

The Canadian Indian Cowboy

JOHN DEWAR

University of Saskatchewan

The relationship of the Indian of the Prairie West to the horse has been a major aspect in the culture of Canada's native people. The horse appeared "north of 49" in the early eighteenth century and together with the buffalo provided the basis for the golden age of the Plains Indians. This time of affluence continued from 1750 to 1883 when the extermination of the great bison marked the passing of prosperous times, and the painful period of attempted indoctrination into the ways of the white man. The effect of Indian Treaties 6 (1876) and 7 (1877) between Her Majesty Queen Victoria and the Cree and Blackfoot Confederacies, brought an end to the era of self-sufficiency of these once proud people of the plains and began their relocation on reservations. The trading, educational and Christianizing period that followed from 1883 to 1912 was not one of pride among the people of native ancestry, although their love of, and relationship to the horse continued.

Many working cowboys on the pioneer ranches of the Canadian West were plains Indians or metis, often their role was of a more menial mode. The emergence of Tom Three Persons, the Blood Indian cowboy from Cardston, Alberta, as the bronc riding champion of the grandiose inaugural Calgary Stampede of 1912 was a great source of pride to the native people. The years preceding the two World Wars saw the dress of the plains Indian take a distinctive cowboy direction. Young Indian riders also aspired, often contrary to their parents wishes to become cowboys. Too often prejudice and alcohol were closely linked to the corrals of the rural rodeo circuit of the west.

Positive performances, role models and programs did emerge. Three generations of the Gladstone family and the Goodstrikers are examples of the positive direction that the cowboy world could play. Champion cowboys Kenny McLean, Fred and Jim Gladstone are quality role models for the young Indian cowboys of the future. They have also taken a professional interest in establishing schools for youngsters to learn the rodeo trade.

James Welch, a Blackfoot novelist provides insight into the life of today's prairie Indian. The times have changed from the days when Charles Russel painted his authentic records of this area, and its people. One aspect still lingers and possibly provides a small part of the solution for some individuals and that is the close, almost cultural relationship of the plains Indian to his horse.