he had decided on. He did not hide anything from them, he knew the kind of men they were.

After a pause the Chief spoke very mildly. He said he himself had decided to adopt Christianity but that his wife was not ready and he was waiting for her. In the meantime his brother could follow the dictates of his conscience, that he would give his sanction willingly to any step that he might take.

The other brother, Susu kwa moos, spoke in like manner. My grandfather was happy to know that now the way for him and his family was wide ~~not~~ open and after a few weeks' teaching they were baptized, - the first-fruits of the missionary's work. Others followed his lead. In a few years there were very few indeed who were pagan.

Ahenakew's brothers.

The names of the two oldest I am unable to find out. One died of small pox in 1870, during an epidemic which went through Saskatchewan and Alberta. Some of his descendants have been leaders on the reserves and a goodly number have joined the colors in the two Great Wars. The next brother, name forgotten, was last seen when he went to some post in the North, acting as one of a party attending some white man of some importance, probably a Hudson Bay Co. officer. While out there he had the misfortune to cut his foot with an axe. When the time came for the party to return, he was unable to travel, so he stayed. He never returned. Rumour has it that he married out there; it was probably true. It needed some such important thing to induce a prairie Indian of those days to settle in a country of forests and rocks.

When I travel through the North country I sometimes think that some of the Indians I meet, may be distant cousins of mine,

descendants of this man.

put back
Chief Ahtah ka koōp (Starblanket)

The third brother of my grandfather was the head of the family. He was a very prominent man. I remember him very well as he was still alive when I left the Reservation to go to school in Prince Albert in 1896. He died the next year (1897) at the age of 86. The date of his birth would thus be 1811.

He stood, I am told, six feet and three inches. To quote one who knew him well, a Hudson Bay officer named Alex Seymour, "he was the best proportioned man I ever saw, Indian or white." The chief had a strong, handsome face. I know, because I saw a picture of him only the other day. His hair was dutch cut, a style then adopted by the half-breeds. He was calm and deliberate in movement and speech. His voice made one think of the deep low sound of a grizzley-bear growl.

He was a powerful man physically and mentally. Assuming leadership, wherever he was, came naturally to him and this was accepted by others as a matter of course. Viscount Milton, who spent a winter near Sandy Lake, referred to him in his book* as one of the biggest savages he knew. He had cause to dislike the chief but ^{if} Starblanket was indeed a Savage, he was a noble one, at least.

He was a fur-chief of the Hudson Bay Co.; when the Treaty was signed in 1876 at Fort Carlton (Sask.), his name and that of Mist awasis (Big Child) were put down as Head Chiefs, in distinction to the rest who were referred to as chiefs. This meant

* Milton and Cheadle: "The North-West Passage by Land."

that Starblanket was the head chief of the bands in the country North of the Fort, and Mist awasis the head chief of the bands operating in the more prairie country, South of the Fort.

Mist awasis was also a very remarkable man and I will have some reason to refer to him later on in this sketch.

Sometime after the Ahenakew family were baptized the chief and his household also joined the Church. He was given the name John. As a child I used to see him and his councillors occupying the very front pew of the church. I still imagine some times, I can hear him sing in church, an octave lower than the rest of the singers. I notice in the old Synod journals that he always attended the annual diocesan meetings in Prince Albert. I note that at one synod he was appointed a delegate to the General Synod. In 1896⁸ just before the closing of the Diocesan Synod a motion was made,- "That we the Synod of Saskatchewan now assembled signify our joy in having had Chief Starblanket's presence with us during our meetings." This was passed unanimously.

Probably the mover and seconder felt that it might be the last synod the now aged chief would attend. It was. He died early the next year.

I shall not take time to describe the funeral. Enough ~~to~~ it is to say, that whites and Indians alike, came to pay their last homage to his worth. The Government, represented by the Indian Department officer did its full share in all that needed to be done.

The Chief took a firm stand when the North West Rebellion broke out. He, with Chief Mist awasis, declared neutrality. They moved their bands to a Sioux Reserve a few miles North West of Prince Albert. The Sioux Indians, who had lately fled across