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CHAPTER TWO

*Cree Contraband
or Contraband Crees?*

Early Montanan Experiences with
Transnational Natives and the Formation
of Lasting Prejudice, 1880–1885

Brenden Rensink

Introducing their edited volume on transnational crime, Itty Abraham and Willem van Schendel mused that today's global media has made a cottage industry out of *talking* about illicit international trade.¹ As societies gravitate toward well-controlled, regulated, and ordered environments, careful policing of internal and international borders is integral. The state and its public citizenry are wary of unsettled, undocumented, and uncontrolled populations because they obfuscate the “legibility” of society, and hence the ability to order it.² When crime transcends supposedly controlled boundaries, these anxieties increase. To make order from chaos, societies and states often seek to define what constitutes illicit transnational behavior and identify who is committing such trespasses. Public verbalization and acceptance of these definitions aims at bringing a return to order. Foreign, transient, or otherwise peripheral elements of society are often targeted in these efforts. As modern globalization draws exponential links across borders and between nations, cultures, and economies, this process of anxiety, public rhetoric, and attempted enforcement will grow. An example of these phenomena can be drawn from the outcry and debate that raged across the Forty-ninth Parallel between Montana Territory and the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan in the early 1880s.

The Chippewa-Crees of the Rocky Boy Reservation

About one hundred miles northeast of Great Falls, Montana, and sixty-five miles south of the US-Canada border, lie the Bear Paw Mountains and the Rocky Boy Indian Reservation. Rocky Boy tribal members, a combination of Chippewas and Crees, are unique among the reservation tribes of the northern Great Plains. Unlike other tribes in Montana or the Dakotas, their history has firm roots north of the Forty-ninth Parallel in terms both geographic and legal. Prior to the 1916 creation of the reservation, the US government officially classified the Chippewa and Cree bands that would eventually settle on the Rocky Boy Reservation as “foreign” Indians. As such, they were subject to deportation and did not have the same legal relationship with the US federal government as other Indian tribes in the region. For more than thirty years, the experience of Chippewas and Crees was subject to the capricious winds of change as driven by local press, and by economic and political interests. Throughout the Crees’ quest for legal settlement in the United States, individual Montanans and some groups occasionally and vigorously rallied behind their cause, but the predominant sentiment toward them was negative. Until the establishment of the Rocky Boy Reservation in 1916, various bands subsisted on the peripheries of Montanan cities and Indian reservations, making consistent and determined, though ultimately unsuccessful, overtures to the United States for federal recognition.

While an obscure story in the broad scope of North American geography and history, this narrative of transnational indigenous activities and response of local Montanans sheds light on late-nineteenth-century borderlands history as well as the modern crises of globalization and illicit transnational vice. The interactions of Crees from Canada and Montanans during this period poignantly reveal the process of defining illicit behavior itself as well as identifying individuals and groups perpetrating it across international boundaries.³ This process evolved internally within the society “receiving” inbound traffic, in this case, Montana, without the involvement, voice, or input of the group being labeled as transnational criminals, in this case, Crees. Divorced from broader contexts of *why* Crees from Canada were circulating south of the Forty-ninth Parallel, for how long they had been doing so, or what traditional claims they may have had to lands and resources in the United States, Montanans formed hasty opinions concerning them and devised plans for terminating their transnational presence.

The territorial-federal context in which these narratives unfold is a familiar one in the history of the American West. A combination of agricultural, ranching, mining, merchant, and urban-booster interests were all vying to establish communities, promote growth, and move their communities from territorial status to statehood in 1889. Their project was to implant American civilization in Montana and reap the harvest of national incorporation therefrom. As was the case in other developing territories, the assimilation, subjugation, or elimination of Native peoples was an integral factor in achieving these goals. By 1880, when the Crees accelerated transnational movements, Blackfeet, Bloods, Piegans, Crows, Gros Ventres, Assiniboinés, Sioux, Salish, and Pend d'Oreilles, among others, had all been under treaty for decades. This reveals why the foreign Cree presence was so troubling. Montanan politicians, elites, boosters, and other settlers assumed the phase of dealing with nontreaty, and thus uncontrolled, Native populations was long behind them. The continuation of Native issues and troubles was accepted, but a fully uncontrolled and transnational Native "threat" was not. Crees from Canada loomed as a threat to the Anglo Montanan project to incorporate fully their developing territory into the nation as a state.

These contexts, however, were not explicitly discussed in response to Cree activities. Rather, Montanans cast the transnational Cree presence south of the line in terms of inherent illegality. Transnational trade or immigration was not the issue, but rather *Native* transnationalism. As noted in this volume's introduction, what nations define as licit for one group may be illicit for another.⁴ At other times, Montanans linked the illegality of Crees' physical border crossing with the contemporary fears concerning illicit transnational trade of contraband stolen livestock. Thus Montanan, and by extension, federal, interest built prejudice on two foundational perspectives: all transnational Cree movements were inherently illegal, and Cree activities across the line regularly involved the transportation of contraband. Conflating these two concepts, Montanans regularly described transnational Cree movements in terms of inherent illegality, regardless of whether contraband goods or illicit trade were actually crossing the border. When actual stolen property was involved, it was always intertwined with how Montanans viewed the very presence of "foreign" Indians south of the line. Cree bodies were illicit as much as the stolen property they were accused of transporting across the line. Hence this early history is one of *Cree contraband*, where the stolen goods transported were the focus of Montanan ire, and of *contraband Crees* where their very corporal presence caused offense.

Cree contexts for their transnational movements were either ignored or explicitly discounted as local, territorial, and federal policies were crafted. Unsatisfied with treaty arrangements in Canada, and unwilling to forfeit territories and resources to which they held longstanding traditional rights, transnational Crees followed previously established migratory patterns southward in search of bison, trade, and settlement. The intersection of traditional indigenous activities with new geopolitical structures and jurisdictions extends along the US-Canada and US-Mexico borders. Rarely, if ever, did Euro-American empires consult indigenous geopolitics in assigning or attempting to impose new border regimes. Crees in Montana were certainly not consulted as prejudices were formed; they and future inbound Cree immigrants and refugees would all endure their legacies. Important to the Cree narratives in Montana, and surely important to modern groups and individuals whose transnational movements draw the ire of anxious nations and societies, quickly formed prejudices exact long-term consequences. In this instance, enduring foundational relationships and prejudices formed among Montanans about Crees from 1880 to 1885 led to determined and lasting resistance to foreign Native settlement.

Establishing a Cree Presence on the US-Canada Border

The arrival of Crees to the border itself stands in the broader context of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Native migrations out of the Canadian northeast that far predate the late-nineteenth-century tensions in north-central Montana.⁵ Over the two and a half centuries leading up to 1880, Crees from the eastern woodland areas between the Great Lakes and Hudson Bay made a slow but steady push to the west and south. The Crees shifting territorial boundaries were documented during their prolonged contact and interaction with French, English, and later, Canadian and American traders, settlers, and government officials.⁶ The tensions along the Montanan borderlands in the early 1880s thus stood as the most recent in a long succession of migratory developments that had brought them across the northern Plains and into the foothills of the Rocky Mountains both north and south of the Forty-ninth Parallel. Although an alarming development in the eyes of 1880s Montanans, it stood as the logical outcome for peoples who, for centuries, had migrated and adapted to new socio-economic and military realities in their ever-expanding and -contracting homeland landscapes.

However dynamic the nature of traditional indigenous territories, these

proved utterly incongruous to Euro-Americans, who were guided by their conceptions of policed international boundaries. Whereas Anglo residents of the United States' northern borderlands viewed the border crossing of "Canadian," "British," or "foreign" Indians as a blatant desecration of the sanctity of international boundaries, Crees and Chippewas did not. This disparity is significant: from the earliest Cree-Anglo interactions in Montana, Montanans labeled the inbound Natives' presence as inherently and thoroughly illicit, whereas Crees viewed their actions as wholly natural and rooted in historical and geographic tradition. New national identities, as assigned by the international boundary, imposed severe consequences on Cree bodies without consultation, treaty, or debate. All associated Cree activities were translated through the lens of their physical crossing's illegality. Be it migration or transnational trade, all were read through the prejudice of contraband, illicit trade, or vice.

In reality, Crees would have given significant input if Montanans had solicited their voice when forming policy concerning them. Shared Cree and Chippewa traditions included lands south of the Forty-ninth Parallel as part of their homeland territories. One legend tells of two young men who traveled to lands clearly south of the Forty-ninth Parallel where they saw "Great Rocks" that had snow on them during the summer, a "Great Water" that lay west from those high peaks, a warm country to the south where "there [were] trees with sharp branches . . . sharp needles," and of herds of "buffalo as far as they could see" on the more immediate northern Plains.⁷ Another tradition explained that Montana's Bear Paw Mountains were "marked for [their people]," as a tribal elder was shown them in a dream and told that they were going to be a homeland, a "rich place for his grandchildren someday."⁸ Traditional Cree territories were redefined as transnational by Euro-Americans. The two views were incompatible. "We recognize no boundaries, and shall pass as we please,"⁹ stated Chippewa chief Little Shell in 1882. This pronouncement is emblematic of broadly held Native conceptualizations.

Defining the Cree Presence in Montana

Though the Crees' early interactions with American traders were amicable, by the 1880s they confronted a different American populace when they crossed the international border.¹⁰ By the late nineteenth century, trading posts had given way to aggressive settlement, and farmers and ranchers

viewed the Cree as a threat.¹¹ Whereas many regions in the eastern United States had wrested control from Natives decades and even centuries earlier, these far-off hinterlands were contested ground. In this environment, previous acceptance of northern Indians was increasingly cast in the negative light of territorial violations, contraband transportation, and theft.¹² Thus began the process of defining Crees as an illicit presence. Transnational Cree legal and extralegal activities assumed new importance as they crossed jurisdictional lines. Their transborder movements, whether involving transportation of stolen goods or not, were viewed as illegal because Native crossing itself was illegal.

United States military correspondence of the late nineteenth century expressed broad fears about such unregulated Native crossings. An emerging policy was manifest in various campaigns to track, number, and eventually deport groups of “foreign Indians.” Loath to return to an era of daily “bloodshed and pillage by the Indians,” local Montanans consistently drove federal policy toward the forced removal of “foreign” Indians throughout the 1880s.¹³ With continual fears of attacks from the North from actual resistance groups such as Sitting Bull’s exiled Sioux or even some remnants of Chief Joseph’s Nez Percés, government officials quickly began favoring the deportation option rather than simply tracking transborder movements as had been done in years previous. To execute effectively such plans, US officials sought to clearly classify Natives as domestic or foreign so that appropriate action could be taken: deportation for the foreign and stewardship over the domestic. By imposing such strict definitions over the region’s Native peoples and stemming the illicit flow of human traffic, US officials hoped to make some sense of order out of the seeming chaos of these peripheral borderlands, thus ameliorating the anxiety of local borderlands residents in Montana Territory.

Commanders at Fort Assiniboine translated latent fears of uncontrolled Native movements or outright attacks from across the line into action later in the summer of 1881 by enacting direct military action against border-crossing Natives. The language by which Crees were described reveals important truths in how the US government was beginning to define and view “foreign” Indians. “Send out as strong a force as possible under a careful officer to notify *the foreign Indians* to return to their own country, and so prevent them from driving the game away from the hunting grounds of *our own Indians*,” orders at Fort Assiniboine read.¹⁴ The orders reveal a succinct division and definition of indigenous peoples as foreign and domestic. The United States saw transnational Natives inherently as “illegals,” whereas Natives themselves often did not. Many understood the

jurisdictional divide the border represented, and used it as a tool of active resistance, fleeing across the line when it was to their advantage. However, there is no evidence to suggest that Natives accepted the boundary's legal right to restrict their migratory patterns, assign new national identities, or deny them access to traditionally used lands and resources.

Public response to the so-defined illicit transnational Cree movements and government efforts to deport them are likewise revelatory. In late August 1881, the local *Benton Weekly Record* filed two reports of the looming threat of some three thousand Indians who had already crossed the line and were "coming this way." Placing hope in the Assiniboine garrison, the *Record* felt the two cavalry companies and one infantry company, each armed with artillery pieces, would easily intercept and "drive them back."¹⁵ Had General Thomas H. Ruger not sent these forces, commented the *Record*, the local stockmen were ready to organize a posse of their own to halt the Indian advance.¹⁶ Despite the fact that the Crees were likely travelling with their families and holding no disposition for conflict, a fact admitted by the *Record*, northern Montana locals were adamant that the government support their desire to eliminate any Native incursions from north of the line. They were as concerned about the illicit presence of foreign Crees as about suspected criminal trade, theft, or contraband. Hence, as Cree families traversed well-established routes, following bison into the Milk River country, Anglo Montanans pointed desperately to the international boundary, demanding it be respected and threatening to enforce it themselves.

The determination of Anglo borderland residents to shore up any porous sections of the border clearly stemmed from a looming uncertainty about unregulated Native mobility. Domestic Indian policy was in place to deal with "American" Natives south of the line in Montana Territory. Troops stationed at regional forts with well-established protocol offered a sense of security to newly arrived Euro-American settlers, merchants, and ranchers. In principle, the perceived threat presented by wandering nontreaty Indians, whether domestic or foreign, was the same. In practice, however, the presence of *foreign* Indians south of the line posed unique problems. With no negotiable terms of treaty or reservation status, US officials had no established policy of recourse for dealing with inbound Crees. Even if they pursued deportation, US officials had no jurisdiction for ensuring that Crees leave the borderland region entirely and alleviate anxieties in northern Montana. Instead, the continued looming presence of Crees encamped just a few miles north of the line would persistently undermine the perceived stability of the region. More important, their proximal and

unregulated presence eroded the confidence of settlers, ranchers, and US Army officials alike to impose order over their surroundings. Border proximity and the jurisdictional bisection of Native groups into foreign and domestic left the Montanans impotent in assuring their own sense of security. It was not a singular concern of Native depredations or of illicit transnational trade, but rather, the combination of the two that proved so disconcerting.

Evolving Transnational Cree Activities and Montanan Prejudice

Despite concerted efforts in the summer of 1881 to establish border security, fall brought continued uncertainty. Just as Montanans had feared, previously deported Crees hovered just north of the boundary and soon resumed transnational movements by late September and mid-October.¹⁷ First, word made its way to Fort Benton that Crees were driving off cattle and horses on the Price and Company ranch on the Marias.¹⁸ Soon thereafter, one hundred lodges of Crees were reported in the big bed of the Milk River, though apparently causing no damage.¹⁹ One week later, a military detachment stumbled on two hundred lodges of Crees camped on Woody Island Creek, north of the Milk River and just a few miles south of the border. Likely consisting of the familial bands anticipated earlier in August, the Crees offered no resistance and left the next day toward the line.²⁰ Reports of troublesome bands fighting with Piegans near the Sweet Grass hills further complicated Anglo concerns.²¹

For Cree bands near Woody Island Creek, movement within the strip of land between the South Saskatchewan and Milk Rivers, divided laterally by the border, was undertaken regularly and with little regard for the international line. The environs between the two waters provided a natural corridor for their hunting and foraging, and the bisection of this naturally bounded geography was entirely arbitrary in their perspective. Their appearance south of and apparent dispassionate return north of the line speaks to the regularity and unfettered, almost nonchalant, nature of their border traverses. Some 150 miles to the west, two rivers likewise bounded the Sweet Grass Hills — the Milk on the North and Marias on the south. Presented with another naturally bounded geographic corridor, Cree activities seemed unfettered by the arbitrary presence of the international border. Indigenous geographies were made of open prairies, bounded by waterways and arboreal belts — intersected by competing Na-

tive spheres of influence. Traditional Cree geographies did not feature proverbial “lines in the sand,” bifurcating the natural world along unnatural lines, latitudes or longitudes. Hence, whether moving across the imposed Forty-ninth Parallel in large family groups near Woody Island Creek, or raiding south of the line in the Sweet Grass Hills, Cree movements followed environmentally established, rather than internationally negotiated, geographic corridors.

As the winter of 1881 set in, Crees followed the regular pattern for Natives on the northern Plains of Montana, Alberta, and Saskatchewan: reducing mobility and establishing more sedentary camps. The lull assuaged Montanan’s nerves. By mid-February 1882, however, whatever respite the weary Montanan populace had enjoyed ended. A report coming from the Kipp Ranch, located between the Milk and Marias rivers near Cut Bank and Browning, cited Canadian Indians as stealing some twenty-five horses near the first of the month. On tracking the raiding party, trader Eli Guardipee reported that the thieves had butchered one horse for food and eventually returned the rest, though in a deplorable condition of abuse.²² Compounding these losses was the fact that the raiders had targeted the best animals.²³ Two weeks later, a chilling report offered a more detailed picture of “feloniously inclined” Crees and their operations in the region:

They come from across the line over the divide at the end of the Milk River range, strike across to West Butte, thence to the head of Wilson Creek and following it down come to the Marias Valley, the land of fat horses. Having gathered as many of these together as time and opportunity allow, they have before them a ride of only sixty miles or so to get across the line with their plunder. There have been no less than seven raids on the horse herds in this vicinity within the last year. The latest one is reported by Sol Abbott who came to town yesterday on Friday night.²⁴

Specifically identified as Crees, their route into the Marias Valley indicates Cree utilization of natural geographies as well as an ability to adapt to the imposed geopolitical implications of the international border.²⁵ For Crees whose ancestors had recently migrated across various competing Native spheres of influence, the business of negotiating boundaries, exploiting weaknesses of competing groups, and adapting to new geographic and geopolitical developments was well established. If relations with Ca-

nadian officials were unsatisfactory or game became scarce, making use of Montanan resources was the clear choice. On discovery that Montanans would not pursue them back into Canada, astute Crees used this fact to their advantage. Though a unique and new development, it follows in long-established traditions of adaptation and survival.

This account illustrates specific Montanan fears of transnational Native border crossings as well as Crees' willingness to simultaneously ignore and co-opt the border's supposed impermeability. As depicted by the Montana press, Crees were almost taunting locals with their usage of the border — leaving Montanans powerless to pursue their stolen livestock across the line. In this light, Crees were no longer a simple nuisance that inappropriately crossed south of the line. Now they seemingly leveraged the line to their advantage, raiding “the land of fat horses” and escaping “across the line with their plunder.” This new distinction is significant. The initial definition of illicit transnational human traffic was now compounded with actual contraband, or stolen goods, being transported north of the line and out of US jurisdiction. Montanan prejudice evolved accordingly.

In an attempt to stave off the plunder and flight of transnational contraband, Sheriff John J. Healy of Choteau County rode out with deputies in early February 1882 to apprehend some of these thieves, assumed to be Crees. After five weeks, Fort Assiniboine received word that some one hundred Indians and Métis had captured and detained Healy and his men.²⁶ Three companies under the direction of General Ruger rode to rescue Healy and his men from any possible “dangerously hostile intentions” that their captors held against them. Two days later, Colonel Guido Ilges, who had considerable experience in the region after confronting Sitting Bull there previously, followed Ruger's march.²⁷ Healy was freed without major incident. The Indians and Métis involved had no desire to engage in a large-scale confrontation. They were in Montana to utilize resources, not fight a war. Healy's subsequent report enforced this concept. While returning to Fort Assiniboine, he encountered a camp of Crees, “had them running for the Queen's possessions in an hour,” and sent other “Northern trespassers” across the line as they burnt houses and “struck terror into the hearts” of the troublesome parties.²⁸ As Healy and other parties continued along the Milk River Valley in search of Cree leaders Big Bear and Lucky Man, they sought to impress on all “Northern trespassers” their strict intolerance for their violation of the international boundary. It was likely pragmatism, rather than terror, that convinced Crees and others to withdraw. Having left Canada for avenues of economic activity that would

bring them the greatest benefit but also the path of least resistance, Crees likewise withdrew from the United States for the same reasons. For the moment, returning to Canada was the most prudent choice.

The reported presence of Big Bear south of the line was of particular concern to Montanans. Big Bear was a nontreaty Cree from Canada whose warriors were “considered the most desperate horse thieves in Montana.” Army personnel echoed extreme displeasure in Big Bear’s appearance. One soldier stationed at Fort Assiniboine wrote of Big Bear’s band, “I never was tired of a Tribe as I am of this one.”²⁹ Statements like this likely stemmed more from frustration over the army’s inability to control Cree movements than personal interactions with Big Bear’s Crees. Civilian voices similarly posited that Big Bear was no doubt “causing trouble on this side of the line.”³⁰ The entrance of Big Bear into Montanan public discourse transformed Montanan prejudice. Well-known from Canadian reports as a charismatic, yet stubborn, Native leader, Big Bear’s figure put a more tangible, and prosecutable, name and face to oft-reported instances of Cree horse thieving and supposed depredations.

The May 4, 1882, edition of the *Benton Weekly Record* featured no less than three articles on Big Bear and typified the tone of news coverage and underlying local anxiety concerning his presence in Montana. When fifty Crees under the direction of Chief Little Eagle interfered with a commercial wagon train, an event with which Big Bear had no involvement, his name was nevertheless pulled into discussion. Although these reports did not accuse Big Bear of impeding the wagon train, they pointed out that Big Bear was back at his previous camp on Beaver Creek along the Milk River and “had no intention of going across the line.”³¹ His very presence was of interest because of its inherent illegality as determined by white Montanans and the troublesome reputation that he brought with him from Canada. And, if he was not directly involved with the events surrounding the wagon train, his camp was certain to be involved in the “Annual Spring Opening of Aboriginal Cussedness — Horse-Stealing and Other Outrages.” As the *Record* editorialized, “Big Bear, the Cree, is on Beaver Creek and his camp is sure to be a centre of horse stealing operations and a refuge for dangerous renegades and cut-throats from all tribes.”³²

Increasingly upset and frustrated with the continued appearance of Crees south of the line, and their inability to stem their trade of contraband livestock back into Canada, Montanan settlers debated possible solutions. The *Benton Record* highlighted various problems to address. First, some military successes, such as Captain Klein’s burning and dispersal of a large Cree camp, were ultimately inconsequential. As quickly as Big Bear

had fled on Klein's arrival, the camp immediately reformed and continued "smuggling and rebuilding their houses." The *Record* explained the problem in the following terms:

[A]s hostile Indians are always mounted and are trained to the hardest kind of riding, it is strange that infantry should always be sent out against them — particularly here in Montana, where the Indians as a rule, rove about and commit their depredations in scattered bands. The post at Assiniboine is intended to guard and patrol a vast section of country, and in view of the immense distances to be traversed in all expeditions, and the fact that the Indians to be watched are well mounted as we have stated, why in the name of common sense are there not more companies of cavalry stationed there?³³

As conditions were, some feared that Big Bear and others would continue to dodge units and "laugh at the soldiers" before quickly returning to "their old stomping ground as if nothing had happened."³⁴ As Patrick Burke, a US Army Signal Corps member stationed in Helena, wrote to his father, "The Indians north of here under Big Bear . . . always strike where least expected and then scatter off over the line before the troops can follow."³⁵ Big Bear's band understood these borderland dynamics, the peripheral weaknesses extant in growing Canadian and American empires, and was wise to exploit them. If, but for a time, his people could persist in nomadic traditions, they could live off the bounty of the northern Plains and the added resources unwillingly provided by Anglo settlers and ranchers. If border security was to be enforced, it would require significantly more force than had hitherto been available.

Along with increased numbers, Montanans argued that troops must be allowed to more actively engage Native bands. Perhaps, if the military was given sufficient latitude to *impel* the Natives to comply with their demands, they could succeed. As explained in the *Record*, the troops sent out from Fort Assiniboine were under strict command "not to fight Indians until they are first attacked."³⁶ As evidenced by the fact that Big Bear and his band had "simply dodged" Captain Klein's April expedition, this made for ineffective border enforcement. Big Bear understood that any force sent against them was rendered utterly impotent, given the Crees did not fire first. By evasion and withdrawal, Crees, Métis, and others had veritable free range over the borderlands. The *Record* concluded, "Until a large body of cavalry is stationed at Assiniboine, and greater discretion is allowed officers in command, expeditions from the post against Indians and half-breeds,

must necessarily prove abortive and expensive.”³⁷ Without such action, Anglo residents of northern Montana believed they were effectively at the mercy of the various Native groups that circulated north and south of the Forty-ninth Parallel.

The *Daily Independent* in Helena sarcastically echoed the perceived injustice of this inversed power differential. Commenting on Big Bear’s repeated pattern of evading US forces by crossing the border and then returning, the *Independent* related “the hostiles from the Queen’s dominions declare their intention of running the Milk river region to suit themselves.” Then, they quipped: “Wonder what Uncle Sam is going to do about it? Perhaps the Secretary of the Interior will recommend the removal of the troops from Montana *for fear they may degrade the morals of the reds*. As he has recommended the removal of troops from the Indian agencies in Dakota, it would be no surprise if he next recommended the removal of the troops from all the Indian countries.”³⁸ The bitter sentiment expressed is telling. Northern Montanans were already anxious concerning the state of their “domestic” Indian issues. The seemingly endless threat of foreign Indians, over which apparently they had no control, was vexing. Crees “from the Canadian side . . . [were] engaged in their usual spring sports,” and Montanans, for the time being, were left without recourse or security.³⁹

Much to the delight of worried Montanans, Big Bear and much of his band returned to Canada in the spring of 1882. For a short time, attention toward perceived Cree troublemaking reoriented itself northward — following Big Bear’s return toward Fort Walsh in Canada. Fifty odd miles north of the international border in Saskatchewan, and situated on the southeast flank of the Cypress Hills, Fort Walsh was a place that Crees had frequented for quite some time. Hence the coverage of horse-thieving along the Marias and Milk rivers shifted to reports of similar activities in the regions surrounding the Cypress Hills.⁴⁰ These reports read much like those previously south of the line, telling of thieving, warfare between Crees and other tribes, and the struggles of British authorities to quell such violence. Throughout, Big Bear’s persona loomed. He had caused trouble in the region before his self-imposed, two-year exile to Montana. In the view of the Montana press, his troublesome tendencies had continued in Montana and were again being furthered in Canada. The press painted Big Bear, his band, and all associated with him in menacing terms. This would prove a pivotal precedent for future relations among Crees, the local Montanan citizenry, and US Army officials stationed in regional forts.

As Big Bear attempted to secure treaty agreements more favorable for

his people, the destitute condition of his and other bands of Cree would again drive some south of the border as summer waned. Word reached Fort Belknap in mid-July that small groups of Crees were revisiting their familiar hunting grounds along Woody Island Creek. These were summarily confronted, relieved of their guns and horses (all branded), and turned north to the border.⁴¹ Detachments from Fort Assiniboine faced similar conditions. In July and August, large parties of Crees and Métis were captured, stripped of guns, ammunition, and stolen horses and directed to return north and not cross the line again.⁴² Threatened to be “more severely dealt with” if found south of the boundary again, the groups quickly retreated north.⁴³ As Big Bear’s negotiations waxed on with Canadian officials, however, Crees faced dire circumstances and possible starvation north of the line. One observer wrote, “They are literally in a starving condition . . . their clothing for the most part was miserable and scanty in the extreme . . . [little children] had scarcely rags to cover them . . . it would indeed be difficult to exaggerate their extreme wretchedness and need.”⁴⁴ While some, like Big Bear, decided to remain north, others being “slowly and deliberately starved” took to the border.⁴⁵ Throughout the fall of 1882 and well into the winter of 1882–83, Crees continued to cross south in search of desperately needed resources.⁴⁶

In December 1882, Montanans rejoiced at the news that Big Bear had surrendered to Canadian authorities and accepted newly negotiated treaty terms. The *Benton Weekly Record* explained the significance that this event had for residents of northern Montana:

There is much importance attached to Big Bear’s accepting the treaty, in as much as to him can be ascribed the major part of the depredations committed by North Cree Indians. He has disturbed the people of this Territory by his raids upon stock, and his war parties have more than once within the past few years alarmed the settlers north of Benton . . . and while it may be a somewhat embarrassing confession, it is none the less true that Montana settlers have only the Montana Indians to fear since Big Bear’s yielding to the treaty.⁴⁷

Some eight to nine months removed from Big Bear’s return to Canada, Montanans still looked to his influence as pivotal — for better or for worse. They mistakenly supposed that Big Bear’s signing would end Cree depredations south of the line. Two misconceptions were apparent. First, Montanans assumed that all Plains Crees were under the direct control of Big Bear or other chiefs associated with him. Second, they assumed

that as members of such an all-inclusive hierarchical social structure, all Crees would follow Big Bear's surrender and settle somewhere beyond the immediate proximity of the border. Almost immediately, continued Cree activities laid bare the inherent fallacy in these beliefs.

Finalizing Cree Illegality

In fact, as the winter of 1883 transitioned into spring, Montana experienced a sharp escalation in Cree border crossings and horse-thieving, rivaling those of previous springs. In one alarming instance, a Cree party that numbered some two hundred warriors crossed south of the line. Following familiar lines, but also stressing the unique nature of the threat, the *Daily Independent* wrote that "the Crees, about 200 strong, are moving down the Marias killing cattle, stealing horses, and fears for the safety of the settlers are entertained. It is the biggest Indian raid for years."⁴⁸ In the days to follow, reports streamed in about surrounding ranchers and settlers whose cattle and horses Crees targeted as well as the efforts of the garrison from Fort Assiniboine to drive them back north.⁴⁹ The strength and extent of the Cree incursion was so surprising that national press syndicates reported on the matter and raised alarm:

Runners and scouts bring information of the most daring raid of the Cree Indians, who belong properly beyond the Canadian line, that has been made in many years. The party, supposed to number 200 braves, are represented as moving along the Marias River, killing cattle and other stock as they go. At daybreak on the nineteenth instant, a small war party of Piegans, headed by Little Dog and two white men, had a sharp engagement with the Crees, killing two of them and securing their scalps. Two Piegans were wounded and one horse was killed. The bodies of ten oxen were found near Fort Conrad, which had been killed by a marauding band, and forty horses were driven off by the same party near the same place. The Indians seem to be heading toward the Dominion.⁵⁰

The tone of national coverage presented Crees in the most recalcitrant terms: focused on wanton, gratuitous destruction of property. In their previous complaints of transnational Cree movements, and their illicit trafficking of contraband, Montanans had suggested that Crees were not "what may be properly called hostile Indians," but rather a troublesome nuisance.

Now, however, echoing the *Washington Post*, the local press wrote of reckless destruction of property and “the biggest and best executed raid that [had] occurred on the Marias for a long time.”⁵¹ A salient point was thus revealed. The continued development of transnational Cree movements was inextricably linked to conditions north of the line, but not always with the causal connections that Montanans anticipated. Failed treaty negotiations in the late 1870s had prompted Crees to cross in to Montana, and much to the consternation of Montanans, the inverse relationship was not necessarily true. With Big Bear’s compliance, the majority of Canadian Crees were under treaty, but this did not terminate their transnational presence. Many persisted to negotiate traditional geographies.

Conflict between transnational Crees and Piegans in Montana during the spring of 1883 prompted Montanans to clamor for more lasting solutions.⁵² Both nations were at the point of starvation, and this fueled their mutual “intention to kill cattle wherever they find them” and determination to make raids on one another.⁵³ Some favored the establishment of new military forts and posts nearer to the international border.⁵⁴ The need to curtail the slaughter or stealing of livestock was apparent, but the mounting intertribal antagonism and violence complicated concerns. To make matters worse, Montanan papers reported supposedly “well grounded fears” that Big Bear himself was gathering an immense force to storm across the line, avenge Cree deaths, and make general war on Piegans, Assiniboines, and Gros Ventres.⁵⁵ Although the report of Big Bear’s intentions proved false, it revealed continued anxiety about his looming presence. Some Cree raiding did ensue, even led by his son Little Bear, or Imasees, but it stood in direct opposition to Big Bear’s wishes.⁵⁶

In the late spring and early summer of 1883, Cree-Montan interaction followed much the same pattern. Transnational movements were repelled and charismatic leaders were targeted in hopes of controlling subservient bands. Louis Riel, who was living in Montana at the time, was thus arrested for suspicion of inciting Crees to cross the border and Missouri River to “murder the whites.” The targeting of Riel was similar to that of Big Bear and underlined a belief that eliminating the threat of charismatic individuals may reduce broader problems.⁵⁷ Unabated, Crees continued to range the prairies north of Fort Benton and US Army officials from Fort Assiniboine vied to capture and deport them. In response to reported Cree depredations, soldiers would directly confront Crees and instruct them to return north.⁵⁸ Despite such actions, Montanans’ perennial frustration remained: deportation was their only recourse. Lamenting, the *Benton Weekly Record*

wrote, "It is to be regretted that something cannot be done with these Indians after all the time and trouble spent in capturing them. They will hardly be turned loose on the other side of the line before they will return again to commit more depredations."⁵⁹ This complaint was now becoming all too familiar.

During the summer of 1883, Lieutenant Colonel Guido Ilges moved against the Crees led by Little Pine with mixed success. Commander at Fort Assiniboine, Ilges had been sending mounted infantry units against the Crees for months, but eventually set out himself. After rumors of his defeat, Ilges returned with "nothing of great importance [being] accomplished." He captured and deported some Crees, but as was becoming abundantly clear, this meant little in terms of long-term solutions to the problem.⁶⁰ Canadian officials were announcing plans to move Crees farther north, but the immediate situation continued unabated. Exacerbating concerns was the announced transfer of an infantry company stationed on the Marias. This, complained northern Montanans, left "the country wholly unprotected from the Cree raids."⁶¹ A few months later, Patrick Burke, then stationed at Fort Maginnis, lamented that the trouble was likely to continue: "I think there is going to be some serious trouble with the Indians this summer in this country. They come from north of the line and murder settlers and steal their horses and get away before the soldiers can follow them. One thing is certain; if the boys get a chance they will show them no mercy."⁶² During the remainder of 1883 and into 1884, Burke's contingency and others saw a significant decline in Cree cattle and horse thefts from settlers. Altercations between Crees and other Indians in Montana, however, continued.⁶³

Conclusion

In the spring of 1885, the Northwest Rebellion broke out in Saskatchewan and Manitoba as Métis under the leadership of Louis Riel and others revolted against Canadian authorities. When word reached Montanan papers of Cree involvement in the uprising, the reported actions dovetailed neatly with the prejudices locals had built against Crees during the preceding years. Included in the instigative parties, Crees were perceived as "starting on the warpath" in Canada.⁶⁴ Further reports that Big Bear's band was involved galvanized the worst prejudices that had already formed against the Crees. The linking of Big Bear's negative reputation from Cree border

crossings in the early 1880s to his involvement in the bloody Northwest Rebellion dominated the minds of Montanans as subsequent waves of inbound Crees arrived.

The developments of 1885 would have likely been enough to set US policymakers and Montanan interests against the prospect of offering federal recognition to future incoming Cree immigrants. Never in the business of assuming extra responsibilities for Indians, the United States and local Montanans were even more reticent to accept stewardship over so-called troublesome Crees. With layers of prejudice stacked against them from previous horse-thieving or cattle-rustling incidents, border violations, and the Northwest Rebellion, Crees found their efforts to settle in Montana ill-fated from the start. When Big Bear's son Little Bear fled into Montana after the failed 1885 Rebellion, Montanan policy defaulted to the entrenched bias of previous experiences.

For the preceding five years, the media frenzy concerning reported Cree depredations, thieving, and illegal border crossing had kept frontier settlers at high alert. The very "foreign" presence of Crees frustrated urbanites, ranchers, and farmers alike, and the local press made sure to consistently reinforce these prejudices. The impotence of US military units to enforce border security against the entry, exit, and reentry of Crees exacerbated such angers. Similar events of Native thievery committed elsewhere in the United States were dealt with summarily under established Indian policy. Uncontrolled Native transport of contraband across the United States' northern borders, however, was different. The perceived transnational Cree threat was uniquely problematic.

Throughout the early and short pre-1885 history of Cree-Anglo interactions in Montana, Crees were afforded little, if any, welcome south of the line. They were, in the eyes of many borderlands whites, purveyors of vice: specifically, the theft or slaughter of livestock. This, in and of itself, however, does not explain the underlying "moral panic," as termed by Josiah Heyman and Howard Campbell in this volume's afterward, surrounding transnational Crees in Montana Territory.⁶⁵ For Montanans, Cree activities were not simply an example Native depredation. They were an uncontrolled foreign presence, illicit in their very transnational corporal presence, and intent on illicit transnational behavior. As livestock thieves, Crees were not simple purveyors of vice, they were engaged in international smuggling. From the Crees' perspective, they were utilizing resources and lands to which they had traditional rights. Ancestors of Big Bear relate that he felt the Northwest belonged to him, valued its vast riches, and saw how

Anglos were then reaping the benefits of what was rightfully belonged to his people.⁶⁶ As incongruous as the arbitrary bisection of Native geographies by the Forty-ninth Parallel was with traditional Native understanding of territorial boundaries, the juxtaposition of these competing perspectives of Cree activities in Montana exacted lasting consequences on the histories of both Crees and whites.

Likewise, the proximity of the border itself was a transformational power in the lives of Crees and white Montanans. It recast and reconfigured the histories of all parties involved, adding layers of geopolitical and international complexity nonexistent elsewhere in the country. The transformation of the region from porous borderlands into policed borders, as fueled by increased white settlement, left indelible marks on Plains Crees.⁶⁷ While not resembling a strict Turnerian process where the region moved through discernable phases, the dynamics and histories of Native migration, white settlement, and border enforcement were tightly intertwined as they fitfully progressed. The evolution of the established, though porous, boundary into a geopolitical tool for controlling the movement of desirable or undesirable populations was concurrently influenced by increased white settlement and transnational Cree migrations. Without Cree border crossing, white settlement may not have demanded that their northern frontier be better policed. Likewise, without increased white settlement, transnational Cree activities may have continued without cause for alarm. It was the intersection and combination of the two historical narratives along the border in northern Montana that caused the nature of the region's borderlands to evolve.

Local Montanans, like most societies faced with possible chaos, hungered for order. Facing possible disruption to the ordered society they were in the midst of establishing, they quickly defined the licit and illicit, domestic and foreign. For the individual Crees and other foreign Natives thus defined and labeled, the traditional (though evolving) Native geopolitical landscape in which they were actors was not consulted. Their self-perception as rightful residents of lands arbitrarily bisected by Anglo borders was a view not simply overlooked, but forcefully ignored. How might the consideration of Native perspectives have augmented the Montanan definition of vice, contraband, and illicit transnational behavior? As transnational Cree migration and trade (whether licit or illicit) was defined and interpreted without the Crees' input or context, the history of all involved parties was predestined for conflict. Ironically, the dominant society's quest for order fated the region for chaos. Thus relegated to lives of destitute homeless wandering in Montana, generations of Crees suffered from this

condemnation. Consultation with inbound groups would have ensured peaceful coexistence or successful segregation, but the opposite virtually guaranteed conflict. Sadly, Crees decades-removed from those initial years of Cree border crossings, hunting south of the line, and livestock-thieving would suffer the consequences of persistent prejudice. Defined collectively as illegals within their own lands, Crees, everything they carried, and all they did in their transnational world were contraband, illicit, and vice.