

Ahtahkakoop

**The Epic Account of a Plains Cree Head Chief,
His People, and Their Struggle for Survival, 1816-1896**

by Deanna Christensen

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CHAPTER THREE

Ahtahkakoop Learns the Story of Buffalo Child

It was June. The Eggs Hatching Moon, *pāskaweho-wipicim*, they called it. Yellow buffalo bean flowers had emerged across the grasslands, replacing the gentle blues of the hardy crocuses that weeks ago had transformed into deceptively delicate seed-heads that fluttered in the wind. Three moons had passed since the first singing for the Sun Dance. Now the people were packing and getting ready to leave for the ceremonial grounds near the elbow of the South Saskatchewan River.

The women took the tipis down and lashed the poles together to form travois. Tipi covers and household belongings were loaded onto these conveyances. Then, when the camp was ready to leave, the travois were fastened by a series of rawhide thongs to dogs and horses. Babies bundled into moss bags were carried by their mothers, older sisters, or aunts, or sometimes they were tied securely on the travois amongst soft bundles of household goods. Noisily children and unencumbered dogs ran alongside, enjoying the freedom of the prairie. At the front of the procession rode the chief and the leading men. Members of the *okihcihtāw* (Warrior society),* riding the finest horses in the band, flanked the column and formed a rearguard, keeping order, encouraging stragglers, and ensuring the safety of the moving camp.

Their destination—the Sun Dance grounds in a small valley near the elbow of the South Saskatchewan River—was a sacred place. As a boy Ahtahkakoop had been taught about this and other sacred places. But this site, this place by the elbow, was particularly important to the Plains Cree.

* Men who had distinguished themselves in warfare and who played a crucial role in the well-being of the camp.

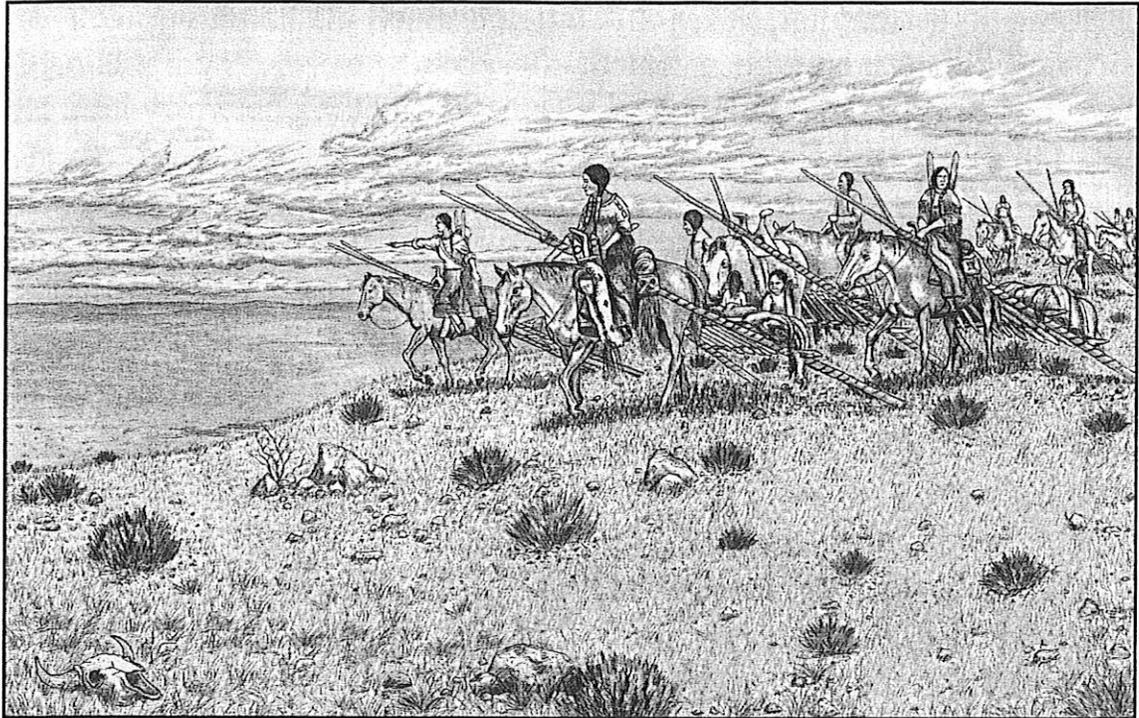


Illustration by Ed Peekeekoot

Ahtahkakoop's family travelling to the Sun Dance grounds.

The story of its sacredness was etched into his mind, a story that became more vivid as the long procession of dog- and horse-drawn travois, people, and horses neared its destination.*

“This happened a long time ago,” Ahtahkakoop remembered the old man saying. “A little child had been born and had been lost.”

“Our grandfathers and grandmothers were moving their camp long ago,” the old man continued. “The baby was tied on one of the travois with thongs of rawhide. They must have come undone as the people were moving. The baby dropped off, and no one noticed because they were happy as they walked and they were talking and visiting. It so happened that his family was at the end of the procession when this child fell off. At first they did not notice as they travelled. It was only much later, for nothing like this had ever happened, nothing like this had ever happened before.

* This sacred story was told by Barry L. Ahenakew, as it was told to him by the elders Opapēciw, Kā-āyāsītēyahkēkocin, Kīsik-awāsis, and Okimāwikwāniyēw. It was taped in Cree, transcribed in Cree, and then translated into English by Freda Ahenakew. Editing was kept to a minimum in order to retain the characteristics of Cree story-telling.

“And so he was left. When this little child fell off he must have been sleeping. He must have been content after breast-feeding. There was nothing, there was no crying right away. There was nothing to worry him. He was full as he slept. He too was happy about his life.

“So his parents continued on their way. They were travelling at the end, behind everyone else. No one was aware of what happened, for stories were told as they travelled.

“And so it happened later now, when he began to get hungry, this little child began to cry and cry. He began crying and crying. He cried when he was hungry.”

“The buffalo were travelling not far away, and they heard him,” the old man said. “They heard something so they went to check. These animals, when they hear something they don’t understand, they search for it. ‘Let’s see what this noise is,’ one of the buffalo said. Some animals are like that. That was how this one buffalo was. It was a female that searched, and some males also looked. These bulls, *hā*, they were going to where they heard something. They went and found this little child there on the ground. He was crying.

“‘Well, well, what is this we have found,’ the buffalo were saying. ‘Look! This is a little person, a little one!’ ‘Look, what is it?’ another one asked. These buffalo were using their own language. They were talking to each other. ‘Well, I will kill him! I will kill him,’ one of the young bulls was saying. I guess he wanted to be a leader, for they too had leaders. The buffalo used to make chiefs of the most powerful one. There was a bull that was a leader for them too, but he was not the one trying to kill this little child. A bull that wanted to be a leader was going to kill this little child. He was going to crush the baby with his head. He was going to use his horns. The others were stopping him.

“‘This is a little child, you should not do that to him,’ the other buffalo told him. ‘This should not be done to him. He does not even know anything. He is not even able to flee. Don’t!’ The buffalo were trying to tell the young bull not to kill the little child. ‘Let him go,’ one of the bulls told the young buffalo. ‘No, I will kill him,’ the young bull said. ‘These are the ones who kill us, these human people.’

“‘No! no!’ some of the buffalo cried out. One of them raced away. He had gone to fetch their leader. Suddenly he came racing back with a big bull. Right away this bull, the leader, raced around. It was there that he

raced around this little child. 'He will know what to do,' said the others. This bull, this leader, he raced right around, so that no one would bother the child. The leader was chasing the other buffalo farther and farther away. Then he came to a stop there beside the baby.

"Yes! What is this? What is this you have found? This one that you have found is alive. Oh my, Oh my, Oh my!' All the while the baby was crying, This little child wanted to suckle.

"Well, well. It is truly pitiful. It is pitiful this human life that you have found,' the leader said. He felt sorry for him. 'This one over here wanted to kill him' one of the bulls told him. 'Hey! None of that will happen, none of that will happen. Go fetch that one! She is to come and feed this child.' Some of the buffalo left again.

"And now they brought this female and she had lots of milk in her bag. 'That is the one,' the leader told her. 'You are to feed this little child, you are to feed him. Stand on top of him, bend over,' And so she stood over the baby, just exactly where the teats were. She was bent over there. She squatted and fed him.

"And this one, when he found the teat—*āw!* what would the little child know—he began suckling this female buffalo. He got really full with drinking. Well! Well, he was really contented from eating. So then he slept again being so contented from eating.

"By the time his parents and the others realized the child was lost the buffalo had already taken him, for one of them had used *yēskanēwak** to scoop the child up. He scooped him up and carried him like that. This little child was small. The place on top of the bull's head was almost like a bed. It was really soft between the horns where he had been scooped. Now this little child was being carried. There were many buffalo. It was a good thing he had been saved. It's a good thing they fetched the leader right away, this chief buffalo, the king.

"It was then that as soon as the child would cry, if he was not being carried, he would be fed. It was this female who fed him. And in this way the child spent the summer. I guess the buffalo milk was very powerful. This child became so strong, and he soon moved around. He was strong. Very early he began taking steps. The buffalo milk was so good for him, and his parents never found him."

* The cradle of the horns.

A boy had put some wood on the fire, Ahtahkakoop remembered, and then the old man continued the telling of the sacred story.

“So this was how the buffalo raised him. Finally it was one year, and then two years, three years, four years, and they did not see the Cree very often. Only once in a while! But they would flee right away when they sensed anything like that. They looked after themselves. And the child would be carried, only now he rode on the back of the buffalo. Sometimes he would run. He had so much stamina. He was becoming stronger and bigger. As the boy got older and stronger, his diet changed. Now it was grass, flowers, and leaves that he was eating. He was living on these now.

“He thought himself to be a buffalo, this young man. He was fifteen years old, he was sixteen years old, he was seventeen years old. He continued to grow and he was getting really long and bushy hair. He did not speak, of course. There was no human language, for he never heard the Cree language, just buffalo talk. But, it so happened that one day people startled them. Hey! There was noise and there was dust flying. These people were yelling as they chased the buffalo. Well, he too was fleeing. But he was big now and he ran with the buffalo.”

“And these Cree saw him,” the old man said. “*Yohō!* They were catching glimpses. They were getting glimpses of this young man. He was running with the buffalo as they disappeared. He was going as fast as the buffalo. Well, well! Some of the Cree were killing the buffalo. They stopped as they spoke to each other.

“‘Did you see him? Is that a person we have seen running with the buffalo, or is it a spirit? What is it, what is that we have seen?’ Well! Well, they were rather scared. ‘Well, well! Okay then, we will take care of the meat,’ they said. ‘We will bring our wives here to come to take care of this meat.’

“Well, they had decided what they were going to do. So now some of these Crees were telling what they had seen. ‘A young man, a boy with long hair, was running with these buffalo. I wonder if we were seeing things if several of us saw him?’ they asked among themselves.

“*Hā!* Buffalo Child—as I will call him now—lived with the buffalo. They had run to another place far away and they were crying for their relatives who had been killed, the buffalo that were killed.

“Well, well, now the buffalo were crying, the bulls and the females for their relatives. Buffalo Child was also grieving, although his mother had come through safely, the one who had fed him, and also his father. He knew them as his parents, this mother and the leader, the big bull.

“*Hā!* That’s it, my son,’ the leader said. The bull addressed him this way now. The young man understood the buffalo language.

“Son, look! These people have given us a hard time again. They are the only ones that give us a hard time. Although we too sometimes hurt them, one by one, they still give us a hard time with arrows and they spear us. Well son, you must learn to run from that kind.’ The old bull was counselling his child well.

“Buffalo Child had a brother. He had a young brother buffalo, and when they were young they used to fight. They still played together. They pushed each other with their heads, and finally Buffalo Child was getting strong too. Finally the buffalo were getting him strong as they pushed each other around with their heads. He played with them, fought with them. And they ran all the time. They travelled all the time. Buffalo Child, as he grew into a man, became very powerful. He was also good looking. He was getting tall. He was getting older in years. At times the Crees were after them, and they had to run even more.

Buffalo Child was also getting more *nipwahkēt*, more intelligent now. He was getting clever. One day they came to a lake. He was drinking and looking down when he saw his reflection. Never before did he mind his reflection in the water. This time when he was drinking he really saw himself. He looked at the reflections of the others. He saw he was different, he looked different. *Ohōh!* He just let the water out of his mouth, it was dripping there as he looked at these buffalo.

“Why?’ he asked, as he looked at his reflection again in the water. ‘*Iyaw*, what do I look like? *Yohō!* These people as they are called who chase after us, who are killing us, this is how I look, *yaw!* What do I look like?’ Well! Well! He was then bewildered. He went to his father then, this chief, this bull. ‘Father! Why do I look like this?’

“Well son! I knew that some day you would come and ask me this. I will tell you. I will tell you, I will not hide anything from you. It is true you look different, I saved your life, son. You were found and one of the bulls was going to kill you. I stopped it. I felt sorry for you, son, so you wouldn’t be killed. These people where you are from, these people the Crees, as they are called, this is where you come from exactly.’

“I will spare you, I had said at that time, as I felt sorry for you. So then I have raised you. I have cared for you. This is what you know now. You will be worried now. You are not a buffalo my son, you are a person for certain.’

“Well, well, what will I do, father? What will I do?”

“You can remain with us. It is all right the way I have raised you. You are like one, a buffalo. You can stay with us.”

“Father, now I am bewildered. How? How can I stay with you, now that I know I am different of body? I look different. What about my people, my mother and my father? My father is a human, also my mother. How are they? Where are they?”

“I don’t know son, I do not know. I have raised you for a long time.”

“Well, father, I am going to be quiet, away somewhere. Do not worry when you don’t see me right away,” the young man said.

“Well, that is it then, my son. I will see you.’ And so Buffalo Child left, only now he knew he was a human. He had no clothes, he had no moccasins. He was naked. He had long hair. He was tall and had a strong body. He was slim when he left to be alone, and he was good looking.

“When he was alone, the young man said to himself, ‘I must go home to the people. I greatly appreciate that the buffalo, my father, and also my mother, raised me but now I will look for the people.’”

“And so he left,” the old man said. “He walked I wonder for how many days, how many nights, but he was able-bodied. He was strong, stronger than any of the other Crees. He must have been much stronger. He found an *ōtēnaw** with smoke rising from the tipis, so he went towards it.

“Some scouts were on the lookout. They saw this young man come walking. They went to announce his arrival at the Cree camp. ‘Someone is coming, a stranger’ they said. ‘We cannot recognize him, get ready for a stranger is coming!’

“Buffalo Child kept coming. Finally he was getting there. They could not recognize him and he was naked. He did not wear a breechcloth and he was barefoot. Who was this? Now they spoke Cree to him. ‘Who are you? Where are you from?’ He could not speak to them, he did not understand them.

“‘What language are they speaking?’ he thought to himself, and he kept walking towards this *ōtēnaw*, to where the tipis were. More and more the tipis were becoming visible. He just went towards these.

“He was not a bit scared. He would leave these people behind anyway

* Cree town or encampment.

when in flight running, but he was human, he had to meet his human relatives. He just kept going, and although they talked to him he paid them no attention. Finally he reached where the tipis stood. He was not too pleased with them. These tipis were made of buffalo hides. They were made from hides sewed together. He recognized them, he recognized the smell. It was really buffalo hides. These were his relatives, the buffalo.

“But he was human. Well truly, finally the people and the children were really around him as he walked, walking along with him and talking to him as they walked, ‘Who are you? Where are you from? What have you come here for? Why are you naked?’ There was so much chattering, the people were chattering.

“After a time Buffalo Child stopped when he thought he was near the centre of the town. There was a big tipi in the centre. He went there. Some people came out, and before he knew it there were many humans around him. They made room for the men coming out of the tipi. These were the chiefs, the councillors, the elders. They were coming towards him, they were not even talking. They were looking at him with his bushy hair. He had long hair—it looked like he never combed his hair—and he was naked. He had no shoes on. Finally one of the men spoke to him. He lifted his hand up for the people to be quiet. ‘*Ēhā.*’ When it was quiet, he asked ‘Who are you? Where have you come from? Tell me, tell us your story!’

“How could Buffalo Child respond to him? He did not know. He simply put his head down, finally he looked up. He had thought what to do.

“He did this. He closed his mouth. He simply made signs to talk to them, ‘*Āw!* He does not speak, he cannot talk!’ the people said.

“Well, well. These people began chattering again. Then the chief again spoke. He was making hand signs. ‘Come! Come! Come with me!’ They took him into the tipi now.

“Only the chiefs, councillors, and some braves were allowed to enter the tipi. They all sat down. At first Buffalo Child kept standing. He saw that they sat upright, cross-legged Cree style. They were all watching him. He looked at how they were sitting, and then slowly he sat down too. He sat like them. He was sitting Cree style, he was sitting up.

“Well, although the men in the tipi talked and asked questions, Buffalo Child could not understand them and he did not know how to talk to them. Finally he simply pointed that he had come from far.

“He did this then. He made signs like horns with his pointing finger, like

he had horns, with the *omomatayēw** hanging down. 'Buffalo, *hā!* He is telling about buffalo, where he saw them!' one of the men in the tipi said. Then Buffalo Child pointed to himself with his signs.

"*Ōh!* You are called Buffalo Child then. Hey! He may be a Blackfoot, maybe a Blackfoot has reached us. But he is in no way dangerous, he does not scare us. '*Hā!* We will watch him,' they said.

"So they watched him.

"Well now, we will watch him!' And from then on the chief himself watched Buffalo Child, for he liked how the strange young man looked. He was tall, he was of strong body, and he was slim. So now they brought him clothes and a breechcloth was put on him. Moccasins too. They were measuring his feet to make moccasins for him and they combed his hair too. Well, his hair was really tangled everywhere. It took a really long time to comb it. Well, well! But when they braided his hair for him, his braids were thick and very long. Well, well, he looked good! A real Cree.

"Then they began teaching him to speak Cree. He imitated those who were teaching him. They pointed to a tipi and said '*mikiwāhp,*' and *iyinito-mikiwāhp,* like a tipi.

"They pointed to the meat rack, *akwāwān,* they told him, and to the *wiyās* hanging on the rack. They were hanging there, strips of buffalo meat spread out on the rack to dry. That was something he didn't like, buffalo meat. It was hanging all over, his relatives. *Wiyās,* meat, he was told.

"That is why they kill my relatives!' Now he knew. 'They eat the meat, these people eat us.' Well, well. Of course he would not say anything. He didn't know how to tell them anyhow, even though he was being taught to speak Cree, even though they were pointing things out to him every day. Finally he had lived with them for quite a while.

"Then one day, scouts came racing in. 'We have seen buffalo!' they yelled. 'We saw buffalo!' Already he knew what that meant. My relatives have been seen, he said to himself.

"He did not tell anyone about how he had been raised, he kept that quiet. Suddenly buffalo had been seen. They arrived racing. The Cree killed a great many of them. The women took their travois and went to the place where the buffalo had been killed. When they came back the travois were loaded with meat. The women also hauled many hides to their camp. They

* A goatee on the chin of a moose or buffalo.

started making dry meat. The women were hanging meat to dry. He watched for a while. His relatives had been killed.

“Buffalo Child was deeply disturbed. At first he thought, ‘I will tell them.’ Then he said, ‘No, I will just leave.’” The old man who was telling the story clapped his hands. “And so in this way Buffalo Child disappeared. It was then that he left the Cree camp.

“Buffalo Child came upon some buffalo as he was travelling, but they wanted to flee when they saw him. The buffalo were scared of a human person, but then he talked to them, ‘*mmmk mmmki*,’ buffalo talk.

“‘*Yohō!* What’s with this human who knows our language?’ the buffalo asked. ‘He doesn’t want us to be scared of him. He is not going to harm us. And so they stayed, for of course Buffalo Child was speaking to them. And he talked with them. ‘I am like you,’ he said. They understood each other, and he asked them, ‘Where is that one? That one who is my father? He raised me, I am like a buffalo.’ He was searching for his father.

“Buffalo Child was thinking, when I was with people they were always chattering. The only time the people were quiet was when they slept. Always there was noise from chattering, dogs barking. Well, well! It is this. It is better to live like this, to live quietly. I would like this much better.

“And then he found his father. Well, well, his father was so pleased that Buffalo Child had come back to them. ‘Son! This is my son!’ he said. ‘My son has arrived! He has come back to us. Thank you, thank you! Well, they celebrated. Then they all came together to hear the young man tell his story. Where did he go? What did he look for? What happened?’

“‘I will not hide anything from you, father,’ Buffalo Child said. ‘This body that I have, I am a human. You told me that so I went to live with people. I went looking for them. I went to know them, to see how they lived, to see if I could live with them. Well truly, I even thought about mating with the women. But I did not bother them. I treated them with respect. I respected them, although they really tried to excite me.’

“Already he was talking to them, he was telling them the story. ‘But father, I hated it! Always, always when I went out, always there was only buffalo meat hanging on the drying racks. They ate it, they ate us, and they had buffalo skins on the floor. They slept on them. They live in them, *mikiwāhpa** they called them. They lived in pointed homes, they lived in

* Tipis.

homes made from buffalo hides. Everything is buffalo, simply everything is buffalo.'

"Well son, this is our life,' his father told him. 'This is our life. We were put here on Mother Earth by the Creator. There are so many of us buffalo, but there is one who rules over us, the Creator. Those people you saw, they have the same Creator as we do. They pray, they pray too. It is the same one they pray to. This is our work. We feed the people, we cover them, we keep people warm, and we give people tools, we are made into all kinds of tools. The people live by us. This is our work. That is the reason you saw what you saw.

"But there is also another law. They cannot over-kill us. They cannot get greedy and kill too much. They can only kill as much as they can use. That is the law. But these Cree must take care, my son. That is the reason you saw what you did. They must treat us with respect, and we too must be good to them. We multiply quickly and there are many of us, but even then we must flee when we see them. That is the way it is my son, so do not mind.'

"But I do not like what I see father!'

"*Hā!* but my son, don't mind, forget it! Now, let's travel.' And so Buffalo Child travelled with the buffalo and again, more and more he was getting wiser.

"Well, he ran along with the buffalo. Heh! Now he was content, for this was how he grew up. He was raised this way and he did not think too much about human life.

"Suddenly again they were startled by an attack. The people, the Crees, were yelling as they chased the buffalo. Well, well! The dust was flying! The sounds of hooves could be heard, and the buffalo could be heard as the bulls were being killed.

"Well, well! Buffalo Child was thinking that he hated this. They had to flee more and more often, they were always fleeing to different places."

The old man sat silently for a moment, deep in thought. When he spoke again there was sadness in his voice. "No, Buffalo Child wasn't that old when his father was killed." he said. "This chief bull, his father, was suffering when he cried out, 'My son, flee! My son, flee!' He was suffering.

"No father, I will not flee! I will not flee anymore!'

"My son, flee! Save your own life!'

"No father!'

“Well, well my son! I am so thankful that you came to live with us again. You came home to us. There is a special way that you can roll over while there is still time, before I stop breathing, my son. If you roll over, you will be a buffalo. And if you roll over again, my son, you will be a rock. This is what you can do before I quit breathing if you will flee no more!”

“Okay father! I will do it, I will do it, I will flee no more. I will flee no more.’ It was then that his father’s breathing was getting more difficult. Buffalo Child was crying because his father was dying. The buffalo were still being chased, the sound of hooves could still be heard when he rolled over. Buffalo Child was human. He rolled four times. He stood up. He was four-legged, a big bull was standing there. He was a buffalo now.

“He still remembered what his father had told him. ‘If you roll over again four times, you will become a rock.’ He rolled over again. The Cree were watching him when he changed form, this Buffalo Child. When this buffalo rolled over again he became a rock, but not the same size he had been as a bull. He was much bigger as a rock. He seemed to grow. These Cree hunters were so amazed. The buffalo-shaped rock grew to such a tremendous size. It looked like a buffalo sitting down. It was a buffalo sitting down.”

“Of course the Cree told what they had seen,” the old man said. “This man called *mostos-awāsis*, Buffalo Child, had the power to change from a man to a buffalo and then to a rock. The rock suddenly became bigger as it sat there in the valley, the people said. They told the story. It was heard all over, how *mostos-awāsis* had lived with the buffalo and how they had seen him change form while they were hunting these buffalo. The Crees started gathering there, they camped there, and they came to see this big rock. They danced, they sang, and they prayed, for of course the buffalo was one of the gifts given by the Creator. And they held their Sun Dances there near the place where the big buffalo rock sat.

“Then a great many people started coming. Saulteaux and Cree came from the east. Cree and Assiniboine from the south, Blackfoot and Cree from the west. And Cree came from the north. They all came.

“This is the big rock, *mistasiniy*,* that we see when we camp near the elbow of the *wāwāskēsiw-sīpiy*† to hold our Sun Dances,” Ahtahkakoop

* Big Rock.

† Elk or Red Deer River, which is now known as the South Saskatchewan River.



Photograph by Zenon S. Pohorecky, courtesy of the Saskatchewan Archaeological Society
Mistasiniy was situated at the source of the Qu'Appelle Valley near the elbow of the South Saskatchewan River. Weighing 400 tons, it was 26 feet across, stood 14 feet high, and resembled a resting buffalo.

remembered the old man telling his listeners. "It is the big rock that looks like a buffalo sitting. It was there the man called *mostos-awāsis*, Buffalo Child, changed form. He did not want to flee anymore. This is how the story has been passed down from generation to generation. It is a sacred story," the old man had said. "And now, we too come to *mistasiniy* to pray and hold our Sun Dances. For our people, it is a sacred place."*

And so, as the large rock shaped like a sitting buffalo came into view, Ahtahkakoop stood in awe, marvelling at the wonders in the world of the Nēhiyawak. And the boy gave thanks to the Creator, for He was the one who gave them all things.

This was the world into which Ahtahkakoop was born.

* On December 1, 1966, engineers from the Canadian government's Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA) drilled 60 sticks of dynamite into the centre of *mistasiniy* and blasted forty tons off the large boulder. Soon *mistasiniy* and the nearby Sun Dance grounds were flooded as dammed water from the South Saskatchewan River flowed into the upper reaches of the Qu'Appelle Valley, thus creating Lake Diefenbaker. Professor Zenon S. Pohorecky, University of Saskatchewan, who took the above photograph in 1959, was one of the men who led an unsuccessful fight to move the sacred rock before it was flooded. A piece of *mistasiniy* has been placed in a cairn near the town of Elbow in commemoration.