



Sitting White Eagle, charismatic medicine man and warrior, and his fellow Plains Indians endured massive changes after 1880. A portrait of the times in southern Saskatchewan.



BY ARNI BROWNSTONE

WHEN HE WAS A YOUNG MAN, Sitting White Eagle—a Plains Indian warrior and medicine man who was born in 1840—and several of his band members were captured by a group of Peigans, of the Blackfoot Nation. The Peigans had encamped all around their prisoners to prevent escape. But the men managed to consult with Sitting White Eagle, and he told them to do as he said. The fire still lingered. Under the moonlight, he rose with

his blanket about him and walked in a straight line through the Peigan camp, his men following in his footsteps. Not one Peigan saw them. As soon as they were out of distance of the camp, Sitting White Eagle told them to run for their lives.

This story is recounted in a diary of Canadian artist Edmund Morris, who in June 1908 made his first of three visits to the Crooked Lake Reserves in Saskatchewan. Morris, under government

SPIRIT OF



Left: Sitting White Eagle holds the pipe bag and pipe collected by Morris. Edmund Morris, June 20, 1908. Cat. No. 98. Courtesy of the Manitoba Archives

Above: Details of Sitting White Eagle's pipe bag. ROM HK2428

Opposite page: Sitting White Eagle's pipe and pipe bag. The pipe bag is an item of ceremonial regalia used to carry pipe, tobacco, and smoking paraphernalia. Gift of Edmund Morris HK210. Gift of Sir Byron Edmund Walker 912.40.4. Photography of all ROM artifacts by Brian Boyle, ROM

THE PLAINS

Below: Sitting White Eagle is on the left, at the head of a mounted parade during treaty-time celebrations. Edmund Morris, June 20, 1908. Cat. No. 101. Courtesy of the Manitoba Archives



commission to draw pastel portraits of important Plains Indians, made the acquaintance of this “very astute old medicine man.”

Another of Morris’s diaries, along with more than 400 artifacts collected on the reserves, was bequeathed to the ROM shortly before Morris’s death in 1913. In the ROM diary, the same escape from captivity is described to even greater dramatic effect, with “hundreds of Peigans” and the daring getaway taking place in “broad daylight.”

Whichever version is true, the story suggests that Sitting White Eagle used supernatural powers to make himself and his comrades invisible to the enemy. These powers fell within the realm of what was expected of a medicine man. Sitting White Eagle, a traditional medicine man and charismatic Indian, was among the first generation to make the transition to life on the reserve. Tales and artifacts of his life during the old days remind us of an important period in Canadian history.

Sitting White Eagle was a Plains Indian, part of a vast community of nomadic peoples whose lives once centred on the movements of the buffalo over the Great Plains of North

America. Around 1870, it became acutely clear to Canadian Plains Indians that the great herds were on the decline, seemingly to be replaced by white settlers. In light of their future prospects, the Indians agreed to a series of treaties with the Dominion of Canada. These numbered treaties were signed between 1873 and 1877.

In 1880, after the buffalo herds disappeared, the Plains Indians made the difficult transition from a nomadic, hunting life to a sedentary one dependent upon agriculture and the provisions of the treaties—government food rations, equipment, housing, and medical help, as well as a small annuity payment.

As that transition was taking place, the discipline of anthropology in North American museums was in its infancy. Natural history museums, eager to preserve a record of the buffalo days before the people of that era passed away, sent field collectors to reserves to gather artifacts and cultural data. Over the next few decades, both New York’s American Museum of Natural History and the Royal Ontario Museum collected artifacts from Sitting White Eagle. In 1913, the Government of Ontario transferred its collection of 58 Morris portraits, in-

Below: Sitting White Eagle and friend (O'Soup?) standing before government-built log houses or "mud shacks." Edmund Morris, August 1910. Cat. No. 48. Courtesy of the Manitoba Archives



cluding one of Sitting White Eagle, to the ROM. The Manitoba Archives also holds more than 600 photographs, several of them of Sitting White Eagle, taken by Morris on his journeys. From these artifacts, paintings, and photos, as well as from written reminiscences of the day, we can reconstruct the history of this charismatic warrior and medicine man—and the cultural environment of southern Saskatchewan where he lived and worked.

Today, 161 kilometres (100 miles) east of Regina, with their southern borders parallel to the Trans-Canada Highway 11 kilometres (7 miles) away, sit the four adjacent Indian reserves of the Crooked Lake Agency. Running northward along flat prairie, the reserves fall off suddenly into the breathtaking chasm of the Qu'Appelle Valley, ending at the southern shorelines of Crooked Lake, Round Lake, and the connecting Qu'Appelle River. The first three reserves—Cowesses, Kahkewistahaw, and Ochapowace—are populated mainly by Plains Cree, while the fourth, Sakimay—where Sitting White Eagle lived—is predominantly Plains Ojibwa. The Crooked Lake Reserves are among those formed when the vast territory of south-central

Saskatchewan was ceded to the Dominion of Canada under the provisions of Treaty Four. That treaty was negotiated with Lieutenant Governor Alexander Morris in 1874 at Fort Qu'Appelle by leaders of the Assiniboine, Cree, and Ojibwa nations.

In the early days after the treaty was signed, the annual \$5 payment to each band member was the event of the year. Bands who had been dispersed for most of the year would converge for a week or more to renew friendships and celebrate their traditions. It was a time when the Indians once again felt masters in their own land. When Edmund Morris (the Lieutenant Governor's son) made his first sketching trip to Crooked Lake around June 20, 1908, it was treaty payment time.

Though treaty celebrations had been dampened after the mid-1890s by Canadian government regulations that prohibited Indians from holding traditional ceremonies, Morris convinced the Agent to permit a one-time traditional dance. At the event, Morris photographed Sitting White Eagle and collected his pipe and pipe bag.

Of the 10 photographs Morris took of Sitting White Eagle, one of particular interest shows him, unfortunately blurred,

Below: Buffalo calling banner collected by Morris in 1908, with tag in his handwriting: "Cree decoration for a rest used in lodges of the Chief and Medicine man." HD6868



inside a tipi sitting on a Plains Indian device called a backrest. It is the only known historical photograph showing a special backrest decoration called a "buffalo calling banner."

The buffalo caller, or pound maker, was considered to be a medicine man in a class by himself. It was believed that he communed with the buffalo in his dreams and could induce a herd to follow his songs to their destruction. The 10 complete and four partial banners in existence consistently display beadwork imagery that seems to represent the calling of the buffalo herd into the pound, a circular wooden corral, hence the name pound maker. The three "U" shapes squared at their tops in the ROM example represent three pounds, the cross inside each signifying poles for holding the pound maker's sacred offerings, while the funnel shape represents the drive lanes, which would stretch 2.4 to 3.2 kilometres (one-and-a-half to two miles) into the prairie. The curious fact about the surviving buffalo calling banners is that they appear to be anachronistic—made soon after the buffalo herds' demise.

Five years after Morris's first visit to Crooked Lake, in June 1913, Alanson Skinner, curator of North American Ethnology at the American Museum of Natural History, spent some three weeks on the same reserves. In his field correspondence to his supervisor, Clark Wissler, he noted that the old timers were still always on the move. "They go to every re-

serve in Canada, drop down into the States to Sun Dance and visit everybody with red skin that they can find, and go, go, go, wintering anywhere they happen to be when the snow falls."

William Graham, the Inspector of Indian Agencies, wondered at their navigating abilities: "Before the days of railroads it was quite common to see old couples of 70 or 80 years of age, starting off by themselves with a team of ponies and wagon to go to Indian reserves hundreds of miles away in Montana. How they got there is a mystery to me, for as a rule, the tracks were not very distinct. Often they would drive over the prairies where there were no trails at all to be seen." These observations are curious since the government "pass system" was still in effect, meaning that Indians could not travel off reserve except for restricted periods and with written permission.

Skinner found that even when the bands were around, collecting artifacts was not necessarily easy. Of "old material there is none, for they bury everything with their dead," he complained. Indians did not have a tradition of preserving heirlooms in the manner of Europeans. Robert Jefferson, a teacher on Red Pheasant Reserve (1878–1884), noted that "relics" were wrapped with the deceased in red stroud or the best cloth on hand. Possessions not buried were given away "except for a small memento which [was] preserved centrally in the family, the accumulation of which is called a 'burden'." Despite Skinner's complaints, he was able to collect a "splendid Saulteaux [Ojibwa] suit in buckskin for a man," which turns out to have belonged to Sitting White Eagle.

This influential Indian was known in his own language as Wahpekinewap or sometimes Pahnnap. "Pahnnap" means "clean sitting"—clean in the sense of leading an exemplary life. Originally from the area of Lake Manitoba and Lake Winnipeg, Sitting White Eagle's father was a Plains Ojibwa, and his mother, a Swampy Cree, was a member of the Ojibwa band led by Peguis (Cut Nose Chief). That band sold its land to Lord Selkirk to establish the Red River Settlement in 1817, and from there the family must have moved southwest, onto the buffalo plains.

Sitting White Eagle was renowned both as a warrior and as a medicine man. In the 19th century, the Great Plains were the scene of intense inter-tribal warfare, and war and religion were inextricably connected. A warrior's success was believed to come from the efficacy of his medicine helper, or spirit power.

At an early age, boys or young men would prepare to become warriors by going on a vision quest to obtain supernatural powers, and by joining war parties as observers and helpers. Sitting White Eagle joined his first war party—against the Blackfoot—at the age of 12 as an observer.

During his lifetime he was in five battles with the Sioux, five with the Blackfoot, five with the Blood (a division of the Blackfoot), and five with the Crows. "At 20 he was in a fight," wrote Morris, "—one of the hostiles got shot through the leg and fled to his lodge. He followed him up & scalped him—for this he still wears a feather in his bearskin cap. The other feather is for another encounter—a Sioux levelled his gun at him. He threw his away & the Sioux did the same & both engaged with scalping knives. He killed the Sioux &

took his scalp. . . He says the large black beads on his [shirt] stand for shots fired which took no effect—bulletproof!” Morris’s portrait of Sitting White Eagle (on page 20) shows him wearing both the cap and the shirt. The same shirt is part of the outfit collected by Skinner.

Taking a scalp while under fire of the enemy or killing a man in battle qualified an Indian as a brave. The most coveted piece of scalp was the scalp lock. Fur trader Alexander Henry observed in 1775 that young Swampy Cree men around Lake Winnipeg removed all their hair from their heads except for a spot on the crown the size of a silver dollar. They grew this clump of hair long, rolling and gathering it into a “tuft.” The tuft was considered an “object of greatest care.” Amelia Paget, who grew up in the Qu’Appelle Valley, noted a century later that although the men let their hair grow, they still decorated their scalp locks as “a sign of bravery, for it incited his foe.”

Although the scalp lock was most prized, a second, third, or fourth scalp could be taken by additional warriors from the same head. Night Bird (Nepahpenais), a contemporary of Sitting White Eagle from the neighbouring Cowesses Reserve, told Morris there was sometimes a rush to take a scalp in battle with “two or three swooping down with their knives. His hand was once cut in this way by the other’s knife.”

Henry Yule Hind, the head of an 1858 Red River expedition to assess the economic value of the prairie region, observed that victory celebrations in several Plains Ojibwa villages were focused around the capture of two Sioux scalps. The scalps were passed from hand to hand accompanied by dancing, feasting, and singing, then were returned to the warriors who suspended them “over the graves of relatives or friends mourning the loss of any of their kindred by the hands of the Sioux.” Killing was often an act of revenge against an enemy who had killed one’s own. Upon receipt of a scalp, those grieving the loss of a loved one were released from mourning.

Sitting White Eagle also told Morris details about victory celebrations. A successful war party, upon returning to camp, would blacken their faces with coal and lead grease, he said. When they were seen, a war cry would go up from camp and everyone would rush out of their tipis. A dance followed, the women donning the men’s war clothes. Skinner collected a charming Native drawing of two young Cree women from Crooked Lake dressed in men’s war bonnets, such as those worn at a victory dance.

The medicine man told Morris about another form of victory celebration: “Sitting White Eagle says it is true that the Saulteaux used to eat the Sioux killed in battle. He himself has done it—says they cut the flesh in narrow strips & let it slip down—says it is very rich.” Skinner questioned several Plains Ojibwa about this practice. All denied its existence except one.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Plains Cree and Ojibwa were renowned for their potent medicine. Although they believed in an all-powerful Creator, they worshipped him indirectly through an intermediary, or medicine helper, which could be drawn from either living or inanimate sources. Each person would seek to establish rapport with a

Below: Sitting White Eagle seated on a “buffalo calling banner” inside a tipi. Edmund Morris, probably August 1910. Cat. No. 47. Courtesy of the Manitoba Archives



medicine helper through a vision, or “meaning dream.” The dream was made manifest in a medicine bundle composed of objects and ritual elements. Most people had some kind of medicine bundle that served to guide them during the course of their lives. Activated through ritual opening—which might include singing, prayer, body painting, and choreographed movements—the bundle established a rapport between the person and the supernatural power.

In some instances, a medicine bundle would contain a carving. Two such carvings were among Morris’s collection; they were found along the Yellow Quill Trail in 1878 and 1879. The first, a finely carved elk-horn figure, was found under the ground “in a box without nails” by a French settler. Traces of red paint cover the entire figure, with the colour particularly strong in the eyes and the heart. Sitting White Eagle explained to Morris why the figure would have been buried: “Either the medicine man who used it became too infirm to practice his art & having no one capable of succeeding him, he would bury it—or else it was bad medi-

From left to right: 1. Probably part of a marionette, the wooden head was found along the Yellow Quill Trail in 1879. HK 954
 2. This finely carved elk-horn figure is characterized by an elaborate conical headdress, which looks surprisingly like a bishop's

mitre. Holes at the sides probably once anchored horns. A small hole on top may once have held a downy feather. HK 956 (1 and 2 Gifts of Edmund Morris) 3. Sitting White Eagle was 70 years old when Morris made this pastel portrait in June 1908.



cine used against an enemy or one against whom he had a grudge, & when this man died or was killed, by reason of this image, the medicine man would bury it.”

A Blackfoot (Peigan) chief named Little Plume owned a medicine figure in the 1890s. Walter McClintock, a dedicated student of Blackfoot culture who spent lengthy periods among the Blackfoot beginning in 1896, explained that “If [Little Plume] placed red paint between the eyes of the image, the one whom he desired to injure became ill; if over the lungs, he had a hemorrhage; if on the top of the head, he became crazy; if over the heart, it caused death.” The ROM’s elk-horn figure may have had a similar function.

But the magic was not always malevolent. The Plains Cree were known for their love medicine, or “sympathetic magic.” Little wooden figures of a man and woman were bound together with some strands of hair of the one whose love was desired, then sprinkled with medicine. In 1934, Fine Day, the 80-year-old Cree Chief from the Battleford area, explained to anthropologist David Mandlebaum that a medicine man would put some medicine on a stick and touch the hearts of the love medicine figures.

The second carved figure in the ROM’s collection is a round wooden head with glass beads for eyes. The stem below the neck suggests that the head may once have socketted into an articulated figure. This carving was found under the leaves along Yellow Quill Trail, perhaps placed there after a Mee-tah-win medicine dance, a dance for medicine men and their novices. Typically the dance ended with the giving of offerings to the Creator.

Sitting White Eagle’s own powers as a medicine man rested considerably in his knowledge of plants. The Plains

Cree and Ojibwa believed, and to an extent continue to believe, that the Creator put plants on the earth to cure all manner of ills. A medicine man or woman almost always purchased or inherited his or her initial knowledge of plants, paying the elder to impart his or her knowledge. According to Morris, Sitting White Eagle bought his knowledge of roots from an old Saulteaux (Plains Ojibwa).

Curing illnesses typically also involved a ritual component—communing with one’s intermediary—often accompanied by a rattle or drum. Around 1885, an elderly Cree explained the theory behind this: “When it has been very hot during the summer for days at a time, all the flowers, trees, and grasses droop and fade. Now to revive these the great Spirit sends the thunder and lightning and rain, and in a little while all nature is refreshed and lives again. He awakens them with his thunder, we try to awaken our sick with the [rattles] and drums, and at the same time give him medicine to drink, just as the great Spirit sends the rain to help drooping leaves and grass.”

According to Morris, Sitting White Eagle was much sought after as a medicine man, even by white people who sometimes called on him. The caption that accompanies a portrait of the medicine man, now in the Saskatchewan legislature, includes the following statement: “After the advent of the white doctors the Indians, especially the young ones, did not patronize him very much.” Nevertheless other testimonials suggest that Sitting White Eagle continued to be sought out by both Indians and non-Natives.

As late as 1930, Graham, the Inspector of Indian Agencies, recalled a conversation with Sitting White Eagle on board a CPR train: “He was a very old man with an otter skin folded about his head for a headdress and a coloured blanket over his

4. Sitting White Eagle's "war shirt" made of animal hide coloured with yellow pigment. 50.1/7371A. 5. A Cree drawing of two women dressed as in a victory celebration, wearing men's war headdresses. From the Crooked Lake Reserves



DENIS FINNIN, AMNH



around 1911. 50.2/6790 6. Sitting White Eagle's moccasins, with separate sole construction and typical "string of rectangles" motif. 50.1/7371D-E (4, 5, & 6. Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History)



shoulders. When he recognized me he became quite friendly and told me that he had received a message from an Indian far west, about 150 miles away. He wanted him to come as his two sons were ill with sore chests and were coughing very much." Graham knew the family well, and concluded that they were tubercular. The Department of Indian Affairs had a doctor caring for the Indians in that district, but it was common practice in cases where there was no apparent improvement under the white doctor to call in the medicine man. "I met the old man about a year afterwards," continued Graham, "and asked him how his patients were. He assured me that they had improved very much under his treatment."

In 1967 Alex Tanner, an 81-year-old Cree from Cowesses Reserve, recalled to anthropologist Koozma Tarrasof details of this "small, but powerful" man's curative methods: "[Sitting White Eagle] used to have a rattlesnake skin which he placed beside whoever he was doctoring, whether on the floor or on the ground in a tepee in summertime. Well, he'd ask this patient to lay down and he'd sing to his rattlesnake. This rattlesnake was just like it was alive; he had no head, only a tail. And he'd start crawling. If he'd crawl over this person that's being doctored, this meant the patient would get well."

In 1991 I was personally able to interview two men from the Crooked Lake Reserves who had known Sitting White Eagle. Louis Gunn, born in 1905, recalled: "He used to have a little shack, we used to call it Gaddie's Lake. He used to have a fireplace where [as in] the old time ways, [it was an] open [hearth]. I remember that old man, he was a powerful Indian." Jeremy Asaikin recounted: "He was about 80-85 when I first remembered this old man . . . he came at one time to doctor my mother . . . See my mother was pretty sick. . . he told my dad, 'lit this

pipe! . . . when I have smoked that pipe your wife will be better, she'll get up.' And that's what happened. . . an' my mother done well. I must have been about six year old . . . and I was there when he cured her. And as far as me, when I was seven years old I went to school and then I was stricken with tuberculosis. Again, my dad went for him. I never went to no Whiteman hospital. He told my dad what to do. And then, this is why I'm here today. I was stricken with heavy tuberculosis, very bad."

Like most medicine men, Sitting White Eagle charged dearly for his services, and collected his fee promptly. On different occasions, Inspector Graham visited the old man's tipi. "Sometimes it was surrounded by articles such as stoves, wagons, sleighs, harnesses, horses, and cattle that he had collected for his services," he reported. "They were always good collectors. On other occasions when I visited him he had practically nothing in the way of horses and cattle and effects. He had either sold them or given them away at a dance."

It is astounding to consider that these accounts of Sitting White Eagle come to us in the breath of only two lifetimes. Sitting White Eagle and his generation felt the brunt of the calamitous transition to life on the reserve. By placing their testimonials on record, these elders guide and strengthen future generations. As Plains Cree Edward Ahenakew (1885-1961) noted around 1930, "We most truly honour what is past, when we seek in our changed conditions to attain the same proficiency that our fathers showed in their day and in their lives." Inside the Museum we also "honour the past" by carefully gathering objects, information, and images scattered over time, and giving them coherence. By reassembling the scattered pieces of Sitting White Eagle's story, we now have a portrait of a remarkable man and the interesting times in which he lived. ■