In Hindsight: Half a Century of Research Discoveries in Canadian History

Presented by Dr. Donald B. Smith
Produced by The Ontario Historical Society

Episode 4: Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance, or Sylvester Long?

"Here's a regular story from a regular Indian." With these words of introduction 7 May 1922, the *Vancouver Sun* ran Long Lance's first article in his series on the First Nations of British Columbia. Its new contributor was "Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance of Calgary," a distinguished veteran who had gone "overseas as a private was commissioned and rose to the rank of captain. Twice wounded and decorated with the *Croix de Guerre*." From May to July Long Lance travelled thousands of kilometres by train in the province's interior, and by steamer along the coast. His very readable feature articles appeared in the *Sun* every Sunday. The writer knew how to collect information quickly and how to use a telling anecdote.

After his discharge from the Canadian Army in the summer of 1919, Sylvester Long Lance had spent almost three years as a reporter with the Calgary *Herald*. There he learned his craft. The new journalist covered every beat from police to sports to city hall. He made frequent visits in 1921, his last year with the paper, to reserves in southern Alberta. The Bloods (Kainai), one of the four

© Donald B. Smith, 2023
Downloaded from: https://ontariohistoricalsociety.ca/podcast/in-hindsight-episode-04/

nations in the Blackfoot Confederacy, adopted him as an honorary chief in February 1922 and gave him the name Buffalo Child, a name he took with him when he left for Vancouver two months later. If asked, he now described himself usually as a Blackfoot, sometimes as a Blood. He was not, of course, in any way a legal member of either Blackfoot-speaking group.

In his B.C. series Long Lance defended the First Nations' right to hold onto their customs and important Indigenous ceremonies. Why were the Department of Indian Affairs and the Christian missionaries so intent on destroying Indigenous society? To a non-Indigenous audience in British Columbia where few treaties had been made, Long Lance brought forward the First Nations' demand for "full title to their reserve lands, as enjoyed by the other tribes of the Dominion, and for better education facilities and medical attention." His article on 26 July, "What Indian Requests to Government Really Mean," continued: "Instead of asking for financial remuneration for the reserve lands that have been taken over and sold by the province in the past, they are asking for extensions where they are most needed."

Long Lance left British Columbia at the end of the summer engaged by the Regina *Leader* to write a similar series on Saskatchewan. He travelled from Files Hills to other reserves in the Qu'Appelle Valley: Piapot, Muscowpetung, Pasquah, Standing Buffalo. He visited the Assiniboine at Carry-the-Kettle's reserve at Sintaluta, about eighty kilometres (fifty miles) east of Regina. There he met Dan Kennedy, or Ochankugahe, "The Pathmaker." Born in 1874, Kennedy had known the last days of the Assiniboine's free way of life before they settled on their reserve in 1882. He had attended an Indian residential school, but as one of the most promising students, had been sent to study at St. Boniface College in Winnipeg. The prosperous farmer told Long Lance that he had just finished his harvest of 300 acres of grain, using his own threshing machine. Kennedy also owned forty head of cattle. Still,

© Donald B. Smith, 2023
Downloaded from: https://ontariohistoricalsociety.ca/podcast/in-hindsight-episode-04/

The Pathmaker continued, he had to cope with the frustrations of living under the Indian Act and the strict supervision of the Indian Agent. Long Lance summarized his findings in Saskatchewan in his article, "Red Men of the West—Yesterday and Today," in the *Leader* on 16 December 1922. He wrote that the Indian does not fear change, but worries that his son "be made into a white man, and that he might be lost to his home and people."

With his articles for the *Herald*, the *Sun* and the *Leader* in hand, Long Lance next approached the *Winnipeg Tribune*. He sold the paper on a series, "When the Indians Owned Manitoba." As he explained in article one on 10 February 1923, his task was not "to excuse nor to accuse." Yet he must report injustice, which he knew from his previous interviews in Alberta, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan, and now Manitoba, existed. In his 3 March 1923 article, in his Manitoba series, for instance, he reviewed the 1907 land sale at St Peter's, at Selkirk, north of Winnipeg. "As a result of a series of cloudy transactions," and "considerable crooked work," the First Nations "sold" their good agricultural lands at St Peters and moved to their present location, an isolated spot with inferior soil at Fisher River northwest of Winnipeg: "Here they live today, harboring considerable discontent over the manner in which they were treated in this deal."

The *Tribune* liked his smooth and popular writing style. They assigned him other stories, not always on Indigenous topics. Winnipeg became his home base for the next four winters. He also started selling stories to other newspapers and magazines. The amateur boxer wrote a great deal on his favourite sport. The *Tribune* sent him to the Polo Grounds, New York City, in mid-September 1923 to cover the Dempsey-Firpo match for the world heavyweight boxing championship. 80,000 people, more than the entire population of Calgary, gathered at the home stadium of the New York Giants of the National League. Long Lance wrote the fight up in his own distinctive manner: "There may have been a

© Donald B. Smith, 2023
Downloaded from: https://ontariohistoricalsociety.ca/podcast/in-hindsight-episode-04/

fight more savage, spectacular and brutal than the slugfest here Friday night between Jack Dempsey and Louis Angel Firpo, but it must have been back in the dark ages when men wore leopard skins around their loins and wielded tree stumps instead of eight-ounce gloves."

Handsome, well-dressed, and articulate, Long Lance travelled in all social circles in Winnipeg, population almost 200,000, the largest city on the prairies. He was at ease at the podium, and spoke to gatherings of authors, to church and local service clubs. Rumours of Long Lance and his accomplishments raced through the city. On 5 May 1923, the *Tribune* described him as "the youngest chief west of the Great Lakes and one by blood inheritance." Garnet Clay Porter, "The Colonel," a senior journalist at the *Tribune* at the time, believed that Long Lance had two university degrees. Long Lance himself convinced Professor W.T. Allison of the Department of English at the University of Manitoba, and the *Tribune*'s literary editor, that he had won the Italian War Cross as well as the *Croix de Guerre*. Samuel Hayakawa, a young student at the University of Manitoba from Vancouver, who stayed at the Allisons, met him several times. Half a century later the respected academic and university administer had become a U.S. senator from California. Senator Hayakawa kindly shared his recollections of Long Lance with me in a 17 December 1980 letter: "In company he was perfectly charming—a good story-teller and conversationist, gracious and flattering towards women comradely with men."

Long Lance escaped much of the discrimination Indigenous people faced in the city, with one exception known to me. As Charles L'Ami, a *Tribune* columnist at time, told me half a century later. On his first visit to the Fort Garry Hotel, a doorman had refused Long Lance entry. When his friends at the *Tribune* privately complained, the hotel management promptly apologized to him.

© Donald B. Smith, 2023
Downloaded from: https://ontariohistoricalsociety.ca/podcast/in-hindsight-episode-04/

One of Long Lance's early talks in Winnipeg, perhaps the first he gave in the city, deserves particular attention. It occurred in mid-January 1923. At a Canadian Authors Association (CAA) meeting at the University of Manitoba, then on Broadway in downtown Winnipeg, Long Lance met a clergyman, Rev. John Maclean, who had known southern Alberta well in the 1880s. McLean had lived among the Bloods for nine years, as a Christian missionary. He had a tremendous respect for the Blackfoot language. Long Lance, in an article in his Manitoba series on 3 March, described what Maclean himself said on 15 January: "As Dr. John MacLean, the noted Indian authority and author, remarked after my talk before the Canadian Author's meeting recently, 'the Indian may be a savage, but his language is that of a highly intellectual people.' It takes 49 pages of foolscap paper to conjugate one Blackfoot verb."

Interestingly, despite the fact he acquired fluency in Blackfoot, the Methodist (now the United Church) missionary failed to make a single convert, not a single one. In his 1896 book *Canadian Savage Folk. The Native Tribes of Canada* (page 430), perceptively Maclean himself identified the reason for his lack of success: "We wish to make them white men, and they desire them [their children] to become better Indians." [Approximately forty years later, John Sampson, Alberta First Nations leader, would echo the same sentiments in a meeting of the Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons on Indian Affairs, Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence, no. 3 (Ottawa, 1960) p. 132: "We do not want education that will turn us into second class white people, rather we want to become first class Indians." Cited by Frits Pannekoek, "Introduction," in Ruth Gorman, *Behind the Man. John Laurie, Ruth Gorman, and the Indian Vote in Canada* (Calgary, 2007), xxxii.

Reverend John Maclean lived in Winnipeg in the 1920s. The minister worked as the archivist of the Methodist Church, Winnipeg, as well as chief librarian at the Methodists' Wesley

© Donald B. Smith, 2023
Downloaded from: https://ontariohistoricalsociety.ca/podcast/in-hindsight-episode-04/

College (now the University of Winnipeg). In his mid-70s the life-long learner worked on a law degree from the University of Manitoba, which was granted three years later in 1926, two years before his death.

In their conversation at the CAA talk, Long Lance mentioned that he belonged to the "Blood tribe of Indians," but that "his mother was of the Cherokee tribe." Casually, he introduced this interesting detail about his mother. He explained that she belonged to the Cherokee Nation to explain his lack of fluency in Blackfoot. Something seemed to be, well, not quite right. But John Maclean, on account of his two jobs and legal studies, even if he had wanted to, had no reserve of energy to investigate this interesting disclosure.

In 1927, having travelled widely in the Canadian west and elsewhere pursuing stories, covering boxing matches, and giving lectures, Long Lance moved to New York City, where, a year later, he published *Long Lance*, a work he intended as a piece of historical fiction, but one his publisher insisted should appear as autobiography. The critics generally praised it. Writing in the *New York Herald-Tribune* on 14 October 1928, Paul Radin, a well-known American anthropologist, described it as "authentic" and an "unusually faithful account of childhood and early manhood.… I cannot think of any work that could act as a better corrective of the ridiculous notions still prevailing about the Indians."

Long Lance's imaginative "autobiography" brought wide public recognition, entry into New York's highest literary and social circles, and an opportunity to pass from print to film. He was offered and took a leading role in *The Silent Enemy*, about the life of the Ojibwe in northern central Canada before the arrival of the Europeans (the "silent enemy" was hunger). He played Baluk, a fictional hunter who saved his community. The film was shot in the Temagami area of northeastern Ontario. Upon its release in 1930, *Variety* (New York) praised his performance in its issue of

© Donald B. Smith, 2023
Downloaded from: https://ontariohistoricalsociety.ca/podcast/in-hindsight-episode-04/

21 May: “Chief Long Lance is an ideal picture Indian, because he is a full-blooded one … an author of note in Indian lore, and now an actor in fact.”

By 1929, questions about his life story began to surface. For instance, in a restaurant in the village of Temagami, a young Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) cook and dishwasher mentioned to him to his face that she had never seen such a dark-skinned Indian as he. Long Lance took great offence. He replied that he was a full-blooded Indian and those around Temagami just a bunch of “half breeds.” Oddly enough the Temagami dishwasher was Agnes Belaney, daughter of Archie Belaney, then beginning to present himself as Grey Owl.

Wilfred Eggleston, the Alberta novelist, then a journalist with the *Toronto Star Weekly*, interviewed him in Toronto immediately after his return from Temagami. Years later in a personal memoir entitled *Literary Friends*, the writer recalled how impressed he had been, and at the same time puzzled by Long Lance’s masterly English style. Long Lance had mentioned to Eggleston, who himself had grown up as a boy in southeastern Alberta, that he had been born somewhere near the Alberta-Montana border. Puzzling indeed, “It was difficult enough for a boy raised in an English home and attending an English school to acquire such skills – but an Indian boy on the range speaking his own native tongue and never making contact with the English language and literature? Amazing!”

In 1930, at the height of his fame, Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance’s stature as a public figure began to decline. Rumours began to circulate in New York itself that he was not who he claimed to be. Cynics claim that most autobiographies contain a fair portion of fiction. Long Lance’s was unique in that his life story was fiction from beginning to end. Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance was neither Blackfoot nor Blood from the Plains of Montana and

© Donald B. Smith, 2023
Downloaded from: https://ontariohistoricalsociety.ca/podcast/in-hindsight-episode-04/

Alberta, but rather a man of mixed heritage: European, Indigenous, and African American, who was born and raised in the factory town of Winston-Salem, North Carolina. This is the discovery I made in 1975.

Both of Sylvester C. Long's parents had been born slaves. Joe Long thought that his father was white and his mother Eastern Cherokee. Sallie Carson had been told that her ancestry was also Indigenous (Croatan, now known as Lumbee) and European. Regardless of what Joe and Sallie believed, they were not federally recognized Indians and consequently had no legal status as Native Americans. Even had it been otherwise, in Winston there were only two racial classifications, "white" and "colored," and as non-whites the Longs lived in the African American community and suffered much of the daily discrimination faced by their Black neighbours. He had gone to a Black school, ridden in the back of the streetcar, watched movies from the "colored" gallery of the theatre. His parents told him for his own safety he must remove his hat in the presence of a white person, never to talk back. The colour line in Winston was indelibly drawn. Yet his "Indian" appearance—his high cheekbones, copper skin and straight black hair—offered an escape.

From an early age Long fantasized about Indians. As a boy of 13 and again when he was 17 or 18, he joined Wild West shows. In 1909, falsifying the extent of his Indian ancestry and capitalizing on his appearance and the fact that he had learned some Cherokee while on the road, Long applied to and was accepted by the famous Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. He identified himself as Sylvester Long Lance. Once he graduated everyone assumed he was indeed Indian.

Perhaps in search of adventure, or regular pay, Sylvester Long Lance travelled north to Montreal in early 1916 and enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Eventually he saw four months'

© Donald B. Smith, 2023
Downloaded from: https://ontariohistoricalsociety.ca/podcast/in-hindsight-episode-04/

action in France in 1917. Wounded twice, he was hospitalized in England on the second occasion and was subsequently assigned to non-combat duties. Upon his return to Canada in 1919, he boarded a troop train and headed west and took his discharge in Calgary, about as far as he could travel from the American South. Introducing himself as a Cherokee from Oklahoma, that is, a Western Cherokee, the first major distortion of his identity, he obtained a job as a reporter for the *Calgary Herald*.

In 1931 Long Lance moved to California, to act as secretary and bodyguard to a wealthy heiress embarking on a trip to Europe. Something happened during this journey to unsettle him further; he suffered bouts of depression and continued to drink heavily. After his return to the United States, he became increasingly unstable. On 20 March 1932, he took his own life, by gunshot, at his patron's home in Arcadia, near Los Angeles.

Long's legacy resides in his writings on the First Nations, in which he did good work in combating many negative stereotypes of Indigenous people. For these articles he carried out, as Alberta historian Hugh A. Dempsey has noted, "valuable field work at a time when few ethnologists, and even fewer journalists, were concerned about the history of the Indian."

Full Exposure—How I Discovered the True Origins of Buffalo Child Long Lance, 1974/1975

I first became interested in Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance in the early 1970s. Then living in Toronto, I was rummaging one day in a second-hand bookstore and noticed a small brown volume published in 1928. Its title firmly imprinted on the spine: *Long Lance*. Intrigued by what appeared to be an Indigenous person's autobiography, I pulled it down and turned to page one: "The first thing in my life that I can remember is exciting aftermath of an

© Donald B. Smith, 2023
Downloaded from: https://ontariohistoricalsociety.ca/podcast/in-hindsight-episode-04/

Indian fight in northern Montana." I bought the book, read it, and never forgot it. My next encounter with Chief Long Lance came in the fall of 1974 when I began teaching Canadian history at the University of Calgary. With my knowledge of the Canadian Plains sketchy to say the least, I made several trips to the archives of the Glenbow Alberta Institute, a rich source of Western Canadiana, as well as appropriate lecture material. One afternoon at the Glenbow I came across a sizable carton full of letters, articles, and newspaper clippings about Long Lance. The Glenbow materials had come from the estate of Canon S.H. Middleton, the Anglican missionary to the Bloods in southern Alberta who had served as Long Lance's executor after his death in 1932. The articles and letters in the collection spoke of his honours at the Carlisle Indian school in Pennsylvania, his distinguished service in the Great War with the Canadian Army, of his years as a reporter in Western Canada, and of his incredible success in New York City as a writer, actor, and aviator.

The material was exciting, yet the files at Glenbow contained inconsistencies. For example, I came across an article published in the Los Angeles *Examiner* immediately after Long Lance's death. Within I found a curious reference to his father who had signed himself "J.S. Long." This seemed strange, as most Plains First Nations that I had read about usually had names like Crowfoot, Bull's Head or Walking Buffalo. I found another discrepancy. In the articles of the late 1920s, Long Lance was described as a young man of thirty, yet in his autobiography he claimed that he had hunted the buffalo in his youth. If he had been born in the early 1890s, that was completely impossible, as the great buffalo herds were gone by the mid-1880s.

All throughout the winter of 1974/75 I sent out dozens of letters trying to discover my new friend's true origins. In a letter home to my mother (my father had died in 1973), I mentioned: "I've got a research project going too on LONG LANCE, he's sort of a Grey

© Donald B. Smith, 2023
Downloaded from: https://ontariohistoricalsociety.ca/podcast/in-hindsight-episode-04/

Owl figure who worked for a couple of years with the *Calgary Herald* in the 1920s, and who wrote a book and articles on the Western Canadian Indians. It's fun, and I've already met some old-timers about him."

Hugh Dempsey, then director of history at the Glenbow-Alberta Institute, and Sheila Jameson, the chief archivist, had long been interested in this extraordinary man. Both Hugh and Sheila put the newly arrived Ontarian in touch with several individuals who had known him in Alberta in the 1920s. In Calgary I met Howard Kelly, Hugh Dann, and George Gooderham; and on the Blood (Kainai) Reserve Mike Eagle Speaker. At Waterton National Park near the Alberta-Montana border I contacted Sophie Allison, the daughter of Canon Middleton, an early Anglican missionary to the Bloods. All went out of their way to help, supplying me with articles and letters written by, and about, Long Lance.

Having read in the article in the Los Angeles *Examiner* that Long Lance's father, J. S. Long, claimed to live in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, I wrote to the city's Public Library. In late February 1975, Ann Correll, the librarian in charge of the North Carolina collection, provided the documentary proof of Long Lance's true origins. From his record of service in the Canadian army (filed at Glenbow) I already knew that he had enlisted as "Sylvester Long Lance." After I contacted her, the conscientious librarian checked through the Winston city directories for the early twentieth century. Yes, she wrote back on 7 March 1975, a Sylvester C. Long appeared in the directories from 1910 to 1913. Listed as a "student," his residence was given as 95 Brookstown Ave, the home of Joseph S. and Sallie Long and of Abraham and Walter Long. In the directories Joseph S. Long was listed as "colored." The librarian also enclosed an article written about Abraham "Abe" Long, "longtime manager of the old all-Negro balcony at the theatre." In the *Winston-Salem Twin City Sentinel* on Saturday 16 September 1967, Abe had reminisced about the

© Donald B. Smith, 2023
Downloaded from: https://ontariohistoricalsociety.ca/podcast/in-hindsight-episode-04/

Carolina theatre of the old days. Three lines in that article especially struck me: “He is the last of the original Long family. A brother, Walter Long, a private detective, died here in 1941. Another brother, Sylvester, had died earlier in California.” Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance had died in California. Sylvester Long of North Carolina and the famous Chief Buffalo Child were the same man. Although he could legitimately lay claim to some Native American ancestry, Long Lance or rather Sylvester Long had been born and raised in the African American community in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. I wrote his life story, *Long Lance. The True Story of an Impostor*, in 1982 and in a revised second edition in 1999. I also introduced this amazing individual in *Seen but Not Seen* (2021), pp. 232-239. Rosmarin Heidenreich provides an overview of Sylvester Long’s or Long Lance’s life in *Literary Impostors. Canadian Autofiction of the Early Twentieth Century* (2018), pp. 146-201. Susan Gray’s biography of Rev. John Maclean in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* is available at http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/maclean_john_15E.html.

© Donald B. Smith, 2023
Downloaded from: https://ontariohistoricalsociety.ca/podcast/in-hindsight-episode-04/