

Lawrence William Herchmer

Indian Agent, Militia Officer, N.W.M.P. Commissioner



L.W. Herchmer was born in 1840 in England, son of Rev. William Herchmer. Although he was born in England he was descended from United Empire Loyalists. He was educated at Henley-on-Thames, Trinity College

(Toronto), and the Royal Military Academy in London. He served in the military in Ireland and India before returning to Canada where he farmed for a period of time in Kingston. Herchmer then became supply officer to the 1872 Boundary Commission, and in 1874 opened a brewery in Winnipeg. He was married in 1866 to Mary Helen Sherwood in Kingston and had at least four children.

Through his father's connections and his own marriage, Herchmer acquired close ties to the Conservative party and the élite of Upper Canadian society, and these were to have a significant influence on his later advancement in life. His father was a long-time friend of John A. Macdonald, the future prime minister of Canada.

In 1878 L.W. Herchmer was sent to Birtle from Ottawa as Farm Instructor for the Birdtail Sioux Band. These men were to establish farms near reserves, which Indigenous peoples could work on to gain practical farming experience. The policy was problematic because the instructors were accustomed to farming in the very different agricultural conditions of central Canada and, because it was a patronage appointment, some had never farmed at all. Herchmer had farmed a little in Ontario but his chief qualification was his father's friendship with the prime minister.

In 1882 Herchmer was promoted to Divisional Indian Agent for all reservations, and bands within a radius of fifty miles of Birtle. The agency comprised three Sioux reserves, Birtle, Griswold and Pipestone; also three Cree reserves, Gamblers, Lizard Point, and Rolling River besides Cree bands in Riding and Duck Mountains not yet allotted reserves. The work necessitated an assistant, filled by John Markle*, who arrived early in the spring from Nova Scotia. In this capacity Herchmer had jurisdiction over other Indian agencies in the vicinity.

Indian Agents were responsible for implementing federal Indian policy under the Indian Act. They were the government's representatives on reserves and, as such, they wielded great power over First Nation people. Their duties included that of magistrate, policeman, and coroner.

This promotion necessitated that Herchmer move into town. Matt Rocket and J.A. Johnston were hired to build him a residence and office on St. Clair (also spelled Clare) Street. Although L.W. Herchmer was no doubt very busy in his new position he did find time to become involved in the community. He and his wife hosted meetings of the Birtle Musical

Society at his home as well as New Year's parties for up to 60 people in his "hospitable mansion." (Birtle Observer 1885, 1886)

Herchmer reported that the Sioux were, "all very well disposed towards the settlers, and wherever trouble has arisen it has, on all occasions which I have investigated, been directly attributable to the settlers, who dislike to see the Indians in possession of desirable locations."

However, the year of the Riel Rebellion in 1885 was one of great uncertainty and potential danger for newly formed

*John Markle became Indian Agent when Herchmer left in 1886.
He held the post until 1901.

settlements in the northwest. Tensions were high in the community and surrounding area as recorded in the local newspaper, *The Birtle Observer*:

Some excitement was caused on Wednesday morning by the arrival of a messenger for Lieutenant governor Dewdney to L.W. Herchmer, Esq., of the Indian Agency, desiring that he should be on the alert, as it was suspected that the half breed of Oak Lake and elsewhere would attempt to form a junction with the rebels at Fort Carlton, by following the old western trail via Birtle and Fort Pelly. Measures were at once taken to ascertain the truth of the reports and the extent of the supposed danger, and if necessary, to guard the interests of the country by stopping the advance. The Agent at Birtle has many bands of Indians under his charge and there are quite a number of reserves in this immediate vicinity, but the Indians are mostly Sioux who have no sympathy with the other tribes or half breeds, and are not at all likely to give the least trouble. As soon as the disturbance in the west was heard of Captain Chambers telegraphed to Ottawa for rifles, at the same time offering to organize a company of volunteers. Mr. J. H. Wood, of this place (Birtle), who, being in the east acted with decision and telegraphed that, at his suggestion, a sufficient number of arms have been forwarded in order that a company can be formed under the command of Captain George Wood. Birtle being the headquarters of the Indian Agency and the point at which supplies have been presented to the different bands, it may be wise to have some men armed in case of an unlooked for disturbance, A meeting was held on the afternoon of Wednesday, to take steps to organize, when, about forty persons gave their expressed willingness to volunteer.

Birtle Observer, April 3, 1885

Herchmer came under attack from the Editor of the Brandon Sun, who called for his resignation for his conduct as Indian

Agent during the rebellion. Herchmer had charged three Sioux Indians for trying to sell some cattle from their reserve, which were in effect government cattle and this constituted breaking the law. (Herchmer's Birtle System) This was a small infraction given the tumultuous times with Riel's uprising threatening war and would perhaps give the Sioux more cause to join the revolt. The Sioux Indians were also calling for Herchmer's removal because he "spoke crossly to them and confined them".

The Editor of the Birtle Observer vehemently defended Herchmer and credited him for ensuring no uprising occurred in the area:

There were thirteen bands of Indians in charge of the Agency here. They are of various tribes and some of a warlike disposition and character. In former years they have been well used to the dangers and excitements of the battlefield and were as liable to temptation as others. Riel's runners visited all those Indians, holding the same inducements which caused the western tribes to revolt and urging them to rise against the white settlers and appropriate the plunder which at the time lay open for seizure all around, undefended. While every town had home guards and armed men to protect lives and property in case of disturbances, Mr. Herchmer moved constantly amongst the different bands under his charge, he did so at all times, night or day, in every kind of weather unattended and unarmed, showing kindness to the Indians, he advised them, warned them, fed and clothed them, allayed their fears, calmed their excitement and assured them of protection; the result was that they remained peaceably on their reserves and cultivated their fields. Only one instance of outrage took place and Mr. Herchmer had the offenders in custody and on their way to prison before other Indians knew anything about the circumstances. If this district escaped evil in an evil time much of our safety was owing to the measures, which the Agent took with the Indians. Birtle Observer, August 31, 1885

Below: A Birdtail Sioux family



Following the Riel rebellion, Herchmer sat on a commission that had been set up to investigate claims for damages suffered in the course of the conflict.

After being promoted to inspector of Indian Agencies for the North West Territories in 1885, a year later in 1886, Sir John A. Macdonald selected Herchmer to become commissioner of the North West Mounted Police, precursor to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Although a former military officer, he had not served in the police, and was a civilian at the time he was named as Commissioner of the force. The change was greeted with general approval in the west; Herchmer's experience as a soldier, businessman, and Indian agent was considered highly suitable for the position. Macdonald himself saw Herchmer as a man well qualified to transform the force into a more professional body. At this time, the force had serious internal problems. Not only were the men poorly trained, but also there was a lack of discipline and no uniform system of control or organization.

L.W. Herchmer left a lasting legacy that was instrumental in shaping the R.C.M.P. we know today:

Herchmer was never a popular commissioner of the N.W.M.P. His uneven and uncompromising temperament got him into frequent conflict with individuals, both inside and outside the police. He could at one moment express compassion for the welfare of those under his command and in the next explode into a fit of anger and punish them severely. The public exposure of his emotional outbursts

earned him a reputation as a tyrant. This is unfortunate since it has tended to obscure his administrative achievements. Herchmer took over a dispirited and poorly organized police force. He raised the standards for enlistment, promoted better training, restored discipline and esprit de corps, improved the conditions of service, and created an efficient internal organization. He also started its transition from a frontier military force to an urban law-enforcement body. When Herchmer left the N.W.M.P, it had attained a high reputation both at home and abroad and was beginning to be recognized as a Symbol of Canada. His lasting legacies in this respect were the adoption of the wide-brimmed felt hat and the introduction of the first musical rides. (S.W. Horrall, Dictionary of Canadian Encyclopedia)

His personality earned him a number of political enemies, leading to charges of mismanagement that produced a judicial inquiry in 1892 (which cleared him) and culminated in his dismissal in 1900, while he was serving with the Canadian Army in South Africa. Herchmer considered his firing unjust, and continued to say so until his death in 1915.



Officers of the N. W. M. P. on Duty at Regina 1895
with Commissioner Herchmer (Centre)

