

This is one of a series of 8 to depict the  
evolution of society on the Grande Prairie

approx. 1959

By Margaret Leggie

Down from the Rocky Mountains pours the river known today as the Peace. To the coureurs de bois, before ~~the~~<sup>they</sup> ~~white men~~ had ever stood on its banks, it was known as la Riviere de la Paix. The Indians called it Unjigah (which means Peace) when the first white men labored upstream against its swift current. But long before the white man pierced the Great Shield to barter with the western Indians, it was Tsades, the "River of the Beavers".

Before the white men came to Hudson's bay to trade with the northern Cree, the "People of the Woods", all the land along the lower "River of the Beavers" and that

stretching from the winding Athabasca River to Lake Athabasca on the edge of the Barren Lands belonged to the Beaver Indians of the north-west Athapaskans. To the north and west of the territories of the Beavers were other Athapaskan tribes: the Slaves in the "land of the little sticks", as they called the Barrens; and the Sikani, who roamed the north side of the "River of the Beavers" to the mountains, from which came their name, "People of the Rocks". On the east were the Chipewyans, the "Pointed Skins"; and southward, separating the Beaver and the Chipewyan from the Indians of the Plains were the Crees....

Between the Beaver and the Cree there was no friendship, but rather, the barrier of differing language and customs, and in the lodges of both tribes the old men, remembering hunting rivalry and war parties, kept old hatreds smouldering. But although the Beavers were shorter and smaller than their rivals, they were renowned as fierce warriors and the Crees could not force them from their hunting grounds.

Through the northern forest - a maze of lakes and streams and swamp - wandered the Beavers. Because ~~their~~ <sup>the</sup> buffalo, the moose and caribou, the bear and beaver were not so numerous not so easy to hunt in the forest wilderness as on the plains (for the northern Indians lacked

the horse), the food supply of the Beavers was too uncertain for village living. Their inherited tribal unity expanded <sup>each</sup> to contain hundreds of bands which centred around a hunter famed for his skill. A hunter needed a woman to skin and sew and cook for him, and the greater his hunting powers the more women he needed and the more he could support. And with his wives and children flocked his parents, brothers and sisters, and others linked closely to the family group.

In the summer, hazy camps dotted the shores of tiny lakes or clearings near running water, and in woods that a few weeks ago were filled with <sup>only</sup> the whining mosquito the squaws and children tugged at ~~the~~ heavy saskatoon bushes, stripping the ripe fruit into bags made from the skin of the moose or caribou; or they knelt in the rough grass and groped with tired fingers for strawberries. The hunter stalked the splay-hoofed caribou and moose, and the black bear, with mongrels slinking at his heels. They would corner their desperate prey with shrill yelps and darting attacks. Then a sharp-tipped arrow or spear plunged to its mark ... and for weeks strong brown hands would pound <sup>berries</sup> ~~strawberries~~ and dried meat into pemmican.

Only for "big meat" would the hunter stir from camp and when the game inexplicably vanished, the squaws and children snared hares, marmots, and prairie chicken with bicche, which are thongs made from moose hide. Sometimes

they fished in stone-bottomed creeks with a bone hook on a line of babiche, or trapped the whitefish and the jackfish on stone weirs with flat platforms of poles below on which the fish became stranded; or ~~set~~ <sup>threw</sup> babiche fishnets at evening ~~at~~ <sup>into</sup> the edge of the glassy lake by which they camped, and in the early morning pulled in their slithering, shining catch from water roughened by the wind.

Time was of little value for the Beavers: the sun was their clock, the seasons with their changing supply of fruit, fish, and game their calendar. The old men in the camps would prophesy a long winter. The hares and prairie chicken would be scarce, they mourned, and hunger would make bold the wolf and lynx and marten. In the shelter of summer lean-tos heaped with brush they told of great feats of hunting, of cruel winters past, of death. Their voices rustled like the dry leaves which shelter them - leaves prematurely seared on branches cut when the sap was running. While the young men bragged in the sun, lounging in skin shirts and leggings ornate with porcupine quills and moose hair, the young boys fasted and dreamed... hoping for guardian spirits - not only from the animal world - but from the wind and the thunder; for the Indian lad favored with the spirits of wind and thunder would be a medicine-man. His would be the power

to cause and cure disease, to deliver his people from famine.

And while life flowed on, leisurely and full, in the summer camps of the Beaver, on the shore of Hudson's Bay the Crees first traded with the white man. Canoes bulging with the glossy pelts of the beaver or the precious silver fox passed swiftly to the coast, and the hands of the "People of the Woods" gripped their first gun-stock.

Worse than the rabid wolf or bear was the Cree armed with the white man's gun. Spitting fire and death before him, the Cree warrior filtered through the sunless woods, stepping without sound on the spongy earth. The warriors of the Beavers dabbed themselves with war paint and snatched up their war caps. But before the merciless Cree even the bravest and the strongest of the Beavers fell now; and the wailing of the mourners filled their camps. Westward and north along the trails of the bison and the moose strode the retreating hunters with ready spear and bow. Behind him scurried the children, cowed and hungry; the snuffling dogs; the squaws sullen under their burdens; silent infants swayed in bags of rabbit fur, and bulging moose skin bags dragged at aching shoulders. The pad of moccasined feet ... guttural commands... the swish of skin skirt and leggings against deadfall ....

And lost forever in the dark forest stood deserted

camps: the peeled trunks of cache trees still glowed whitely at the clearing's edge; mismatched stones encircled bare brown hollows and charred sticks. All that remained was the lingering scent of smoke ... the boxes of the dead lashed high in the trees ... the sick and the old in the shadows.

To the "River of the Beavers" the Crees pursued the terrified Beavers, and there the scattered bands sought sanctuary on the lower waters. Hastily-fashioned canoes of spruce bark scudded across the wide river and from the east bank the triumphant Crees hurled insults; but though that winter and for many more summers and winters, their moccasins beat out a war path down-stream beside the river, the Crees allowed the Beavers to range unmolested through the forests north to the Barren Lands. ~~With the first~~ With the first snow came a gale, and the hunters sought wide, marshy valleys overgrown with grass and cropped willow. Between camp and kill the women trudged with dragging toboggan, and in the deeper snows set snares to catch the unsuspecting hare and grouse. For many winters the Crees and the Beavers huddled in tipis covered with the skins of the moose and caribou and through the heavy branches of the sheltering spruce they watched the "dance of the spirits" across the night sky. And every year when the river ran again the young braves

wrestled for wives ....

Then the Beavers heard of the massing of their enemy, and their own canoes skimmed down-river to ask help of the Slaves. Then the Beavers put on their war caps and drummed their challenge to the Crees. Along the banks of Tsades, the Crees and the Beavers fought - but with the wonderful firearms of the eastern traders had come the scourge of smallpox. The decimated Crees were beaten and some of the chieftains of the Beaver suggested peace. But some of their own people refused to accept peace and pushed in small bands north into the Barrens onward to overrun the land of the "People of the Rocks".

The remaining Beavers met with the Crees below the Falls near the mouth of the "River of the Beavers". On the north shore of the river, among the lodges of the Beaver and the Cree, peace was made; and great Tsades was called Unjigah - the River of Peace.