

## Almighty Voice and His Stories

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*The story of Almighty Voice, a young Saskatchewan Cree responsible for the deaths of three Mounties and a White volunteer, has attracted the attention of dozens of writers, both hostile and sympathetic. Arrested on a minor charge in 1895, he escaped jail, killed a Mountie sent to apprehend him and remained at large for nineteen months. The details of Almighty Voice's life, especially his success in avoiding recapture and his controversial death, have fascinated writers for nearly a century. Despite the abundant literature, however, some questions remain unanswered.*

*L'histoire de Almighty Voice, un jeune Cri de la Saskatchewan, responsable pour les morts de trois policiers montés et un volontaire blanc, a attiré l'attention d'une douzaine d'écrivains hostiles et sympathiques. Arrêté pour une accusation mineure en 1895, il s'est évadé de la prison, a tué une police montée envoyée pour l'arrêter et, est resté en liberté pendant dix-neuf mois. Les détails de la vie de Almighty Voice, en particulier ceux se rapportant à sa reprise difficile et à sa mort prêtant à la controverse, ont fasciné des écrivains pendant plus d'un siècle. Malgré la littérature abondante cependant, quelques questions restent encore sans réponses.*

On a warm Sunday in May 1897, Kahkeesay-manitoowayo or Almighty Voice, a 23-year-old Plains Cree, met a violent death near Batoche in what is now the province of Saskatchewan. The death of Almighty Voice was the culmination of a long series of tragic events that began in October 1895 with the young man's arrest, his escape, and the killing of a Mountie—all within one week. For nineteen months Almighty Voice had eluded all efforts of the Mounted Police to track him down. The police finally cornered him in a wooded bluff not far from the scene of his original arrest. Here, he and two companions held out for three days until overcome by a large and heavily armed force of Mounties and volunteers. Before dying themselves, the three Indians killed three more men and wounded three others.

The story surrounding the death of Almighty Voice has attracted the attention of writers and readers for nearly a century; the first account (apart

from police and newspaper reports) appeared in print in 1899.<sup>1</sup> The story is full of ingredients which excite the imagination. It embraces several dramatic elements—tragedy, pathos, despair, rage. The protagonist's very name evokes energy, grandeur, power, mystery. The simplicity of his escape from jail adds a dash of comedy. His exploits in avoiding recapture bring romance and adventure to the tale. The use of artillery to obliterate his tiny group adds controversy to the mixture. And, finally, a number of puzzling questions in the story have provided writers with wonderful opportunities for provocative conjecture and stirring symbolism.

Dozens of writers, including at least three of Native ancestry,<sup>2</sup> have been attracted by the tale. In some instances the story has been told as part of a larger treatise, while in others it is the centre of a single, discrete work. Writers have used this colourful material in a wide range of literary forms, including poetry,<sup>3</sup> historical fiction,<sup>4</sup> stage plays<sup>5</sup> and, of course, histories, both popular and academic.<sup>6</sup> In addition, in 1974, Almighty Voice's death and life were depicted in a feature film, *Alien Thunder*, starring "Chief" Dan George, Gordon Tootoosis and Donald Sutherland. In the movie, the scriptwriters (who included W.O. Mitchell, though he disavowed it) used the story to portray the "lovely, simple life of the Indians," as one reviewer put it; and after presenting a "lecture on [Mounted Police] overkill," they provided the young Cree with "a most artistic death."<sup>7</sup> Given this lavish attention, Almighty Voice has understandably become a legend of the Canadian west.

Almighty Voice was born about 1874. The only information from which his birth date can be estimated was supplied by a Department of Indian Affairs agent for use on a poster offering a reward for his capture; that information, dated April 1896, gives his age as approximately twenty-two years.<sup>8</sup> Almighty Voice was the son (probably the eldest) of Saynawaykeesick, or The Sounding Sky, later called John Sounding Sky by government officials. His mother (perhaps his adoptive mother), was Spotted Calf, the daughter of Chief One Arrow or Kapeyakwaskonam. According to some accounts, Almighty Voice was so named by his paternal grandfather because when he was a boy his voice was remarkably strong and deep, like that of the Great Spirit.<sup>9</sup> His paternal grandfather was Taytapisasung of the Nut Lake Saulteaux reserve (Yellow Quill's band).<sup>10</sup>

One Arrow was the leader of a band of Plains Cree who, before the buffalo disappeared, had often wintered in the parklands south of the junction of the North and South Saskatchewan rivers and summered on the plains farther south. His people were known as Willow or parklands Cree,

Indians who lived in the transition zone between the plains and the northern forests. One Arrow signed Treaty 6 in 1876 and by 1880 had settled on a reserve near Batoche. During the rebellion of 1885 the chief and some of his band actively supported their Métis neighbours; they were the first Indians to join Louis Riel's cause. One Arrow was sentenced to three years in prison for treason-felony, was released after seven months for health reasons, and died two weeks later. No one succeeded him because after the rebellion the government refused to recognize chiefs in any bands that had not shown unambiguous fidelity to the Crown.<sup>11</sup> Among those who fought as a rebel in 1885 was One Arrow's son-in-law, Sounding Sky; he escaped probable imprisonment by leaving the country for two or three years.<sup>12</sup> Some writers have insisted that, by the 1890s, Sounding Sky had become chief of the One Arrow band; this claim might have given the Almighty Voice story more lustre but there is no evidence to support it.<sup>13</sup>

Although the great majority of Indians remained loyal during the rebellion, the government imposed tighter controls on all reserves in the North-West Territories after 1885.<sup>14</sup> The Department of Indian Affairs became more determined to implement its plan to remake the Plains Indian, to transform him from a heathen hunter into a Christian farmer. Government efforts to compel such sudden and sweeping cultural change led to years of difficulty for most Indians in the North-West. Leaving the free, nomadic hunting life of the plains to become sedentary farmers on small, confining reserves was understandably traumatic. And at the same time, Indians could see Euro-Canadian farmers and ranchers settling on their former hunting grounds.

On the One Arrow reserve conditions were difficult in the first years after the rebellion because the government was bent on punishing the residents for "disloyalty." In 1885-86 the Department of Indian Affairs tried to starve the band into abandoning their reserve (though without success) and treaty payments were suspended until 1888.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the band no longer had a chief to act as its spokesman. Most decisions affecting the reserve were made by the Indian Affairs agent who lived fifteen miles away at Duck Lake, where he supervised several bands; more immediate direction was exercised by the resident government Farm Instructor. As happened frequently in the North-West, the band suffered considerable depopulation due to low birth rates, disease and possibly malnutrition in the early reserve years: its numbers fell from 123 in 1883 to 109 in 1896. Still, by the 1890s the Department of Indian Affairs felt that the Cree of the One Arrow reserve were beginning to show some success in adjusting to an agricultural life. They were reported to be growing potatoes and wheat and



cutting wild hay, which they sold to the Mounted Police detachment at Batoche; they were also tending a small but expanding herd of cattle. They supplemented these pursuits by digging wild turnip root (*Psoralea lanceolata*) and hunting game for furs and meat. Although they spent the summer months in their traditional skin tipis, they lived at least half the year in log houses chinked with mud. In 1896 the government opened a boarding school at Duck Lake to educate the band children in the ways of Christian civilisation. In that year only 40 percent of the population was noted as Christian, the remainder termed "pagan." Traditional Plains Cree "sun-dances" and "give-away dances," which had both religious and social significance, were still occasionally performed. In short, while the Indians of the One Arrow reserve were obviously still far from reaching the standards of "civilisation" desired by the Department of Indian Affairs, their "progress" in the 1890s was considered satisfactory. They were reported content and friendly towards Whites. Alcohol was not a serious problem and there was little crime.<sup>16</sup> Still, while there may have been no overt signs of dissatisfaction on the reserve, for some residents the tedium of tending a potato patch must have compared poorly to the glories of the buffalo hunt. Doubtless, some resentment towards the "new order" must have existed on the reserve.

While Almighty Voice was likely born on the plains, he grew up on the reserve. He would have been about ten or eleven years old when the Métis were defeated by the forces of Canadian authority at Batoche, only a few miles away. Like many in the band, his family suffered several misfortunes: four of his siblings died during the 1880s and in 1894 his own first child died in infancy. Almighty Voice probably supported his family by hunting in the parklands and forests to the east and north of his home. He had a reputation as an outstanding hunter and does not appear on an 1894 list of farmers operating on the reserve. The list shows, however, that his father, who had spent most of his life on the plains, had turned to agriculture and was experiencing moderate success.<sup>17</sup>

In reports filed by government officials after he had killed a Mountie, Almighty Voice was characterized as a man with a tough reputation, and other Indians were afraid of him. At the sun-dance celebrated at the Duck Lake agency in the summer of 1895, he is said to have clashed with an Indian from the Battleford area; the visitor accused him of molesting his wife but was warned by others to be cautious for Almighty Voice was "a very wild young man." A Mounted Police officer reported that Almighty Voice had once threatened to shoot the local Indian Agent, R.S. McKenzie. The agent never mentioned the incident in his own reports, though he did describe Almighty Voice as "a dangerous character." The Mounties also claimed that

his paternal grandfather, when interviewed during their search for the fugitive, told them that he had "always been a very bad boy."<sup>18</sup> The Mounted Police may not have always had a poor opinion of Almighty Voice, since there is evidence that, as an adolescent, he had spent some time around their Duck Lake post doing odd jobs and competing in running races.<sup>19</sup> However, once he had been branded a police-killer, it is hardly surprising that the Mounties should focus their attention on his negative qualities.

The series of events that has fascinated so many writers began in October 1895 when both Almighty Voice and his father were jailed within days of one another. On 19 October, R.S. McKenzie, the Indian Agent, had John Sounding Sky arrested for the theft of a pea-jacket. That same day, he was convicted and sent to Prince Albert to serve six months in prison with hard labour. On 22 October, McKenzie went to the One Arrow reserve to issue the annual treaty payments and had three more Indians arrested—a woman for theft, and Almighty Voice and another man for cattle-killing five months previously.<sup>20</sup>

The question as to why Almighty Voice killed a steer that did not belong to him has aroused a surprising degree of interest over the years. Some writers have claimed that the steer was slaughtered for meat to be served at a feast celebrating his taking a new wife.<sup>21</sup> Others have suggested that Almighty Voice might have been trying to evoke the glories of the buffalo hunt, which men of his generation had heard so much about but had never been able to enjoy.<sup>22</sup> The symbolism is not as far-fetched as it might appear since, in the years following the disappearance of the buffalo, a number of instances were reported of Plains Indians attempting to recapture the wondrous days of the hunt by chasing and killing cattle from horseback.<sup>23</sup> Reports of Indians shooting cattle belonging to Euro-Canadian ranchers who had recently arrived in the North-West were not uncommon. However, whether or not the killing was done buffalo-style, the underlying impulse was usually the hunger that Indians were enduring as they struggled to adapt to life on reserves.

In any case, Almighty Voice and the two other prisoners were held overnight in the office of the small Mounted Police detachment at Duck Lake and, during the night, Almighty Voice slipped away. The escape and the reasons for it have long provided rousing material for enterprising writers, particularly the dramatic elements added by the journalist Long Lance. Born Sylvester Long in North Carolina, of mixed Indian and White ancestry, he came to Canada, took the name Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance and, in 1928, published a widely read, though fictitious, "autobiography." In his book, he included an account of visiting Almighty

Voice's parents in the early 1920s. He says they told him that one of the Mounties at Duck Lake, Constable Dickson, mischievously advised Almighty Voice that he would be hanged for cattle killing. Understandably terrified, Almighty Voice resolved to escape. During the night the guard (Dickson again) fell asleep and the prisoner saw his chance. According to Long Lance, Almighty Voice, while carrying a "heavy ball to which he was chained," tiptoed across the room, filched the guard's keys, unlocked the "manacle around his ankle" and fled.<sup>24</sup>

Long Lance's biographer, Donald Smith, has observed that he was "blessed, or cursed, with the novelist's imagination. He knew how to inflate a story to make it read well."<sup>25</sup> There is no reason to doubt that Long Lance did, indeed, interview Almighty Voice's parents. However, a number of arguments can be advanced to cast suspicion on his account of both the escape and the incident that he claimed provoked it: he had misrepresented his own credentials; his version was accompanied by invented dialogue; and no corroborating evidence has ever been found. Indeed, the evidence presented at a NWMP inquiry into the escape differed in several ways. (The inquiry, of course, only looked into how Almighty Voice escaped, not why). The inquiry report shows, for example, that all three prisoners had been held in the same room and none was shackled in any manner. The testimony, given under oath, was certainly candid, since it brought only discredit on the Mounties involved. The three prisoners had been placed in a locked room with a constable guarding them. He either left for a moment or fell asleep, allowing Almighty Voice to pick up his key and unlock the door (not a manacle). The inquiry resulted in Constable Dickson being sentenced to two months' imprisonment "at Hard Labor" and dismissal from the force; as well, his superior, a man with twenty years' service, was reduced in rank from sergeant to constable.<sup>26</sup> Some details of Long Lance's account, however, can be confirmed in NWMP despatches: for example, Almighty Voice's swim across the icy South Saskatchewan River.<sup>27</sup> He is also surprisingly accurate in citing the names of many of the people involved. Whether accurate or not, however, Long Lance's version provided the material that has allowed writers to personalize the villainy of some Whites. Long Lance and others<sup>28</sup> make a point of specifically blaming Constable Dickson, the representative of White authority, for the tragedy that was coming. At the same time, they were able to satisfy their readers' need for justice by showing how Dickson was appropriately punished for his tragic joke (imprisonment and dismissal). Long Lance's account also allowed later writers to introduce some comedy into the tale (the clever Indian tiptoeing past the bumbling guard).



One weakness in Long Lance's explanation for Almighty Voice's impulse to escape is that the threat of execution would also have applied to the second Indian accused of cattle-killing: he too could have escaped but did not. At his trial the next day, he convinced the justice of the peace that Almighty Voice had induced him to kill the steer, and was acquitted.<sup>29</sup> Another plausible explanation for Almighty Voice's escape may have been simply a powerful dread of prisons. After all, his grandfather, One Arrow, had died from the effects of incarceration and his father had just been sentenced to six months in prison for a minor theft. Almighty Voice was evidently a man who rejected the tedium of agricultural life on a small reserve, preferring the more independent life of a hunter. Confinement to a small jail cell for even a short period was something to be avoided by any means at all.

It was a week after Almighty Voice's escape that the next act in the tragedy began. After gaining his liberty, the young Cree immediately headed for his reserve. He knew, however, that this would be the first place the Mounted Police would look for him, so the next day he took a horse and rode eastward. He was accompanied by a thirteen-year-old girl, Small Face, from the nearby James Smith reserve. Early in the morning of 29 October, Almighty Voice and Small Face were preparing to eat a bird he had shot when they were surprised by Sgt. Charles Colebrook and his guide, Frank Dumont. Although Dumont was a second cousin of Gabriel Dumont, military leader of the 1885 Rebellion, he was not a Métis as some historians have believed; he was a treaty Indian who had grown up on the One Arrow reserve<sup>30</sup> and must have known Almighty Voice well. As the Mountie approached, on horseback but with his gun still holstered, the fugitive loaded his shotgun and retreated. At the coroner's inquest, Dumont testified that Almighty Voice shouted in Cree, "I want to shoot the Sergeant." Colebrook responded by ordering him to surrender; when the Mountie continued to advance, the Indian told him repeatedly to go away. Dumont, translating for both men, claims he warned Colebrook that Almighty Voice would undoubtedly shoot. The sergeant continued to advance until Almighty Voice fired, killing him with one shot. Long Lance claims Almighty Voice also shot Dumont, taking care not to kill him; however, Dumont, in his own testimony at the inquest, made no mention of this.<sup>31</sup>

There has been little disagreement in explaining the shooting, either by contemporaries or by later writers. The consensus is that the outcome was inevitable, that neither man had any choice in the matter. Shortly after the shooting, local Métis were reported to feel that Almighty Voice's act was justifiable: he was only defending his freedom and had given several

warnings before firing.<sup>32</sup> Later writers commenting on the incident have not disagreed, not even Pierre Berton, who is totally unsympathetic to Almighty Voice. Berton concludes that the Indian, having seen his freedom constantly inhibited by White authority, must have felt trapped; he could not surrender to the man who "symbolized that authority." As for Colebrook, Berton believes he, too, was trapped, by the NWMP tradition of relying on persuasion rather than guns.<sup>33</sup> Joseph Dion, a Cree historian who conducted oral research among his people, agrees. He says the two men were old friends and the sergeant felt he could rely on "the intimacy existing between them" to talk Almighty Voice into surrendering. Even when it became evident that he would not submit, "the traditions of the Force would not permit him [Colebrook] to halt in the face of armed resistance." Dion concludes that, "Two friends who had no quarrel between them, both upholding their word of honor, ended up in a situation of one having to shoot the other."<sup>34</sup>

A curious sidelight to the story is the attention some writers have given to the youthful Small Face and other women in Almighty Voice's life. William Bleasdale Cameron, a fur trader who knew him, later wrote that Almighty Voice went through three wives in a short period and was courting a fourth at the time of the shooting. While Cameron praised Almighty Voice's ambition and courage, he also made much of the Indian's "inconstancy" and "fickle heart" and the youthfulness of the girls involved. Later writers, such as Pierre Berton and Grant MacEwan, pursued these themes. To Berton, Almighty Voice's "transitory interest in young girls"—that is, the number of wives he had taken and abandoned in a short period—revealed a "restless and volatile" character; he deemed him no better than a "punk." After condemning Almighty Voice for sequential wife-taking and desertion, both Cameron and Berton then contradict themselves by accusing him of polygyny: they suggest he was trying to recall the old days of the Plains Cree when great men kept multiple wives.<sup>35</sup>

It is true that the treaty payment lists for the One Arrow reserve do show that, by 1895, Almighty Voice had already taken two wives. In 1890 he had married a young girl of his band, the daughter of Napaise, but had left her two years later. The girl, described at the time as "still being under age," returned to her mother. In 1892 he married another girl from his band, the daughter of Rock Child.<sup>36</sup> It is possible that Almighty Voice intended to take Small Face as a wife also. The girl herself may have thought so for she testified at the coroner's inquest that, before taking flight, Almighty Voice said he hoped to rejoin her soon. There was no polygyny involved in the case of Almighty Voice's first two wives for they were sequential. If he had taken



Small Face as a wife, then he would have been bigamous. While the practice of keeping multiple wives troubled men such as Cameron, Berton and MacEwan, it would have been no scandal on the One Arrow reserve, since Canadian authorities had not yet succeeded in transforming the band's beliefs; the majority of the people were not Christian and polygyny was still perfectly acceptable so long as a husband could provide for his wives. Indeed, the paylists show that Napaise, Almighty Voice's first father-in-law, had supported two wives in the late 1880s.<sup>37</sup>

Some writers have claimed that throughout the next nineteen months that Almighty Voice spent in hiding he was accompanied by his "girl-wife" (presumably referring to Small Face). Long Lance even tells his readers that, towards the end of their wanderings, the couple had a son "born to them in the wilderness."<sup>38</sup> This detail allowed later writers to put a human face on the fugitives, adding depth to their story.<sup>39</sup> The claim, however, is improbable. The reserve paylists do, indeed, show that a son was born to Almighty Voice and his second wife (the daughter of Rock Child). However, the boy was born less than two months after the Colebrook shooting and the mother is shown as residing on the One Arrow reserve.<sup>40</sup> If, during this period, the fugitive had fathered a second child with another woman, the child would have received an annuity and, like its sibling, been noted on later paylists.

The nineteen months following the Colebrook shooting constitute the flight and chase instalment of the Almighty Voice story. After the killing, police patrols tracked Almighty Voice's movements eastward but lost the trail after a few days. They correctly believed that he would seek help from the Crees of Fort à la Corne (the band to which Small Face belonged). Information later gathered by the Mounties revealed that it was from these Indians that Almighty Voice secured the wherewithal to survive the winter that was about to begin. He then moved on to contact the Nut Lake Indians among whom he had several relatives, including his grandfather. This large band of *Saulteaux* lived almost entirely by the hunt, travelling over a wide expanse of rugged territory north of their reserve.<sup>41</sup> It was probably in this area that Almighty Voice spent most of his time, except, perhaps, for a few clandestine trips home.

Almighty Voice's success in avoiding capture—a solitary Indian struggling against all the men and resources of the NWMP—make for high drama on the western plains. Details of the time spent in hiding, however, are scarce. Thus, an anecdote involving daring, surreptitious visits home was a welcome addition to the Almighty Voice story. It was Long Lance, in 1928, who related the first particulars of the anecdote. Using testimony from Almighty Voice's mother, he wrote of how her son was able to move

through the wilds "like a ghost from another world," and of how, on many nights, he would appear out of the dark to sleep in her tipi.<sup>42</sup> In the 1950s a western historian, Harold Kemp, visited the One Arrow reserve and interviewed Almighty Voice's younger brother, Prosper John. The brother told him that Almighty Voice used his parents' home as "his headquarters" and that "there he built a dug-out, access to which was gained by a tunnel leading from the root-cellar under the floor of the family residence."<sup>43</sup> Not surprisingly, many writers have made good use of this demonstration of Indian cleverness and bravado.<sup>44</sup> Some documentary evidence exists to support the oral history: on at least two occasions, informers advised the Mounted Police of Almighty Voice's trips home and the existence of a secret cellar; the Mounties do not seem to have followed up the reports.<sup>45</sup>

The Mounties had difficulty enlisting informers from among the Indians of the South Saskatchewan valley and what information they did gain was usually outdated. None was willing to work as a scout on the search patrols, though some Métis agreed to help. Indian Affairs officials felt that the One Arrow Indians' reluctance to co-operate with the authorities was based less on sympathy for Almighty Voice than on fear of him. They observed that Frank Dumont, the Indian guide who had been with Colebrook when he was shot, left the area in fear of retribution. The Mounted Police, for their part, were inclined to believe that many Indians were happy to assist the fugitive. One officer suspected that, by most Indians, "he is no doubt regarded as a hero."<sup>46</sup>

The North-West Mounted Police search for Almighty Voice was long and laborious, not only because of the intermittent assistance he gained from local Indians, but also because of his skills in living off the land and the nature of the area in which he chose to hide. Almighty Voice lasted more than a year and a half in hiding, but for him it was not time spent in a fearful wilderness. He was a robust young man, accustomed to living off the land. From the outset the police were not optimistic about finding him since, as one officer observed, he was as cunning as "a wood wolf."<sup>47</sup> The land they were scouring was a huge tract with a very small population and extremely rugged topography. Travel in the parklands and forests north of Nut Lake was impeded by rock outcrops, deep valleys and heavy bush; the Mounties found it nearly impossible to patrol the vast region by horse or to cover it on foot. Equally perplexing to the police, Almighty Voice was reported spotted in widely dispersed areas across the North-West Territories and the northern United States.<sup>48</sup>

Special patrols were organized to search full-time for the police-killer, but the Dominion government was slow to approve a reward for information

leading to his capture and conviction. Although White settlers all over the North-West were upset at the Mounties' failure to get their man, it was not until April 1896, after considerable newspaper agitation,<sup>49</sup> that the government authorized a \$500 reward. Posters announcing the reward and describing the fugitive were distributed throughout the North-West Territories and the northern United States. All efforts proved fruitless, however, and at the end of December 1896 the force terminated its special patrols.<sup>50</sup> In the end, it was only by chance, or by Almighty Voice's own choice, that the Mounties finally came across their quarry.

On 26 May 1897 David and Napoléon Venne, Métis farmers in the Minichinas hills just east of the One Arrow reserve, noticed three Indians riding suspiciously close to their cattle. They chased the Indians away but one fell from his horse; when asked who his companions were, he was evasive. The Vennes reported the incident to the NWMP at Batoche who, the next day, sent a corporal along with Napoléon Venne (engaged as a scout) to investigate. In the same area, they encountered three Indians who fled into a wooded bluff; when the pair followed them, Venne was hit in the shoulder by rifle-fire from the brush. The two men returned quickly to Duck Lake, reporting that one of the Indians was a youth of the Nut Lake band, known to be Almighty Voice's cousin; they also presumed (correctly) that another was the famous fugitive himself.<sup>51</sup> The Indian described as his cousin was John Sunish Kesick (Going-up-to-the-Sky), son of Neepaytayawahquah of the Nut Lake band. The third Indian, identified only after his death, was Almighty Voice's brother-in-law, son of Rock Child of the One Arrow band; his name may have been Tupean (the meaning in Cree is unclear). Almighty Voice's companions were young, still listed as boys on the Department of Indian Affairs' paylists at their deaths;<sup>52</sup> however, among the Cree, males usually entered manhood at an early age and the two may not have been considered boys by their kin.

On the morning of 28 May, nearly forty-eight hours later, a dozen policemen, led by Inspector John B. Allan, went to search the area. They spotted some Indians entering the brush and were fired upon when they pursued them. Both Allan and Sgt. C.C. Raven were wounded. The inspector was lying helpless on the ground when Almighty Voice approached, signalling that he wanted Allan's ammunition belt. However, other Mounties arrived, firing their weapons, and the fugitive had to hurry back into the woods. In the afternoon the police, concerned that Almighty Voice and his companions might escape after dark, attempted a sweep through the bluff with the assistance of a few civilian volunteers. During this manoeuvre, two Mounties and a volunteer were killed.<sup>53</sup>



By the next day police and armed volunteers (as well as scores of curious local settlers and reserve Indians) began arriving in the Minichinas hills from several directions. From Prince Albert came thirty-two officers and men of the North-West Mounted Police "F" Division. They arrived on horseback under the command of Supt. Sévère Gagnon, bringing with them a seven-pounder brass gun and thirty-four civilians sworn in as special constables. Thirty Métis from Batoche had also been enlisted but changed their minds and did not report. From headquarters at Regina came another troop of twenty-five officers and men. They travelled to Duck Lake by train and were then taken by wagon to the hills, seventeen miles away. At the suggestion of a local physician who had seen the siege begin, they brought along a nine-pounder cannon. The Regina contingent was led by Assistant-Commissioner John McIlree who took command of the whole force on the evening of the 29th. Some writers, wishing to emphasize the disparity between the two groups, have inflated the number of Mounted Police: Joseph Dion claims "about 200" and Long Lance "one thousand." McIlree, on the other hand, reported ninety-one men in his command, including the special constables.<sup>54</sup> Even with this lower number, however, there is no doubt the disparity was overwhelming.

McIlree and his men encircled the bluff in which Almighty Voice and his companions had taken shelter. Heavily wooded with poplars, this unimposing height of land was about 140 yards long and perhaps 60 yards wide at the broadest and surrounded by low hills about 700 yards distant. Although never certain of how many Indians were hiding in the brush, the Assistant-Commissioner knew there was no more than a handful. Still, the Indians were well concealed and had already killed three men and wounded three others. McIlree's instructions were to avoid unnecessary risk to his men. Before sunset, he ordered a general rifle fire, followed by a brief artillery bombardment from the seven-pounder. It is believed that Tupean died from shots fired in this action and that Almighty Voice was wounded in the leg by an exploding shell from the cannon. Finally, McIlree installed a tight cordon around the bluff to make sure his quarry did not escape during the night.

The poignancy and exoticism of the events that followed after darkness fell have held strong appeal for writers ever since. Within two years, W.A. Fraser had given them dramatic publicity. In stirring fashion, he described how Almighty Voice called out to his besiegers, proclaiming both his bravery and his readiness to "finish the fight" the next day. Fraser also told of how the fugitive's mother "crooned a weird death-song" and "screamed defiance to the police."<sup>55</sup> Fraser does not indicate where he got his information

but it must have come from interviews with policemen who had participated in the siege. One of the Mounties, Sgt. William Parker, confirmed some of the details in memoirs written many years later.<sup>56</sup> Long Lance added more particulars in the 1920s. He maintained that Almighty Voice's mother shouted encouragement to her son throughout the night, reminding him of the exploits of his father and grandfather and urging him to die bravely. Later in the night, he says, she chanted her son's death song and he dutifully repeated it.<sup>57</sup>

The last act of the Almighty Voice tragedy began at dawn on Sunday, 30 May 1897, when the cannon were turned on the bluff, bombarding it for about a half-hour. McIlree then telegraphed the commissioner of the NWMP that he felt the shells were making "no visible impression" and he was considering digging trenches towards the target. In the next few hours, however, not a sound was heard from the Indians and some of the volunteers began jeering at McIlree for not taking any further action, even threatening to attack on their own initiative. Finally, at about two o'clock in the afternoon, McIlree acquiesced and organized a charge through the bluff. All three Indians were found dead. Tupean had been dead for some time and Almighty Voice and his cousin had been killed by the morning's shelling. The latter two were found together in a shallow pit they had dug with a knife in the thickest part of the brush.<sup>58</sup>

A number of writers have accused the Mounted Police of using excessive force in their efforts to bring Almighty Voice to justice. Even Pierre Berton, though clearly unsympathetic to the man, considers the artillery bombardment "overkill," an action that "was to reflect badly on the police."<sup>59</sup> In his official report on his actions,<sup>60</sup> Assistant-Commissioner McIlree seemed to anticipate the accusations and offered two defences. First, he pointed out that his instructions were to avoid unnecessary risk to the men in his command. Second, he claimed that he had to take drastic action because the Indians on nearby reserves were "very unsettled, and if the affair had lasted a few days longer the trouble I fancy would have extended." Presumably, this argument was also advanced to explain why no consideration seems to have been given to protracting the siege and starving the Indians into submission without killing them.

Most observers have found McIlree's first argument acceptable, since the Indians had already killed three and wounded three of their pursuers. However, the second argument, the need for deterrence, has been given little attention. Both Indian Affairs officials and NWMP officers had worried about the support some Indians gave Almighty Voice while a fugitive and believed that the longer the police-killer remained at large the less tractable

they would become. One senior Mountie later contended that, had Almighty Voice managed to escape once again, he might have induced Indians across the North-West to rise in general revolt. Some western newspaper editors held similar beliefs and praised the police for heading off a possible insurrection. In the 1920s, Long Lance claimed that the Cree had come close to rising in an attempt "to drive the white man off the plains."<sup>61</sup> Not surprisingly, within weeks of the Minichinas hills affair, both NWMP and Indian Affairs officials were pointing to the success of the strong measures they had taken, reporting that the Indians were now friendly and peaceable.<sup>62</sup> The official reports may have been embellished, of course, and the Indians may have been hiding their true feelings; on the other hand, it is unlikely that the potential for insurrection will ever be known.

One question that has been asked over the years is whether Almighty Voice's stand in the Minichinas hills was a planned showdown. According to Long Lance, Almighty Voice told his parents on one of his clandestine visits home that he did not want to hide from the police any longer and that he would show himself and "fight it out with them." In an interview many years later, Almighty Voice's brother also claimed that the final encounter with the police was not inadvertent and that the fugitive had decided on a showdown.<sup>63</sup> Clearly, the three Indians could have left the area after shooting Napoléon Venne, since it took nearly two days for the Mounted Police to return in force. After three men were killed and two wounded on the first day of the siege, observers at the scene believed that the confrontation had been prearranged.<sup>64</sup> To the Mounties, the bluff seemed a well chosen death-trap; here, Almighty Voice and his companions were able to hide in the dense brush and shoot down their antagonists without exposing themselves. It may also be significant that the location was close to the One Arrow reserve, allowing Almighty Voice's people to witness the denouement of his story. Some writers even maintain that the Indians had prior knowledge of his plans and had begun to assemble at the bluff before Venne was shot.<sup>65</sup> However, while Almighty Voice's choice of location may have been well considered, he seems to have made few other preparations. The three men entered the fray with only two rifles among them (though they later added a hand-gun taken from a dead Mountie). Nor had they brought food or water; by the second day they were driven to eat bark for nourishment and dig pits to find moisture.<sup>66</sup>

Still, it remains perfectly possible that Almighty Voice felt no need to bring sustenance with him—that is, if he had no intention of leaving the bluff alive. A few writers have made this suggestion,<sup>67</sup> but none has attempted to explain why he would choose death. One explanation might be that Almighty



Voice considered himself a victim, but a victim who was not prepared to accept his condition passively. That is, he, like many other Cree, may have felt virtually powerless in the face of what was considered a policy of brutal change being forced on his people by Euro-Canadians. Unlike most, however, he would not admit to impotence. He would take action while others merely grumbled; he would show defiance while others were merely sullen. He would choose the noble death of a warrior in battle over an undignified demise at the end of a rope. He would arrange a showdown with the North-West Mounted Police, the embodiment of Euro-Canadian authority.

If Almighty Voice did truly seek death, no one has tried to claim that it achieved any purpose; no one has portrayed him as a hero who died for a lofty cause.<sup>68</sup> Even those writers who have endeavoured to discern meaning in the death and life of Almighty Voice have found it difficult to point to any positive consequences for Native people. The most they have been able to say is that his death somehow gave Indians some courage, pride and hope. Pierre Berton, for his part, saw only unexalted destructiveness in Almighty Voice's actions, particularly as he had "lured two teen-agers to their deaths."<sup>69</sup>

Many writers, however, have felt that Almighty Voice's story held wide metaphoric meaning for all North American Indians. The steer Almighty Voice killed was a stand-in for the buffalo that had disappeared. And Almighty Voice, forced to give up home and family or go to prison, represented all Indians, dispossessed of their freedom, land, culture and future. His escape, his success in avoiding recapture and his surreptitious visits home exemplified the daring, cleverness, fortitude and endurance of the Indian people. Shooting down Mounties from the bluff that epitomized people's frustration and rage against the inevitability of the "new order" being imposed on the Plains Indians by Euro-Canadians. The North-West Mounted Police were a symbol, too, of the forces of dispossession. And the police bombardment of the three men in the bluff was, in its turn, a metaphor for the obliteration of Indian culture.<sup>70</sup>

Most negative treatments of the Almighty Voice story date from the early decades of the 20th century; they reflected and, at the same time, validated prevailing public sentiments about Native people in those years. Almighty Voice's attitude towards women, for example, revealed the Indians' basic inconstancy, thereby confirming the need to displace their culture, to "civilize" them. His murderous behaviour demonstrated the untrustworthiness of Indians and, thus, the necessity to keep them under tight control. For some writers, the story provided the means to vindicate

Canadian dominion over the Indians and their lands (to any readers who might still have doubts).<sup>71</sup>

By the 1950s, however, writers generally began to show a deeper understanding of the Almighty Voice story. By this time it had become evident that, despite all efforts to assimilate Indians, some of their culture had managed to survive. The change in literary tone may have been a reflection of a growing feeling among Euro-Canadians that the survival of Indian culture indicated that it had more validity and substance than had hitherto been thought. Some of those who wrote about Almighty Voice in the second half of the 20th century used his story as a vehicle to depict the golden days of Plains Indian life before the European arrived; implicitly or explicitly, Euro-Canadians were condemned for attempting to displace Indian culture across the country.<sup>72</sup>

After nearly a century of literary attention, there is no reason to believe that the potential of the Almighty Voice story has been exhausted. The story is a powerful one and powerful stories can generate an abundance of interpretations. Future generations will doubtless find new themes to pursue. Native writers, for example, may discover new and illuminating literary ideas in the published record. And research into Native oral history may add further details to the record. Whatever themes are taken up in the future, they will continue to reflect the prevailing values, preoccupations, hopes and assumptions of both the Native and White communities in Canada.

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