

# Travel Routes of the Chapleau Cree: An Ethnohistorical Study

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The Chapleau Cree have historic ties to Moose Factory and to the waterways of the Moose-Missinaibi River. Their ancestors often traveled this river during the seasonal cycle of the fur trade, the rivers and lakes were central to their way of life. Sometime before 1885, a Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) trading post was established at Chapleau on what is now called Mulligan's Bay.<sup>1</sup>

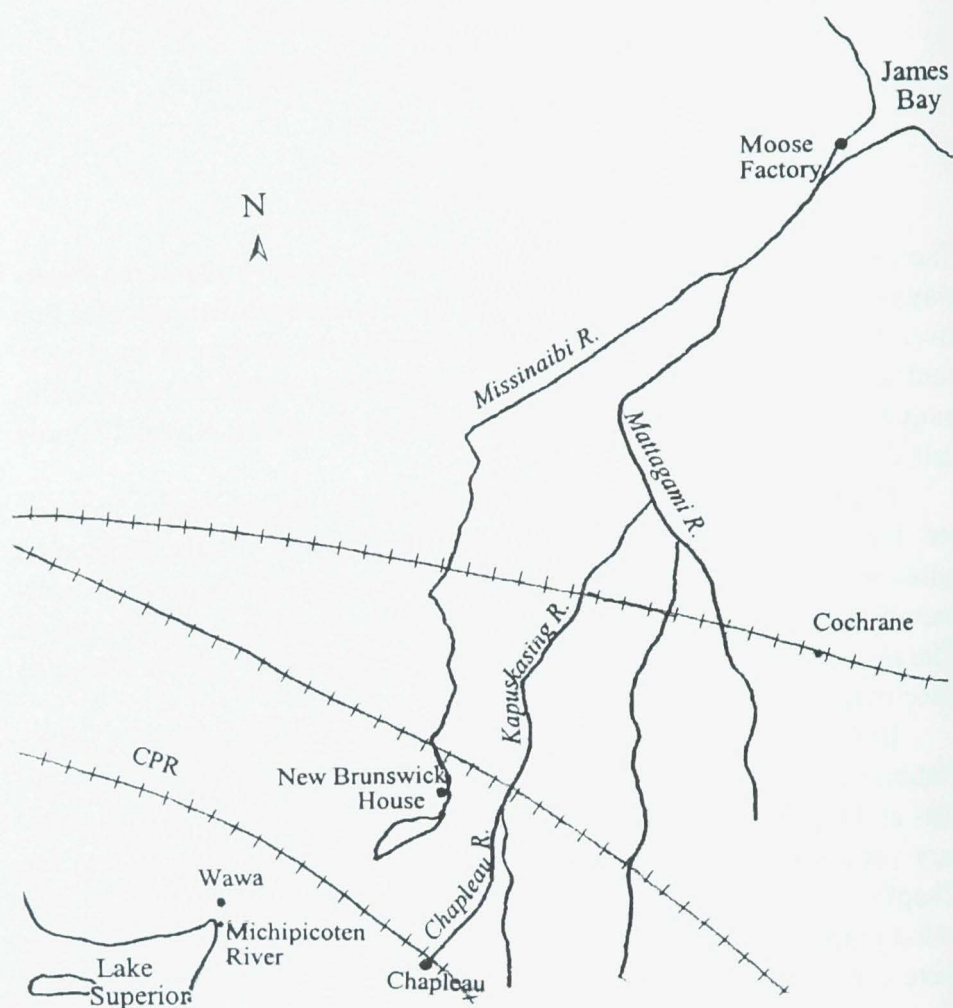
Compared to Moose Factory, Chapleau has always been a backwater. This is obvious not only in the archival records but also in modern publications: while a number of studies have been written about the community that has settled at Moose Factory (e.g., Flannery 1995, Francis & Morantz 1983, Judd 1992, Long 1978, 1985). The history of the Chapleau Cree remains largely unexplored.

In the context of a broader social history of the Chapleau Cree First Nation this paper concentrates on archival evidence from the treaty paylists and the Hudson's Bay Company Archives, which offer complementary perspectives for examining the places that were important to the Chapleau Cree. The Treaty 9 paylists from 1906 to 1945 that were provided to me by the Chapleau Cree community identify the members who were the original families of the Chapleau Cree First Nation, giving names, number within family, and marital status. The names from these paylists were then compared to HBC documents in an attempt to gather information about their way of life. The Hudson's Bay Company Archives preserve post journals, post inspection reports and account books, as well as letters and miscellaneous papers. Family names were

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1. The exact date is not known, but references to its prior origin appear in the 1885 inspection reports from a second Chapleau post that was created after the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) to serve the European population (HBCA B.261/e/1). After 1885 this outpost on Mulligan's Bay was referred to as the "Indian Trading Post at Chapleau."

If the Chapleau Cree were using this post, it was not the only one as their names still appeared in the daily post journals at Moose Factory as late as 1913.



Major rivers and east-west railway lines (scale 1:3,860,000)

relatively easy to track in both sets of documents as many of the early Chapleau Cree used to travel to Moose Factory on James Bay with the furs they had collected during the winter and spring. Often they would stay in Moose Factory during the summer, taking jobs as mail runners, sawyers, hayers, and post hunters. As trappers for Moose Factory, they were for the most part referred to as the "inland trappers" as opposed to the "homeguard Cree" who trapped near the coast and returned earlier to the post than the inland Indians (Francis & Morantz 1983).

The inland hunters typically returned to their family hunting grounds



in the fall. The seasonal cycle of the fur trade is outlined in an 1885 inspection report from Moose Factory:

The trade at Moose Factory is still carried out in the usual manner, a system which seems to have existed since the coalition of the two companies. In the autumn each Indian hunter receives advances in proportion to his ability and trustworthiness. Those who winter inland generally leave for their hunting grounds about the beginning of October, and no more is seen of them until May or June following when they return with their packs of fur, and pay their debts. As a rule little difficulty is experienced with these men who winter on their inland hunting grounds, for the reason that the country which they inhabit is well stocked with fur bearing animals, and the most ordinary industry can produce good results. Each man's capacity being known and his debt given according to it; unpaid accounts are not common among this class. Sickness and death, of course, sometimes leave debt or balances, but as a rule the inland hunters attached to Moose pay their accounts regularly, and are a well to do, and respectable set of men. (HBCA B.135/e/23)

Some of these inland hunters eventually settled in the Chapleau region, that is, close to their trapping areas. Their demography prior to the 1906 census remains obscure, as even during treaty signing the Chapleau Cree were considered a branch of the "Moose Indians." Another factor for moving to the Chapleau region might have been the CPR line, completed in 1885, which offered a balance between the decline in the fur trade and the opportunity of new kinds of jobs.

#### FAMILY NAMES IN ARCHIVAL DATA

Many of the names found in the 1906 treaty paylists of the Chapleau Cree were also found in the Hudson's Bay Company Archives. However, many of the names that occurred in the paylists were of European origin, reflecting the fact that the Crees of Moose Factory have had a long history with the Hudson's Bay Company; the European names, such as Turner, Swanson or McAuley, tended to be less useful in identifying Chapleau Cree individuals as they are very common among Hudson's Bay Company employees. Two of the names that I was able to identify with some consistency are the current family names of McWatch and Cachagee, families still associated with the Chapleau community. These names, which appeared in the 1906 treaty paylists as Mecowatch and Catagee,

can be traced in the Moose Factory post journals back to the 1820s, and some of their relatives as well.

For example, the Moose Factory journal records in August 1832 that "Anishanaubie and son Mecowatch brought 9 MB in summer skins" (HBCA B.135/a/136, fo.55). Anishanaubie was mentioned on numerous occasions as coming in to the post with Mecowatch, but it is in this August 1832 record of daily events at Moose Factory that their relationship was specified. The Mecowatch family name was the easiest to trace into treaty signing times due to the stability of the name through the generations. Its current form, McWatch, is still highly consistent with its earlier phonetic representation.

Another surname that could be traced back into the 1820s was Catagee, also on the 1906 treaty paylist. The Moose Factory journal for 24 May 1841 stated that "Leask and son Cauchegee from up the river likewise came in with a few furs very early this morning" (HBCA B.135/a/145, fo.51b), which was the first time Cauchegee was identified as being Leask's son. Leask first appeared in the records of 1820, and his son in 1824. As early as 1837 there is a record of Leask coming in to Moose Factory with Cauchegee, but the 1841 was the only explicit statement of their relationship. Although the two family heads, Leask and Anishanaubie, were sometimes recorded as arriving at Moose Factory alone they were more often recorded as coming in with their families or at least their sons, Cauchegee and Mecowatch, respectively. As well, these two families were often mentioned as either coming in or department together. This can be seen in particular on 17 October 1837: "The Indians Hanishnabe and Leask families departed and proceeded up the River to execute their winter pursuits" (HBCA B.135/a/142, fo.33). The two family groups were also both reported to have repeatedly arrived at Moose Factory with Indians who were known for trading at the New Brunswick post. This suggests that these families would have traveled south in the direction of New Brunswick House to an area where the families would have been in close proximity to one another.

Much fur trade research has focused on the importance of the male head of family. The treaty lists allow us to determine the male heads of family in the past and to show where they hunted. The HBC records almost exclusively noted family heads well known to the post employees. They were referred to by name and location as bringing in furs, and their



credit records were maintained year after year. Women were mentioned in the post journals only in terms of their familial relationships as wives, mothers, sisters and daughters. In her 1986 article on family hunting territory in Eastern James Bay, Morantz mentions that “the ideal was that hunting lands were to be inherited by sons, but brothers, sons-in-laws, and nephews also inherited” (1986:80), and inheritance by non-relatives was not completely out of the question. Flannery 1995 also examines the issue of inheritance in her book on the life of Ellen Smallboy, a Moose Cree Indian. Following this pattern, the areas that were being trapped by the Chapleau Cree were most likely passed on primarily to their kin, suggesting a consistent ownership of earlier family hunting territories.

#### FAMILY HUNTING TERRITORIES

Morantz (1986:71) suggests that reports of trespass can be used to show land ownership. Tracing the names from the paylists, I found Cauchegée’s relatives mentioned by the Chief Factor at Moose Factory in May 1830:

Leask and his son arrived with their collection of furs amounting to 103 MB which is far short of payment for the goods advanced them during the past season – the reason they assign for bringing so few skins are that the Abitibi Indians have hunted up the beaver on their lands and that the season was so unusually early that their Martin Hunt was spoiled by it. (HBCA B.135/a/135, fo.37b)

A similar fate befell Mecowatch’s relatives, Anishanaubaie and his sons, as described by the post journals in 1832:

About noon Anishanaubaie and his 3 sons arrived with their winter hunts – a part only 138 MB – they brought as they have had the misfortune to lose one of their deposits of 200 skins more – which had been willfully burnt by some Indians belonging to Albany District. (HBCA B.135/a/137, fo.34)

It is clear that the journal writers at Moose Factory knew that these places were in fact the hunting territory of the above-mentioned families, and that the concept of trespass was evident in the complaints that were lodged against families from other districts.

Morantz also relies on questions of conservation in a particular territory to show concepts of ownership (1986:72-73). A case involving the Chapleau Cree is recorded for 5 May 1831:

The Indians Anishanaubaie, Mecowatch, Cunnaeshish, Neecousim arrived with their winter hunts consisting of 329 ½ MB chiefly beaver. The reason they assign for killing these animals is that Intruders had come from Lake Superior quarter making a havoc through their Lands and they could not see any reason why they should nurse them for others to kill, and carry them to Michippicotten; or perhaps to Private Traders or Americans at Sault St. Marys. (HBCA B.135/a/136, fo.35b-36, underlining in original text)

The reason offered by the hunters suggests that family hunting territory as outlined by Morantz 1986 do indeed exist here. The record of the intruder's territorial origins permits the sketching of a broad triangle between the Albany, Abitibi, and Lake Superior regions, which includes the New Brunswick post on the Missinaibi River. As noted earlier, some hunters identified as being from New Brunswick also arrived at Moose Factory with the family groups described above.

#### DESCRIPTIONS OF WATERWAYS

As the waterways to Moose Factory played a central part in the lives of the early Chapleau Cree, it stands to reason that the breakup of these waterways was an event worth celebrating. Nicholas Smith (1997:301), writing about the spring breakup at Moose Factory in 1983, calls it "a holiday celebrated in both Cree and HBC traditions." The journals described the preparations that occurred in the spring to protect the fort from flooding, and recorded unusually high waters and floods. The inland hunters also regularly provided information regarding the status of river conditions. For example in a report from 1838:

An Indian namely Aunechinaibaie with his five sons arrived from the upper part of this river bringing their winter and spring hunts, amounting inclusively to 371 MB apparent valuable kinds of fur, which is considered a valuable and productive hunt...They give a discouraging report of the immense quantities of ice which remain heaped or piled mountains high up on the shore with boats quite impracticable. Hence we must delay sending off the transport Boat for some days. (HBCA B.135/a/142 fo.61).

The writer clearly knew who Aunechinaibaie was, that he was a valuable hunter, that he had five sons, that he came from the upper part of the river, and that he had knowledge of the conditions on the waterway. Another report directly linked Mecowatch with the Chapleau Cree is found under the dates of 26 and 27 April 1846:



The following Indians arrived here from the New Brunswick Branch viz Cunnashish, Utap, Sheeshequon, Tarsanck, Cauban, and Shaupattam. They inform us that the Matawayamy and Abitibi Rivers are not yet come down, nor the French Creek, that the river from the Kinogummissie branch is broken to this place forming a very narrow deep channel with high walls of Ice on each side from whence there is no means of approaching the shore, moreover that at the Mill and at Hencock Rapids there are two huge barriers of masses of ice filling up the channel of the River, and they do not think it safe to send off a canoe for some days – the channel being too deep for poling, and no possibility of tracking... The furs brought in by the Indians yesterday were opened and examined. They amount to 250 Made Beaver – exclusive of 57 MB sent in by Mecowatch, the elder brother of the first three named Indians. (HBCA B.135/a/150, fo. 75-76)

This record shows that Mecowatch, his brothers, and a few others were classified as New Brunswick Branch Indians. These inland hunters who trapped along the Missinaibi River knew the state of the connecting rivers and streams, whether this knowledge was acquired through personal travel or through word of mouth. The post writer acknowledged the importance of such knowledge in his description of the river and his comment that the natives “did not think it safe to send off canoes for some days” (HBCA B.135/a/150, fo. 76). The document did not specify, however, if the advice was followed.

A final example comes from ten years later, in the Moose Factory journal entry stating that on 15 November 1856, “The wife of Mecowatch died this forenoon. This Mecowatch is one of our best Inland Indians and has been detained here this fall to attend the afflicted deceased” (HBCA B.135/a/165, fo. 21b). The hunters previously described as being Mecowatch’s brothers were, however, mentioned in the description of the severe flooding occurring in the spring of 1857. The journal in the evening of 26 May 1857 stated:

Arrived here from the New Brunswick branch are Oulicketashish, Shesaquon, Cunashish, and Shampattam - They say the Rivers are so full of water that it is utterly impracticable for any boat to go up for a great length of time to come, as the waters are high up on the banks of the hills within the woods, consequently no tracking ground, and as for poling or pulling that is altogether out of the question. Further they state that no more than half the snow is thawed, and that the rivers must increase in depth as the weather becomes warmer. It is probable that we must forward our supplies for the Long Portage Store at one trip for there will not be time for two trips if we cannot dispatch the boats sooner than 15 days hence. (HBCA B.135/a/165, fo. 39)

In this description it is obvious that the Chief Factor acted on the information he was given by the New Brunswick Branch trappers, and in his actions he validated the accuracy of their description and the knowledge they had of the land and waterways where they traveled. Not only did Chief Factor R.F. Miles record this description of imminent flooding, but he also used his knowledge of it to keep business proceeding at the Long Portage store.

There are many more descriptions of waterways and spring thaw conditions that are attributed to the "New Brunswick Branch Indians" in the Moose Factory journals, including entries from 1838, 1839, 1856, 1859, and 1861, after which period the descriptions of waterways end. There are no post journals for Moose Factory in the HBC Archives for the years 1871 to 1892.<sup>2</sup>

#### MIGRATION AND THE CANADIAN PACIFIC RAILWAY

There continued to be active travel along the rivers, and on 30 April 1899 it is recorded that "the first Indians from inland viz Phil Mecowatch" (HBCA B.135/a/188, fo.68b) arrived. Shortly afterward, on 11 June 1899, the Chief Factor at Moose Factory described the arrival of a trading party in opposition to the HBC, consisting of Phil Mecowatch's brother, Saunders Mecowatch, along with Charles McAuley, 2 Chapleau Indians, and an engine driver in the employ of the CPR (HBCA B.135/a/188, fo.69). This record indicates that the Mecowatch family had significant interactions with other Chapleau Indians and the CPR engine driver, while the use of the Mecowatch name by the Moose Factory Chief Factor suggests a continuing relationship there as well. The Chief Factor also recognized Charles McAuley by name, although he was also recorded as having debt from the HBC store in Chapleau in 1894 (HBCA B.261/d/1, fo.334). This event shows that there was continuing travel between Moose Factory and Chapleau. Other evidence of the travel that was occurring along the Missinaibi River between 1885 and 1906 is found in the 1900 credit accounts that Philip Mecowatch had at the Long Portage post midway between New Brunswick and Moose Factory (HBCA

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2. However, there were many surveyors present in the area throughout the 1870s and 1880s (both CPR and Canadian Geological Survey), with the CPR completed in 1885.



B.302/d/1, fo.5). Philip Mecowatch was, as mentioned above, described as being at Moose Factory in 1899.

There appears to be a migration out of Moose around the turn of the century, when many of the company's servants were dismissed. The names of the servants dismissed on 5 June 1902 included six individuals who appeared on the 1906 treaty paylists from Chapleau (HBCA B.135/a/189, fo.35b). The fur trade had declined sufficiently to induce Natives to seek employment with the HBC and with the CPR. An entry from Moose Factory in 1903 states that

men arrived from Chapleau April 5th 1903 with Landin – said to be hired by the company – all moose men with him they were a month on the way (HBCA B.135/a/ 189, fo.58).

However, on 15 April 1903 “the Micowatches, who came down with Landin are going back to the [CPR] line today” (HBCA B.135/a/189, fo.59). Travel continued between Chapleau and Moose Factory.

The Treaty 9 signing in 1906 contributed to the Cree settlement in and around the town of Chapleau as a reserve was established on the eastern edge of the village. However, settlement was not the only option as, even in 1913, the Moose Factory journals reported: “Boys from Phil Mecowatch came in Friday and brought [\$]88.00 fur, sending two men to get the balance of their fur” (HBCA B.135/a/190, fo.15), and “got a good supply of fur from P. Mecowatch” (HBCA B.135/a/190, fo.28). Although Chapleau had become the home base for many families, their ties with the fur trade still took them back to Moose Factory.

## CONCLUSION

The continuing travel to Moose Factory, even after a post was established in Chapleau and Treaty 9 was signed, suggests that the factors drawing the early Chapleau Cree to Moose Factory were economic. In their discussion of spring aggregation sites among Northern Algonquian groups, specifically in the Saskatchewan River delta, Meyer & Thistle (1995:406) suggest that there was an overwhelming tendency for spring gatherings to occur at fur trade posts:

Clearly necessary to maintain the social, political, and spiritual life of the group ... Marriages are arranged, disputes are settled ..., and religious ceremonies are held. ... These aggregations are not simple gatherings of large numbers of people; rather they are complex events....

They are the means by which a sense of community, of cultural oneness is maintained.

One possible motive for the continued relationship that the Chapleau Cree had with Moose Factory was a desire for family contact in the face of increased European pressures within the town of Chapleau. Not only was the 1906 reserve too small for the number of people it was supposed to hold; the reserved land was situated on a peninsula between two rivers (the Keksquashing and Nebskwashi Rivers) that regularly flooded in the spring. Despite the failure of the first reserve, the ongoing relationship with Moose Factory may have contributed to the continuing cultural distinctiveness of the Chapleau Cree.

Family names of the 1906 treaty paylists and names documented in the Hudson's Bay Company Archives link the families of the Chapleau Cree First Nation to the area of the Missinaibi River. By applying Morantz's indicators of family hunting grounds such as trespass, conservation, and inheritance to the historic records of Moose Factory, this study suggests that the Chapleau Cree had well-defined family hunting grounds. Their unique knowledge of the conditions of the waterways as travel routes and sources of livelihood attests to an identity based on their connection to this land, a connection that can be traced in the journals of HBC posts for much of the 19th century. Brody writes that "hunter-gatherers have experience and knowledge that must be recognized. Their genius is integral to human potential, their skills are appropriate to their lands" (2000:7). This is true for the trappers of the fur trade, including those who ultimately became the Chapleau Cree First Nation.

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