

The Treaty Relations Commission of Manitoba *We are All Treaty People!!*



Transcript: Interview with Elder Doris Pratt

Elder Pratt is Dakota and a member of the Sioux Valley Dakota First Nation. She has dedicated her life to educating First Nation youth about their cultures, language and history. Elder Pratt has made it a personal goal to collect the traditional Dakota names and history of important First Nation sites throughout Manitoba. Elder Pratt holds a Masters in Education from Brandon University and Educational Specialist Degree from the University of Arizona. She has served as an official translator for the federal government and has produced numerous educational materials for teaching about the Dakota people.

Pre-Treaty lifestyle and Treaty-making of the Dakota People

The belief is that, that land really, the land, the world, belongs to him. Really, it belongs to The Creator. He has put us here, much the same as a gardener maybe, for us to look after it. So, for our people, for the Dakota people it is the belief that we are here for his purpose. That our purpose was to look after that land that he's given us. The land doesn't belong to anybody, it belongs to The Creator, but we are fortunate that he has put us here. Life is like a test: this is what you look after, the resources that go with it, the water, everything. His purpose was to see how well, what kind of gardeners we're going to be on this continent.

Life was good. Our people were free; they were free to go where ever they wanted to. You see, their whole system, the whole culture was about making sure that we all lived a good life. We had a whole continent to do that in, so we learned to do the best in there that is how the Dakota were. They knew on which part of the continent; where the best hunting was; they also knew the changes of the weather, so they where nomadic. They never were sitting in one place all the time; they could move to where they wanted to on the continent of North America. So it wasn't in one place all the time, many of the tribes were moving about, they followed the buffalo herds then because there were a lot of buffalo then. It was their food, their clothing, and their shelter, all in one. From there they needed to know where the other foods were. See, the whole continent has food all over that will sustain you. You didn't have to buy anything or make anything; it was there. So they knew where to go in order to live good... where to move. They probably had skirmishes; they did, that is the way human nature is, because they want to hang on to the territories where the goods are. But they moved about; they co-existed with one another, all the tribes did. That is just the way our people were before any other culture came in.

The grandparents in the community, that became grandparents to all of us; they were good at giving advice. The grannies, they had a way if they didn't like something they would stop you and they would advise you. That is all the old people did that in the community, so we certainly had people that were guiding us all the time. They were the ones that told you how to conduct yourself in public and even in your home. You know our culture was very strict about kin. You did not speak. You see in my culture, you did not speak to your older brother; he had a title. He had a title, they had titles for everybody, if you were older you deserve more respect. And you treated him that way; you did not walk in front of him unnecessarily. And in the home, if a visitor came, you did not utter a sound; you listened to what these older people were saying. Sometimes we would have to sit for a long time because we were not expected to move about and be disrespectful. Oh, when I see today's people... it is so different.

Treaty-making and the Dakotas

A treaty is an agreement between the two tribes; so you presented your case to them or what it was you wanted. And from that, the discussion went from there, they listen to you. And they wanted to see how this would benefit their people. And they did a lot of this, and it was all done friendly, and it was done because maybe it was going to benefit all of the people. It was always done so: "Is this a good thing that is going to benefit our people: what they are presenting to us?" Whatever it might be: maybe they wanted to make a treaty on a certain area. They did not call it: I have a right to this river and all the fish in it, or whatever. But, maybe, they had all the fish there and because they knew that they would make some kind of a treaty with our people. And say, "Look, this is how we will do it; we'll give you this much fish, or whatever, or rights to fish at certain times. And you will also give us time to come and hunt there." Or maybe there was more wild rice in one area. You know they had things, they had some riches to resources too, that they was their bargaining... it was like a bargaining. And once they came to an agreement, these were all friendly and it was good business, because they stood to gain both ways. Whoever was presenting the treaty, and they were respectful of one another and did not bring any harm to one another. That was just the way. That is what a good business man would do today. Well, they knew how to do that too.

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Transcript: Interview with Elder Doris Pratt, continued...

And then when the newcomers came, they welcomed these people, they wanted to help them because they were so few of them and they were not posing any kind of a threat. So they did help the newcomers come in; they did not see any threat coming to them. So they helped them to become part of the land here, but they didn't really foresee what the future was. As more and more came, other things started happening were disagreements came in, not with the First Nation people, or the Dakota People, but a lot of it had to do with the newcomers starting to disagree with one another. And then they started with the wars amongst themselves with the British and the French. All these people were coming in to conquer the country. Well, unknown to us, we didn't know these cultures so we did not know what was in their minds or what their intentions were. But our people went there and helped them as the need arose. The newcomers utilized the people that were here, all the First Nations here, whichever way they could. They could use them as guides or whatever.

So as the differences brought about conflict, they also used our people to help them to fight in their disagreements. And that was the start of some things that were not good. But they took the side, if they were asked to; they took the side of the British or whatever group of people it was. They too were given promises if they helped, in these situations, they would be looked after. There were always some promises made to them. And of course some of those promises weren't kept.

The Dakota did not want to enter to any kind of a treaty with the governments, because they had that some of the tribes who were in the States, you see the Dakota People aren't just in Canada they were all over, but traditionally we knew where the land was. Traditionally, we had a territory where we were there, this is our territory most of the time, and then this belonged to the Cree, and this belongs to the other tribes. Traditionally, they know where their territory is; where they were originally. And if the government, when they were in the states. There are Dakota People that were in the States, we given, were... entered into treaties; with the Federal Government in the United States. The very new United States at the time, they entered the treaty with them, and the treaties were never honoured; they were never honoured, or respected. That is what created all the great wars. Now our Sioux people, in particular, are known, the history books are telling about the Sioux and the Sioux fighting with the Federal Troops. It seemed that the Sioux were the greatest warriors that were fighting and fighting. They were fighting because the Federal Government in the United States was not honouring these treaties. That created the wars; that was the biggest thing: they did not honour the treaties. And the Sioux, the Dakota People, would never again enter into another treaty. They wouldn't.

They also had an agreement with King George, who was fighting with other people too and he wanted the Sioux to help him. They helped him and he made an agreement with them and he said "if you ever need me I will be there". And the Dakota People that are in Canada, they never entered into any kind of Treaty because he had made an agreement with them long before that. And he, the King, he's long gone, but all his succeeding representatives never tried to honour that to this very day. That is the issue that the Dakota People have today with the Canadian Government. They have not honoured that agreement that the King made with our people.

After the newcomers arrived and the residential school system

I'm seventy one; I'll be seventy two in a couple of month's time, I was seven years old when I went to residential school in Elkhorn, Manitoba. I am the youngest of the nine children and they had all gone there, so they all had been in residential school before me. So I know very much, a lot of that happened to our people, I know that the Federal Government had taken our people; it was part of the assimilation process. The Federal Government had to do something to try and make the people... they were scared. I keep telling you that fear is a great motivator: there was fear about our people that if they didn't quickly calm them down, and put them on reservations, and try and put them in one permanent place where they could watch them. And they thought of us, of all aboriginal people, as savages and cutthroats that we could probably kill all the homesteaders and do all these things. You know, when you're full of fear, you'll fear all kinds of things that are not really going to happen.

The language was lost during the period of residential school because in order to assimilate us, they had to get rid of the language in order to make us like them. They were successful in a way, but it is slowly coming back and that's what we've been almost preaching all the time. Look, if you want to keep your culture; because our people, we all keep saying we have to keep our culture, the biggest part of culture is language. And for me, that's what I've always worked for all my life. Since I went into teacher-training I looked around and thought I don't see anybody doing anything about language. So I made it my business to do that and I still do that today and I know it's coming back slowly. Because you cannot conduct a Sundance unless you know the language. You cannot have prayer; you have to pray to The Creator in your own language. He gave you that language. See it's not anyone of us that gave the language; it was The Creator that gave it. Why did he do that? Why did he give every tribe their own language? There is a reason for that and our people have to take that and say, "I want to learn my language", because that was given to us. And if our people take that and do something with it, they will be fulfilling something that the Great Spirit gave them, learning the language.

