

Revisiting Alberta history

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Photo courtesy Narcisse Blood Cowboy Smithx and Blake Brooker working on Making Treaty 7 at the Banff Centre

What's that old saying about how history gets written by the winners?

Thanks to Calgary 2012 curator Michael Green and a group of first nations artists, elders and international cast of theatre artists, Alberta history is getting a rewrite — or, if not a rewrite, then a historical re-enactment unlike any other.

More specifically, Treaty 7 (<http://www.aadnc->



aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100028785/1100100028787), the 1877 agreement between the first nations of southern Alberta and the Queen that basically set the stage for the development of what has become modern Alberta.

It's the culmination of the first stage of a legacy project that Calgary 2012 curator Michael Green hopes will open the conversation about this province's past.

"Together," Green says, "we have worked very hard to iron out a chronology of events that — and believe me, this is contentious — but I think we have come close to hammering out a chronology of events for the ten days at Blackfoot Crossing in 1877."

The group members are presenting their work in a weekend Making Treaty 7 symposium and workshop at Fort Calgary (it's sold out), which includes a public presentation of the re-enactment of Treaty 7 at 2 p.m. Sunday.

For Blackfoot elder Narcisse Blood, one of the project participants, the Treaty 7 project is an opportunity to educate Alberta's young people about our province's origins in a way that offers multiple perspectives.

"It's not going to be strictly a historical reenactment of the event itself," says Blood, "Of course it's going to be (partially) about that — but (also) to be able to look back and to give people an idea that things are the way that they are (nowadays) because of our past."

The project originated out of [Calgary 2012](http://www.calgary2012.com/) (<http://www.calgary2012.com/>)'s mandate to create a legacy project, which inspired in Green a memory of a trip to New Zealand in the early 1980s, where he found himself performing a mask and mime show in Wellington, while across town there was historical re-enactment of the signing of the Waitangi Treaty, the agreement that was basically the origin story of the founding of New Zealand.

What if, Green proposed, we brought together a group of First Nations artists and elders and Calgary artists to explore the 10 days in 1877 that

led up to the signing of Treaty 7?

“When we realized that we needed to get the elders together,” he says, “well, guess what? You go to the Yellow Pages and open it up and look under E for elder, and there’s nothing there.”

Slowly but surely, Green tracked down elders from the Kainai, Piikani, Siksika, Tsuu T’ina, Chiniki, Bearspaw and Wesley First Nations, spending a year slowly earning their trust.

Eventually, he managed to get them to agree to spend a December weekend at the Carriage Hotel in Heritage Park (<http://www.heritagepark.ca/>) (where the project will be presented in 2014 as part of the park’s 50th anniversary), exchanging dialogue about the Making Treaty 7 Project.

“That’s when I discovered,” he says, “that outside the social events of powow and rodeo, this first elders meeting at heritage Park in December was the first time — now I don’t know this, I was told this by the elders who were there ...(that) it was the first time that group of people had ever met to discuss anything like — especially — treaty.

“It turns out,” he adds, “it’s at the core of their identity.”

And Green had the ghosts of 1877 — a smallpox epidemic, the elimination of the buffalo and the inglorious legacy of the residential school system — generating a little skepticism.

“You can imagine,” he says. “They wanted to know, who’s this snappy looking white guy with the pointy nose?”

Happily for Green, he had been working with a pair of elders — Reg Crowshoe and Leonard Bastein — for over a year already, and they vouched for him.

His role in the project has been curatorial rather than authorial — he’s harvesting stories from every conceivable perspective, which One Yellow

Rabbit's Blake Brooker is assembling into the re-enactment's hour-long narrative, to share the story of the making of Treaty 7 with all Albertans.

"When we left the elders in December," he says, "and realized we had our mission to go ahead and do this on behalf of our entire community, I came away understanding that we had certain values we must fulfil.

"And the elders made it very clear.

"It must be respectful. It must be consultative. It must be accurate.

"I can't tell you," he adds, "how many times I heard my elder say to me, you'd better get this right.

"It has to be authentic. Has to be traditional. Has to honour tradition. And it has to be contemporary."

For Green, telling the story of Treaty 7 is a game-changer for himself as much as it could be for the province.

"I can't really think of anything more important to do with my career, and my life, to tell you the truth," he says.

"The reality is," he adds, "that what we are going to put onstage is going to be a story of hope.

"It's not all a happy story," he says, continuing, "but it doesn't have to end this way. And it indeed is a hopeful story because everybody gets to participate, because what we've got now frankly — we're better than that."

Narcisse Blood agrees.

"It's a healing thing for everybody," he says. "Not just for us.

"One of the people that influenced me quite a bit was a French psychiatrist who wrote *The Wretched of the Earth* called Frantz Fanon," he adds. "And basically he says, it's not just the colonized that needs to be healed. It's the colonizers.

“Canada is very young,” he adds. “and so that is the challenge: as a very young country, does it have the maturity to be able to look at itself in the mirror?”

“To be able to say geez, we’ve done some good things, but we’ve done some things that we should be ashamed of (too).

“But,” he adds, “you know what? We can be better than this. We need to criticize ourselves.”

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