

Plains Cree Men's Clothing (1895–1926)

When David Mandelbaum interviewed Cree men in 1934–35, Fine Day, Sitting with Earth, and Pimotat identified floral beadwork as recent innovations introduced by 'Half Breeds' and the Saulteaux. Fine Day, who was born in the 1850s, stated, 'in my young days I didn't see very much beadwork. It was mostly porcupine quillwork. We never used floral designs then—all patterns were geometric.'¹ However, by 1892 when Isaac Cowie, a former Hudson's Bay Company clerk, began to collect for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, there were few surviving Plains Cree quillwork pieces in Saskatchewan.² Late nineteenth century Cree beadwork largely consisted of wide bands of appliqué beadwork sewn onto clothing, such as shirtsleeves and down the front or sides of leggings. Men wore shirts and full-length leggings that were worn with a breech clout. Hair was worn long, often in braids wrapped with coloured cloth. Most men wore shell earrings and chokers. Short hair, unless cut during mourning, and trousers were signifiers of conversion to Christianity.

Geraldine Moodie's 1895 photographs of Cree people gathered near Battleford for a Sundance document turn-of-the-century clothing and personal decoration.³ While some elements of European dress had been adopted (cloth shirts, cloth vests, and felt hats), many individuals had prepared for this ceremonial occasion by wearing special Cree clothing. The most common garments, particularly in the wide shots of the camp, were capotes, made from Hudson's Bay Company blankets, worn with fur caps. Dancers wore regalia that included suits of beaded clothing and eagle feather headdresses. Most of the shirts and leggings were made of wool trade cloth, with the coloured selvage integrated into the design.⁴ The blanket was an important part of men's formal attire, worn over one shoulder and around the body, leaving the right arm free. White and red Hudson's Bay Company blankets were the most popular (and more widely available), but Pendleton blankets were also worn.

Moodie's photographs also indicate that the use of brass tacks to create border accents and decorative lines, evident in 1885 photographs of Poundmaker, were still

¹ Mandelbaum, D. 1934. *Field Notes*, Notebook II. R-875, SAB.

² The Isaac Cowie Plains Cree Collection is in the Chicago Field Museum, Chicago, IL.

³ Geraldine Moodie Collection, National Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, ON.

⁴ The selvage is the finished edge of a length of fabric. When fur trade companies noticed that their First Nations customers used the selvage edge as a decorative element, they began to introduce multiple colours to the selvage.

popular. Several portraits taken at the 1895 Sundance and in Moodie's Battleford studio show wide bands of beadwork sewn to leggings, shirtfronts and sleeves. The beadwork had large, bold, geometric shapes on a white background. In addition to the Moodie photographs of Fine Day, Thunderchild, and Poundmaker Jr., men from File Hills were also frequently photographed wearing beaded regalia. Pimotat, Red Dog, Star Blanket and others were photographed between 1907 and 1940 wearing beaded shirts and leggings with distinctive bold geometric designs on a white field.⁵

The men in the James Henderson portraits are wearing the clothing and beadwork they wore on formal and ceremonial occasions. One innovative element appears in the two portraits of Ohoo—a solid beaded necktie. In a 1908 photograph of Chief Star Blanket and Ohoo, Star Blanket wears the beaded shirt, leggings and fur cap in which he was frequently photographed, and Ohoo wears a fabric shirt, choker with beaded rosette, and a dark blanket wrapped around his body. In a group photograph taken in 1912, the men wear silk neckerchiefs or beaded chokers.⁶ A panoramic photograph of a 1925 pageant held at Lebret shows several men wearing beaded neckties, while others wear chokers and neckerchiefs. One of the earliest photographs of a Cree man wearing a beaded necktie was taken circa 1910: it is a studio photograph of Dan Minde of Hobbema wearing what appears to be dance regalia, including a large black felt hat, beaded tie, wide armbands, and beaded cuffs over a cloth shirt.⁷ This might suggest that it was a stylistic innovation that moved east from Alberta into Saskatchewan.

Pimotat was first photographed in his regalia in 1914, when a group of men from File Hills were photographed with young World War I recruits.⁸ It is interesting that Henderson chose to paint Pimotat wrapped in a Hudson's Bay Company blanket when he was so frequently photographed wearing a heavily beaded trade cloth shirt of traditional cut, leggings, and moccasins. The coloured striped selvage of the trade cloth formed a border around the hem of the shirt and up the sides of the full-length leggings. These may have been constructed like trousers, as he does not seem to be wearing a breech clout. Wide beaded bands are sewn on the shirtfront (and probably the back too)

⁵ A later example is the Donald Cadzow photograph NA 1463 (series), Glenbow Museum, Calgary, AB. 1925–1926.

⁶ Cree in front of tipis, Qu'Appelle district, SK. 1908. NA-5462-13. Group of Qu'Appelle Cree, circa 1912 NA-1315-21, Glenbow Museum, Calgary, AB.

⁷ Dan Minde and little girl, Hobbema, c 1910. NA-5498-1, Glenbow Museum, Calgary, AB.

⁸ Pimotat (in group) with File Hills recruits. NA-5462-23. Pimotat and Leonard Creely. NA-5462-24. Glenbow Museum, Calgary, AB.

and down the sleeves. The beadwork on the shirt is comprised of large horizontal X-shapes formed by solid triangles on a white background. Ermine skin tassels fringe the sleeve seams. The beadwork design on the leggings is one of two large rectangles surrounded by small triangles. Pimotat also wears a long beaded necktie sewn to a neckband. The necktie is solid beadwork, with geometric shapes on a white background and a beaded fringe in a complementary colour.

Beaded neckties became more common in the 1920s, worn by dancers and dignitaries at special events such as the Regina Exhibition, a visit by Earl Grey, and the 1925 Lebret pageant. Another prominent man who wore a beaded necktie as part of his regalia was Red Dog; the necktie does not appear in earlier photographs but is present from 1925 until 1940.⁹ Red Dog's outfit, as documented in the photography of the time, is very similar to the clothing worn by Ohoo in the Henderson paintings. Unlike other chiefs and headmen, Ohoo does not appear to have had one outfit that he wore for special occasions. It is possible that Henderson transferred Red Dog's outfit onto Ohoo, as an act of artistic license, or that Ohoo had acquired or borrowed Red Dog's regalia.

There are several museum collections with Saskatchewan Plains Cree beadwork from this time period. The largest is in the McCord Museum, a collection of Plains Cree and Saulteaux beadwork made by Charles Sidney Rackstraw.¹⁰ The Cowie Collection in the Chicago Field Museum and the Donald Cadzow Collection in the National Museum of the American Indian also provide an opportunity to study technique and style. The beadwork is appliquéd, where the artist has stitched rows of beads, each row a single thread, tacked down every two to three beads. Changing the bead colour and careful counting to achieve perfect symmetry created the geometric designs. Most designs are outlined and colour combinations are bold. The most common motifs were triangles, multi-coloured stripes, squares, rectangles, zigzag, or lightning designs. Many of the motifs were stepped or constructed from small squares that created larger shapes. The meanings were probably related to personal vision, society membership, and war records. Fine Day mentioned some of these in his interviews with David Mandelbaum: a

⁹ A photograph of Red Dog and Donald Cadzow taken in 1926 offers excellent detail for comparison. NA-1463-31. Glenbow Museum.

¹⁰ The Rackstraw Collection includes four beaded neckties, one with Cree syllabics on the back of the collar. ME954.1.34.1-2. McCord Museum, Montreal, QC.

horizontal robe stripe signifies a long war journey; a short red stripe a short war journey; a cross denotes bravery in a peace party.¹¹

A shirt created in 1910, collected by Donald Cadzow in 1925, is made from black cotton with brass tacks scattered across the surface of the shirt. Wide bands of white beadwork with alternating large blue geometric shapes and yellow crosses are sewn to the shirt, front and back. The fabric is fringed. The owner called it a 'dream shirt' and it represented the night sky.¹² These are only indications of the deep meaning that traditional clothing had for the men who posed for Henderson and in many photographs throughout the early decades of the twentieth century.

-Sherry Farrell Racette

¹¹ Fine Day Interview #30, p. 10–11, Indian History Film Project. David Mandelbaum (IH-DM 86), University of Regina Digital Archives, Regina, SK.

¹² 'Dream Shirt', Prairie Cree c 1910 (14/3160). National Museum of the American Indian, Washington DC, U.S.