

ANTHROPOLOGY IN PRACTICE

News from the Society for Applied Anthropology in Manitoba (Inc.)
S.A.A.M. INC.

Web: saaminc.org

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President's Report

Our new season was started brilliantly by the unassuming, factual and humorous presentation of Chief Simon Fobister of the Grassy Narrows reserve. If you missed this moving presentation, you can see a lengthy summary in the following pages.

The attendance at our Annual General Meeting (18 people) was notable by the absence of several long-standing members. The proposed slate for the executive was voted in, and I would like to congratulate all those who have accepted to offer some of their time, efforts and ingenuity to the service of S.A.A.M. My congratulation to the two newest members of the Executive Committee, Erin Jonasson, who accepted the difficult job of Newsletter editor, and Kate Mossman, whose efforts will allow our membership to grow.

I was a bit disappointed by the slow trickling of registrations. If you have not yet registered, please do so **very soon!** In addition to this newsletter, you should also consult the web site of our society, at :

Saaminc.org

We have a very interesting programme of activities planned for this year. In order to "Bring the mountain to Mohammed" facilitate the participation of the students and faculty of Menno Simons College and The University of Winnipeg, we shall alternate meetings at the Library and at the

University of Winnipeg. To start this cycle, our meeting of November 4, 2003 will be at the University of Winnipeg. Seek (on the 4th floor) and you shall find! This presentation of the **Whitefeather Initiative** will show that conciliation has a bright place in the realm of conflict resolution!

Jean-Luc Chodkiewicz

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Editor's Corner:

As the new editor of the Anthropology in Practice 2003-2004, I would like to share with the members my sense of excitement and anticipation for the challenging topics and speakers that we will be experiencing as this year unfolds. I hope to see you all at our functions.

I would also like to extend a warm thanks to Allan Suchan for his hard work as the previous newsletter editor, as well as for his contributions to this issue. His review of "A Poison Stronger Than Love" by Anastasia M. Shkilnyk is especially relevant considering our recent visit by Chief Simon Fobister of Grassy Narrows, and our upcoming discussion on November 4th.

On a serious note, SAAM is an association which is built on the premise that its members get active

in the field of anthropology. This also includes getting involved in issues of social justice, both within our community and beyond. Each time we meet we are given a glimpse into this world, learning more about the practice of anthropology, as well as having a chance to discuss and debate. But, the group will only function properly if all members become involved. If any members of SAAM are interested in adding their voices to Anthropology in Practice, through writing a film or book review, discussing issues which our guest speakers have touched on, or discussing their own experiences, they can contact me via email at erinj@mb.sympatico.ca

Erin Jonasson

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“Don’t the trees have standing on their own?” or “The forest stands on guard for thee.” (Apologies to Menno Wiebe and Jean-Luc Chodkiewicz)

On September 27th, the members of SAAM had the honour of welcoming a guest speaker, **Chief Simon Fobister** of the Grassy Narrows First Nation.

Remarking on the temperature of the meeting room and noting that it was a comfortable setting for a gathering, Chief Fobister began his presentation with a brief story. He spoke of an Elder who, looking out his cabin window saw a Mennonite missionary approaching. At the sight of the man heading his way, the Elder added more wood to the fire. It was not long after the preacher arrived and began sermonizing that he started to feel the heat. Peeling away layers of clothing to no avail, the preacher finally decided that it was too hot to continue and left without finishing his sermon. Fobister ended his story with the statement, “Anishinabe are always thinking ahead.” With this statement Chief Fobister set the stage for a discussion which highlighted the continuing agency and resistance of the people of Grassy Narrows.

Grassy Narrows, an Ojibwa First Nation located 80 kilometres south of Kenora in north-western Ontario, has been the subject of significant media coverage over the last 40 years. The community was relocated in 1962 to its present location, but it was soon discovered that a pulp and paper mill (now owned by Abitibi Consolidated) had been dumping mercury into the English-Wabigoon river system upstream of the reserve. The results of this contamination have been devastating to the community, with many residents exhibiting the signs of Minamata disease, a debilitating neurological disorder caused by mercury. The issue of mercury contamination, first brought to international attention by Japanese researchers in the 1970s, has recently

been updated and the findings remain as disturbing as the original report.

Chief Fobister spoke at length about the effects of mercury contamination on both the health of the community and the health of their environment. He told us how the mercury remains in the sediment of Clear Lake, a small body of water near Grassy Narrows. In the spring the runoff stirs up the sediment and reintroduces the mercury into the food chain. This, in turn, affects the community because residents continue to hunt, fish, trap, and gather in their Traditional Land Use Area, a region spanning 2,500 square miles. These activities maintain the traditions and lifeways of their culture while subsidizing incomes in the community. For instance, Fobister reported that the unemployment rate in the community is a staggering 80%, with the average annual income around \$12,000. At the same time, the ‘country food value’ of a moose is approximately \$8000. Therefore, the hunting, fishing, and other

resource-based activities of the community are necessary for the livelihood of the people. These activities are also the First Nations’ rights under Treaty No. 3. Unfortunately, with the contamination of the soil and water, the livelihood and traditions of the First Nation are increasingly coming at the cost of the health of the community’s members.

The community has been fighting to maintain the ecological integrity of their region which, in addition to mercury contamination, is also the site of intensive clearcut logging by Abitibi. The result of clearcutting, which according to Fobister is the policy of both Abitibi and the government of Ontario, is the acceleration of the release of mercury stored in soil and plant-life, and the destruction of prime forest habitat. Both problems are having negative impacts in Grassy Narrows, adding to the area’s contamination while clearing the lands which sustain the community. Fobister illustrated some of

the concerns of residents by giving the example of local trappers who have set up their traplines in the forest, only to come back a week later to find that “their forest is gone.” One trapper, Andrew Keewatin Jr., has seen the devastation first hand. Along his line only one quarter of the forest remains untouched. The other three quarters have been clearcut, destroying the trees as well as the habitat of the marten, a weasel-like creature that lives in the coniferous old-growth forest.

Industry has also had a negative impact on the moose and caribou populations which once roamed the region. Fobister said that the Elders speak of a time when the forest was pristine, with moose and caribou but no deer populations. As the forest has been criss-crossed with logging roads and clearcuts, deer have entered the area carrying with them a deadly brainworm infestation, and causing death amongst the moose and the woodland caribou herds. The surviving animals have moved further and further away. In fact, the caribou is now only found in Woodland Caribou Park, a refuge which park officials wish to expand by absorbing trapline areas near the community. But Fobister and other community members believe that this may actually increase the brainworm epidemic by expanding the ‘deer highway’ into populations which are currently unaffected. “People don’t understand [that] when people do things, there are impacts.”

Despite criticisms of clearcutting, Fobister maintains that the people of Grassy Narrows do not object to logging, they merely object to the ways that logging has been and is being done. They want meaningful consultation with the provincial government and the companies involved in forest industries. Instead, many ‘consultations’ take place in small meetings where maps are shown and community members are told where

clearcutting will take place. The people of Grassy Narrows see consultation as ‘informed consent.’ Fobister stressed that his people want to know both the positive and negative impacts that certain industries could have on the land. Until they are fairly and reasonably consulted, the people of Grassy Narrows will not be satisfied.

Due to their frustrations and concerns, the First Nation has taken matters into their own hands. Members of the community began a roving blockade along logging roads on December 3, 2002; an action which remains active nearly a year later. The roadblock is patrolled by many residents of Grassy Narrows, both young and old. By demonstrating in this way, the community is demanding that government, as well as industry, listen to their concerns and allow their active involvement.

Ultimately, Chief Fobister told SAAM, the logging of the area surrounding Grassy Narrows amounts to the exploitation of both the land’s resources, as well as the people of his community. He believes that there are alternative methods for harvesting trees and other forest products which would be beneficial to both the First Nations people and business. Despite billions of dollars of profit for companies like Abitibi Consolidated each year (as I write this, I hear that A.C. is estimating record profits this quarter!), the people of Grassy Narrows do not see any of the benefits. Instead, they see the destruction of their way of life, along with the destruction of their community and their spiritual home.

Chief Fobister seems resigned to fight the daunting issues which are facing his people to the end. Indeed, he and the people of Grassy Narrows, joined by many others across the country and internationally, have pledged to fight to maintain their livelihoods, traditions, and lands. I get the impression that it is both

their duty and privilege to protect their forest home. As Fobister so rightly stated; “we’re in it for the long haul. We don’t just have cottages out there, it is our home. If you want our trees, give us respect. Respect our understandings and our lifestyle.”

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Erin Jonasson

If members of SAAM would like to help, Fobister suggests that they can go to the blockade and speak with the protesters, or send donations. They can also get in touch with the Friends of Grassy

Narrows, a Winnipeg-based group which supports the people and efforts of the Grassy Narrows First Nation. They can be contacted through their website:

www.friendsofgrassynarrows.com

Book Review

Shkilnyk, Anastasia M.

1985 ***A Poison Stronger Than Love: The Destruction of an Ojibwa Community.*** New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

By Allan Suchan

In *A Poison Stronger Than Love* (1985) Anastasia M. Shkilnyk analyzes the tragic consequences for the Ojibwa of Grassy

Narrows, Ontario of both their forced relocation and the mercury contamination of the English-Wabigoon river system. In the summer of 1963, the Department of Indian Affairs began to relocate the people of Grassy Narrows against their will to a new reserve about five miles south of the old settlement. Before having time to adjust, it was made public that a pulp and paper mill located about eighty miles upstream from Grassy Narrows had dumped over 20,000 pounds of mercury into the English-Wabigoon river system between 1962 and 1970. The Ojibwa’s sacred river, with its supply of fish, would probably remain poisoned for half a century or more.

The combined effects of their forced relocation and the poisoning of the river system devastated the Ojibwa way of life. Shkilnyk’s portrait of their destroyed community, which includes an examination of the prevalence of death due to interpersonal violence, suicide, alcoholism, family breakdown, the neglect of children, gas sniffing among children and frequent arrests for criminal and liquor offenses, shock the reader into the realization that the devastation of entire communities does not just occur in the Third World - it happens also here in Canada.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Shkilnyk’s research was undertaken, many of the current issues involving Canada’s First Nations, such as land claims, residential schools and Third World conditions on reserves, were slowly entering the public arena and were on the cusp of becoming headline news. Since, recent publications and work by anthropologists, including the Society for Applied Anthropology in Manitoba, has refuted the claim made by sociologist Kai Erikson in the forward to Shkilnyk’s study that “[w]hat happened to the band [Grassy Narrows] over a period of years is unique, a singular tragedy” (1985: xv). For example, a more recent study, Ila

Bussidor and Ustun Bilgen-Reinart's *Night Visions: The Story of the Relocation of the Sayisi Dene* (2000) demonstrates the horrific consequences, including poverty, discrimination, alcoholism and violence suffered by the Sayisi Dene of northern Manitoba upon their abrupt relocation from their ancestral homelands to the outskirts of a frontier town. This forced relocation, like that of the Grassy Narrows Ojibwa, was at the hands of the Canadian government. For the Cree of Cross Lake in northern Manitoba, the culprit was not a pulp and paper mill. John Miswagon, vice-chief of the Pimicikamak Cree Nation, stated at a conference held by the Society for Applied Anthropology in Manitoba, that the construction and operation of a hydroelectric mega-project has wreaked havoc on their habitat and traditional way of life. Their traditional fishing industry has been ruined. Moreover, many of the Cree families at Cross Lake used to hunt and trap. Now, eighty-five per cent of the people at Cross Lake are forced to live on social assistance (1999: 79).

Along with demonstrating the grim consequences of forced relocation and mercury contamination for the Grassy Narrows Ojibwa, Shkilnyk analyzes the impact of continual government neglect to act decisively. No admissions of responsibility for the crisis, along with a lack of adequate compensation, have served to make recovery for the Ojibwa more difficult. This situation parallels that of the Cree of Cross Lake, who are still seeking reparation while the federal and provincial governments and Manitoba Hydro try to interpret the Northern Flood Agreement, which their own lawyers drafted.

Fortunately, the experiences of these First Nations are not all tragic. Resistance is also a major theme. According to Chief William Fobister, who recently addressed S.A.A.M, The Grassy Narrows Ojibwa are currently making access to their traditional homelands difficult for logging

trucks. The Sayisi Dene fled their slum to start a new community at Tadoule Lake. The Cross Lake Cree are continually pressing the governments and Manitoba Hydro for just compensation.

The collective trauma experienced by the Grassy Narrows Ojibwa and demonstrated by Shkilnyk is not unique. The efforts of other researchers, including those of the Society for Applied Anthropology in Manitoba, have raised awareness of the injustices other First Nations across Canada have been forced to deal with. The people of Grassy Narrows, like other First Nations across Canada, are still resisting unjust treatment and are fighting to maintain their identity as a distinct society. For these reasons, *A Poison Stronger Than Love* should not be relegated to collect dust on library shelves. The tragic experiences it brings to our awareness are still part of Canada's current social and political state of affairs.

Allan Suchan

Work Cited:

Ila Bussidor and Ustun Bilgen-Reinart, 2000 *Night Spirits: The Story of the Relocation of the Sayisi Dene*. Winnipeg, Manitoba: The University of Manitoba Press.

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