

LOON LAKE

On a miserable June day in 2005, with the heavy overcast sky threatening rain and a relentless wind ploughing through the aspen bush, I stood at the site of the so-called Frog Lake Massacre of 1885 – or, rather, stood at the little cemetery not far from the site where lie buried seven of the men murdered on April 2, 1885, in the early weeks of the North West Rebellion.

In what is now Alberta, hard by the border with Saskatchewan, in the parkland near the North Saskatchewan River country near the reserve of Frog Lake First Nation, I meandered shoulder-high in grass and bramble, wild rose bushes and aspen deadfall, noting the still-visible slumps of land where cellars had been dug for the houses and Hudson's Bay Company post of the settlement of Frog Lake. The calm beauty of the fields spread out all around belied the violence and tragedy commemorated here.

A monument, a very imposing stone cairn about two metres high erected by Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada in 1926, describes the event as a "massacre" by "rebel Indians under Big Bear" who then also "took prisoners." Among these prisoners, or hostages, were the widows of some of the men killed, as well as a young employee of the HBC, all of whom eventually wrote about their ordeal: two months in the camp of Big Bear (in Cree, Mistahimaskwa) and his people and followers, sharing their anxiety and privation as they trekked cross-country just ahead of the militia of the Alberta Field Force in hot pursuit.

I too was on their trail, following the story from one historic site to another.

Downstream the North Saskatchewan, in the winter of 1829-30, Chief Factor John Rowand of the Hudson's Bay Company had built a post known as Ft Pitt to trade in buffalo hides, meat and pemmican with the Cree, Assiniboine and Blackfoot of the prairies. I read this in English and French on a bronze plaque erected in the grass field nearby the river landing of the post, described by a visitor in 1859, James Carnegie, Earl of Southesk, as cut out of the woods "within a hundred paces of the river, which is here deep and rapid." Nothing else marks the site of Ft Pitt, all material evidence of this once-flourishing post having been burned, carried away or left to rot (it closed in 1890). On the rising slope of land behind, now covered by a large farm operation, representatives of the First Nations and the Canadian government had convened in 1876 in an impressive assembly to negotiate the terms of Treaty Number Six.

It's important to walk around to the other side of this plaque, for here you read a trilingual text, including Cree, which ties everything together: Treaty Six, which Big Bear, "noted warrior and hunter [...] one of the foremost champions of the northern Plains Indians," refused to sign; the Mounted Police sub-post established here in that same year, 1876; and in 1885, twelve days after the massacre at Frog Lake, a kind of siege of the fort by Big Bear and a large party

of Cree followers who negotiated the withdrawal of the police, took more hostages, and burned the place down.

The militia caught up with them on May 28, further downstream, at the so-called Battle of Frenchman Butte along the valley of Little Red Deer Creek, a tributary of the North Saskatchewan. Near the lip of the butte there is a bit of a campsite now, and a large billboard with a map showing the location of the rifle pits that the Cree warriors dug for themselves. I followed the pathway through the brush to these small depressions in the earth now filled with forest litter, but it was still possible to imagine how the warriors had lain here with a clear view down onto the forces of General Thomas Strange, and rained heavy fire down on the soldiers slogging about in the muskeg at the creek bottom.

And behind them similar pits had been dug, as protection for the seventy hostages and 950 non-combatants in Big Bear's band, by order of war chief Wandering Spirit. It was mind-boggling to think of these numbers – many children among them – hunkered down in bush and bramble, bullets whizzing past them into the trees. I went back to the billboard: "They all stayed in the trenches overnight.[...] Major General T B Strange and troops engaged the warriors in battle for several hours on May 28, but were forced to return to Ft Pitt for lack of supplies, ammunition and reinforcements. Warriors abandoned the pits as impractical against the 9-pound percussion shells. The battle terminated in a stalemate".

In the morning fog of May 28, civilians and hostages had been moved for their safety four miles north of the action at Frenchman Butte to an established campsite. The warriors caught up with them. And this is where I lost them, for northward of Frenchman Butte lies what looked to me like impassable ravines and impenetrable thickets. I did not know of any official historic sites in that landscape, and so I got back in my car and drove back to Edmonton.

But for the next two years I thought about that desperate trek of refugees from battle who did finally emerge at Makwa or Loon Lake, starving, bedraggled and soaked to the skin by heavy June rains. There was one more battle – a skirmish, really - to endure, an attack by Inspector Sam Steele and his Scouts at the narrows leading into Loon Lake mid-morning June 3. It was the last engagement of the North West Rebellion – the warriors responsible for the murders at Frog Lake would be hanged in a mass execution at Fort Battleford November 27, 1885 and Big Bear imprisoned at Stony Mountain Penitentiary.

It is known as the Battle of Loon Lake and I knew there had to be a monument there. I was determined to "close the circle" of my own trek to the sites linked to the narrative of the Frog Lake tragedy but for this one I needed a guide.

I found the perfect and essential guide in Wayne Brown of Peck Lake, Saskatchewan (just a few kilometres from Loon Lake), author of *Steele's Scouts*:

Samuel Benfield Steele and the North-West Rebellion, a blow-by-blow account of the events of 1885, especially of the pursuit of Big Bear and his people after Frog Lake. Brown had been a Fish and Wildlife officer for years in this area and knows the terrain intimately. On July 18 2007, I climbed into his truck, we barrelled out his yard, turned a corner onto a dirt road that leads to Bronson Lake, bounced by grazing leases, and pulled up at a clearing in the bush, the mouth of an ATV trail that precisely follows the trail of the refugees of 1885. They had fled from Frenchman Butte, without food or ammunition for their rifles, bearing infants and the elderly, one foot ahead of the other for five days, wading through swamp and ford, their boots and shoes falling to pieces, until they emerged here: "With a really good quad," says Brown, "I don't think I could make that trip in that time."

They skirted around the eastern end of Little Fishing Lake, heading across country for a camp at the first narrows of Loon Lake. We ride the truck into Little Fishing Lake campground where local families now come out for picnics and barbecues under the pine trees, then head north on gravel on highway 21, until we turn east at a sign, "Loon Lake." For twenty kilometres on secondary highway 699 we drive through boreal forest set in grey-wooded soil, "not much good for anything," but I smell clover in the ditches and, when we stop to look around, I pull mid-summer's saskatoons off tall bushes. There wouldn't have been berries yet, when the refugees came through.

We pull into Steele Narrows Provincial Historic Park. The monument is at the top of a trail uphill. Alfalfa and goldenrod are already blooming in thick profusion and my every step squeezes out swarms of biting ants; halfway up we stop to chat with an elderly man resting on a bench. He'd known this countryside in the 1950s as a local Agriculturalist but now you wouldn't know the place: "fouled," he calls it. He means that bridge down there crossing the narrows which connect the placid grey-blue waters of Sanderson's Bay with the much larger, silvery, Loon Lake, and he means the asphalt laid down where there had been only a corduroy road. "In the Spring you'd drive over it and logs would fly in all directions." We reach the top which gives us a viewpoint onto the scene of June 3, 1885. Brown shows me Captain Rutherford's sketches made on the spot and we compare them with the ravines and slopes covered in very dense bush and aspen spread out below us: left to my own devices, I wouldn't have a clue. Through binoculars I can see the narrow, pale shaft of a cairn built by Parks Canada to mark where an unnamed Indian fell in the skirmish with Steele's Scouts, across the road and in the trees. Not even a skirmish: by the time the two sides "exchanged fire," says Brown, the Cree were reduced to picking up rocks from the lake shore; they had powder but no bullets.

We climb back down the hill and cross over into the trees to look more closely at the gravesite of three Indians, Komenakos, Mestahekipiniko and Pwacemocees, "killed in action," the plaque reads, "Battle of Steele Narrows, June 3 1885." They were given Christian burial – a white iron cross rests on a grave rail – but an Aboriginal memorial red scarf hangs twisted in the trees. Mosquitoes the size of

houseflies whine and screech around our heads while I grab greedily at wild raspberries hanging in the shaded bush. Then we dash to the truck to drive to the other side of the Narrows and another viewpoint – a popular campfire spot with ashes and Coors beer boxes strewn about – onto the site of the Crees' camp which had come under fire from Steele's Scouts who had left their horses behind, up there on the ridge now outlined by dark spruce. They fought on foot, slipping downhill with their Winchesters, whooping and hollering toward the tipi encampment, flushing out Indian fighters from the spruce and tamarack swamp, shooting at close range, while the Cree had only muzzle loaders loaded with pebbles and firing at low velocity, "barely penetrating the buckskin jackets of the scouts," says Brown.

Strangely, for all the disproportionate strength of the Scouts, the "battle" was inconclusive and, exhausted, Steele and his men withdrew to wait for reinforcements from Ft Pitt. The Cree buried their dead and headed north with their hostages once again, this time around the east shore of Loon Lake and a second narrows, to wade up to their armpits in more muskeg and swamp, and, near the end of their tether, make camp on the north shore. "This is where everybody split off," Brown explains, some Cree fleeing still further north to Beaver River, others east in the direction of Battleford, while the hostages, finally released, regained Ft Pitt 400 kilometres to the south, back the same arduous way they had laboured with the Cree.

Brown tries to find the road that would take us to the site of that last camp but we end up driving in circles, all roads now seeming to end at the Mistahay Musqua Treatment Centre. The name means Big Bear. It seems a good place for us to turn around and go back home.