

THE LAND BENEATH US ◆

The Waterways

Season One · Before Canada · Episode 21

aiwrangler.ca — an illustrated companion

Every date, term, and quotation in this series is drawn from the historical record. This companion is the full episode narration, illustrated.






From the episode

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

I'm standing at the south end of Lake Winnipeg — where the town of Gimli sits today, looking north across more than four hundred kilometres of open freshwater. Before Gimli, before any of this, there was just this lake. One of the largest in North America. And for thousands of years, the highway itself.

SAM CARDINAL

The nations of this lake — Swampy Cree, Ojibwe, the communities at places like Berens River, Norway House, Grand Rapids — they didn't live beside the water. They lived on it. Canoe routes running north and south, fish through the winter, trade the whole length of the lake. The lake was not background to their lives. It was the economy.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

And by eighteen seventy-five, Canada had noticed. Because the lake that was a highway for the people was about to become a highway for a new country.

SAM CARDINAL

The steamboat had arrived on Lake Winnipeg. Not a fleet yet, but enough — vessels were already working the northern routes, and Canada understood what this water could be: the corridor connecting the Red River settlements to Norway House, to the trade routes beyond, to the whole interior north. The Crown was moving through the West, and this water had to be secured.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

So commissioners came to the lake in the summer and fall of eighteen seventy-five — to Norway House, to Berens River, to Grand Rapids — to make a treaty. Treaty Five. And the written terms looked familiar at first glance.

SAM CARDINAL

Canada had been working through the numbered treaties for four years by then. Cash at signing, an annuity of five dollars per person per year, and reserves. But here is where Treaty Five departed from the treaties to the south, and the departure was written right into the document: reserves under Treaty Five were set at one hundred and sixty acres per family of five.



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One hundred and sixty acres. Treaty Three, to the south — one square mile per family of five. Six hundred and forty acres. Treaty Four, the same. So why a quarter of that here?

SAM CARDINAL

The Crown's commissioners had an answer, and it was written into their reports. This was not prime agricultural land, they said. The people were not going to break the prairie and grow wheat. They were fishing people, living on the water. The reserve did not need to be large because the lake would provide. That logic was tidy. It was also a door that was not yet visible as a door.



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Because if the Crown knew these were fishing people — and the commissioners' own reports make clear they did — then the question is what the treaty said about the fishery. And that is where the three records begin to pull apart.

SAM CARDINAL

The written treaty is silent on the fishery in any specific protective sense. The language that is there follows the standard form: the people retained "the right to pursue their avocations of hunting and fishing throughout the tract surrendered." That phrase is present. But the fishery as a governed resource, as a named and protected livelihood — Treaty Five does not carve that out. The Crown took back the right to open the land for settlement and other purposes. The fish of Lake Winnipeg are not mentioned by name.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Now — what did the commissioners report was said at the councils? Because Lieutenant-Governor Alexander Morris left a written record of these negotiations.

SAM CARDINAL

The commissioners recorded that the chiefs at Norway House and Berens River were careful and measured at the council fire. Chief Ramsay at Norway House pressed directly on what the treaty would mean for the water — for his people's way of life on the lake. The commissioners gave assurances: their fishing would not be interfered with. That was understood. Those words appear in the commissioners' notes. They do not appear in the treaty text.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

And the third record — what the people carried forward from those councils in their own memory?

SAM CARDINAL

What the elders of Berens River, Norway House, Grand Rapids held was that the treaty was a sharing arrangement, not a surrender of the water. You might share the land on shore. Settlers might come. But the lake — the fishing grounds, the routes, the livelihood — those were not given away. The assurances spoken at the fire were that the fishery would be protected. That understanding was real. It was simply not written down. And so you have three accounts of the same agreement, and they do not match.



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The written treaty: hunting and fishing rights acknowledged in general language, reserves set at one hundred and sixty acres per family. The commissioners' notes: oral assurances given that the fishery would not be disturbed. The nations' memory: the lake itself was never surrendered.

SAM CARDINAL

For a generation, that gap stayed quiet. The communities fished as they always had. The lake was still theirs in practice. But Canada's relationship to the fishery was changing beneath the surface.



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By the eighteen eighties and nineties, the commercial fishery on Lake Winnipeg was becoming serious business. Companies arrived. Licences were issued. The lake that the treaty had not specifically protected was being managed as a Canadian resource — and the communities along it were not at the centre of that management.

SAM CARDINAL

I want to hold the full picture here, because the story deserves it. The commissioners in eighteen seventy-five were not constructing a deliberate trap. They genuinely believed a smaller reserve made sense for fishing people who would continue living on the water. Canada in eighteen seventy-five was not imagining a commercial lake fishery a generation ahead. The treaty was unequal and it was shortsighted — but it was made by people who did not see the future they were making. That doesn't undo the consequences. It keeps us honest about what we're actually looking at.



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And the consequences have been long. The First Nations of Treaty Five — Norway House Cree Nation, Berens River First Nation, Pinaymootang, and others — are still working through what that treaty actually promised. Still pursuing specific claims about the reserve sizes. Still asserting rights to the fishery on the lake that was never named as surrendered.

SAM CARDINAL

The lake is still here. More than four hundred kilometres of it, still the largest water body in Manitoba, still the route it always was. The nations of Treaty Five are still here as well — on those small reserves, on the water, in the courts and at negotiating tables where the work of making the treaty mean what was actually agreed continues. The gap between the paper and the promise is not a closed chapter. It is an open file. That is the honest shape of this story. I'm Sam Cardinal.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

I'm Willow Born With a Tooth. The next time you look at a map of Lake Winnipeg — really look at it — find the reserve lands along that shore, and notice how small they are against the water. That proportion is Treaty Five. Made in eighteen seventy-five to secure a corridor for Canada. The conversation about what it actually meant is still being had on the same lake.

Sources & Notes

The Land Beneath Us is built on the historical and documentary record. Where that record is contested, we say so.

References & further reading