



# Sabretache

THE OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF  
THE CALGARY MILITARY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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February 2014

## The Battle of Belly River— Painting by Charles Russell



On the morning of October 25, 1870 an army of Cree clashed with Blackfoot warriors at the Belly River, near present-day Lethbridge, Alberta. When night fell and the fighting ceased, hundreds of dead lay on the ground or in the river. This was the last, largest, and bloodiest of the battles between Plains Indians.

By the 1850's the Cree Nations recognized that the buffalo herds were diminishing and they moved west to the Qu'Appelle area on the Saskatchewan. But in the 1860s, those herds, too, were thinning. Moreover, Metis from the Red River had begun to settle on the Saskatchewan in places like Batoche and St. Laurent as the beaver trade collapsed. It was time for the Cree to move on, but where?

**Big Bear**, the leader of the Cree and **Piapot**, the leader of the Assinboine saw the problem in terms of encroaching settlers and lack of buffalo. Further west, in the Alberta foothills, there was plenty of buffalo and no settlers. But this was the territory of the Blackfoot Confederacy — the Blood, Peigan, Blackfoot, and at times the Sarcee.

The Blackfoot tribes were also facing changes. Although they saw no problem with the supply of buffalo, American traders had come north. This brought both good things and bad to the Blackfoot. Bad things

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### CMHS Meeting

The next CMHS  
meeting will be held  
on

**Tuesday,  
February 18th  
2014**

**7:00 pm**

At the  
Petty Officers' Mess  
HCMS Tecumseh

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CALGARY MILITARY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The  
CALGARY MILITARY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

is a non-profit registered society  
which fosters the study of the  
military and the police, and the heritage of  
Canada, the British Empire, and the world  
as well as the preservation of military  
artifacts and records.

The CMHS meets once every calendar month  
at:

Petty Officers' Mess  
HMCS Tecumseh  
1820 - 24th Street SW  
Calgary AB T2T 0G6

All are welcome to attend

## Notice of Next Meeting

The next CMHS meeting will be held on

**Tuesday, February `18th. 2014**

**19:00 (7:00 pm)**

At the Petty Officers' Mess, HMCS Tecumseh.

Members are reminded that an offering of foodstuffs for the Legion Food Bank is considered your unofficial entrance fee to our regular scheduled meetings.

The unofficial agenda of this meeting will be:

- Introduction of guests, Minutes of last meeting
- Correspondence, Membership report
- Treasurer's report, Old business / New business
- Break, Show & Tell

The President, David S would like to invite everyone to remain after the meeting for an informal time of fellowship.

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included alcohol and disease, good things were new repeating rifles and ammunition.

In 1869, a riverboat on the Upper Missouri brought smallpox to the region and the traders took the disease north with them to Fort Whoop-Up. That winter, the Blackfoot were ravaged by sickness.

Big Bear and Piapot heard of this development. The Cree had been in contact with Europeans for more than two centuries and had developed some resistance to imported disease. Now, with the Blackfoot weakened, the Cree saw an opportunity to take over their buffalo territory. Big Bear, Piapot, and some other chiefs planned a major incursion into the Alberta foothills. Big Bear assembled three thousand people who were to set up their own settlement in Blackfoot territory. This included as many as 800 fighting men. Piapot led another contingent.

Late in the afternoon of October 24th, a Cree advance party came upon a Blood settlement west of the Belly River and attacked it. The Blood were greatly outnumbered but their repeating rifles were far superior to the Cree arms and they held their ground. Meanwhile, they sent messengers to others of the Blackfoot Confederacy nearby. Big Bear committed his forces to the battle but Piapot had a dream warning him against the conflict and held back.



**Big Bear**

Unknown to the Cree, a large group of Peigan had moved into the region after others of their group had been murdered by US troops in the Marius Massacre. These men now roused to action and a large war party rode back to the Belly River. Along the way they stopped at Fort Whoop-Up and picked up **Jerry Potts**.

Potts was then working as a hunter for the traders at Fort Whoop-Up. His mother was Blood and he had lived among Blood and Peigan all his life, at one time acting as patriarch of his own band. He was a ferocious fighter and had a great reputation among the Blackfoot since he was never wounded in battle.

At dawn, when fighting began again, the Blackfoot forces had been bolstered not only with the Peigan but other warriors who continued to trickle in all day until this army was as large as that of the Cree. The Blackfoot were ranged in a coulee running east and west and the Cree in a parallel coulee to the south. The two groups engaged in heated combat well into the day. Potts noticed that a small butte overlooked the Cree lines. He led a party onto the butte and fired down into the enemy. The Cree were being hurt badly now and began to mill in confusion. Potts seized this opportunity and his force charged directly at the Cree who broke and fell back on the river. The Blackfoot warriors pressed on and many Cree tried to get across the river. They were slaughtered in the water. Potts later said, "You could fire with your eyes shut and kill a Cree that day." The killing ended at nightfall and the Cree were allowed to retreat with their dead and wounded. Cree losses totalled around 300, but only 40 Blackfoot were reported dead.

## Minutes of the last meeting

Minutes of the meeting held January 21st, 2013

**Meeting** called to order by President David S. at 7:10 PM with 24 members in attendance.

Motion to accept Minutes of December meeting by Mike C and seconded by Floyd S.

**Correspondence.** Newsletter journal from MCCofC.

**Membership** report by Brian H. 42 members so far compared to 48 last year.

**Treasurers report** by Brian H. Expenses and donations listed. Party expenses listed and balance. Motion to approve by Mike C and seconded by Barry E. Approved.

### Old Business.

Discussion of winter soiree and how members stayed and partied till 10 pm. Suggestion by Stuart E. that seating be arranged at next years party so everyone can enjoy each others company better.

Maurice Harvey Award is presented to member James B. for great work.

Gun Show report; everyone happy.

Constitution and changes recommended. Discussion and vote to approve.

### New Business.

Mike C reports that British War Diaries to be digitalized.

Alan Mck. States that MCCof C to have convention in same hotel as last year. Sept. 12, 13, and 14th.

### Break

### Show and Tell

David G. Shows badge bought in error.

Barry E. WW1 Canadian Veteran Badges.

Alan Mck. Ammo belt South African Bower War Police and his method of obtaining buckle.

Dan Sk. Brought in old New Zealand antique named Tom.

Tom C. Still collecting old miniature medals.

Al D. Tells storey of funeral that he attended. Women who was with Anti Aircraft Battery and also in Red Cross WW2 Also story of neighbor who gave away his navy books.

Mike C. Metals of South African Constabulary Medals of father and son.

Bob McP. WW1 German helmet and WW1 Brodie helmet from South Sask. Regiment.

Dave L. Book "Topography of Armageddon." Uses book in correspondence as Society Historian.

Darrel K. Discusses fake badges on eBay and shows WW1 badges.

Bob. B. Medals of chaplain WW! And 2. Books issued to him in 1943 when he joined up.

Stuart E. storey on memorial at Crescent Heights School.

Gary Discusses family medals, Boer War photos and book of family member who died there. 1901 Lee Enfield rifle.

James B. Story of online service in England to start soon.

**Adjourn Meeting. Motion by Floyd S..at 8:40 PM.**





**Chief Piapot**

Big Bear's grand scheme had failed, partly because he had overestimated the numbers of Blackfoot who had died from disease. His army had lost almost half its warriors killed and many more were incapacitated by wounds. One of Big Bear's own sons was killed in the battle. Now he saw, there was nothing to do but sue for peace. The Cree sent tobacco to the Blackfoot and, in 1871, made a treaty with them.

In the years afterward, the Blackfoot allowed the Cree to settle nearby and to hunt buffalo in their territory. But the buffalo was not the inexhaustible resource it had seemed. Hides increased in value and the early 1870s saw the herds on the plains wiped out. Not just hunting, but also agriculture, doomed the buffalo. Settlers began moving into the plains in great numbers, aided by the railroads being built in both Canada and the US. By 1879 the buffalo was almost gone from the Blackfoot territory and Indian peoples were being pushed into reserves.

Big Bear tried to make the best of the Plains Indians' chances. He tried, for instance, to get the tribes to select reserve territories that adjoined one another, looking to form an Indian nation in Alberta and Saskatchewan. This was blocked by the Canadian government, even though the tribes were, by treaty, supposed to be able to choose their own territories. He refused to sign Treaty # 6 for a long time. However with his people on the verge of starvation, he finally gave in and signed, in order to receive food from the government. He was marked as a trouble maker and, during the 1885 Riel Rebellion, Canada imprisoned him by accusing him of the murder of some whites, something Big Bear had been careful not to do all his life. He died a few years later.

Piapot also attempted to negotiate a decent life for his followers. He signed treaties and honored them, moving away from settlement areas. In 1883 he organized a sort of non-violent resistance to the CPR which resulted in some concessions being granted to his people. Piapot adapted the Blackfoot Sun Dance to the Cree. When the Canadian government

declared the Sun Dance illegal, Piapot refused to acknowledge the law. Attempts to remove him as a chief failed and Piapot remained an important Cree leader until his death in 1908.

In 1874 Jerry Potts guided the North West Mounted Police to Fort Whoop-Up to shut it down. The American traders abandoned the fort before they arrived. Potts always expressed hatred and disdain for the Cree even until his death in 1896 from cancer.

Today the Belly River battleground is memorialized at Indian Battle Park, near Lethbridge, though much of the battle area has been covered by housing developments.



Now called "The Oldman River"



**Jerry Potts**