

SPECIAL EDITION

STORIES FROM THE LAND



# CANADIAN Geographic

# INDIGENOUS

## VOICES

### KAKINIIT

THE REVIVAL OF  
**INUIT**  
TATTOOING

**PROMISED LANDS**  
A STORY OF  
CREE RELOCATION

SAVING THE  
**MICHIF**  
LANGUAGE



INDIGENOUS PHOTOGRAPHY FROM  
ACROSS THIS LAND, **ORANGE SHIRT DAY**,  
THE LAST RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL, **MAPPING**  
**THE FIRST TREATIES** AND MUCH MORE!



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# INDIGENOUS VOICES 2021

## ON THE COVER

Bessie Pihuk Omilgoetok (right) remembers her great-grandmother wearing *kakiniit* (traditional Inuit tattoos). Now they adorn the skin of her granddaughter Tammy Omilgoetok (left).

*Photo by Denise Peterson*



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## 28 KAKINIIT

Inuit tattoos, or *kakiniit*, were once banned. Now they are worn with pride.

*Photography by Denise Peterson*

*with text by Jana Angulalik*

JULY/AUGUST 2021

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Uprooted repeatedly by development projects, the Oujé-Bougoumou Cree wandered boreal Quebec for 70 years before finding a permanent home. For some, the journey continues.

*By Julian Brave NoiseCat*

*with photography by Christian Fleury*

MARCH/APRIL 2020

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Translating as “over the land,” this trail connects the communities of Iqaluit and Kimmirut across southern Baffin Island, spanning both age-old traditions and recent change.

*By Ossie Michelin*

*with photography by David Kilabuk*

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2018

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*By Betty Ann Adam*

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2020



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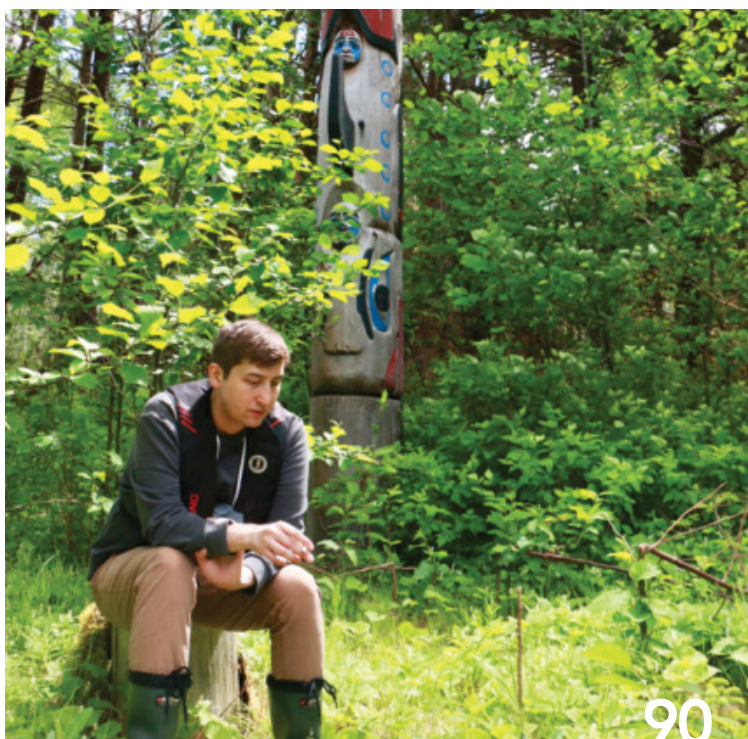
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*By Lisa Charleyboy*

*with photography by Ben Powless*

MAY/JUNE 2020



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*Photography by Peter Mather*

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*By Julian Brave NoiseCat*

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## RENAMING PLACES

Last summer, Toronto city council voted 17-7 to remove the name Dundas from city landmarks — just one example of how people from across Canada are taking a second look at our maps in the wake of recent events. Robert Jago explores how Canada is now Indigenizing its map, returning names of significance and beauty to the landscape where First Nations and Inuit have lived for so long. [cangeo.ca/renaming-places](https://cangeo.ca/renaming-places)



## A NEW VIEW OF B.C.

Developed by the First Peoples' Cultural Council, the First Peoples' Map of B.C. features 18 layers that explore more than 200 First Nations communities. The layers highlight heritage sites, profiles of local artists, information about community events and even common greetings and pronunciation guides. [cangeo.ca/first-peoples-map-bc](https://cangeo.ca/first-peoples-map-bc)



## PAYKIIWIKAY MÉTIS CULTURE PODCAST

Michif for “come and visit,” Paykiiwikay takes listeners on a journey through Métis communities around the province of Saskatchewan, revealing the depth and richness of Métis language, history and culture. [cangeo.ca/paykiiwikay](https://cangeo.ca/paykiiwikay)



## WHY INDIGENOUS TOURISM MATTERS

Beyond offering travellers a great time, Indigenous tourism provides an opportunity to discuss, debate and collaborate toward a more inclusive future in Canada. Here's why your post-COVID travel plans should include an Indigenous-led experience. [cangeotravel.ca/indigenous-tourism](https://cangeotravel.ca/indigenous-tourism)

## CONNECT WITH US ONLINE







# Ben Powless

Over this past year, many Canadians were suddenly and drastically awakened to the horrors of residential schools, finding evidence of thousands of lives taken away much too soon — in addition to the other, well-known abuses documented in the Truth and Reconciliation process. The horrors of these schools are not only measured in lives lost, but in cultures and languages devastated. Those languages are rich with understanding of animals, of natural cycles, of eons of meticulous scientific observations.

It's no wonder, then, that Indigenous communities are fighting to reclaim those languages and practices, often by immersing speakers and learners in the very lands those languages developed in. At the same time, Indigenous Peoples have spent decades trying to preserve those very landscapes and waterscapes that are increasingly understood as vital to prevent widespread ecological collapse and fend off dangerous climatic changes.

This special edition seeks to collect many of those stories — of both individuals and communities fighting to remember, and to create new possibilities, as the day-to-day challenges of governance move back into Indigenous hands. These are stories, told across the vastness of Turtle Island and beyond, of trying to understand the past to create a new vision and direction for all of us today.

— Ben Powless

*Note from the editors: the stories in this special edition appear the same as when they were first published, to keep the essence of the stories the way they were written. You can see the original publication dates on the contents page.*



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Veteran broadcast journalist David McGuffin interviews  
Canada's greatest explorers about their adventures  
and what inspires their spirit of discovery



JAVIER FRUTOS/CAN GEO

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# BIG PICTURE

Celebrating Canada's Grandeur





PHOTO BY **BEN POWLESS**

An Inuit Elder at Cape Dorset's Kenojuak Cultural Centre and Print Shop highlights traditional Inuit arts and crafts and games to visitors, including a cup-and-ball game fashioned out of an animal skull.



To see more photography by Ben Powless, follow him on [Instagram](#) @benpowless.









PHOTO BY **PAT KANE**

Members of the Ni Hat'Ni Dene Rangers: Valadee Lockhart, Kyle Enzoe, Terri Enzoe and Sam Deranger at Taltheilei Narrows, Thaidene Nëné National Park Reserve. These rangers are the guardians of the land, a conservation program led by the Denesóliné of Łutsël K'é, Northwest Territories.



To see more photography by Pat Kane, follow him on  
@patkanephoto.



# EXPOSURE

Showcasing Indigenous photographers

## PHOTO BY **PATRICIA BOURQUE**

Wyonna Bernard is the granddaughter of the late Margaret Bernard. Her grandmother was the first Chief of the Abegweit First Nation, which was formed in 1972, and was also a residential school survivor of the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School, N.S. Margaret was a basket maker; Wyonna is a beader and a dancer.



To see more photography by Patricia Bourque, follow her on [@trishab223](#).





**PHOTO BY MELODY CHARLIE**

Melody's son takes a moment to acknowledge the history of this space, in the territory of Nlak'pamux. Melody writes: "How do we skip straight to healing, reconciliation & unity without accountability, consequences and justice? We do not have a word in our language for government and the closest one we do have loosely translates to 'war, court or prepare for battle.' We are done fighting to be who we are, let us know when your war with us is over."



To see more photography by Melody Charlie, follow her on [@firstnationphotographer](#).



# IN A SNAP

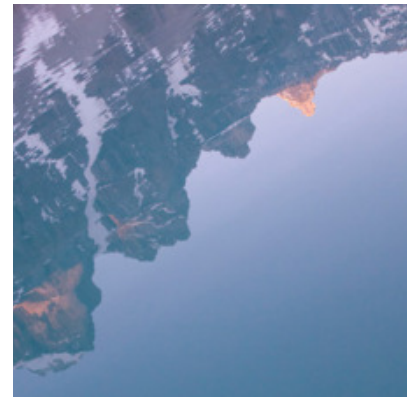
Sharing perspectives via Instagram



**@lucasie16** Lucasi Kiatainaq  
My younger brother fishing, just before we were passed by belugas, Kangiqsujuaq, Que.



**@patkanephoto** Pat Kane  
Cloudberry near Contwoyto Lake, N.W.T.



**@nahanster** Nahanni McKay  
The Valley of Wikchemnä, Treaty 7 Territory, Alta.



**@sweetmoonphoto** Tenille K. Campbell  
Fireweed by Highway 155, outside Beauval, Sask.



**@kim.art4life** Kim Stewart  
"Pas Finii - [we are] not finished," Kamloops, B.C.





**@the\_landk** Theland Kicknosway  
An eagle flies over Nipigon River, Ont., during an honour song for survivors of residential schools



**@tinyzeppelinstorytelling** Leslee Merasty  
A braid of sweetgrass, gifted by my grandfather



**@alexjacobsblum** Alex Jacobs-Blum  
Heart berries, "symbolic of life", Binbrook, Ont.



**@k.takpannie** Katherine Takpannie\*  
Tininniq (low tide), Apex Hill, Nunavut



**@chicory.wild** Alyssa Bardy  
Christine Luckasavitch, Madaoueskasibi, Unceded Algonquin Territory

See more work from these photographers by finding their handles on Instagram. Follow us on @CanGeo and share photos using #ShareCanGeo.





Autumn Peltier stands on unceded Algonquin Anishinabe territory on the banks of Kichi Sibi or Kitchissippi, "Great River" (Rideau River). She holds a small copper water vessel.

## Autumn Peltier

Environmental activist and chief water commissioner for the Anishinabek Nation on the importance of protecting water

In 2016, 12-year-old Autumn Peltier of Manidoowaaling (Manitoulin) Island in Ontario stood onstage at the winter gathering of the Assembly of First Nations in Gatineau, Que. She wore an Anishinaabe water dress, made painstakingly by her mother, and held a water bundle, comprising a copper bowl, a copper cup, some red cloth and tobacco, to present to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Peltier, who is Anishinaabe-kwe and a member of Wiikwemkoong First Nation, had just returned from the Children's Climate Conference in Sweden — but her plea to Trudeau to protect the water catapulted her to international recognition. Five years later, Autumn is the chief water commissioner for Anishinabek Nation, has been nominated for the International Children's Peace Prize three years in a row and in 2019 was the only Canadian on the BBC's list of 100 most influential women. Peltier spoke with *Canadian Geographic* on water protection, youth activism and her ties to the water.

### On what drew her to protecting fresh water

When I was eight, I attended a water ceremony in Serpent River First Nation, Ont. I went to the washroom, and all over the walls were signs that said, "Don't drink the water. Water is not for consumption. Don't





touch the water.” And I was like, “okay, why can’t we do that?” We had to use hand sanitizer after using the washroom. My mom explained to me that they couldn’t drink their water in that community. They have to boil it before using it. That hit me: why can’t they drink the water? There are kids my age and younger not knowing what it’s like to drink clean water from a tap. I had to do something about it.

### **On her 2016 confrontation with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau**

I was 12 years old, and Prime Minister Trudeau had recently approved the Kinder Morgan pipeline — after promising First Nation Peoples that he was going to do better for them. To me, that’s a broken promise, so I had to tell him off. I said, “I’m very unhappy with the choices you made and broken promises to my people.” He said he understood and that he’d protect the water. I don’t think he should have made that promise, because now I’m going to hold him accountable.

### **On addressing world leaders at the UN the very next year**

Addressing world leaders is not something I ever expected to do at 13. I stopped being nervous after the first couple of years of speaking to audiences. And I knew this was my chance to get my message out to the world. I had to say what I had to say, and I knew that they wanted to hear it. I’m really happy that I have this platform because I’m able to speak up for these First Nations communities on an international level. Everyone deserves clean drinking water. It’s a basic human right.

### **On being chief water commissioner for the Anishinabek Nation**

Josephine Mandamin, my great-aunt, was doing this work way before I was born. As I got older, I started to realize that her health was deteriorating, and it was becoming a lot harder for her. That’s when I started working harder



**‘I HAVE TO KEEP THINKING ABOUT WHY I’M DOING THIS – AND I DON’T STOP!’**

and doing advocacy work. When she passed away, the Anishinabek Nation decided to give the role to me. Before she passed, she said, “People are going to try to stop you, but you can’t listen to them; you have to keep on thinking about why you’re doing this.” Her words are stuck in my head every time I give a speech. I have to keep thinking about why I’m doing this — and I don’t stop.

### **On the importance of youth**

In the past few years there are a lot more people my age and younger that are standing up. I strongly encourage the youth to stand up because we are the future leaders and we are the people that will be making decisions for our country. But, our youth shouldn’t be having to stand up — we’re paying for the mistakes that older people made. There are people that say, “she can’t do this, what she’s saying doesn’t matter because she’s only 15 years old.” But I think what I’m doing is really good and I feel like more youth do need to stand up.

### **On women as water activists**

In my culture, my people believe that water is one of the most sacred



Peltier and Manitoba Regional Chief Kevin Hart at a pipeline protest in Burnaby, B.C. (TOP), and at the annual Wiikwemkoong Traditional Pow Wow in Ontario in 2019 (ABOVE).

elements. It’s something we honour. My people believe that when we’re in the womb, we live in water for nine months and our mothers carry us in the water. As a fetus, we learn our first two teachings: how to love the water and how to love our mother. As women, we’re connected to the water in a spiritual way. We believe that we’re in ceremony for nine months when we’re carrying a baby. Another way to look at it is that water is the lifeblood of Mother Earth, and Mother Earth is female. ☯

COURTESY OF STEPHANIE PELTIER



# Nuvumiutaq

How the Canadian Museum of History and the community of Arctic Bay are telling the real story of an Inuit ancestor

By Nick Walker

**A**rcheologists found his remains in a stone cairn on northern Baffin Island in 1959 and, as would never be done today, they took them south for study and storage. The Inuit Heritage Trust is now leading the repatriation of this Thule man's 800-year-old bones and belongings from the Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau, Que., to his homeland, but in the meantime, the people of Arctic Bay, Nunavut, the museum and a French forensic artist have worked together to create this lifelike figure of what he looked like. Given the name *Nuvumiutaq* (simply, "person from the peninsula") by Arctic Bay Elders, he now stands in the museum's Canadian History Hall.

Around the time he hunted in the waters off northern Baffin Island, Crusades began and ended in the eastern Mediterranean and Genghis rose to power as Great Khan of the Mongols. European sails would not appear in the Northwest Passage for another four centuries. Read on to find out how forensics, traditional knowledge and clues left by Nuvumiutaq himself came together to give this Inuit ancestor new life.

**BONES** The formation and tendon attachments of Nuvumiutaq's clavicle, scapula, wrist and leg bones are consistent with those of a frequent, skilled kayaker, and it's evident that he regularly carried a heavy weight in his elevated left hand (a harpoon). He would have hunted caribou that had been driven into the water from his kayak, and bowhead whales and possibly narwhal from a larger craft called an *umiak*.

**WALKING STICK** That Nuvumiutaq would have depended on a walking stick is an educated guess. His bones show multiple signs of trauma, from whiplash and back injuries to broken ribs (possibly having been struck by a whale's tail while hunting), and one ankle never had the opportunity to knit.

**Original name** Unknown  
**Died circa** AD 1200  
**Approximate age** 40  
**Height** 157.5–162.5 cm. (5'2"–5'4")  
**Home** Today's Borden Peninsula and surroundings, near Arctic Bay, Baffin Island  
**Craft** Hunter, kayaker  
**Culture** Thule, direct ancestors of modern Inuit; occupied Arctic Canada AD 1000–1600

**HEAD AND BODY** No actual remains were used in the exhibit, of course, and out of respect, Nuvumiutaq's bones were handled as little as possible during analysis and laser scanning. Elizabeth Daynès, a renowned forensic artist in France, built his face using a 3D-printed skull provided by the museum, and developed with the Arctic Bay community a visage that made him "look proud, looking out on the land, remembering his past."

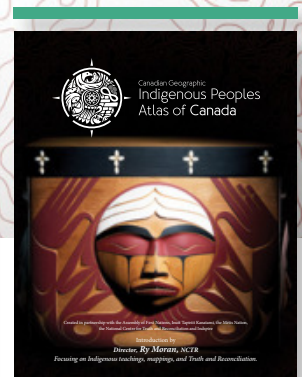
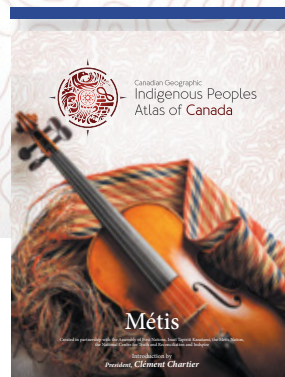
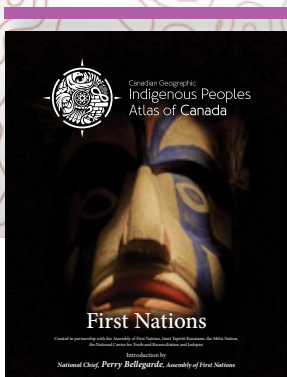
**CLOTHING** Seamstress Olayuk Kigitikakjuk of Arctic Bay sewed the traditional sealskin parka (Arctic spring and summer wear) from the skins of four ringed seals.

**THE BOW DRILL** In the toolkit buried with Nuvumiutaq was a walrus-ivory bow drill, used to bore holes or start fires by pulling a hide string back and forth to spin a drill shaft (the replica shown here is relative to his height). Etched into it are potentially autobiographical scenes, including kayaking, bow hunting and caribou, sex, people with walking sticks and children.





# Canadian Geographic Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada



The Royal Canadian Geographical Society is honoured to present the *Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada*, a groundbreaking and ambitious educational resource. This four-book set shares the stories, perspectives and history of the Indigenous Peoples of Canada. The RCGS has partnered with the Assembly of First Nations, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the Métis National Council, the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation and Indspire to ensure that Indigenous voices are heard and understood. This collection of unique maps and rich narratives offers an opportunity for Canadian classrooms to take an important step on the road to reconciliation.



[INDIGENOUSPEOPLESATLASOFCANADA.CA](http://INDIGENOUSPEOPLESATLASOFCANADA.CA)





## BRINGING BISON BACK

**IN THE 1500s, SOME 60 MILLION BISON** roamed North America; today that number is roughly 500,000. And though everyone understood the precipitous decline was a tragedy for the bison, it is now widely acknowledged that it was also devastating for the Great Plains ecosystem, which is among the most endangered in the world. But a number of Indigenous nations in the U.S. and Canada are pushing to restore free-ranging bison to parts of their historic range, allowing the animals to move freely across the landscape. Without fences and manmade water sources, the bison would roam and graze, natural fires would occur and the ecosystem would be in balance — working towards a system that's more climate resilient and supports a diverse range of species, including many grassland birds.





# 150 years later

**INDIGENOUS FOREST GARDENS** planted more than a century and a half ago on the Pacific coast are still boosting plant diversity. At archeological villages along B.C.'s northwest coast, in collaboration with Tsm'syen and Coast Salish First Nations, Simon Fraser University historical ecologists found native fruit and nut trees such as crabapple, hazelnut, wild plum and wild cherry; medicinal plants like wild ginger; and food crops like wild rice. "The forest gardens of Kitselas Canyon are a testament to the long-standing practice of Kitselas people shaping the landscape through stewardship and management," says Chris Apps, director of the Kitselas lands and resources department.



## "Tree of life"

**FROM THE DUGOUT CANOES** of the Nuu-chah-nulth to the totem poles of the Haida to the longhouses of the Tlingit, the western redcedar (known as "the tree of life" by various northwest coast peoples) is more than just a tree to the Indigenous people of the Northwest Coast. However, the western redcedar growths suitable for traditional carving are as rare as they are iconic, largely as a result of logging. Now, the five First Nations of the Nanwakolas Council and Simon Fraser University are undertaking a collaborative research project, combining traditional ecological knowledge with scientific research. The project is contributing to new forest stewardship policies focused on cedar conservation — and is now being implemented through First Nation laws and subsequent agreements with forestry companies.

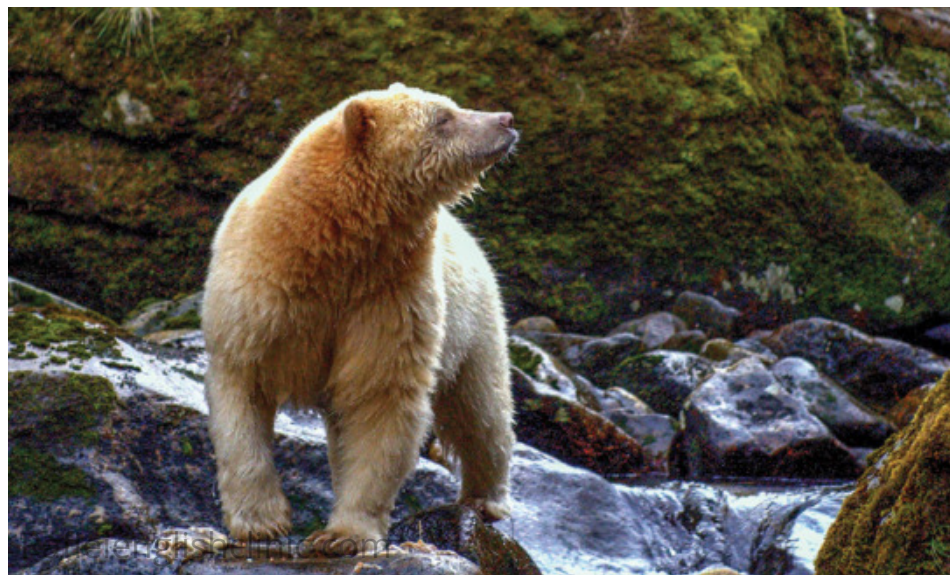
## ARCTIC THROWDOWN

**POLAR BEARS** aren't just powerful hunters through sheer force; a long oral history from Inuit, combined with recent observations and analysis, shows they also use tools to kill walrus: striking them over the head with pieces of ice, or hurling rocks at them. "[Polar bears are] the only species we know, that can think...that can have weapon[s]. Like, we know that they can design a... piece of ice, make it round, they can use that to smash walrus head," said one Inuk hunter from Arctic Bay. Another Inuk hunter from Qaanaaq said "If mathematicians had measured it, they would be amazed at how perfectly round [the ice ball] was." The researchers suggest that this hunting behaviour is infrequent and limited to walrus because they are large, difficult to kill and possess their own weapons (their tusks).



## RARE 🐾 BEARS

**INDIGENOUS-LED RESEARCH** by Kitsoo/Xai'xais and Gitga'at First Nations, in collaboration with scientists from the universities of Victoria and British Columbia, is providing insights into the genes that lead to the white coats of the rare spirit bear, a subspecies of black bear endemic to the B.C.'s Pacific coast. It is also known as the Kermode bear and Moksgm'ol in the Tsimshian language group. The team found that the genes that lead to the spirit bear's ghostly coat colour are even rarer than once thought — and that the bears' home in the Great Bear Rainforest needs greater protection.



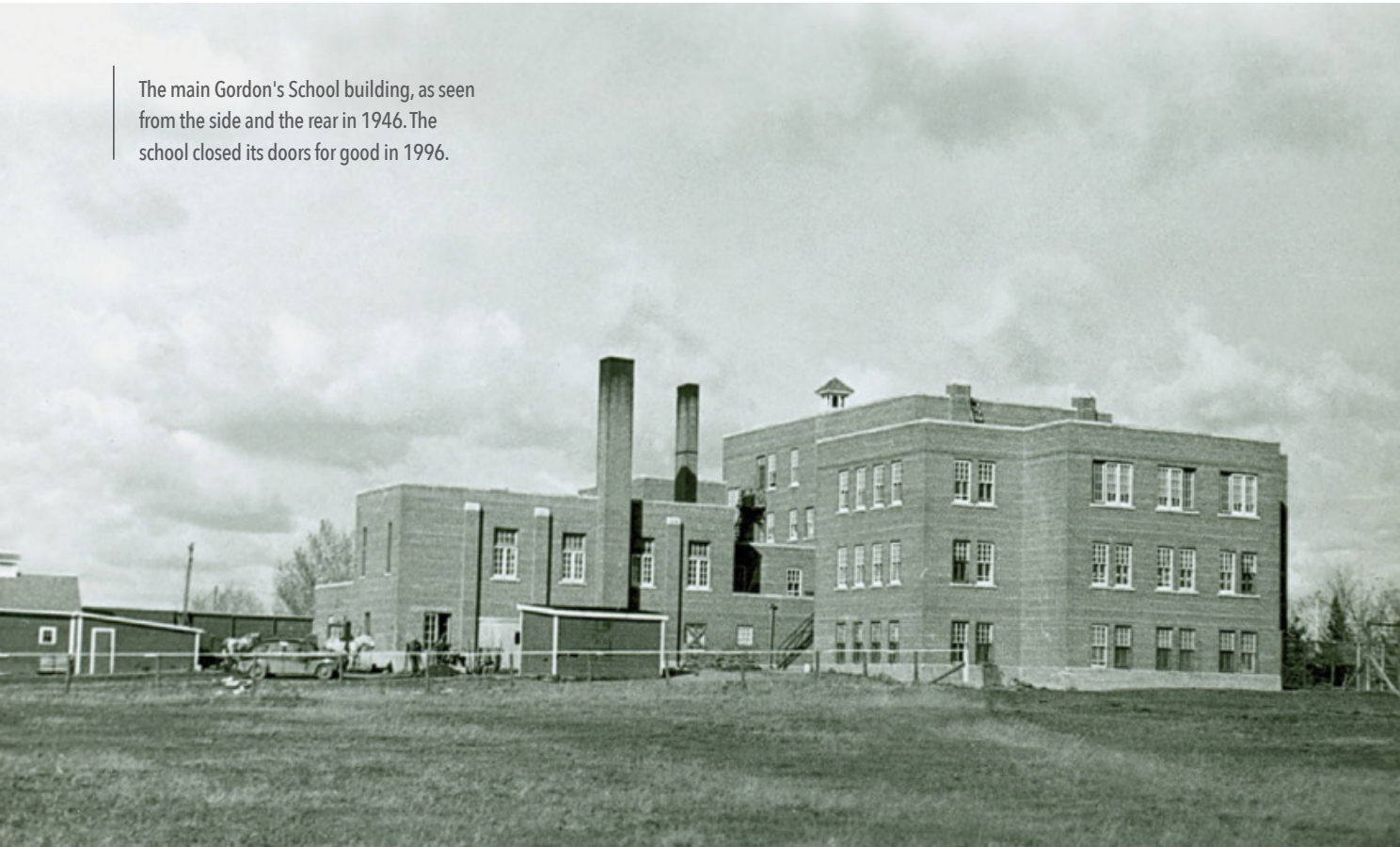


# Not as envisioned

A quarter century ago, Gordon’s Indian Residential School was the last in Canada to close its doors

BY **WINONA WHEELER**

The main Gordon's School building, as seen from the side and the rear in 1946. The school closed its doors for good in 1996.



**NESTLED IN THE ROLLING ASPEN** parklands of the Touchwood Hills, George Gordon First Nation is about 10 kilometres south of Punnichy, Sask., in Treaty 4 territory. The community was originally founded by Chief Ka-nēwo-kwaskwatēw (George Gordon) and our late great-great-grandfather, Askenootow (Charles Pratt) — who in the 1850s worked for the Anglican Church Mission Society as a lay reader, catechist and school teacher. Pratt built the first day school there in the early 1870s; it

was later incorporated into the reserve in 1876. In 1888, this day school became Gordon’s Indian Residential School — the longest-running residential school in Canada. In 1996, 25 years ago, it was the last residential school to close down.

The federal government enlarged the building that Pratt had built and converted it into a boarding school in 1888, before moving the site to its "current location" in 1895. Over the years, despite a fire in 1929, the school grew to include a big brick building

with classrooms and a dormitory, horse and cattle barns, poultry and laundry buildings, and staff residences. In 1911, the maintenance and management of the school was handed over to the Anglican church,

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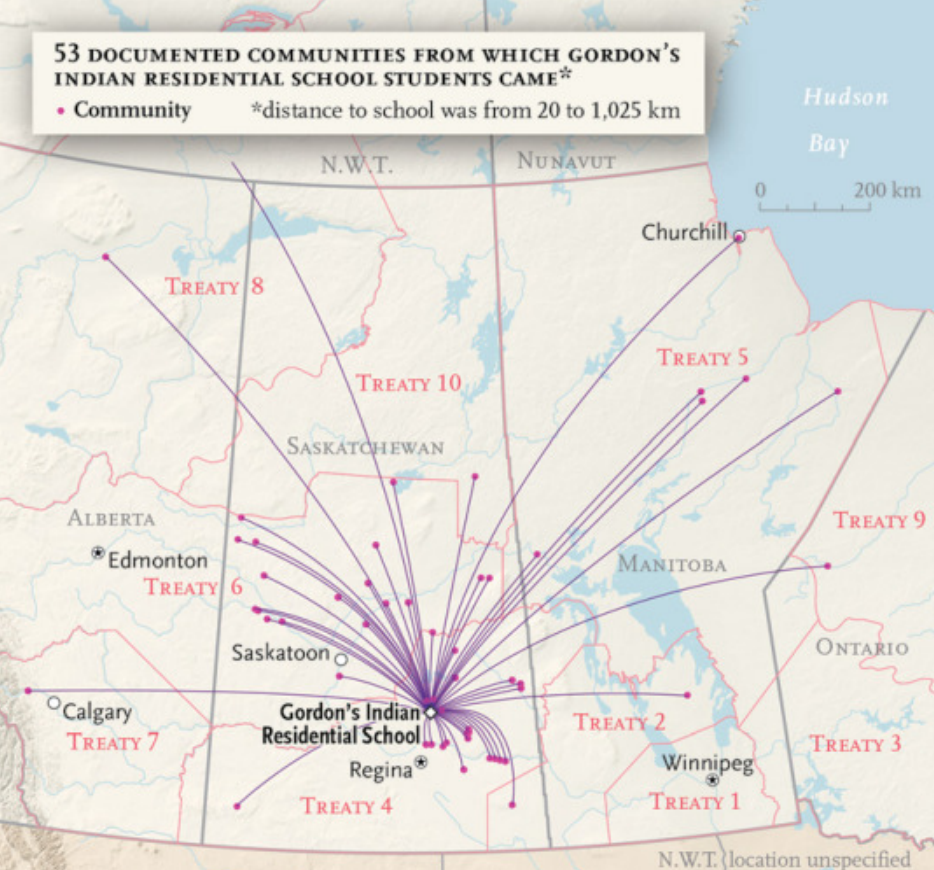
*Winona Wheeler is an associate professor in the Indigenous Studies Department at the University of Saskatchewan. She is a member of Fisher River Cree Nation in Treaty 5 territory, Man. Her family is from George Gordon’s First Nation in Treaty 4 territory, Sask.*

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### 53 DOCUMENTED COMMUNITIES FROM WHICH GORDON'S INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL STUDENTS CAME\*

• Community \*distance to school was from 20 to 1,025 km



Staff and students of Gordon's Indian Residential School on the front steps of the school building in October 1953 (ABOVE). Many students travelled huge distances from their homes to attend the school (LEFT).

and it remained under its authority until 1969, when the Indian Department resumed direct responsibility. In time, additional buildings were erected: a new classroom block with a basement auditorium and an additional block with a gymnasium in 1965. The school also boasted a hockey arena and large sports field.

Gordon's Indian Residential School was originally built on the industrial school model, where most of the children's time was spent working with livestock, in the large gardens, in the kitchen and laundry, and in housekeeping. Very little time was given to academics, but as the farm was slowly decommissioned, the focus became "residential" — the children got a high school education in addition to doing chores. Students came from Gordon's reserve — many of them could see their homes from the dormitory building — and from numerous other reserves in Saskatchewan. A few students came from as far away as York Factory and Churchill on the southwestern shores of Hudson Bay in northern Manitoba.

One of the most positive aspects of the school was its robust sports programs, especially hockey. It also

had a well-regarded boxing team and a traditional dance troupe that travelled across Europe. Boy Scouts, Girl Guides and other clubs started in the 1960s. The sports and cultural activities gave students a break from the monotony of residential school life and were the most common enjoyable experiences recounted by Gordon's school survivors.

## THE EDUCATION SYSTEM AT GORDON'S SCHOOL WAS NOT THE ONE ENVISIONED BY CHIEF KA-NĒWO-KWASKWATĒW AND ASKENOOTOW.

For many students, however, the extracurricular activities were a double-edged sword. Some participants were victimized by supervisors, staff and principals. Numerous reports of physical and sexual abuse of students go back to the early 20th century. The

most notorious sexual abuse crimes were brought to light in a 1992 court case launched by former students against a former director and principal. He was convicted of 10 counts of sexually assaulting boys between the ages of seven and 14 from 1968 to 1984 and admitted to abusing hundreds of young boys over a 40-year period.

The education system at Gordon's school was not the one envisioned by Chief Ka-nĕwo-kwaskwatĕw and Askenootow. That generations of their descendants were forced to endure unimaginable pain and hardship is truly a national crime — and the long-term, intergenerational effects of the residential school system are still felt in our communities. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Commemoration, and Health and Healing Services — which were created to address numerous court cases and class actions — continue to raise awareness and support community healing activities. At the local level, the George Gordon Recovery and Wellness Centre continues to provide services and support for victims and their families.

The building was demolished not long after the school closed down. All that physically remains of the school is a memorial — incorporating the old school bell, the cross from the roof and the "1929" cornerstone — that was erected in 2008 to honour the students who lived and died there. 🌐



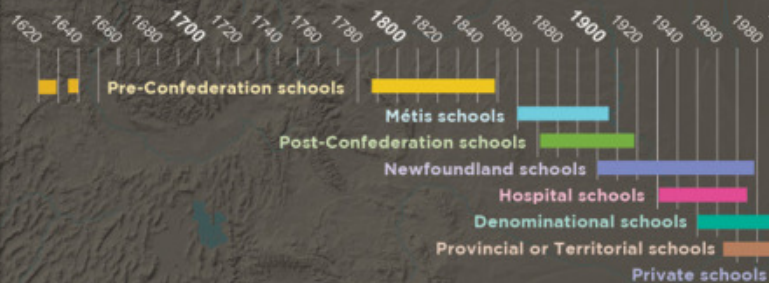
# ON THE MAP

## Paths to Reconciliation

Hundreds of residential schools were never recognized in the federal government's original reports because they'd been run by the provinces or other organizations. Here are those schools.



### TIMELINE OF RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL OPERATION



\*\*First Nations communities are based on locations of First Nations Band Offices. Métis communities are based on locations of Métis Local Offices. Inuit communities are based on locations of northern settlements with primarily Inuit populations.

\*\*\*Map includes major cities with First Nations populations of >2,000, Métis populations of >1,000 and Inuit populations of >200 (based on 2016 census).



**S**hock. That was the reaction of many Canadians when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada released its map “Residential Schools of Canada” in 2011. The map shows the locations of residential schools attended by more than 150,000 First Nations, Inuit and Métis students between the 1870s and the 1990s identified in the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement.

Since that release, students, teachers and Canadians at large have wrestled with this reality. How could this happen in Canada? How could I not know? How do I learn more? The paths to reconciliation are long, but Canadians are committed to the challenging journey.

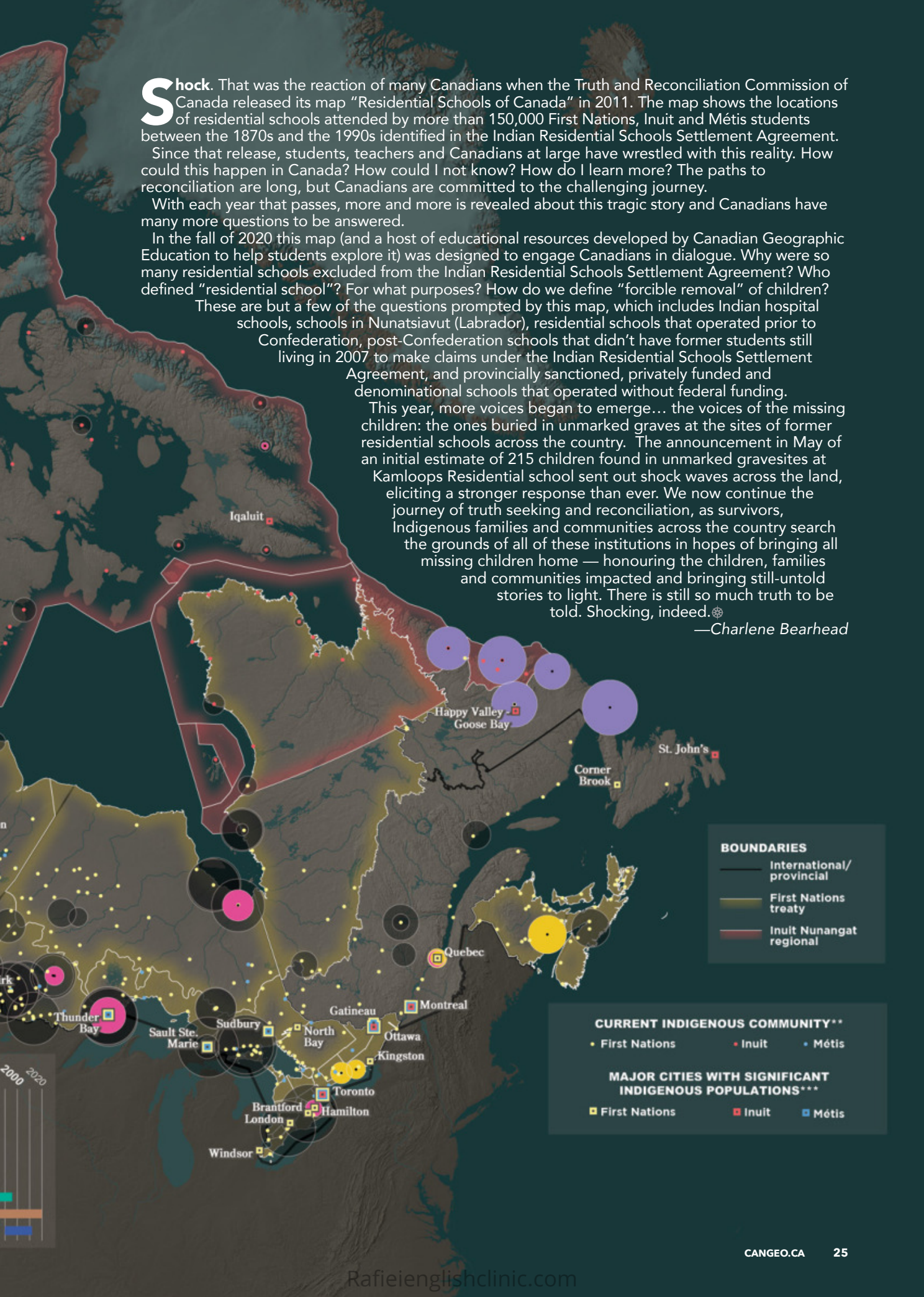
With each year that passes, more and more is revealed about this tragic story and Canadians have many more questions to be answered.

In the fall of 2020 this map (and a host of educational resources developed by Canadian Geographic Education to help students explore it) was designed to engage Canadians in dialogue. Why were so many residential schools excluded from the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement? Who defined “residential school”? For what purposes? How do we define “forcible removal” of children?

These are but a few of the questions prompted by this map, which includes Indian hospital schools, schools in Nunatsiavut (Labrador), residential schools that operated prior to Confederation, post-Confederation schools that didn’t have former students still living in 2007 to make claims under the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, and provincially sanctioned, privately funded and denominational schools that operated without federal funding.

This year, more voices began to emerge... the voices of the missing children: the ones buried in unmarked graves at the sites of former residential schools across the country. The announcement in May of an initial estimate of 215 children found in unmarked gravesites at Kamloops Residential school sent out shock waves across the land, eliciting a stronger response than ever. We now continue the journey of truth seeking and reconciliation, as survivors, Indigenous families and communities across the country search the grounds of all of these institutions in hopes of bringing all missing children home — honouring the children, families and communities impacted and bringing still-untold stories to light. There is still so much truth to be told. Shocking, indeed.🕸

—Charlene Bearhead





# ON THE MAP

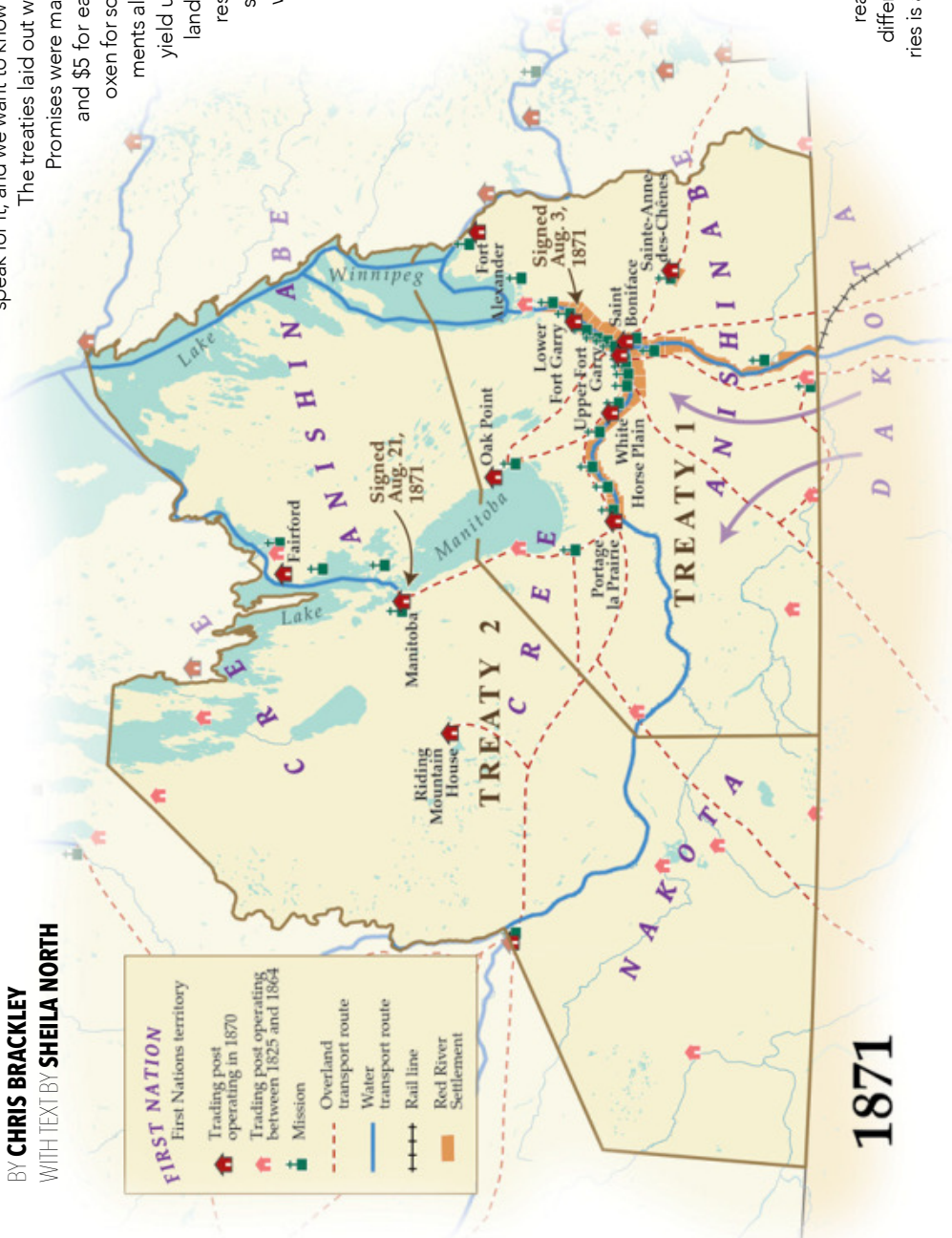
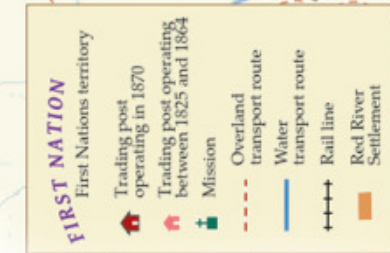
Exploring Cartography

## For the record

This year marks a century and a half since treaties 1 and 2 were signed

BY **CHRIS BRACKLEY**

WITH TEXT BY **SHEILA NORTH**



1871

One of the most startling views from anywhere in southern Manitoba is from an open field at sunrise or sunset. Standing under the vastness of the sky on a cloudless day can make you feel small and even take your breath away. The scenic river basins and fertile lands have made the region an alluring place to live for thousands of years.

This land is where Canada started to take shape as the country it is today. This land is where treaties 1 and 2 were signed in August 1871 between the British Crown and some of the original people from these lands — Treaty 1 was with the Anishinabek and Swampy Cree of southern Manitoba, while Treaty 2 was with the Anishinabek of southern Manitoba. These were the first of 11 numbered treaties signed that expanded Canada — with promises made to the original people of the area in exchange for large tracts of land.

Negotiations over Treaty 1 started in July 1871, with about 1,000 First Nations attendees. “How are we to be treated?” wondered Chief Mis-Koo-Kenew (also known as Henry Prince) of what is now Peguis First Nation. “The land cannot speak for itself. We have to speak for it; and we want to know fully how you are going to treat our children.”

The treaties laid out where lands reserved for settlers and original peoples would be. Promises were made for schools to be built; for a modest annuity of between \$3 and \$5 for each “Indian”; and for items such as twine, ploughs, boars and oxen for some elected Chiefs, headmen and councillors. The treaty documents also describe how the Indians agreed to “release, surrender and yield up to Her Majesty the Queen, and Her successors forever” the land reserved for settlers, to not have “intoxicating alcohol” on reserve lands and to “maintain perpetual peace between themselves and Her Majesty’s white subjects, and not to interfere with the property or in any way molest the persons of Her Majesty’s white or other subjects.”

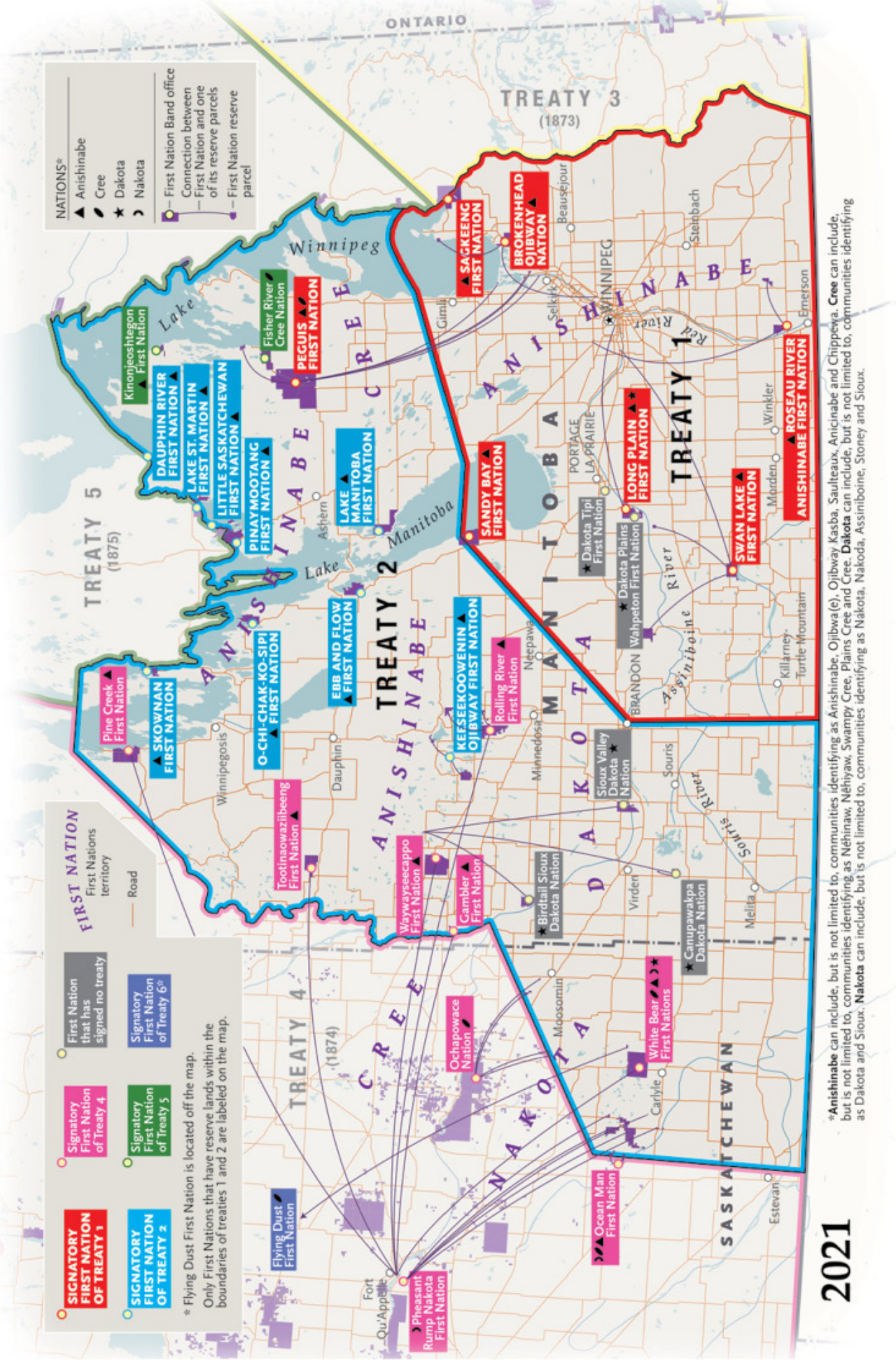
If you read only the federal government documents on treaties, you might get the sense that it was because of the good graces and charity of the British Crown and settlers that First Nations would be allowed to keep existing on the lands reserved for them. However, when you talk to Elders and other knowledge keepers, you learn that when the Chiefs signed the documents, they had a different understanding of the treaties. They considered the process sacred — that the agreements were made between three parties: the Creator, settlers and themselves. You would also understand that ceding land was not a concept held, because they felt the land ultimately belongs to the Creator, they were of the land, and therefore they couldn’t possibly give it away.

If you know First Nations Peoples you would see that the concept of sharing, caring and protecting people — and the territory — was and is extremely important to them. By signing the treaties, they were helping the settlers who may not have survived the elements without them.

To this day, opinions vary on how treaty agreements were reached and how they can be interpreted or implemented. The difference in the benefits of the agreements for each side of signatories is as vast and wide as the prairie sky.







**NATIONS\***

- ▲ Anishinabe
- ▲ Cree
- ★ Dakota
- ★ Nakota

○ — First Nation Band office

— Connection between First Nation and one of its reserve parcels

— First Nation reserve parcel

**FIRST NATION**  
First Nations territory

— Road

○ Flying Dust First Nation is located off the map.  
Only First Nations that have reserve lands within the boundaries of treaties 1 and 2 are labeled on the map.

● SIGNATORY FIRST NATION OF TREATY 1

● SIGNATORY FIRST NATION OF TREATY 2

● SIGNATORY FIRST NATION OF TREATY 4

● SIGNATORY FIRST NATION OF TREATY 5

● First Nation that has signed no treaty

● Signatory First Nation of Treaty 6\*

\*Anishinabe can include, but is not limited to, communities identifying as Anishinabe, Ojibwa (e), Ojibwa Kasba, Saulteaux, Anicinabe and Chippewa. Cree can include, but is not limited to, communities identifying as Nêhinaw, Nêhiyaw, Swampy Cree, Plains Cree and Cree. Dakota can include, but is not limited to, communities identifying as Dakota and Sioux. Nakota can include, but is not limited to, communities identifying as Nakota, Nakoda, Assiniboine, Stoney and Sioux.

2021



# Kakiniit

INUIT TATTOOS, OR *KAKINIIT*, WERE ONCE BANNED.

NOW THEY ARE WORN WITH PRIDE.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **DENISE PETERSON**

WITH TEXT BY **JANA ANGULALIK**







A family of two generations comes together to showcase their traditional tattoos. Left to right: Jacqueline Lafrance, Tammy Omilgoetok, Bessie Pihuak Omilgoetok and Geneviève Lafrance.





TOP: Sisters Geneviève Lafrance, Jacqueline Lafrance and Tammy Omilgoetok pose for photos near Freshwater Creek.

BOTTOM: Tammy Omilgoetok (left) holds her sister Jacqueline Lafrance's hand as they show their traditional tattoos.

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*Jana Angulalik is a kakiniit artist, esthetician and writer from Iqaluktuuttiaq (Cambridge Bay), Nunavut. She has written for CBC and the National Post. She is currently studying social work at Nunavut Arctic College. Denise Peterson is a photographer from Iqaluktuuttiaq. Her work has appeared in Up Here magazine.*

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**A RIVER INTERTWINED** in legend as old as time runs gently from Iqaluktuuttiaq Lake to the Arctic Ocean — and nestled along the estuary among low-rolling hills is my hometown, Iqaluktuuttiaq (Cambridge Bay). This river, or *kuuqaq* as we say in our mother tongue, Inuinnaqtun, is a popular spot to fish all months of the year. So too is the enormous lake it runs from and the ocean it flows to. *Ovajuq* is a legend that shares the story of a family of giants that lived on Kiillinik Island long, long ago. They starved to death and formed our three mountains; their bladders had burst and eventually formed the many streams, rivers and lakes found on Kiillinik Island, our home.

Much like our knowledge that has seen us through thousands and thousands of years, some of our *kakiniit* (traditional Inuit tattoos) are still being passed down from generation to generation. I often find myself wondering: what lands did our birthright markings travel and which waters did they navigate when we Inuit lived a solely nomadic lifestyle? Some tattoos fuse modern with traditional designs; others are older than Canada, older than the borders separating Inuit Nunangat, older than the English language. Hand-poking today consists of poking modern tattoo ink into the skin, one dot at a time, whereas skin-stitching is a method where a needle and thread dipped in ink is sewn through the skin and leaves a mark that darkens as it heals — methods older than any books we can find information on *kakiniit* in.

Our markings survived the years they were banned by our colonizers. Now our beautiful *kakiniit* are being proudly worn, coming out of secrecy, filling up spaces and faces. Whether they are hand-poked, skin-stitched or machine work, they are always only for Inuit to wear. Our *kakiniit* are here to stay. Never to be banned again. Never to carry shame again.



**IT WAS NO SURPRISE** that Tammy Omilgoetok, granddaughter of matriarch Bessie Pihuak Omilgoetok and the late Paul Omilgoetok, agreed to have her family's photo shoot at "the River," where Tammy is often seen casting her rod with the midnight sun.

Eight o'clock in the evening in mid-August above the Arctic Circle is filled with pastel skies and a sun that we're getting used to seeing set once again after a summer with 24-hour sunlight. A perfect night not only to honour *kakiniit* but also to honour some of the women who wear them proudly, so willing to share with the world, with you. Letting beauty flow like the *kuuqaq*, we all laughed on that brisk, late summer evening. It was important to photogra-

pher Denise Peterson and me to work with Pihuak first and foremost because she is the oldest tattooed woman in our community, wearing her traditional forehead and wrist markings at the age of 81 — markings she remembers her great-grandmother wearing, and now she wears them along with three of her granddaughters.

It was as if time had stopped or slowed down — even the undulating stream seemed to have paused in awe. One by one, the captivating and eloquent matriarch Pihuak and her family arrived and made their way riverside. I was completely mesmerized and wondered if the fish swimming beside us also halted mid-water to see four generations of Omilgoetok women and children dressed in their best hand-sewn outfits, with the wind helping itself, dancing in their hair. Head to toe in Inuit beauty. For one of Pihuak's granddaughters, Geneviève Lafrance, her wrist markings from her great-great-great-grandmother bring a sense of pride and identity. It's a statement that her family is still here. And they aren't going anywhere.



**THE SAME WATER THAT FLOWS** from the *kuuqaq* can be seen here at West Arm, matching the beauty of Darlene Iryirituk Dyer, who graciously took a break from her three beautiful children to share with us her story of her mother bearing tattoo — signifying she is a mother — found on her chest. Although this may not be a traditional tattoo, the mother bearing tattoo resembles an *amauti*, the traditional garment used by Inuit women to carry their babies. After weeks of being patient for clear weather, on a late August evening the skies seemed to clear up and the winds died down just for Darlene, Denise and me as we met up along an arm of the ocean — even the mosquitos had left us in peace.

Darlene is as vibrant as hot pink sunsets yet gentle as pastel sunrises, a woman who effortlessly embodies the traits of the sweetest mother and a woman who nurtures all those she loves. Her forehead and chest tattoos are two ways she draws her strength, as she finds they represent her as a whole being, as if her tattoos were always meant to be. She shares with me that the dots on her forehead tattoo represent her new skill of sewing, a skill that allows her to provide beautiful garments for her family and brings her closer to her culture. "I proudly wear my markings to help carry into the future generations what my family had lost," she says. Other ways of gathering strength and creating joy include making memories on the land with her family and friends. As she shared with us such deep and wonderful meanings, I couldn't help but wonder if the birds watching her from the sky were swooning at the timeless and beautiful being she is.





**AS THE RIVER FLOWS** from summer into fall, Ariel Anisalouk Taylor stood before Denise's camera, showing her cheek and wrist hand-poked tattoos. On a September evening with winter around the corner and a crisp in the air, she confidently posed in front of Iqaluktuuttiaq, our hometown of 1,700 people. Her markings represent her family to whom she is daughter, sister and aunt. She feels strongly connected to her culture through wearing her tattoos — and immense pride that she is one of a few but growing number of young Inuit with facial tattoos. When I see Ariel, I often wonder how many ancestors are smiling down because she wears her *kakiniit* so magically, for *kakiniit* were once banned and done only in secret. Now look at us, look at her: our youth are thriving.



**FINALLY: AMAAMAGA**, my mother, a sweet saxifrage flower yet a fierce warrior of a human. She has an enormous heart filled with love, despite the effects of genocide that she faced, and that we as Indigenous People still face to this day. Alone, she raised three children and three grandchildren, all while healing from her wounds and passing on valuable and loving knowledge along the way. At the age of 55, she received her first *kakiniit*, her forehead tattoo that represents her holding her late daughter, Patricia Anne Kikpak. This marking helped my mother through her grieving process by allowing her to finally let my sister rest. It allowed Amaamaga to move on with her life, releasing

her daughter to the afterlife where she awaits. Often, our forehead markings, before our culture was interrupted, signified entering womanhood — the first tattoo to mark shortly after menstruation began. Now, we are reclaiming our culture and adapting it to fit our life today. My mother's forehead tattoo is such an example of reclamation, healing with the aim to thrive instead of just surviving. And this year, at the age of 58, Amaamaga finally received her chin tattoo that she had been waiting for me to give her since I learned how to hand-poke and skin-stitch in 2017.

As I prepared to give my first facial tattoo, on my mother's chin, I peered over my shoulder to see Amaamaga calmly sewing a pair of mitts, looking peaceful and content. I took this moment to be grateful for the strength she has carried through her 58 years. I became emotional because she taught me the value of inter-generational healing — a common aspect and a thread between all Inuit who are tattooed. There we were, healing together. I remember the enormous feeling of pressure and pride with each poke as the afternoon sun filled my home. Like the never-ending flow of our *kuuqaq*, my mother's strength and love for her family, her people and her community has never ceased. Her session was the calmest session I have ever had, only the sound of the needle hooking her skin, allowing ink to enter and become one with her. Once her chin was completely marked, I placed my tattooed forehead onto hers, and while we shared a moment in the physical world between just us three Inuit ladies, I knew without a doubt that our ancestors filled the room and finally I didn't have to wonder where my strength comes from — I was looking right at her, my mother tattooed, beaming with pride and joy with her new *kakiniit*. ❁





*Our markings  
survived the  
years they were  
banned by our  
colonizers.*

OPPOSITE PAGE: Matriarch Bessie Pihvak Omilgoetok (centre right) and her granddaughters Jacqueline Lafrance, Tammy Omilgoetok and Geneviève Lafrance. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Jana Angulalik's leg tattoos and *pualuuk* (mittens); Darlene Dyer shows her face and chest tattoos; Geneviève Lafrance (left) and sister Tammy Omilgoetok (right) show their wrist tattoos on the banks of the *kuugaq*.







Clockwise from TOP: Bella Angulalik smiles in excitement as she waits to see her traditional chin tattoo. Bella had her forehead tattoo completed by another Inuk tattoo artist, to whom Bella is also related; Bella beams with pride as she is shown her *kakiniit*, handpoked by her daughter, Jana Angulalik (pictured). Both women have matching forehead tattoos that were handpoked by their relative; Ariel Taylor shows her intricate traditional tattoos.







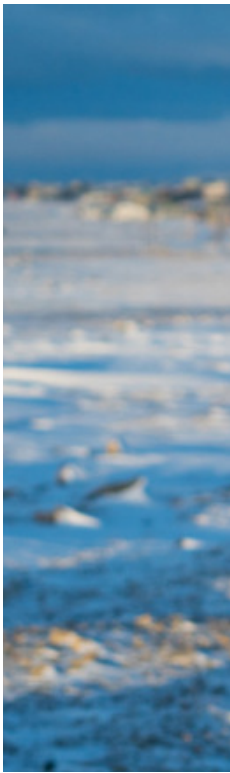
*There  
we were,  
healing  
together.*

TOP: Darlene Dyer with her facial and chest tattoos. The chest tattoo – or mother bearing tattoo – is given to Inuit women after they become mothers. BOTTOM: Tammy's daughters Lily and Alicia join in for a photo with their great-grandmother Bessie. From left to right: Lily Evetalegak, Tammy Omilgoetok, Bessie Omilgoetok and Alicia Omilgoetok.





*Look at us,  
look at her:  
our youth  
are thriving.*







Clockwise from LEFT: Jana Angulalik is photographed at sunset; Ariel Taylor shows her cheek and wrist tattoos in front of her hometown Iqaluktuuttiaq (Cambridge Bay); Darlene Dyer laughs in the wind at West Arm.





An aerial photograph of a vast, forested landscape in Quebec, Canada. The terrain is a complex network of dark green coniferous forests interspersed with numerous lakes and waterways. A thick layer of white mist or low clouds hangs over the scene, particularly in the upper and middle sections, creating a dramatic and ethereal atmosphere. The lighting suggests a soft, early morning or late afternoon sun, casting gentle shadows and highlighting the textures of the trees and water.

# Promised LANDS

UPROOTED REPEATEDLY BY DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS,  
THE OIJÉ-BOUGOUMOU CREE WANDERED BOREAL QUEBEC  
FOR 70 YEARS BEFORE FINDING A PERMANENT HOME.  
FOR SOME, THE JOURNEY CONTINUES.

BY **JULIAN BRAVE NOISECAT**  
WITH PHOTOGRAPHY BY **CHRISTIAN FLEURY**





The lake-pocked landscape  
near Ujé-Bougoumou, Que.





## ABEL BOSUM, GRANDCHIEF

of the Grand Council of the Crees, plants his dress shoes where his parents' house once sat on a thin wooded spit that curls into Doré Lake like a dog's tongue into a bowl of water. A late September breeze rushes through the birch trees. Bosum's mind turns to the past. This was the site of the final village from which his people, the Oujé-Bougoumou Cree Nation, were uprooted by a mining company — this one a gold pit owned by a fellow named Campbell — in the unrelenting pursuit of monetizable minerals from the Canadian Shield.

The Bible says the Israelites wandered the wilderness for 40 years before Moses led them to the Promised Land. The Oujé-Bougoumou Cree roamed the boreal near what is now the town of Chibougamau, Que., like squatters, seeking shelter in road-

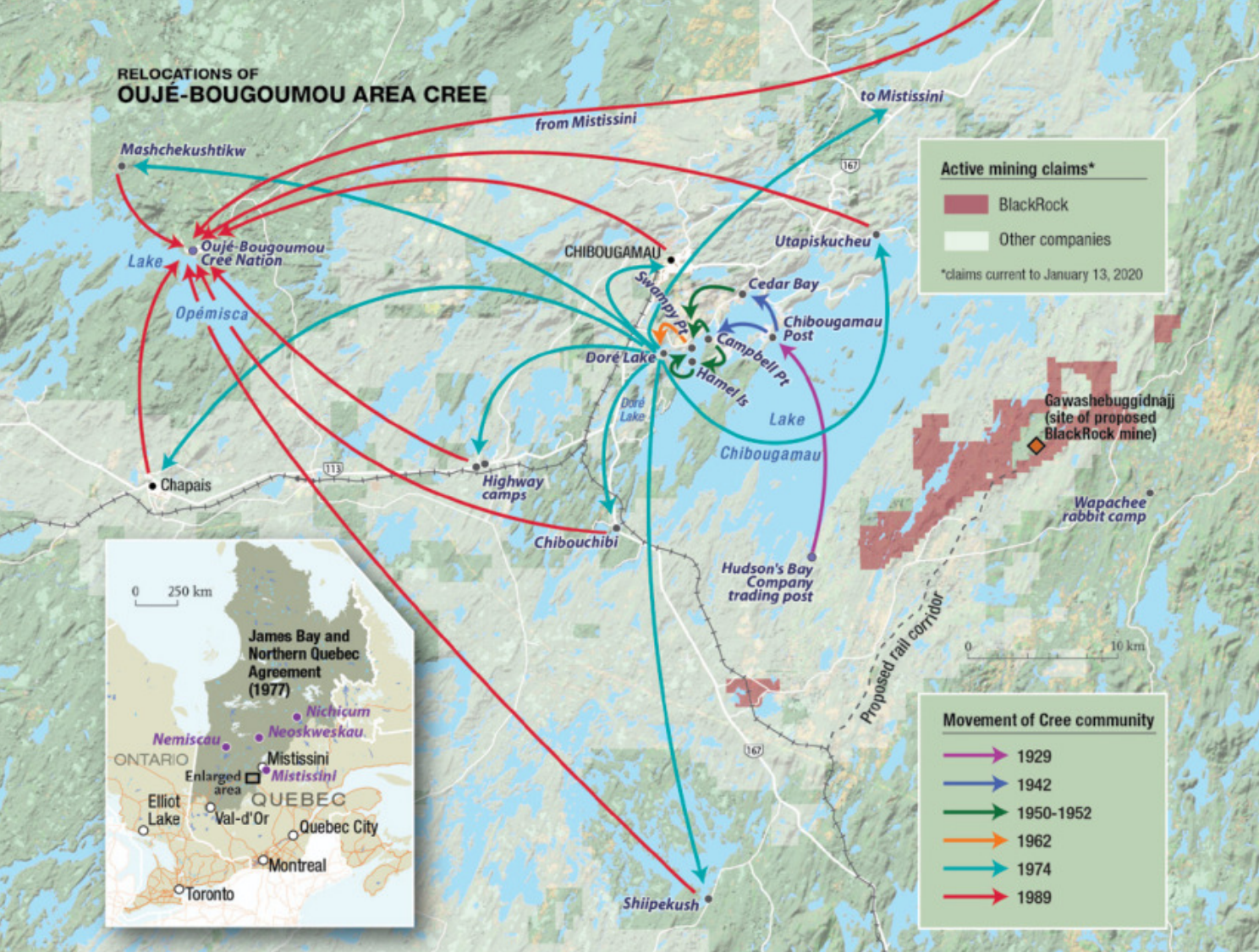
side shacks, miners' tents and trapline cabins for some 70 years before Bosum led them to secure a permanent reserve on the shores of Lake Opémisca, about an hour's drive from here, in 1992. For some, the exodus might not be over.

Bosum was born in 1955 at nearby Lake Chibougamau, separated from Doré Lake by a thin isthmus across which the Cree could easily portage their canoes. He was the eldest of his mother Lucy's 11 children. Lucy's parents forbade her marriage to Abel's biological father, Cypien Caron, a French-Canadian, and so Lucy instead married Sam Neepoosh, who was a father figure to Abel. **Standing where his childhood home once did, Bosum surveys the lakeside peninsula. This is his first time back since the Oujé-Bougoumou Cree hosted a healing camp on this plot 20 years ago.** Today,

it's the site of a small family farm with chickens, rabbits and a lone cat. When Bosum and I stop in, the owners aren't home, so technically, we are trespassing.

"I'm still amazed at those trees," Bosum says, scoping out the paper birch outside the modest two-storey house. Bosum recalls a photograph taken of his aunt in front of one of these trunks. There's another, somewhere in the memory books, of Bosum posing outside his family's cabin in a pair of DIY bell bottoms (made by cutting a slit up from the cuff of the jeans and stitching in an extra triangle of denim), his hair hanging over his shoulders like a hippy. At 63, Bosum's now silvery hair is close-cropped. He speaks softly and thoughtfully as memories return, periodically adjusting the rectangular glasses resting on the bridge of his





plump nose. “That was a long time ago,” he says wistfully.

Bosum remembers log homes built in a circle, their front doors facing inward. About a dozen structures once stood here. The builders would begin by erecting a plywood shack with a tarp for a roof. Over two to three years, using materials rummaged from a nearby dump, families slowly built up walls and roofing before sealing windows, adding insulation and finally fixing up the interior. “It wasn’t like today,” says Bosum. “We had no credit, couldn’t go to the bank.” Nonetheless, families took

pride in their homes, at least in part because they were under the impression that, if they built up a dignified community, the provincial and federal governments would let them stay.

In the centre of the village, roughly where the current residents now have a front-yard firepit, there was once a makeshift ballfield. A baker used to stop to sell bread and Vachon cakes out of his van. Families pinched pennies to save for the pastries. One time, Bosum and five young friends organized a cake heist. Their plan was simple: Eddy, the fastest, would pick up a Vachon and run. The baker would give chase. His van abandoned, the other four would make off with as many morsels as they could. The scheme worked and the baker was pissed. After that, the kids weren’t allowed to come around his van anymore. Months later, during a trip to

Abel Bosum, Grand Chief of the Grand Council of the Crees, revisits his childhood home at Doré Lake. His family was forced to leave the community in 1974.

the dump for building supplies, Bosum spotted the man throwing away his cakes after making his final sales at Doré Lake. It was then he realized the breadman had been selling the village the last of his supply as it started to spoil. “That was no favour,” says Bosum.

Behind each house, there was a trail down to the lake, where families kept the canoes they used to traverse the many interlinked waterways spattered across Chibougamau and James Bay like a region-wide Rorschach test left by the retreating Laurentide Ice Sheet millennia ago. Despite the once meagre circumstances of his people, Bosum considers this a place of plenty.

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Doré Lake, or Lac aux Dorés in French, is named for the doré (walleye) found in its waters. Blueberries and raspberries grow on the hill above the village. In the 1960s, a Quebec government official told then Chief Jimmy Mianscum that his people could remain here indefinitely. In 1966, the Canadian Centennial Commission even wrote a grant for \$1,700 so that Anglican Church volunteers from far-off cities like Toronto could build a 15-metre-long hall for community meetings and religious services at Cache Bay, just around the bend from the village. It doubled as the chief's home. The villagers called it "Beaver House."

Bosum remembers a wedding party at Beaver House when he was a little boy. At around 11 o'clock at night, four police pulled up and started throwing attendees into the backs of their squad cars. The Cree were shaken and injured. "Nobody knew what was going on," says Bosum. "There was a lot of racism back then. There was a lot of tension built up between the Cree and French people working in the mines and so forth. And so, the police — I wouldn't say all of them, I knew some good police — but there were some police who would use their authority to just come in and crash a party. They weren't even invited and they weren't called."

**FOR MOST OF THE 1900S,** Cree life was organized around the harvest of fur, timber and minerals for French- and English-speaking colonists who first appeared in the region in the 1600s, as well as an older Indigenous subsistence economy. In 1870, the Canadian Geological Commission sent a surveyor to the region. Gold was first discovered in 1903 at Copper Point on Portage Island in Chibougamau Lake. The Cree maintain that their ancestors, who didn't know the value of the metals, first identified outcroppings to prospectors. A series of mining booms and busts followed, generally tracking global economic cycles: down with the crash of 1929, up after the Second World War. In 1947, the Quebec government began construction of a road into the region. It was completed by 1950, and loggers began chopping away at the spruce that grew dense, strong and tall in the backcountry. When Chibougamau was established as a company town in 1952, there were 25 sawmills operating in the region producing 50 million feet of timber, primarily for export to the United States. In 1954, the province incorporated Chibougamau as a municipality.

The Cree, who had the misfortune of building homes on top of riches

claimed by white men, were displaced from village after village. And even when they weren't removed by industry, they felt its impacts. Piles of mining garbage left atop frozen lakes in winter killed fish and ruined drinking water in summer. New mines, logging plots and roads scared off game. In the years before they established themselves at Doré Lake, the Cree lived at Hamel Island, Swampy Point, Campbell Point and Cedar Bay, among other places. At Hamel Island, they were told to move because the government needed sand to build highways. At Swampy Point, the only land not claimed by prospectors, influential clergymen cited public health concerns before telling the Cree to hit the road. At Cedar Bay and Campbell Point, the Cree were told their homes were too close to mining explosives. **Each time they were uprooted, they had to find a new place to settle, clear-cut a lot and start building a new shelter. When they left Campbell Point, they had to dig up and relocate the remains of ancestors interred in a community cemetery. Many turned to alcohol to cope.**

Beginning in 1962, most had summer residences at the village on Doré Lake. Men would join prospecting teams, working as explorers and line-cutters felling trees in areas of interest



Maggie Wapachee, 88, skins a beaver in her home (OPPOSITE LEFT). Her son, Norman (OPPOSITE RIGHT), worked for a mining company. Another such company was once responsible for forcing the family from their home near Doré Lake (BELOW).

for mining corporations. Others found jobs as lumberjacks. They drank the water and ate the fish from the lake and supplemented their incomes with rations and welfare collected from government officials at a Hudson's Bay Company post on the Mistissini reserve, about four days' voyage by canoe. In the fall, families returned to camps where they trapped beaver, otter and lynx to sell to the Hudson's Bay while they hunted moose, goose, caribou, bear, porcupine, rabbit and partridge to eat. Between 1952 and 1972, the white population of Chibougamau grew from fewer than 200 to nearly 12,000. They far outnumbered the Cree at Doré Lake, whose population was about 125 in 1968.

**BOSUM REMEMBERS** when, in 1962, his mother and stepfather took him on one of their trips to the HBC post in Mistissini. At the store, Bosum's mother bought her boy the finest clothes she could afford. Bosum remembers the pride he felt, looking at himself in the mirror. The next day, a plane landed on Lake Mistissini. Bosum's stepdad Sam said, "time to go" and walked the seven-year-old down to the dock where Cree children were gathered. A white man stood before them, calling out names to be loaded onto the aircraft. Bosum's name was called, and his stepfather carried him to the hold alongside 30 other children. They would be the first students of the La Tuque residential school run by the Anglican Church hundreds of kilometres south. The children cried as the plane carried them away.

That same year, despite repeated promises from both the provincial and federal governments to respect their village and build new homes, the Cree at Doré Lake, along with others from Neoskweskau, Nemiscau and Nichicun, were incorporated under the Mistissini Band by the Department of Indian Affairs. Government and industry compelled the Cree to abandon Doré Lake. Finally, when the Campbell firm discovered a new deposit near the village, the Cree caved. "At Doré Lake, we were told to move to Mistissini — that the land belonged to the white men," Mary-Ann Bosum, a local Cree, told anthropologist Jacques Frenette in 1982. "This was not true. The land was my father's hunting territory, and his father had hunted there, too." Others, like Bosum's mother Lucy, relocated to the town of Chibougamau. Some went to Chapais. The community, once gathered around the lake, the Beaver House and the ball field, dispersed.

The last Cree families departed Doré Lake in 1974. Their log homes and the Beaver House were demolished soon after. The Campbell mine operated for three years.

**MAGGIE WAPACHEE, 88**, is skinning a beaver that is lying belly-up on her kitchen table, when her son Norman walks in the front door. Earlier that morning, Norman's father Matthew, 87, trapped and killed the animal before retiring to his room. Maggie speaks Cree exclusively, so Norman translates for me as she sets about flaying the critter. "I'm getting old for this kind of job. I can't work as fast as I used to," she says in her percussive Eastern Cree dialect — pointy vowels wrapped in round, repetitious consonants. (Say "Chibougamau" and you get a taste of its phonology.) Norman chuckles as he offers the translation.

The beaver, a Cree staple, can be broiled in the oven, boiled on the stovetop or roasted over an open fire. Their tender tail is considered a delicacy. But they're also pungent when they cook, and Maggie, a gracious host, says she wants to spare our nostrils. "I would never stop doing these types of activities, because I love it," she says as she takes a break from her work. "My late mother taught me these things, so I just want







it passed down to continue this way of life.”

Still outfitted from his early morning moose hunt, Norman points out the back of the house at the Chibougamau River, which moves at a slow crawl. There, most of his 14 siblings — six boys, six girls, plus two adopted sisters — had their walking-out ceremonies, a Cree rite of passage marking a child’s first steps. The mother and grandmother walk baby girls out into the water; grandfathers and fathers walk out baby boys. “It’s a commitment that they will raise the child, introduce the child, in the Cree way of life — that the child will be raised out on the land to maintain cultural tradition,” explains Norman. “It’s been done since time immemorial.”

The Wapachee family has lived here at Chibouchibi on the Chibougamau River for decades. After leaving Doré Lake, they lived in Mistissini for 10 years. When the Oujé-Bougoumou reserve was established, Matthew, the Wapachee patriarch, opted instead to build a house on the family trapline, which runs more or less perpendicular to Highway 167, the main thoroughfare built after the Second World War to connect Chibougamau’s mines and lumberyards to the rest of

the world. (Chibouchibi is located right on Highway 167, while the turn-off for Oujé-Bougoumou is 20 kilometres west down Route 113, which transects the highway south of Chibougamau.) The Wapachee clan, who now number some 140 children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, maintain a traditional way of life. Their seasonal hunting grounds extend deep into the bush to the southeast along Logging Road 210 to a mountain called, in their stories, *Gawashebuggidnadj* (pronounced “Ka-wa-she-pi-ki-ti-nach”), which roughly translates as “Gold” or “Bright” Mountain, so named for the birch trees that grow on its slopes and shine from a distance. That’s where the Wapachees can most reliably spot and hunt browsing moose. “It’s where we feed our children and our grandchildren,” explains Maggie.

**BlackRock Metals Inc., however, wants to level the mountain to create a giant open pit titanium, vanadium and high-purity iron mine.** In 2013, the Grand Council of the Crees and the Oujé-Bougoumou Cree Nation signed an impact benefits agreement with BlackRock. The agreement, named for Bally Husky, one of the Wapachee ancestors who hunted this land, promised to provide money, jobs, training, business contracts and

environmental monitoring opportunities to the Oujé-Bougoumou Cree Nation. Norman has even worked as BlackRock’s community relations coordinator.

BlackRock plans to break ground once the company secures more than \$1 billion from investors. As of 2018, the company had raised about a third of that, including \$63 million from the Quebec government to support infrastructure upgrades at Port Saguenay so BlackRock’s products can be exported to China. But the mine has been delayed by mineral price fluctuations, and in the interim BlackRock seems to be rolling back some of its commitments.

Critics of the project in the Wapachee family and the community say there will be fewer jobs and contracts available to the Cree than originally promised. Meanwhile, early exploration and construction have been more disruptive to wildlife, the environment and the Wapachees than anticipated. Before BlackRock opens, for example, the Wapachees will have to relocate their rabbit camp — the cabins they use for the fall and winter hunt. “The relocations have not stopped yet,” explains Norman, who is clearly conflicted about the mine but feels he has little power to stop it. “We have





The Wapachees' traditional hunting grounds near the mountain they call Gawashebugidnaji (OPPOSITE) are now threatened by a mining claim. Mining and logging (LEFT and ABOVE) in the area are largely responsible for the repeated relocations of the local Cree, such as Cynthia and Maggie Wapachee (TOP LEFT) who still live outside Ujé-Bougoumou (TOP RIGHT).

camps over here that we use seasonally for our main hunting activities. BlackRock company came in, and now what's challenging for the Wapachee family is that we're being asked to relocate those camps." He continues: "It's been repetitious, how the government works: opening doors for further resource development. ... Our hunting areas in the trapline are getting smaller and smaller, and so this is where we look at what are we going to do."

Roused by the commotion of company, Norman's father, Matthew, emerges from his room. "He's upset with me," says Norman under his breath, before skedaddling out the front door.

**"WE'RE IN TROUBLE!"** yells Matthew. "We're in trouble on the trapline!" Stout and cantankerous with bushy eyebrows poking out above thick black glasses, Matthew uses a beaded belt to hold his grey trousers aloft. He plops himself down at the head of the kitchen table, the half-dressed beaver still resting there.

Matthew was once tallyman, or manager, of this trapline, but has since passed that responsibility to his eldest son, Phillip. Matthew is opposed to BlackRock. But it's a more complicated story for his children. While all express misgivings about the desecration of familial territory, some feel that development is inevitable and that they must make the best of bad circumstances.

A few, like Norman, have even chosen to work with the company. But by doing so, Matthew feels the children have circumvented his and Phillip's authority. It's not that Matthew is categorically opposed to development — in fact, he was one of the first Cree miners in the community. But as the land becomes increasingly bare, his sense of loss and bitterness grows. He chose to build his home out here. And now, in his old age, it's being taken away from him. "I'm going to win," he says in a later conversation. "The BlackRock, they're not going to start this mine while I'm still alive."

Once Matthew settles down, Maggie heads out to the back porch, bundled up in a jacket with a red





sweater underneath, Cree florals embroidered on its left breast. Maggie's daughter Cynthia joins us to translate, plunging her hands and bespectacled face into a green hoodie to stay warm. Maggie has birdfeeders set up on the deck. Generations ago, in a time of hardship, Matthew's father Alan had to kill and eat small birds to avoid starvation. The warblers that frequent their home serve as a reminder of the family's survival.

"I love it here," says Maggie, a wisp of grey hair hanging in front of her ear, the corners of her eyes curled toward the sky in a slight smile as she speaks. "I hope for my children to have stability in their lives and not have to go through what I went through in having to move from different places."

The Cree way of life is one of survival. Unlike most Cree people her age, Maggie did not attend the residential school and instead learned the skills of Cree womanhood from her mother in Mistissini. Before she could marry, she needed to know how to skin a beaver; how to scrape, stretch and smoke a moose hide; how to make clothes and moccasins out of the leather; how to knit a fishnet; how to clean an animal and a house.

Once she learned these things and more, a marriage was arranged with Matthew, who lived in Doré Lake. But there, Maggie recalls that the couple was surrounded by hardship and alcohol. Maggie's own father, William, was a drinker. And as she tells the story, Maggie, an animated speaker, sticks out her chest and boisterously swings her arms, pretending to take a deep swig from an imaginary bottle. (She's a favoured orator at community functions for obvious reasons.) Maggie credits tradition and the Church — which she doesn't see as incompatible — for setting her family and the community on a different path. She's devoted to both. "When we became Christians — that's when I found peace in my home," she says. "We've got to continue our way of life — it's like you drop something," she stretches out her fist and opens it, as though an object is slipping through her fingers, "it's hard to pick it back up."

The divisions sown by BlackRock weigh on her. At the time of my visit, Norman, Phillip and Matthew aren't speaking. With her husband and children at odds, Maggie, the matriarch, has to hold things together. "She's like a needle," says her youngest daughter, Alice. Like Matthew, Maggie is concerned BlackRock has

caused the Wapachees to lose their way. Sitting on the back porch, Maggie looks out at the water where her children took their first steps in the Cree way. "I have good memories of the past," she says. "The environment, where I am, how I see it now — it hurts."

Back inside, Maggie finishes skinning the beaver. She demonstrates how to use a willow tool to make a fishnet and shows off the moccasins and gloves she makes with smoked moose hide. Mid-visit, her son James walks in the door wearing a Boston Bruins cap and camouflage sweatshirt. (If there was a Cree sitcom, the Wapachee household would be a worthy set.) James has just spotted fresh tracks out on the trapline. He didn't see the animal, but he made some moose calls and expresses optimism that the game will return later that night. It is about time for the Wapachee hunters to gather at camp and prepare for the hunt.

Maggie, Cynthia and I wrap up our conversation. *Tapwe*, she says as she gives me a big hug, rubbing my back while she prays in Cree. The only word I understand — "Jesus" — is peppered throughout her invocation. "Amen," she says. And although I don't go to church, I say "amen," too.

Then Cynthia and I walk out the door and hop in the back of James's F-150. His .270 hunting rifle rattles beneath my boots as we roll on down the road to rabbit camp.

**ABEL BOSUM AND I SIT** on a bench beside the shaptuan, an oblong Cree structure that stands roughly at the centre of the Oujé-Bougoumou Cree Nation's administrative buildings. The business services centre is to our left and the government offices to our right. The Cree Cultural Institute, a museum, lies directly ahead. The Pentecostal Church is at our backs, and beyond that, Lake Opémisca.



In 1989, the Oujé-Bougoumou built this shaptuan for a signing ceremony with Quebec when the province agreed to contribute funding for the construction of a village and recognized, to a limited degree, the community's jurisdiction and self-government. Three years later, the Oujé-Bougoumou finalized an agreement with the federal government, securing further resources for their village and setting them on the path to independence. Back then, the Cree lived in shacks down the hill closer to the lake, and the shaptuan was the only structure here.

Bosum recalls the 1989 celebration. It began with a prayer from an Elder and a song from the youth. The Cree feasted on moose, bear, beaver and bannock. Speakers from the First Nation and the provincial government shared speeches marking the historic agreement before signing the document and shaking hands. Bosum, one of the negotiators, remembers people in the crowd crying. "It was quite an emotional journey for many people," he says of the negotiations. "They come out, they express, they participate, and then sometimes I had to come back and report that things were not going well or that idea is out the window. It was like a roller coaster. **But to actually reach a point in the process where you've got an agreement, you've got the ceremony — well, that was quite an accomplishment.**"

Bosum tells the story of how he and his people got to that point. After Doré Lake, Abel's mother Lucy moved to Chibougamau where she lived on welfare and worked intermittently as a chambermaid. Her husband Sam died in 1969. She turned to alcohol. She remarried. When he was around and his mother was on the bottle, Abel helped take care of his siblings. He remembers the arguments and violence that accompanied Lucy's addiction, the



sound of her sobbing. On weekends, he would leave the apartment with the kids until things died down on Sunday. Child services ended up taking some of them away. Many have pulled through, but some are no longer with us — their lives also consumed by drink and grief.

At the residential school, Abel met Sophie Happyjack from the Waswanipi Cree Nation. When they weren't in La Tuque together, Abel would hitchhike for two days across northern Quebec to visit her. They had four children: Irene in 1975, Curtis in 1977, Reggie in 1982 and Nathaniel in 1989. Nathaniel, a professional motocross rider, died in a racing accident two years ago. Curtis has been Chief of Oujé-Bougoumou since 2015.

Despite the circumstances of his youth, Abel persisted. After residential

The town of Oujé-Bougoumou, designed by renowned architect Douglas Cardinal (OPPOSITE). The community's impressive Aanischaukamikw Cree Cultural Institute building (ABOVE).

school, he worked in the mines. Then he took a course on community planning, communications and government affairs in Elliot Lake, Ont. Every other weekend, he would drive 17 hours back to Chibougamau to be with his wife and young family. (He missed Curtis's birth by two hours during this time.)

In the 1970s, things were changing in northern Quebec. The province had plans to expand hydroelectric dams on James Bay, but the affected First Nations and Inuit insisted that their rights be respected. In 1975, the Cree and Inuit of the region, as well as the provincial and federal govern-





ments, signed the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, the first modern treaty in Canadian history. It allowed the province to complete construction of the dams and in exchange, it awarded the Cree and Inuit \$225 million to be paid over 20 years and recognized their distinct territorial and cultural rights. It affirmed the independence of many Cree and Inuit communities, while incorporating them into the region's economy. But it left out the Cree from Doré Lake, who were legally subsumed under the Mistisini Cree Nation at the time.

After completing his coursework, Abel got a job in Val-d'Or with the Grand Council of the Crees, a new governing body created to implement the James Bay agreement. His job was to travel to First Nations in the region, communicating plans and developing economic strategies. His travels brought him back to Chibougamau.

In the 1980s, the Cree dispersed from Doré Lake were being born again. Preachers with colourful names — Enoch Hall, Chuck Mor-

ton, Lott Thunder — evangelized the community. Many became Pentecostal. At camp meetings, they studied the Bible, but they also rediscovered who they were and began discussing what had happened to them. Many got sober. In 1984, they elected Bosum chief, and he opened an office in Chibougamau and started leading workshops and sending letters to the provincial and federal governments to petition for recognition. His allies at the Cree Indian Centre of Chibougamau enlisted the aforementioned anthropologist Jacques Frenette to conduct an ethnographic study of the First Nation. Frenette argued the Cree who once lived at Doré Lake were a distinct group, and his book, *The History of the Chibougamau Crees*, published by the centre in 1985, armed the community with valuable evidence to advance their cause. People, some in high places, started paying attention to these Cree who had been left out of the James Bay Agreement and were living in Third World conditions.

When the Liberals came to power in Quebec in 1985, Bosum saw an

opening, but tripartite negotiations between his community, Quebec and Canada were slow and complicated. Quebec's position, according to Bosum, was that his band could receive land once they had secured federal recognition. The Canadian government's position was that the Cree could receive recognition once they had land. The negotiations were further complicated by the fact that Quebec sovereigntists wanted nothing to do with the federal government, and Indian reserves were primarily a federal issue. **Neither government wanted to compensate the Cree for the \$4-billion worth of natural resources that the First Nation estimated had been stolen from their territories since the 1950s** — contaminating lands and waters and dispossessing them of their homes along the way.

Bosum remembers one particularly contentious meeting held in a Cree cabin. The federal negotiator had flown in from Ottawa and left a taxi outside the meeting with the meter running. Cree kids built a bonfire nearby. As the hours dragged on, federal and provincial representatives





Many area Cree were relocated to Ujé-Bougoumou (OPPOSITE), now home to the region's administrative building (LEFT), in 1989 after an agreement with the feds and province led by Chief Abel Bosum (RIGHT).

had their aides fetch hot dogs. Finally, around 11 at night, the federal negotiator caved and signed a deal. Two days later, he sent a letter alleging he had been coerced. Negotiations broke down. Bosum recalls advice that Robert Epstein, a friend, gave him: "You're going to wait on the government forever. If you believe your people are distinct, act like it."

**IN THE SUMMER OF 1989**, the Cree declared jurisdiction over their territory, established their own court and convicted Quebec and Canada of theft of resources and destruction of villages. They erected a blockade under a transmission line carrying power from James Bay to the United States. "The reporters that came, they were taking pictures with the transmission line in the background. And, of course, **that caught Quebec's attention, because this is**

**their billion-dollar line for their hydro-electric project and here are these Indians underneath."** Bosum recalls, laughing. By September, the First Nation and Quebec had reached an agreement. The federal government followed suit.

After a long diaspora, the Cree set about selecting and designing a permanent village. They began by having each family choose a favoured spot on their trapline. They then worked with community planners to narrow down the selection. The community voted on the final three options and chose the current site on Lake Opémisca. It was a fortuitous decision. Although the Cree didn't know it at the time, an esker, a ridge of gravel, runs through the land and acts as a natural water filter. The community hired renowned architect Douglas Cardinal, of Blackfoot, Algonquin and Métis heritage, to design their new village according to traditional architectural forms, like the shaptuan, and to reflect traditional values, like sustainability.

All the buildings on the reserve are connected to a central heating system, which burns waste sawdust from local

mills to pump heated water. When the community moved into their new houses, after generations of living in shacks, many didn't even know how to use a faucet or toilet. The most common complaint, Bosum recalls, is that the homes were "too big." Families named the streets for places out on their traplines: *Muskuuchi Meskino* for "Bear Street," *Ginshaw Wagumshi Meskino* for "Pike Fishing River Street," *Oukauw Sakhegun* for "Doré Lake." They called their nation Ujé-Bougoumou: "The Place Where People Gather."

The Ujé-Bougoumou Cree, particularly the Elders, still spend much of their time out on the land. The community observes a two-week Goose Break in the spring and a similar Moose Break in the fall. When I visited, the village was mostly empty, as families were away pursuing bull moose on their hunting grounds. But tradition is, of course, a flexible thing. For Goose Breaks, Abel has built a plush cabin with six rooms. On a recent family hunting trip, his grandson told him: "Grandpa, this is not a cabin. This is a hotel!"





Bosum was Chief for 14 years and has been Grand Chief of the Grand Council of the Crees since 2017. His son Curtis was just elected for a second term as Chief of Oujé-Bougoumou. Before interviewing the elder, I spoke with the younger Bosum in his second-floor corner office. **From his desk, the Chief can see much of the nation his father built: the Pentecostal Church, the daycare, the youth centre, the tourism lodge, the development corporation and the shaptuan.** Beyond that, the lake, the woods and the mountains. At the start of every day, he looks out across his people's domain. "My morning view," says Chief Curtis, "really is just a reminder of my duties, my responsibilities, who I'm here for."

### AT THE WAPACHEE RABBIT

camp, a row of four cabins crossing Logging Road 210, Cynthia is trying to get a fire going using dry spruce twigs and boughs for kindling, but isn't having much success. John Blacksmith, her boyfriend from Mistissini, steps in, as men tend to do, but can't catch a spark. Eventually Cynthia's brother James comes over with a piece of cardboard doused in gasoline and the fire bursts to life. "Get the steaks!" James yells, theatrically. "Now don't write we had to use gas," he says to me.

Once the fire is crackling, Cynthia

fetches the moose leg steaks, which she has cut into thin filets and set out to thaw on butcher paper. (These came from Norman's kill last year. The Wapachees haven't taken a moose yet this season, as the animals are increasingly scarce on their hunting grounds.) She spears one filet each onto three pointy sticks, which she digs into the ground and props up so that the meat hangs just a few inches above the flames. "We just had a marshmallow roast on this stick," she says, chuckling.

After the meat has browned and starts to ooze tiny bubbles of white fat, Cynthia cuts off a piece and tastes it. "It's done," she says before distributing bite-sized chunks to the visitors and family gathered round, who chat mostly in Cree.

Rabbit camp is both a hunting and gathering place for the Wapachee. While I was there, more than a dozen relatives and visitors cycled through. "We never plan anything, we just bump into each other wherever we go," says James. "We might even bump into each other in Montreal." Among the visitors during this trip is Wally Wapachee, one of the elder brothers, with his wife, Linda Bosum, and adopted granddaughter Amberlynn Shecapio, a gap-toothed five-year-old, her hair wild and loose, wearing pink boots and a camouflage sweatshirt about five sizes too big.

Cynthia and James Wapachee cook moose steaks at the family's rabbit camp (LEFT), where youngster Amberlynn Shecapio (RIGHT) shows off her moose-calling skills.

"Hey, you wanna' see her moose call?" asks Wally. "She does a great moose call." He passes a red horn to the little girl who wails into it. For a pint-sized Homo sapien, she blows a pretty convincing moose.

"Do it again," says Linda. "I didn't hear." Amberlynn does it again, but louder. When hunting is a way of life, kids start early.

Before Wally gets his family back on the road, I ask what he thinks about BlackRock.

"If you follow this road up here," he says, pointing down Logging Road 210, deeper into the bush, "you can see the whole mountain range that's going to disappear." Wally is outspoken like his father. He believes BlackRock misled the family and the community. According to Wally, the Bally Husky Agreement committed BlackRock to building a work camp that would provide 500 jobs and create many business contracts for the Cree. But the company has walked back the commitment to a work camp and now plans to employ far fewer workers, maybe 150 to 200, and ship most of the ore out by rail. "Canadians call it development," he says. "We call it disaster."





Curtis Bosum, Chief of Oujé-Bougoumou, at the local rink.

At about six in the evening, Wally, Linda and Amberlynn get on the road back to Oujé-Bougoumou. With the sun setting and our appetites sated, Cynthia, John and a few others set out toward Gawashebugidnadj in two trucks. With John in the lead, we bounce around on bumpy backroads. Every so often, John stops the car and looks out across the swampy shorelines of the lakes for moose feeding in the shallows, as the Wapachee have done for generations. “Don’t be surprised if John stops and shoots a moose,” says Cynthia. During the drive, we pass an old gold shaft, called Le Moine, and then the Black-Rock campsite.

As we start to climb Gawashebugidnadj, I see the birch bark trees for which the **Wapachees named the mountain in their mother tongue, clear-cut and stacked two metres high,** with the trunks’ round bottoms facing the road. We drive deeper into the bush: 30, 45 minutes, our eyes peeled for wildlife, our wheels skirting axel-breaking potholes every few dozen metres. There isn’t an animal in sight.

But then, as we approach the summit, John spots something moving in the bushes and stops the truck. He fetches his .30-30 rifle, used for big game, and takes aim.

**CHIEF CURTIS BOSUM** sits in the stands of the Chibougamau Arena in a Blue Jays cap and zip-up, watch-

ing his daughters, Megan, six, Leah, eight, and Leanne, his stepdaughter, also eight, figure skate. Unlike most Cree kids, Curtis grew up middle-class and played hockey at this rink. While relative privilege afforded him the opportunity to skate, it didn’t spare him from racism. Curtis remembers opposing players calling him *kawish*, a French epithet for Natives, and *aits asti Indien*, the equivalent of “fucking Indian.” He remembers the prejudice of his friends’ parents. And he remembers how he overcame it: by hanging in there, by having tough and thoughtful conversations. Hockey helped. Curtis learned how to listen to the coach and how to be a team player, which to him meant that despite differences, teammates stuck together on the ice. Curtis remembers how his Quebecois line mates would stand up for him, the only Native in the rink, against all-white teams from Val-d’Or and the Lac Saint-Jean area. “That felt good,” he says.

Curtis’s opportunities reflect the fortitude of his parents. Neither Abel nor Sophie spoke about the abuses they suffered at La Tuque, to spare their children from the ripple effects now well documented by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Abel, in particular, was a disciplinarian. There were, according to Curtis, rules and regulations: no swearing, no hitting, no wasting food — especially meat. And if you didn’t listen: “there was the belt.”

Like most Cree families, the Bosums hunted together, mostly on the Happyjack trapline near Ramsey Bay. Growing up, Curtis took his little brother Nathaniel under his wing. When Nathaniel was a baby, Curtis changed his diapers. When Nathaniel got older, Curtis hunted and fished with him. And when Nathaniel became a professional motocross rider, Curtis was his manager. When the accident happened, Curtis was the first to get the call. He had to tell the rest of the family Nathaniel was gone. “That was tough,” says Curtis. “I still hear the screams and crying.”

As Curtis tells the story, his son Alexandre, Megan’s twin, comes and sits in his dad’s lap. Alexandre was born without a left eye, a one-in-a-million case, but still plays hockey and other sports. Curtis speaks French to the boy and hands him a credit card to buy poutine. The Bosum household is trilingual, with the kids speaking French, English and a little Cree. For a man who has spent his life navigating the seams between Cree, Québécois and Canadian worlds, this feels appropriate.

In August 2019, Curtis was re-elected Chief for another four-year term. He views his role as Chief not unlike his role as a teammate, brother and father: it’s all about balance. As Chief, Curtis must balance the need to address pressing social issues like education and unemployment with his responsibility to protect and preserve the territory and culture of the nation. This is not always easy. Although he knows development will harm wildlife and the environment, Curtis sees mines like BlackRock as an opportunity to provide jobs and create businesses in a community that needs a lot more of those. He says he has done his best





to represent the interests of the Oujé-Bougoumou Cree while giving voice to the Wapachee family's concerns. He too recognizes the loss the mine will represent. "There won't be any more mountain," he says, sitting on the cold metal stands. "Digesting it, it's a little tough."

Curtis takes Alexandre down to the locker room to get suited up for practice. The Chief gets his son fully dressed and gives the boy a big, enthusiastic high-five before lacing up his own skates. On the march to the ice, the mites in their Timbits jerseys — mostly boys, but a few girls, too — look like a gaggle of bowlegged astronauts: their pants a bit too long, their helmets a bit too big, their sticks, unwieldy.

At the gate, Alexandre takes off in a circle. Once all the players file out onto the rink, the coaches follow behind, the sound of laughter and little skates scraping the ice fill the arena. A whistle blows, and the kids reverse direction. Another whistle, and they practise skating backward. Curtis approaches a tyke in a red jersey and shows him how to make a C-cut, the fundamental technique for backward movement.

**A MAMA BEAR STANDS** up on her hind legs in the bushes, sniffing the air. When she spots the trucks, she takes off into the trees, three baby bears following behind. John lowers his gun. The Cree don't take mothers with cubs. We hop back in the trucks and finish the treacherous drive to the peak of Gawashebuggnajj, the Wapachees' traditional moose hunting grounds.

"They say the mountain here is all going to be extracted. There will be no mountain here," says Cynthia Wapachee, as though she can hardly believe it. She pauses, before adding: "It devastates me knowing that there's history," she gestures to the exposed granite mountaintop beneath her feet. She lifts her glasses to wipe the tears welling from her eyes.

She looks out across the land: the forest spotted with silver lakes and streaked with trees turning yellow with the changing season. In the distance is Chibougamau Lake, and just beyond that the sliver of Doré Lake. The Wapachees have traversed this land countless times, stalking antlered giants on the shores of the

The Wapachee family has hunted near the mountain they call Gawashebuggnajj for generations. The area may soon become a mine, forcing them to move on again.

blue-grey swamps and among the birch trees of the mountain. After a successful hunt, they would return to lakeside homes, a slain beast in tow. From the summit, the distance the Wapachees, their forebears and the Oujé-Bougoumou have travelled appears formidable, but not insurmountable or irreversible. If investors have their way and turn this mountain into little more than a kilometre-long hole in the ground — the titanium, vanadium and iron beneath shipped off to China and wrought into batteries, wind turbines, electric vehicles, implants — maybe then the distance between the past at Doré Lake and the present at Gawashebuggnajj will be flattened and imperceptible. 🌐



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# ITIJJAGIAQ

The Soper River cuts through the exposed rock of southern Baffin Island alongside the unmarked Itijjagiq Trail.





Translating as “over the land,” this trail connects the communities of Iqaluit and Kimmirut across southern Baffin Island, spanning both age-old traditions and recent change

BY **OSSIE MICHELIN**

WITH PHOTOGRAPHY BY **DAVID KILABUK**

**T**HE ITIJJAGIAQ TRAIL is more of an expanse than a trail. There are no trail markers here other than nine emergency cabins scattered along the trail’s length.

No trees or bushes corral hikers along a set path; they must determine which ridge lines to hike or which streams to ford. Nothing but rivers, mountains and marshes influence how far and wide hikers wander to their destination.

For the Inuit of southern Baffin Island, the trail runs through their backyard, and in the winter it becomes a highway of snowmobile tracks connecting Iqaluit’s Frobisher Bay to Kimmirut on southern Baffin. It is also where they fish for Arctic char, pick berries and hunt geese, other birds and, at one time, caribou by the hundreds.

“It’s a big part of a lot of people’s lives, particularly those with family in Kimmirut and Iqaluit who use it to travel back and forth,” says Amy Brown, acting manager of parks planning and establishment with Nunavut Parks and Special Places. “Now with a growing population of southerners using the trail as well, its users have grown beyond just local Inuit. It’s interesting to share something that is so natural to us here in Nunavut with the rest of Canada as a piece of The Great Trail.”





Running 120 kilometres across the Meta Incognita Peninsula, the Itijjagial is one of the newest additions to The Great Trail and the only section in Nunavut. This is not a hike for beginners: the trail traverses Katannilik Territorial Park, crossing over mountains, vast barren plateaus and lakes and through river valleys. For those experienced enough, however, it is an unforgettable journey.

Leaving from Iqaluit south across Frobisher Bay, the trail climbs from sea level to almost 670 metres in altitude across an expansive plateau within a span of about 25 kilometres. The terrain then shifts to broad rolling hills of sheer rock and sparse patches of stunted vegetation. The lack of distinctive points of reference is disorienting.

Two billion years ago, mountains rivaling the Himalayas pushed up here from a continental collision, but glacial erosion and time wore the mountains

down to their roots. Now ever-changing rock and mineral formations dominate the trail's landscape, from chalky mountains of crumbling marble, to monoliths of quartzite and other rocks, to rusty brown cliff faces.

The rocks here are striking, but they are nearly identical to rocks and minerals found farther south in Quebec and Ontario. The difference lies in the fact that the glaciers have relinquished Baffin Island much more recently than southern Canada. And with such short growing seasons, the area has yet to bury the exposed rocks with topsoil, let alone top them with forests, as it has in the South.

The unbroken horizon of the upper plateau all but disappears upon reaching Mount Joy, roughly halfway along the Itijjagial. Known as *Kiinaujaq* in Inuktitut, this is where the terrain transforms into a deeply embedded sandy and marshy river valley bursting with willows,



The Itijjagial Trail follows the Soper River Valley (TOP) across much of the Meta Incognita Peninsula. Few people alive today know the region's terrain as well as Elder Sandy Akavak (ABOVE) of Kimmirut (BELOW).

cotton grasses and other plant life all the way to the end of the trail. Across Baffin Island, the Kimmirut area is known for having the most sought-after berries, and in the late summer they are undeniably







IN INUKTITUT, *ITIJJAGIAQ* means “over the land,” and for Inuit this is unique, as traditionally they remained along the coastline harvesting the bounty of the sea. Things began to change in 1942 when the American Army built a base at Frobisher Bay, on the trail’s north end, in what is now Iqaluit. With vibrant communities at either end of the peninsula, Inuit began taking the inland trail in winter by dogsled.

“The youth today have no idea what my way of life was like. I know they can’t go back to that way; some people are trying but it’s just not possible,” says Inuit Elder Sandy Akavak. He is a large man with strong weathered hands. Everyone in town greets him as he passes, and he greets them back with a smile and a twinkle in his eye.

The 76-year-old is one of the oldest residents of Kimmirut; he has seen many changes come to Baffin Island in his lifetime. He was born in a tent on a small islet off the Baffin coast. His family moved to Lake Harbour, now Kimmirut, when he was seven so his father could work as a special constable with the RCMP. His father was the first to begin running a dogsled overland to Frobisher Bay. This dogsled route for delivering supplies, assisting the RCMP and delivering the mail would become the basis for most of the Itijjagiaq.

“Sometimes we would do the entire trail run just for one letter,” Akavak laughs. He points out that the current trail veers to the north more than his father’s original trail, but he says it

abundant, plump and flavourful. Many Inuit stain their fingers purple and blue harvesting bag upon bag of crowberries and blueberries.

At this time of year, Nunavut conservation officer Sean Noble-Nowdluk patrols along the southern end of the trail on ATV and by jet boat up the Soper River. The 22-year-old bears the mark of a hunter who has spent much time on the Land, with the inverse image of his sunglasses tanned onto his face.

“This is an amazing valley for geese. I’ve never seen so many geese as I have seen here,” says Noble-Nowdluk. As he

continues up the river, more and more geese enter the sky, disturbed by his boat’s drone. The protected river valley is a summer nesting ground for Canada geese. At their peak, he says, they number in the high thousands and the sound of honking fills the valley.

Also scattered across the river valley are reminders of the thousands of caribou that once roamed here. Antlers, skulls and other bones can be found almost everywhere. Like other caribou herds across the North, the number of Baffin caribou is dwindling significantly. The most recent surveys estimate that there are fewer than 5,000 across all of Baffin, compared with more than 200,000 in the early 1990s.

“They said there used to be thousands of caribou here,” Noble-Nowdluk laments. “You might see one or two now sometimes but not so much since they went away, not like they used to.”

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*Ossie Michelin (@Osmich) focuses his journalism on northern and Indigenous issues. His work has appeared on APTN, CBC Indigenous and Vice. David Kilabuk (@DavidKilabuk) specializes in photographing the area in and around Pangnirtung, Nunavut.*

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makes him happy to know people are still using the route. Akavak, and later his son, would continue the tradition of working with the RCMP in Kimmirut.

Growing up, Akavak and his brothers would set a trapline in the fall to catch Arctic fox and silver fox to sell to the Hudson's Bay Company trading post in exchange for bullets, equipment and staples such as flour, lard and baking powder.

With the arrival of the American army in the 1940s came snowmobiles, planes parachuting supplies at Christmas, and more and more southerners moving up and bringing with them alcohol and crime, something Akavak says had never been a problem before. For better or worse, being connected by a trail to Iqaluit, and by extension the rest of the world, has brought many changes to Kimmirut. Akavak, for his part, hopes that the Itijjagiaq joining The Great Trail network will bring many new visitors and friendly faces looking to explore what makes his home so special.

Brown shares that sentiment and hopes that the trail will open visitors' eyes to the beauty of the territory. "When you look at Nunavut, everywhere is essentially remote. All our communities are fly-in communities," she says. "So having something to draw in people's awareness — to home them in on a particular region — allows visitors to dip their toe in the pond, and it gives



them something to gravitate toward. We're hoping this trail will be the first of many adventures for people in the South as they turn their gaze north toward Nunavut."

Likewise, Brown sees this as more than just a hiking trail but something to give people in the territory a sense of belonging and connection to share with those living in the South.

"Nunavut can feel very removed from the rest of Canada," she says. "The trail helps connect us to the rest of the country even though it's such a vast distance between the southern communities and the southern Great Trail to here all the way up in Nunavut."

**KATANNILIK TERRITORIAL** Park ranger Andrew Boyd sees visitors of all kinds, each seeking their own adventure in the beautiful land. All visitors must sign up with the park and carry GPS devices, so park staff can track them to ensure their safety. Boyd is the first to say this trail, which can take more than a week to hike in the summer, is not for beginners. "Dealing with the environment, the bugs, the elements, the animals — you never know what to expect," he warns, although he admits that's part of the charm. "You go out there and it's never the same. You can cross the same land and there's always something different. You can appreciate it in a new way every time you go out."

Andrew Boyd (IN RED), a Katannilik Territorial Park ranger, speaks with Ossie Michelin at one of the trail's emergency cabins (ABOVE). Soper Falls, in Katannilik park (BELOW).

With every season, the trail transforms completely. Boyd jokes that the three seasons are "snow, mud and bug." Each winter the trail becomes a vast untouched canvas only marked by rock faces jutting out defiantly from beneath the soft snow and well-worn snowmobile tracks, which create a wide, hard-packed thoroughfare that can be crossed in a single day. In the spring, as snow softens and the rivers begin to flow again, the trail becomes nearly impassable and is closed for weeks. In the summer, the scent of plants fills the air along with the droning of thousands and thousands of flies. In the autumn before the snow begins to accumulate, the land is quiet and still in anticipation of winter's approach.

Boyd believes that what makes the trail so special is that there is no set way to get from the trail's start to its end. "There's no definitive line that you have to follow. You're always trying to find the animals along the way with no guarantee, because there's nothing to herd them or keep them in anywhere so they just roam, so you have to roam as well. That speaks to the type of trail we have here." 🌐



See 360-degree views of the trail and meet a few of its stewards at [cangeo.ca/jf18/baffin](https://cangeo.ca/jf18/baffin).





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# KAHKIIHTWAAM EE-PEE-KIIWEEHTATAAHK

THAT MEANS "BRINGING IT BACK HOME AGAIN" IN MICHIF,  
THE LANGUAGE OF MÉTIS. THE STORY OF HOW A CRITICALLY  
ENDANGERED INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE CAN BE SAVED.

BY **BETTY ANN ADAM**



A Métis fiddler plays in front of Saint-Antoine de  
Padoue Church at Batoche National Historic Site, Sask.









Surveying the deserted Batoche National Historic Site in May before the season opening, one can imagine the Métis people in the spring of 1884 preparing their fields and garden plots by the same windswept prairie and glittering South Saskatchewan River.

By that time, the descendants of voyageurs and bison hunters in the Catholic parish of St. Laurent, where the community of Batoche was located, now about 90 kilometres north of Saskatoon, had seen their way of life altered dramatically with the near annihilation of the bison and the decline of the fur trade. Many Métis, traditionally bison hunters, had previously lived a freedom-loving, travelling life throughout the northwest, wintering in the Prairies and returning in the spring to communities around the forks of the Assiniboine and Red rivers in what is now Manitoba.

Amid the freedom of the Prairies, the people created a new language, one that mixed Cree and French in a way that, as a linguist described it 100 years later, was unique. But in the late 19th century, few outsiders

even knew the unwritten Michif language existed.

In the Red River area, the Métis's struggle with the Hudson's Bay Company and the government over land rights had culminated with the Red River Resistance of 1869-70, an armed political resistance led by Louis Riel. The Métis ultimately lost that fight, and the people of the new nation, as they declared themselves, were forced to disperse. Many went west to the

*AMID THE FREEDOM OF THE PRAIRIES,  
THE PEOPLE CREATED A NEW LANGUAGE,  
ONE THAT MIXED CREE AND FRENCH  
IN A WAY THAT WAS UNIQUE.*

Saskatchewan River area of the newly created North-West Territories. Over time, Métis in the north and elsewhere in the Red River area came up with other blendings of Cree and French, all of which they referred to as Michif.

At Batoche, the Michif (the name for their identity and their new language) people had established a permanent settlement in what had previously been a wintering place.

Many were eking out a living, still freighting for what was left of the Hudson's Bay Company, farming and selling bison bones picked from the carcasses left by government-sanctioned mass slaughter. They hoped that, this time, the government would recognize their ownership of the land. Between 1878 and 1885, they sent petitions to the government, seeking formal title to the land they had claimed. Their frustrations mounted as colonization companies were granted land rights, and so they sent leader Gabriel Dumont to Montana to entreat Riel, who had been living in exile, to join the cause once again.

By the spring of 1885, the Métis, including Riel, had sent 84 petitions to the Canadian government. Rather than negotiate, the government increased the number of North-West Mounted

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*Betty Ann Adam is member of Fond du Lac Denesuline First Nation in Saskatchewan and is an award-winning journalist. She resides in Saskatoon.*

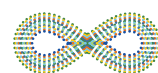
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A view of the Saskatchewan River (OPPOSITE) from Saskatchewan's Batoche National Historic Site, a community where the Michif people emerged; Norman Fleury (LEFT) is a respected Métis Elder and Michif speaker.

guage, along with the nation's identity, is at risk of being lost — but there is hope.



**“I COME FROM GENERATIONS,** they were the buffalo people, they were the fur trade people, they made their own language, they made their own stories, their dances, their songs, became a people with the help of God,” says Norman Fleury, a respected Michif Elder and speaker who wrote a dictionary of Michif terms. “They were able to adapt with different nationalities, but they made their own and they knew who they were.”

Police and militia in the region and sent troops.

The Métis of Batoche decided to fight for their rights once again and declared a provisional government. In three separate battles fought over eight weeks from March 26 to May 12, 62 or 63 men died, 30 on the Canadian side and 32 or 33 on the Métis side. Dumont fled to the U.S., while Riel surrendered, was convicted of high treason and was hanged in Regina on Nov. 16, 1885.

Métis were forced to move again. Some went south to relatives in Montana, North Dakota and Minneapolis, some travelled west to Alberta and B.C., and others went north. The federal scrip system established in 1870 to provide land or money to Métis people was vulnerable to fraud and did little to provide a land base for Métis. Many resorted to creating small communities on the road allowances, Crown land set aside for highways, but these communities

were also subject to demolition at the government's discretion.

The once cohesive communities, busy with travel, hunting and trapping and vibrant with stories, music and dance, drifted apart. The culture and community, where the extraordinary Michif language was created and flourished, now faced the challenge of colonial assimilation.

Recent generations of Métis have grown up without learning the language. According to the 2016 Canadian census, Michif was the mother tongue of 725 people and the language spoken at home by 275 people, but those numbers include as many as four languages spoken by the Métis. Some now say there may be 500 fluent speakers, but others estimate fewer than 100 people speak fluent Michif today. The United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization has designated it a critically endangered language. As Elders become too frail or pass away, the Michif lan-

Fleury is the foremost translator for the Gabriel Dumont Institute, a non-profit Métis organization that promotes the renewal and development of Métis culture through research and education, and a lecturer at the University of Saskatchewan. Fleury's Métis lineage goes back seven generations on both his parents' sides, with ancestors who were part of the resistances in Red River and Batoche.

Raised on the same farm that his grandmother, Mrs. Jean Baptiste LeClerc (nee. Lepine), lived on he once asked her where Michif came from. She told him to return the next day, as elders do, so she could take time to ponder before answering. Fleury says the next day she told him, “God created the world, made everything. Over the water, there's people. The Germans speak German, and the English speak English. Over here, our first nation relatives the Sioux speak Dakota, Nakota and Lakota; the Blackfoot speak their lan-





guages; Cree speak Niihiyow and Saulteaux speak Anishinaabemowin. God created these nations. It's like making a hoop, a circle of life. She said it was our turn to be created and we finished that hoop in the world. We are Michif, we speak Michif."

She continued, "God gives us those kinds of connections, spiritually, with the world, with our own nations, our stories, our histories, our medicines, our belief systems that are all connected. We cannot put things together without having that spiritual connection."

Fleury emphasizes that Michif is a nationality encompassing the language. Old songs that came from France were "Michif-ized," he says. The pronunciation of French nouns was often Michif-ized, too. For example, "les chevaux," which means "the horses," became "Lii zhvoo." In Michif, "li zhwall" means the horse, but in French it's "le cheval."

Sometimes Michif borrowed from English, but even then words were so absorbed into Michif that native speakers often didn't realize they had any other origin, as in the case of a

woman who asked what the English word was for "beans" — the word had long ago been adopted into Michif from the English-speaking workers at Hudson's Bay Company trading posts.

"Michif was a family language, it was a ceremonial language, and it was a trade language," says Fleury.

Communities spoke Michif among themselves and within their homes. For many generations, most Métis

*'ALL OF A SUDDEN IT WAS  
A REAWAKENING, AND [MÉTIS] SAID,  
"THAT'S RIGHT! NOBODY SPEAKS THAT AT  
HOME. OUR KIDS ARE NOT SPEAKING IT."*

were illiterate and remembered important information in the oral traditions of their First Nations ancestors. Schools run by missionaries were instruments of colonization that prohibited the use of Michif in classrooms.

The ceremonial aspect of the language came from elements of Catholicism and First Nations spiritu-

ality, which were fundamental to the Michif worldview, and morphed into words and customs that became uniquely Michif. Fleury remembers his grandmother tying a black nylon cloth around his eyes to watch the sunrise on Easter mornings and seeing the vibrating, shimmering light that conveyed the glory of the risen Christ. His grandmother, a Catholic, was taught to kneel when picking medicines, like she was praying, and to lay down tobacco, in the way of the Cree.

Many Métis participated in the sun-dance and other First Nations ceremonies, and they respected protocols that still are not discussed casually with outsiders. The values of Métis are inextricably bound in the language. When Michif people began to marry outside the culture after the Second World War, the language fell into disuse. Parents stopped using Michif in their homes, and the use of the language declined, says Fleury.

Fleury, who speaks Heritage Michif, which is considered the first Michif language, is possessive of Michif as a nationality and culture, but he says he readily accepts other versions of the language that emerged within historical Métis communities, dubbed by the Gabriel Dumont Institute as Michif French and Northern Michif. However, not all Métis agree with this viewpoint. Instead, they feel that funding for Heritage Michif should be prioritized over the others.

Fleury also has a great fondness for Dutch linguist Peter Bakker, who helped introduce Heritage Michif to the wider world in the 1990s but also raised the alarm among Métis that their language was in peril. At that time, Bakker estimated that there were just 500 fluent speakers of Heritage Michif remaining.





An 1879 painting of fur traders in present-day Winnipeg (OPPOSITE). The trade helped in the development of Michif, which linguist Peter Bakker (RIGHT) has studied for years. The children of unions between European traders and First Nations women, such as Mary Sanderson and her cousins (BOTTOM), circa 1890, also played a role.



“All of a sudden it was a reawakening, and [Métis] said, ‘That’s right! Nobody speaks that at home. Our kids are not speaking it,’” says Fleury.

“If a language disappears, then also a culture disappears and a whole system of knowledge,” says Bakker. “Each language is a unique solution to the communication problem. How do we divide the world into objects and actions and how creative people are in maintaining and changing the language... Sometimes it’s said that each language that disappears, it’s like the Louvre museum in Paris burning down or the Library of Congress burning down.”

As a linguist devoted to the scientific study of languages, Bakker thought he knew a lot about how languages were created by different groups coming together, but Heritage Michif surprised him when he stumbled upon it in 1985: it blended two languages in a

way he’d never seen before, using French nouns and Plains Cree verbs.

In 1987, Bakker, who already spoke French, came to Canada and lived with the Henry Daniels family at Saskatchewan’s Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation to learn Cree, so he

could analyze the Michif language. He met with Heritage Michif speakers in Manitoba and the northern U.S. and with speakers of other versions of Michif in Métis communities in Manitoba, central and northwest Saskatchewan and Alberta.

Among the 7,000 known languages in the world, only about 30 are mixed languages, of which about 25 have a specific pattern where their vocabulary comes from one language while grammar comes from another. Mixed languages, such as Michif, evolve when speakers are bilingual in both originating languages. In the case of Métis, this would have begun when the voyageurs began to marry Cree and Nahkawiniwak (Saulteaux) women.

There were mutually beneficial reasons for intermarriage: the white men were accepted as kin among the First Nations fur-trapping people who knew how to thrive on the land and in the climate, while the Indigenous families gained a member with







access to the traders. The bilingual couples smoothed relations in the fur trade, creating a peaceful co-existence between the disparate peoples. In the beginning, the children of these unions were brought up by their mothers as First Nations, but that changed over generations as more of the men made their lives in the northwest, leaving the employ of the trading companies and focusing on the bison hunt, trading in pemmican and hauling goods overland in the all-wood Red River carts they devised to increase the carrying capacity of horses.

While some Métis kept homes in the Red River area around present-day Winnipeg, others lived there only part of the year; some spent most of the year almost exclusively on the plains of Saskatchewan, Alberta and the northern U.S., following the bison; and others lived along the river systems in the northern forests. Métis often spoke the languages of Cree, Nahkawininiwak (Saulteaux), Dene and other First Nations, as well as French and English, which allowed them to interact and trade wherever they went.

With that ability, Bakker wondered why Métis would create a new language. To answer that, he needed to know when the language first appeared. There was scant information in the historical record about when the language emerged: Bakker found a reference to Michif from the 1930s and learned of other references from the 1890s. Elderly Michif speakers recounted oral history that traced Michif usage to at least as early as

*'IF A LANGUAGE DISAPPEARS,  
THEN ALSO A CULTURE DISAPPEARS  
AND A WHOLE SYSTEM OF KNOWLEDGE.'*

1840, facts confirmed by missionaries' genealogy records.

Michif was not created as a necessity for the fur trade, Bakker found. By 1840, many generations of bilingual speakers had long been trading successfully in French, Nahkawemowin and Cree. Besides, trade languages are usually simple pidgins, when speakers with no common language create a lingo they can both understand, or creoles, when a primitive

pidgin gains wider usage, develops a complete grammar and becomes the mother tongue of new generations.

Heritage Michif is anything but simple. In addition to its intricate, descriptive Cree verb system, its French system of nouns and adjectives includes the unpredictable gender assignments of articles, such as "le" and "la" (the masculine and feminine forms of "the") and "un" and "une" (masculine and feminine forms of "a").

"It seems that the most complex categories of each language are part of Michif instead of the most simple," writes Bakker in his groundbreaking 1997 book, *A Language of Our Own: The Genesis of the Mixed Cree-French Language of the Canadian Métis*, which focuses on Heritage Michif.

Nowhere in the world did an economy trigger a language with the complexity and mixed nature of Michif. Its emergence is comparable to the way young people invent new words or use existing words in new ways to create an insider's language that distinguishes them from their parents, or what Bakker calls an "ingroup" language.





These types of languages are “the utmost language of solidarity for the group members and a distancing language for non-group members,” writes Bakker in *A Language of Our Own*.

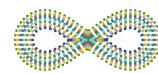
“In this case it is very likely that [Michif developed] in the early 1800s when basically, the Métis started to see themselves as a separate group, different from both the French and the Cree,” he says.

The generations who had intermarried, bringing the languages and customs of their First Nations and European ancestors to their new families, had children who married each other. This expanding population grew up without ever living with their First Nations relations or in the white settler cities and communities of Eastern Canada. The sense of being their own people, unaccustomed to outside authority, flourished in an era before Confederation where the colonial rule had not reached the northwest and the Hudson’s Bay Company exercised its authority as de facto government only where and when it needed to for the sake of business. Heritage Michif was born amid the subsequent life of freedom on the plains.

Métis “began to think, act and identify as a separate group. They gave themselves a collective name: the Bois-Brûlés (who would later become the Métis Nation)... They were fiercely proud of their independence and freedom,” writes Jean Teillet, a founding member of the Métis Nation of Ontario, founding president of the Métis Nation Lawyers Association and Riel’s great grand-niece, in her book *The North-West Is Our Mother: The Story of Louis Riel’s People*.

The fire of Métis nationhood was fanned by colonial authorities from the Hudson’s Bay Company who arrived on the Red River in 1812 with Scottish settlers and laws that benefited only them while hindering and excluding Métis. Participation in government, land and resource rights were at the heart of the conflict. By 1815, the Bois-Brûlés were flying their own flag, a white infinity symbol on a blue background. They asserted a new political consciousness and were developing their own language and culture, which they called Metif and pronounced Michif. In June 1816, the Bois-Brûlés fought HBC Governor Robert Semple and settlers at the Battle of Seven Oaks, the event that marks the birth of the Métis Nation.

An 1870 survey map of the Red River area (OPPOSITE) and Cypress Hills, Sask. (ABOVE), two regions critical to the development of Métis culture and language.



**IN ÎLE-À-LA-CROSSE IN NORTH-**western Saskatchewan, Louise Oelke, 69, grew up with Northern Michif as her mother tongue. Now retired, she has become a sought-after Northern Michif language teacher. Oelke’s father hunted and trapped, returning home with beaver and muskrat furs. In town, they lived in a two-bedroom house with 13 children, a cast-iron wood stove and light from a coal oil lamp or just a wick in lard. Baths were every two weeks in a galvanized steel tub, with water heated on the stove. Sometimes the whole family would go and live in a tent in the bush.

Oelke didn’t start speaking English until she went to the village school, where she was forbidden from speaking her own language.

“The nun would hit us on the head with a ruler and said you cannot speak that language,” says Oelke.

While Northern Michif was widely





used in the community, Oelke says she stopped using the language when she moved south to Saskatoon in the 1970s, mainly because there was no one to talk to. Many people in her age group lost the language or never learned it because there was so much prejudice against Métis people in the south. In the central part of Saskatchewan, many families hid their Michif language and declared themselves French. Oelke didn't teach her five children the language beyond a few words and phrases. As a single parent, sometimes working two jobs, "it was quicker and easier to use English. For me to teach them [Michif] was hard."

In recent years, Oelke has been asked to share her knowledge of Northern Michif. Last year, École College Park School in Saskatoon obtained a SaskCulture grant and hired her to teach Michif. The children enjoyed the class and picked up words and phrases, but not enough to carry on a conversa-

tion. She says a couple of months of instruction is not long enough to create fluent language speakers.

"It should be taught consistently, not just eight weeks," she says, wondering, "Is the language going to stay with them?"

Oelke is just one of the many people working to revitalize Michif.

At the Gabriel Dumont Institute, curriculum developer David Morin helps produce Michif phone apps, books (including illustrated children's books), transcribed recordings and other Michif learning resources, many of which are available for free on the organization's Virtual Museum website. And because Michif was traditionally an oral language, the institute includes an audio component with nearly all of its Michif resources. Fleury translates and records many of these resources. It's a painstaking process that's sometimes slowed by his busy schedule.

Fleury is also working on record-

ing an 11,500-word Michif dictionary and phrase book he wrote years ago. In Michif's 200-year existence, it has been committed to the page only in recent decades, and there is no standardized spelling. Though some work has been done to create a standardized orthography, it hasn't been widely adopted, and different Michif speakers have come up with their own phonetic spellings. Fleury is also working with educator Angie Caron to create a two-year, 10-course Indigenous language certificate program with the University of Saskatchewan he says will include at least three classes in Michif. A certificate course is also in the planning stages at the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teachers Education Program at the University of Regina.

In Saskatoon, the public and Catholic school systems have each appointed an elementary school to have a Métis focus, bringing snippets of the language into the children's daily lives. In Île-à-la-Crosse, Northern Michif is a regular feature of life at Rossignol High School and on the community radio station, where broadcaster Robert Merasty speaks the language for about five hours a day. Back in Regina, a Michif opera called "Riel: Heart of the North" premiered in the fall of 2019, marking the first time the language has been an integral part of a major orchestral and vocal project. Online, SkyBlue Morin's Michif Cree Language page on Facebook shows how the language is a living thing that can be used to describe the world today.



Louise Oelke (LEFT), who grew up speaking Northern Michif in Île-à-la-Crosse, Sask., is now a sought-after Michif teacher, while Elder Grace Zoldy (OPPOSITE, left) has helped learners such as Heather Souter (RIGHT) in a mentor-apprentice program.

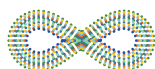




She posts dozens of simple videos made with her iPhone, including some in which she walks through her community and comments on things along the way in Michif. Her posts include transcripts of the Michif Cree words heard in the video, along with English translations.

Yet Fleury and others agree that while books, social media and classes are useful for raising awareness and sparking the passion to learn a language, efforts to save the language are missing huge swaths of human activity.

“There’s no more using the language in hunting... in working on a farm, in butchering, fishing, in family, caring, love, legends. It’s not used. There’s a very small basics of the language that’s used today,” says Fleury. “If we don’t bank all that terminology, we have no more language.”



**ENTER THE MENTOR-APPRENTICE** program and language documentation. Mentor-apprentice, the one-on-one immersion technique developed by Leanne Hinton, Matt Steele and Nancy Steele Richardson, who also wrote the mentor-apprentice bible, *How to Keep Your Language Alive: A Commonsense Approach to One-on-One Language Learning*, pairs a fluent speaker of a language that is no longer commonly spoken with a younger learner in a home or other culturally appropriate setting. There, the two speak only the language they’re focused on. Mentor speakers learn to convey messages without using English, and apprentices learn a few basic rescue questions and

how to indicate a query with pictures or gestures.

Through the program, students get direction from Elders while also taking responsibility for their learning, preparing questions in areas of study, rather than waiting to be taught. A lesson might have the mentor making a pot of tea, with the apprentice prompting commentary about filling the kettle with water, lighting the stove, heating the water until it boils and so on. Writing notes during sessions is frowned upon, as apprentices must remain fully engaged in the focus language, but they are asked to keep audio recordings so they can listen and re-listen to lessons outside of sessions to continue their learning.

Heather Souter found the mentor-apprentice method through speaking with Bakker. Growing up in Vancouver,





her father told her about their Métis history and culture, but there were no Cree or Michif classes at the University of British Columbia in the late 1970s when she attended. In the early 2000s, Souter was working as an interpreter and translator in Japan when she discovered Bakker and contacted him — a conversation that changed her life. Bakker’s work had contributed to a growing pride among Métis people, many of whom had been raised by parents and grandparents who had suffered violent racism and taught their children not to draw attention to their heritage.

The linguist pointed Souter to the mentor-apprentice method and connected her with Michif-speaking Elders Rita Flamand and Grace Zoldy. When they agreed to teach her, she took both of them and fellow learner J.C. Schmidt to California to learn the mentor-apprentice program from Hinton and Richardson.

Souter also studied with other Indigenous language revitalization experts in the U.S. before moving to Camperville, Man., to apprentice with Zoldy and Flamand (the latter died in 2016). Souter went on to do a master’s degree in Indigenous language revitalization in Saskatoon through the University of Victoria and partnered with local speakers, including Verna Demontigny, to start a non-profit group, Prairies to Woodlands Indigenous Language Revitalization Circle, and to train mentor-apprentice pairs, mostly relatives who have the benefit of relationship, trust and access to each other.

Demontigny grew up in a road allowance community near Brandon, Man., and spoke only Michif until she began school. As much as she loved speaking her language, Demontigny did not teach her children Michif because she didn’t want them to suffer the ridicule and discrimination she had endured.

Though she didn’t pass the language to her children, she has become a voice for Métis culture and language, giving school and other public presentations. When the revitalization circle received funding to run a mentor-apprentice program, Demontigny and her son Elvis were among six pairs who signed up. They have spent up to 12 hours per week for the past two years living in the language.

“You’re literally not speaking English at all, just pointing or using pictures or cooking or shopping, doing the laundry. There’s steps: you sort the laundry, this pile is white, there’s colours. It’s a lesson all itself,” she says. “We learn the language through everyday living.”

Demontigny has seen Elvis’s confidence grow as his understanding and ability expands. “He’s proud now because he knows the language and because the culture comes [with it]. He never realized it was our culture he lived. It gives him a lot of pride. It makes me feel proud. I fulfilled my obligation to him because now he knows who he is,” she says.

Elvis is now teaching his daughter Michif, while Demontigny is passing the language on to her other son and his family.

Along the way, Souter met Dale McCreery, who was in the first semester of his master’s degree in linguistics at the University of Victoria. Souter recruited him to the project, and linguist Nicole Rosen asked him to also document the Michif language for future learners, which led him to apprentice with Grace Zoldy. McCreery was the ideal candidate for the two-jobs-in-one position. At 26, he already spoke five languages and he had grown up listening to his Métis grandfather speaking some of the Cree words he remembered. McCreery had taught himself some Cree over the years from books his grandmother had given him.





When he started university, he received some Métis student funding that brought his grandfather to tears.

“He said, ‘it’s the first time being a half-breed has ever done any good for anyone in my family,’” says McCreery.

In preparation for his 2009 summer of immersion in Michif, McCreery brushed up on his Cree, which provided a foundation in the complex verbs used in Michif. McCreery stayed at Zoldy’s cosy house on the edge of Camperville, near Lake Winnipegosis, for about four months and returned twice over the next two years, doing the intense and rare work of learning the language while formally documenting it for future learners.

“Our goal wasn’t just to learn. It was to make recordings of all the learnings that would be comprehensive enough that another learner could come by afterward and listen to them and learn the language themselves,” he says.

McCreery, now a PhD candidate focused on best practices in language documentation for the purpose of effective teaching, says Michif is on the brink of “going to sleep,” the term linguists use instead of saying a language is disappearing or dying. And with so few elderly Michif speakers, focusing on classroom teaching is not the best use of scarce language revitalization resources, he says. Learners need intensive time using the language with fluent speakers. Likewise, books and social media posts are excellent for sparking the passion to learn a language but, in and of themselves, will not create fluent speakers. At best, 50 or even a few hundred hours of instruction will produce a beginner speaker: fluency takes thousands of hours of conversation and study, says McCreery.

The mentor-apprentice method is the most immersive experience now available for adults wanting to learn a



language with few remaining speakers and is the “gold star” in teaching endangered languages, says Sonya Bird, an associate professor in linguistics at the University of Victoria and an expert in language revitalization. Equally important is large-scale documentation of the spoken word to provide teachers with a source of the language to work with when the current speakers have passed on. This kind of documentation requires specialized training, different from those of the average language learner. Doing it well requires a learner to spend time with the mentor, followed by time away from them listening to recordings of the sessions and returning with questions that will lead to deeper understandings of the language.

“To really document thoroughly is hugely time-consuming, and it’s a lot of effort both for the apprentice and for the mentors during the sessions,” says Bird. “If the apprentice is not being paid to be part of the team, they probably have some other job, and

Dale McCreery (OPPOSITE), picking berries in Bella Coola, B.C., says language fluency requires thousands of hours of study, which Verna Demontigny (ABOVE) is helping facilitate through a non-profit organization she co-founded.

there’s just not enough time in the day to do that kind of work.”

It’s a full-time, skilled occupation that requires living wherever the speaker lives, however inconvenient that may be. And family members may be the best candidates for the method. With Michif, however, many of the remaining speakers have not regularly used their language for years. For some, it’s too late for them to act as mentors, given the hours of intense mental work necessary.

Bird says what’s needed now are funded teams of committed language speakers and learners, linguists to properly document the spoken language, classroom teachers who know the pedagogical needs and someone to administer such a program.





The Qu'Appelle Valley, Sask., (LEFT) is home to the Lebret Farm (ABOVE, at harvest time in 1946), a spot where Michif was brought to life and today a site of a revitalization camp.

McCreery had the skills to record about 500 hours of Michif in Camperville, and he knows there are more recordings out there, but he says thousands more hours of systematically gathered conversation are needed to capture as much of the spoken language as possible.

Since his time in Camperville, McCreery has brought his knowledge of the mentor-apprentice method and language documentation to his current work with the last generation of speakers of Nuxalk, the language of the First Peoples along British Columbia's Bella Coola River and the surrounding area. Since 2012, he has spent thousands of hours building relationships with Elders, helping them to breathe life back into their language. It can take months or even years with a dedicated learner for an Elder to regain fluency, but it is possible to reawaken language in people who, when they began, could barely utter a phrase. McCreery has seen some of these Elders remember phrases they heard in childhood.

Bird, McCreery and Souter all believe fully funding mentor-apprentice programs with documentation is the last, best chance to create real Michif

speakers capable of transmitting the language, while also systematically capturing the complexity and nuances of language for independent learners in the future. Though McCreery says the mentor-apprentice method isn't for everyone, his and Souter's own language proficiency has shown that it does work. But Souter has had only limited success in obtaining funding for such projects. One challenge? As crucial as language is, organizations are not allowed to pay learners with federal language grants because apprenticeship, even to preserve endangered Indigenous languages, is classified as training and therefore a provincial responsibility.

"None of the money we get from Heritage Canada [for language revitalization] can be used to pay the apprentices for embodying the languages of their ancestors for this important work they're doing," says Souter.

"It would be nice to have real support for serious learners, as well as serious support for ongoing documentation," adds McCreery.

Bird is also concerned that sometimes groups are hesitant to work with linguists because of the history of

colonial and unethical practices of academic experts.

Glen McCallum, president of the Métis Nation–Saskatchewan, says he is satisfied with the expertise of the Elders in teaching the language. He points to relationships the Métis government in Saskatchewan established with the University of Saskatchewan to plan for the advancement of a Michif language certificate program. Between 2012 to 2019, the Métis government in Saskatchewan received about \$1.2 million from the federal government, which they decided to use for Michif language revitalization, and in part turned to Elder speakers to guide a project with *Canadian Geographic*. The initiative includes translating the Métis volume of the *Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada* into Heritage Michif and creating podcasts highlighting Michif language, a Michif word-of-the-day campaign and a documentary on Métis culture and Michif language, as well as a variety of additional education resources and tools.

The project is important for raising awareness among Canadians that Michif is the only language born of a combination of the First People and newcomers, says Charlene Bearhead, director of reconciliation for The Royal Canadian Geographical Society, *Canadian*



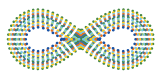


*Geographic's* publisher, and a former education lead for the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and for the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation. "If that's not a reason for 'national pride,'" says Bearhead, "I'm not sure what is."

She says governments need to value the preservation of Indigenous languages and take responsibility for adjusting Western mainstream funding criteria to fully fund mentor-apprentice programs. Ironically, a main stumbling stone to funding that could save a critically endangered language is the English word "apprentice," she says, and funders need to find a different word that will encompass the work of saving the language.

Regardless, McCreery remains optimistic. "I think that before we lose all our speakers, we will have other first language speakers. And I believe that as times and situations change, a lot more people will be able to be involved, and we will have done the work necessary so that they can achieve goals of learning to speak their language."

"On the bright side, 10 years ago, language wasn't such a big thing. People were just starting to realize our languages are really important," he says. "Elders always knew that."



**SEVEN MÉTIS FIRST-YEAR** students from the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program at the University of Regina drive from the city in spring 2019 into the sloping green Qu'Appelle Valley to the historic site of the Lebert Farm, one of the places where, in the days of the bison hunt, the Bois-

Brûlés had brought life to the Michif language. Between the 1850s and 1870s, a Michif community emerged, and in the 1930s, the provincial government established a Métis farm, the remnants of which still stand: derelict buildings, houses and a large barn remain amid acres of tall grass alongside Manitoba maples, poplars, chokecherry bushes and Saskatoon bushes. For these students, the site will be used as a Michif language camp.

Every school day for three weeks, professor Russell Fayant's students join six Elder speakers to learn Michif in a modified mentor-apprentice program. Students

**'IF I COULD GET FUNDED TO LIVE WITH AN ELDER FOR A COUPLE OF MONTHS AND ACTUALLY LEARN ONE-ON-ONE WITH SOMEBODY WHO SPEAKS IT FLUENTLY, THAT WOULD BE INCREDIBLE.'**

receive an hour-long, Western-style class in language basics, such as grammar, pronunciation and conjugating verbs, before joining the "old ones" for small group activities, speaking only Michif. Three to four days are devoted to each of five language areas: greetings, kitchen and food, the land, labour and celebration. Students and Elders speak the language together as they pick medicines in the former Bois-Brûlés wintering area.

Student Dani LaValley was amazed by how much language they were able to understand in just a few days. "It was really quick, especially since all the Elders speak Michif so fluently. I felt comfortable speaking it myself. It was awesome. It got a lot more comfortable very quickly," says

LaValley. Having other students of the same age to learn with made the program fun, notes LaValley. It also provided other people to practise with outside camp. LaValley's biggest thrill, though, was speaking an unscripted sentence and being understood by the Elders.

Professor Fayant says he replaced a three-credit, 16-week in-class experience with a six-credit, three-week immersive language camp because no authentic language acquisition had happened in the traditional classroom. But as amazing as the camp is, stakeholders understand that three weeks isn't going to save the language. With the Gabriel Dumont

Institute and the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program working to start certificate language programs in Saskatchewan universities, the field of mentor-apprentice work remains open to any non-profit groups that can obtain funding to run them.

LaValley still practises phrases and reads their Michif language materials regularly. "If I could get funded to go and live with an Elder for a couple months and actually learn one-on-one with somebody who speaks it fluently, that would be incredible. We could get a lot more Michif speakers that way. But until we get there, the only options we really have are those classes or this camp once in a while," says LaValley.

"Our language is our culture. It's who we are as a people, and without our language, our culture dies. That's a big part of who we are as Métis, and it's critical we carry that on to the next generation and every generation after that." ❁

 Learn more about Métis culture and history at [indigenoupeoplesatlasofcanada.ca](http://indigenoupeoplesatlasofcanada.ca).



# SURV



PHYLLIS WEBSTAD TURNS HER RESIDENTIAL  
SCHOOL EXPERIENCE INTO A POWERFUL TOOL FOR  
RECONCILIATION THROUGH ORANGE SHIRT DAY

BY **LISA CHARLEYBOY**  
WITH PHOTOGRAPHY BY **BEN POWLESS**



# IWOR







**“A LOT OF STUDENTS** were asking me over the past few days if we were having *the* Phyllis Webstad from Orange Shirt Day to speak to us today,” says Meagan Lundgren, Altadore Elementary School’s assistant principal, to the students seated on the floor. “Please welcome *the* Phyllis Webstad from the Orange Shirt Society to talk to us about Orange Shirt Day!”

Clapping erupts and bright faces emerge from the roughly 200 students at the Calgary school’s assembly on a cold February morning. Shades of orange, from peach to pumpkin to paprika, are evident on many bodies gathered in the gymnasium. There is both an innate curiosity and comfort between the children and their guest of honour.

Webstad is the creator of Orange Shirt Day (September 30), a grass-roots movement that turned global a few years ago to commemorate the residential school experience and

honour survivors. Since September 2019, she had been touring schools across the country to share her own experience attending residential school and the importance of Orange Shirt Day, part of a project called Paths to Reconciliation, a partnership between the Orange Shirt Society, Canadian Heritage and *Canadian Geographic*, to bring her story to Canadians. When the tour finished on March 31, Webstad had travelled from Halifax to Calgary, delivering her message of reconciliation in person to more than 6,000 students and 500 adults.



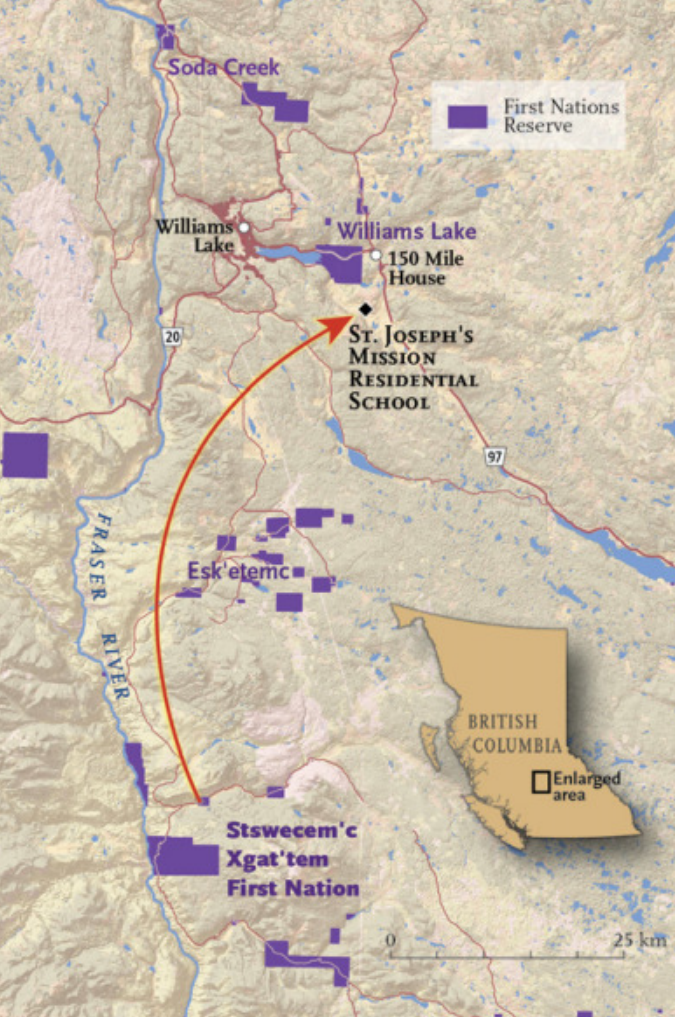
**ORANGE SHIRT DAY** started school-wide at Altadore in 2018, with Principal Kelly Christopher, although a smattering of classrooms opted in the year prior. Teachers use one of Webstad’s two published children’s



books, *The Orange Shirt Story* and *Phyllis’s Orange Shirt*, to introduce students to Webstad’s experience as a six-year-old girl going to residential school.

From 1831 to 1996, more than 130 federally funded, church-run residential schools were attended by more than 150,000 Indigenous children. The goal, as Canada’s first prime minister, John A. Macdonald, so succinctly put it, was to “take the Indian out of the child,” or forced assimilation. It was a cultural geno-





cide that has reverberated through generations of Indigenous Peoples, through intergenerational trauma. Stories stolen, stories lost, stories too horrific to tell.

Born on Dog Creek Reserve, 85 kilometres south of Williams Lake, B.C., Webstad is Northern Secwepemc (Shuswap) from the Stswecem'c Xgat'tem First Nation (Canoe Creek Indian Band). She lived with her grandmother, who in preparation for her first day of school in 1973, took her out shopping for a new outfit. Webstad carefully picked out an orange shirt that was both bright and exciting, reflecting her feelings on going to a new school.

But when she arrived at St. Joseph's Mission Residential School, just outside Williams Lake, B.C., her emotions quickly went from excitement to terror when her shirt was taken away from her. The shirt represented a piece of home, a piece of

her heart and life as she knew it. This would be the first of many atrocities and traumas she would experience during her year away from her home on the rez'.

As Webstad begins sharing her story to the students in Calgary, she asks them how many have ever had a sleepover. Many of the students raise their hands.

"Can you imagine going on a 300-night sleepover? That's what it was like for me going away to this school," she explains.

Some students' jaws drop. The analogy Webstad provides helps them understand just how difficult her experience must have been for her as a young girl. Following her 45-minute presentation, a staff member from Canadian Geographic Education uses a huge map spread across the gymnasium floor to help the students visually contextualize just how rampant residential schools were.

At St. Cyril School in Calgary (OPPOSITE), Webstad tells her story of attending residential school when she was six years old, pictured BELOW on the right with her cousin, Barbara Wycotte. A monument (ABOVE) to honour students of St. Joseph's Mission Residential School.



**WEBSTAD'S PATH** of speaking engagements, writing books and heading up the not-for-profit Orange Shirt Society is not what she envisioned for her life, especially now in her early 50s. This journey started over coffee with a friend in late April 2013 in Dog Creek Reserve, while Webstad was brainstorming what she was going to say at a media announcement for the St. Joseph's Mission Residential School Commemoration Project the next morning. She had joined the planning committee and, as a residential school survivor of





St. Joseph's, she had been asked to speak at the kick-off of a week-long series of events across the country to coincide with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's efforts to begin to right the wrongs of residential schools. Thankfully, an idea came to her in the café, coffee in hand.

"I know what I can talk about. I can talk about my first day, when Granny got me my shirt," she says she told her friend Joan Sorely.

No sooner were those words out of her mouth than Webstad broke down. It was a deeply personal story that she had never shared before, not with her husband, nor with her children. Armed with a message, Webstad now had a mission. She had less than an hour to check out local shops for an orange shirt to wear during the big announcement.

"I had nothing orange. I hate orange," she explains. "I've always hated orange."

The next day at the news event, much like her fateful first day at the residential school, Webstad was a bundle of nerves in her bright new orange shirt.

"I was to be a part of the media announcement," she says. "So, there's the Chief, and the mayor, and all these people with big titles, and

there's me, unemployed residential school survivor."

But on April 24, Webstad courageously shared her story about the orange shirt that was taken from her. Little did she know, she was about to share her story with the world.

Joan Sorely, the first person ever to hear her story that fateful evening in the coffee shop, was on the commemoration project planning committee with Webstad.

"We were generating some momentum here about the horrors of residential school, and Phyllis's story is so simple and yet powerful. And it's pretty much everybody's story. You know everybody [residential school students] lost their clothes on their first day of school," Sorely says. "I was trying to figure out how



Clockwise from LEFT: Webstad's Orange Shirt Day scrapbook; a poster announcing the first Orange Shirt Day in Williams Lake, B.C.; a photo of Webstad's grandmother, Helena, from 1935, the year she graduated from residential school.

'We chose **September** because that's when kids went back to school. That's when they were **taken away.**'

we can keep this momentum going. And I thought 'well, there's Pink Shirt Day [to take a stand against bullying] — why don't we have Orange Shirt Day?'"

And that was the genesis of

Orange Shirt Day. Over the next two days, Sorely brought her idea to the planning committee comprising representatives from the Cariboo Regional District, B.C. School District #27, the City of Williams Lake, local First Nations and others. Webstad was absent that day but was approached via email for her permission to hold an Orange Shirt Day in B.C.'s Cariboo-Chilcotin area. At the next committee meeting, they decided to have Orange Shirt Day there annually on September 30.





“We chose September because that’s when kids went back to school. That’s when they were taken away,” Webstad says, adding that it felt divinely guided. “[That fall] when I went to the TRC event in Vancouver, [I was] sitting there listening to the truths being told, and an Elder sitting not far from me was talking, and she said that September was ‘crying month’ — and I knew then that we had chosen the right day.

“We chose [the slogan] ‘every child matters’ because I talked about how I felt that I didn’t matter when I was in residential school. No matter how much I cried, nobody cared. Nobody. We weren’t hugged. We weren’t consoled. We could be half-dead and we weren’t tended to,” Webstad shares. “Every child that went to residential school, well, they all matter. Even the ones that didn’t come home, they matter. And it wasn’t until after we were using that slogan that I realized that it fits the past, the present and the future. It fits reconciliation. It’s one of

those divine things that fits in this day of reconciliation.”

On April 26, 2013, the idea of Orange Shirt Day was first presented in public at a professional development day for educators at B.C.’s School District #27. Presbyterian Minister Shannon Bell from Quesnel, B.C., happened to be there and was fired up by the idea. She approached Webstad following the event to ask if she could help her make Orange Shirt Day global.

“Go ahead, help make it global,” Webstad told her.

Webstad didn’t give it much thought after that. After all, it had only been a few days since she had first shared her story and the idea of Orange Shirt Day sprouted. However, five months later, when Webstad was in Vancouver for the TRC’s Reconciliation Week at the Pacific National Exhibition grounds, she was handed a brightly coloured orange flyer. The flyer read, “Orange Shirt Day September 30,” and continued, “Wear an



Artwork with the Orange Shirt Society’s slogan hangs in the Society’s office (TOP) in Williams Lake, B.C. Webstad (ABOVE) shares more sensitive details of her residential school experience with older students.

orange shirt to honour the children who survived the Indian Residential Schools and to remember those who didn’t.” At the bottom, it directed people to an Orange Shirt Day Facebook Group and in script said, “poster done by Shannon Bell.” Webstad was floored.





Orange Shirt Day stickers at the site of St. Joseph's Mission Residential School (TOP); messages from students at Calgary's James Short Memorial School to children who went to residential schools (BOTTOM).



"I look at this card and I'm like 'What? What's going on?'" Shannon's making it global. They had thousands of these. I don't even know how many. And they were handing them out to people at the TRC event, so it hit social media," Webstad says. She then makes an explosion sound. "And then it blew up."



**SEATED AT THE BOARDROOM** table in her office in Williams Lake, B.C., where she now lives with her husband, Webstad shows me her scrapbook documenting the first year of Orange Shirt Day, all the while insisting that she's really "not a scrapbooker." She shows me just a smattering of the photos that were posted online in 2013. One photo shows a man in his 20s all

the way in Italy, flexing at the gym while wearing an orange shirt in support of Orange Shirt Day.

From unemployed to over-employed, with no more time to

scrapbook, Webstad heads the Orange Shirt Society with one part-time employee to help with administration at an office just 20 kilometres northwest of St. Joseph's. During her year there, Webstad was bussed to a different school in Williams Lake to attend classes during the day and then brought back to St. Joseph's at night to sleep. Fortunately, the following year, a school was established on Dog Creek Reserve, so she was able to return home to live with her grand-

mother and sleep safely in her bed again. Her mother and grandmother were not so lucky — they both attended the residential school for 10 years each. Parental visits were strictly forbidden, and they were only able to go home for one month each year. Ten years away, and only 10 months in their actual homes.

Webstad's experience is just one story from one residential school pulled from a tangled web of thousands of stories.

"Everybody has a story," Webstad says. "Orange Shirt Day is not just about me — it's about everybody. For some reason, my story is the door opener, but there's thousands [of stories]."

Webstad's message is helping to alter the public consciousness to include the true history behind Canada's colonial past. Over the past seven years, Orange Shirt Day has opened the door to conversations in classrooms, corporations and communities about residential schools,

'Go ahead, help make it **global.**'

reconciliation, and the intergenerational impacts that reverberate across Canada.

In 2025, the first students who have had the opportunity to acknowledge and observe Orange Shirt Day since kindergarten will graduate from Canadian high schools. The Phyllis Webstad is particularly looking forward to the two 2025 graduating classes in Williams Lake, B.C., where her story will have transformed tragedy to triumph, one orange shirt at a time. 🌐



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# WOLV



# ERINE

TRACKING THE ELUSIVE TRICKSTER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **PETER MATHER**  
WITH TEXT BY **OSSIE MICHELIN**







**IN INNU CULTURE**, the wolverine is a trickster, the central character in many dramatic capers. Sometimes the wolverine is a hero, saving Innu families from vicious cannibals; other times he's a scoundrel tricking both the Innu and his fellow animals. Either way, it's guaranteed that he's getting into mischief.

Filmmaker Christine Poker, who comes from the Innu community of Natuashish in northern Labrador, grew up hearing stories around the tent stove about the conniving *Kuekuatsheu*, the name for the wolverine in her language of Innu-aimun.

For the Innu, Kuekuatsheu is more than just a character in a story; he is almost a part of the community. Elders still talk of him as if they know him personally, as if they witnessed his antics themselves. Poker says she remembers her grandparents telling her stories of how Kuekuatsheu would steal food from their camp.

"My grandparents said that when the Innu people started dying and

leaving the country [to settle in larger communities], Kuekuatsheu left with them," Poker explains. She notes that when she is in her community with her grandkids, they're less interested in hearing the stories of the wolverine. But that all changes when they are on the Land. In their tent at night, the young people are eager to hear the stories of Kuekuatsheu.

It is not difficult to determine where the idea of the wolverine being a trickster comes from. Though reclusive, these animals are also renowned for being curious and sneaky. They have been known to steal bait from traps, ransack cabins and elude hunters. If you see a wolverine in the wild, consider yourself lucky — they tend to avoid areas inhabited by people, have an extremely low population density and are most active from dusk to dawn when most people are asleep.

Although they resemble small bow-legged bears with bushy tails, wolverines are actually the largest terrestrial members of the *Mustelidae*

family, which includes weasels, badgers and otters. Adult males can weigh up to 14 kilograms, and adult females can weigh up to nine kilograms. They have small ears, a stubby nose and sharp teeth, as well as sharp semi-retractable claws. They are also known to be ferocious, with a bark as bad as their bite. Their growl can best be described as a cross between a lion's roar and the engine of a small plane — it's a startling sound to hear when you're walking alone in the woods and no doubt adds to the creature's mystique.

Wolverines play a generalist's role in their ecosystem and will eat just about anything, from berries and

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*Ossie Michelin (@osmich) is an award-winning Inuk freelance journalist from North West River, Labrador. He writes about Indigenous Peoples and the North with a capital N. Peter Mather (@matherpeter) is a freelance photojournalist based out of Whitehorse.*

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vegetation to meat and carrion. They hunt smaller animals — their favourite meal is the beaver — but are often scavengers, eating the remains of larger animals such as moose and caribou that have been taken down by wolves. There are, however, also verified accounts of wolverines killing large ungulates such as deer and caribou by stalking them over long periods, exhausting their prey before going in for the kill.

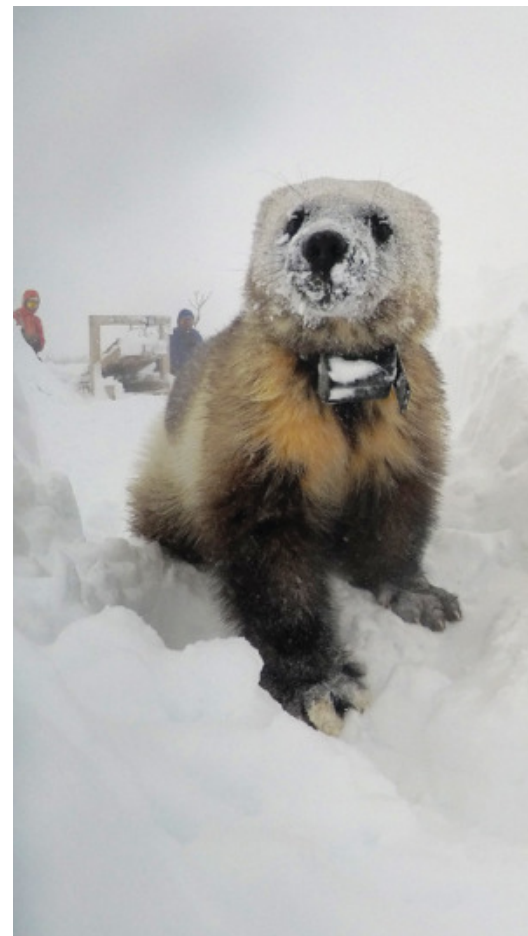
One of the wolverine's greatest survival adaptations is its bite; the muscle and bone structures in their heads give them a powerful jaw for such a small creature. A special upper molar at the back of their mouths is rotated 90 degrees toward the inside of their mouth, allowing them to chomp through bone to get at the marrow inside. They have no problem tearing through frozen flesh. As a result, the scat of wolverines is easy to identify because it's full of bone fragments.

Wolverines are active year-round, although like most forest life they are

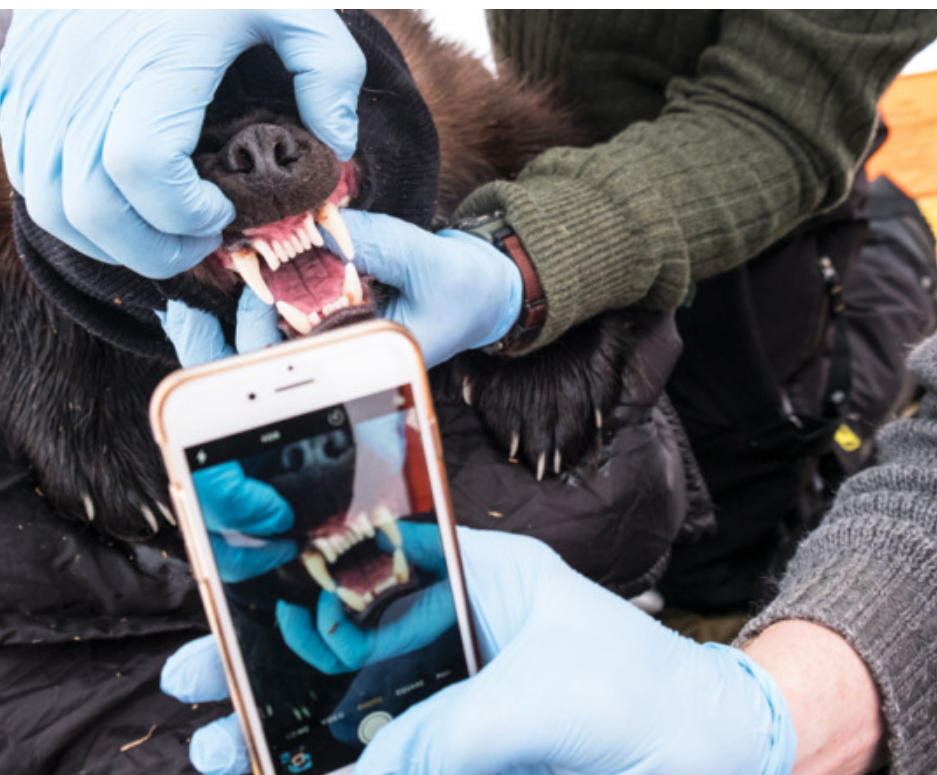
Clockwise from TOP LEFT: A wolverine runs along a ridgeline on Alaska's North Slope; wolverine numbers have not recovered from historic overhunting; the species is most active at night; a female pauses after being fitted with a satellite collar by the Wildlife Conservation Society.

quieter in the winter. They breed in early summer and give birth to one or two kits in the late winter or early spring. Their thick coats protect them from the frost and cold, and their wide snowshoe-like feet are perfectly adapted for moving through deep snow. They need that deep snow cover to insulate their dens from harsh winter conditions. While these adaptations are important for the wolverine's survival, they also make them susceptible to the impacts of global warming.

That thick, warm fur that wicks away frost once made wolverine pelts a prized part of the North American fur trade. Their fur, which was often used to line the hoods of







parkas, once led to the animal being trapped in great numbers. Their populations in southern Canada have never fully recovered.

Indeed, though their range once stretched across much of southern Canada, they are now largely found in the boreal forests, mountain ranges and tundras that stretch across much of the North. With an average of just three to 10 animals typically found in a thousand square kilometres, a single wolverine can maintain a territory of hundreds of square kilometres, walking great distances every day to patrol for food and to drive away any would-be competition. A dominant male wolverine will overlap its territory only with one or two females with which it breeds.

Like all the animals in the *Mustelidae* family, wolverines have very





A wolverine scavenges the remains of a bison in central Yukon (TOP). A biologist takes a picture of a sedated wolverine's teeth (LEFT) to help identify it and determine its age and health, while another is weighed, measured and fitted with a GPS satellite collar (RIGHT).

well-developed scent glands, which they use to mark their territories to warn other wolverines to stay away. That's why young wolverines, which remain with their family for up to a year, will often travel hundreds of kilometres to establish a territory far away from other wolverines.

It was once believed that wolverines lived solitary lives, getting together only to breed during the summer. Although this is mainly true, researchers using GPS collars to track the animals have discovered







Clockwise from TOP LEFT: Wolverines use snow holes as resting sites, to raise kits and, possibly, as places to cache food; a wolverine in Yukon's Tombstone Territorial Park; wolverines have traditionally been thought of as loners, but new GPS data shows that both wolverine parents sometimes hunt with their offspring.

that wolverines are more social than originally thought.

Matthew Scraftford, an ecologist with Wildlife Conservation Society Canada, has been studying wolverines in northern Ontario for more than three years. In that time, his GPS data has shown both wolverine parents hunting and scavenging with their offspring for days at a time. "They're a family unit," Scraftford explains. "They're learning from each other and teaching their offspring. Before a lot of this good GPS data and cameras started coming in, we thought of them as loners — and

they are — but they do spend a lot of time roaming around the landscape with each other."

A healthy wolverine population is a strong indicator of a healthy ecosystem, Scraftford says, since the species requires a variety of foods gathered from large intact areas of interconnected wilderness — in other words, they need lots of types of food and lots of space to roam.

"We have found that in as far as they can withstand some human development, they're not purely a wilderness species," says Scraftford. "You do find wolverines in developed landscapes and

forestry working landscapes. They don't need pure wilderness to exist, although they have low density and low reproductive rates, so you have to watch what happens to their territory, or else they're going to blink out of existence."

Today, the biggest threat to wolverines is habitat loss and human development. Researchers are working with Indigenous communities across the North to track and monitor wolverine populations to better understand how their habitats are being affected by human encroachment. The trickster hero — ferocious, clever and strong — will need all of its ingenuity to continue to flourish. 🍄



See more of Peter Mather's photos of wolverines at [cangeo.ca/jf21/wolverines](https://cangeo.ca/jf21/wolverines).





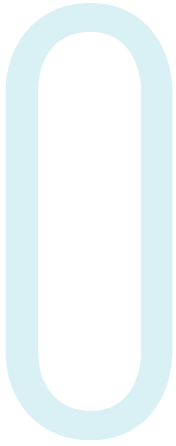


# INDIGENOUS GUARDIANS OF THE NUXALK

How one British Columbia First Nation is building its vision of the guardian conservation model being adopted by Indigenous Peoples across Canada

**TEXT AND PHOTOS BY JULIAN BRAVE NOISECAT**





**ON A MAY MORNING** in British Columbia's Bella Coola Valley, Clyde Tallio, a long-limbed 31-year-old Nuxalk intellectual, and I walk a dirt road that gives way to a forest path up a bank from Thorsen Creek, swollen with spring melt. As we slip beneath the forest canopy, we move between worlds: from rural Western Canada to sacred Nuxalk territory. These are the lands of Tallio's people, who are emerging as protagonists in an Indigenous epic unfolding on this unconquered expanse of Pacific coast.

Tallio calls out in his Nuxalk tongue, an endangered language with fewer than 10 fluent speakers that he spent years studying instead of attending university. He announces our presence to the animals, ancestors and spirits, clearing our path and asking for protection. We turn our bodies in a clockwise circle, the same way dancers spin before entering the dance floors of the big houses that are the spiritual hearts of Indigenous communities along the coast. Thorsen Creek, or *Squmalh* in Nuxalk, a tributary of the lower Bella Coola River cut into the valley by retreating Pleistocene glaciers, connects us to Nuxalk creation.

Ahead, watching us from the rainforest's soggy verdant floor, are dozens of ancient petroglyphs etched into rocks lining the stepped trail. The glyphs, carved in stone thousands of years ago (estimates range from 5,000 to 10,000 years), date roughly to the Mid-Holocene, a period of significant ecological change that made resources like western red cedar — an essential material for building structures, wares and artworks — more abundant and accessible to coastal peoples. Tallio dates the glyphs to “the time of the fixing of the Earth.” In poetic, if not archeological terms, he might be right.

Tallio describes each image as we ascend the hill: the guardian caretaker of this place; the frog, a transformer who takes many forms in life; raven, the meddlesome trickster whose follies and

transgressions animate many Nuxalk stories; the four ancestors representing the four generations who survived the four catastrophes (the falling of the sky, the burning of the world, the flooding of the land and the famine of the people). Like biblical plagues, these calamities led to the creation of Nuxalk laws, or, as Tallio puts it: “the way of being, being at the place.”

The Nuxalk followed and enforced these ancient decrees in every aspect of their social life, from summer fisheries to winter ceremonies. The explorer Alexander Mackenzie learned just how serious the Nuxalk were about their laws when he travelled the Bella Coola River in 1793. Admiring a large fishing weir, Mackenzie asked for a closer look but was refused as a visitor unpractised in the Nuxalk way.

The village edict appears stern, but across the generations, laws like these, which controlled access and mandated fair distribution, fostered, in the summation of historian Lissa K. Wadewitz, “a world negotiated for the benefit of both salmon and people.” Tallio and others are working to bring Nuxalk rights back to this place and many more throughout Nuxalk territory. In the coming years, many places in the

Nuxalk homeland, roughly from Dean Channel in the north to South Bentinck Arm in the south and King Island in the west to the Bella Coola Valley in the east, may come under Nuxalk jurisdiction for the first time in more than a century.

“As a much older nation,” Tallio tells me in his professorial tone, “we have to show Canada how to manage these resources.”

**AT THE NUXALK BAND**, I meet Wally Webber, Chief Councillor of the Nuxalk, whose grey shoulder-length hair and plain black-rimmed spectacles make him

look like an aging hipster. Webber heads the Nuxalk elected government responsible for policy and welfare on the reserve. He also holds the hereditary title *Snixiluulhla*, a name that hails from “Sunny Village,” the land the band office stands on today.

We are joined by Ernie Tallio, the stout and soft-spoken manager of the Guardian Watchmen, a Nuxalk environmental stewardship program. The three of us pile into his white GMC pickup and ride down to the wharf. At the docks, Blair Hans, 21, and Keith Windsor, 37, dressed in khaki Watchmen uniforms, are preparing their vessel. Clyde Tallio is here too.

**‘As you learn to connect and dance with these beings, you’re able to learn more about yourself and what it means to be human.’**

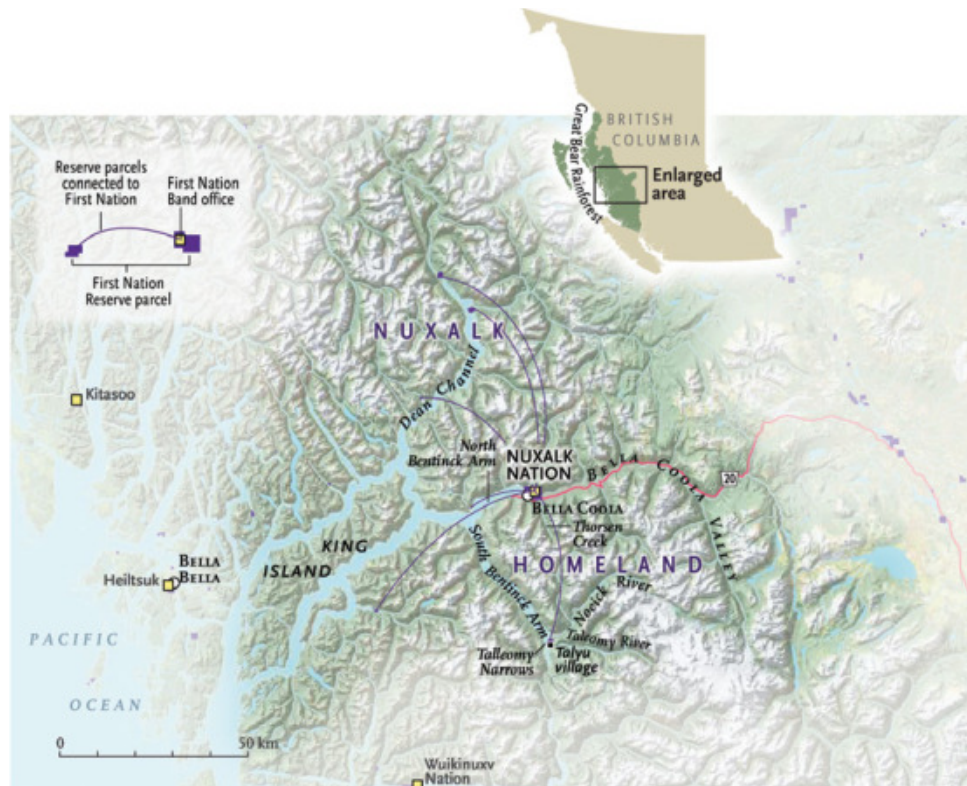


From April to October, Ernie Tallio, Hans, Windsor and three other members of the Watchmen patrol the labyrinthine inlets, islands and fiords of their Nuxalk homeland.

The Guardian Watchmen program provides secure jobs to First Nations people in a region with few. In the 1990s, logging corporations pulled out of Bella Coola. Combined with the steady decline of the fisheries, the departure of the forestry industry left many in the community unemployed. According to Statistics Canada, more than one in four workers and more than 40 per cent of men are unemployed. More than half of the population can't work because there aren't enough jobs. But the Guardian Watchmen program provides more than just employment. As eyes and ears watching over water and land, the Watchmen are enacting a simple but potentially revolutionary principle: the return of territories and resources to Indigenous protection.

"This is how governance and sovereignty, if you will, are being exercised by the nations," says Paul Kariya, a Coastal First Nations senior policy advisor, in his 16th-floor office in downtown Vancouver later that week. "They're saying we have to coexist. They're saying we have to protect the environment in a way that creates longevity and opportunity for us."

The Nuxalk established their Guardian Watchmen program in 2009 as part of the broader Great Bear Initiative negotiated by First Nations and the government of British Columbia. Through the Coastal First Nations alliance, the Nuxalk cooperate with eight other communities to protect, monitor and restore natural and cultural resources. The Coastal First Nations Guardian Watchmen program is funded by the \$58-million Coast Funds endowment. They also benefit from \$6 million in annual revenue from carbon credits created through the preservation of the temperate old-growth Great Bear Rainforest, which acts as a vast repository for climate-change-causing carbon dioxide emissions.



The Nuxalk program was inspired by the path-breaking Haida Watchmen initiative formalized in 1981. Today, Guardian programs draw on the Haida model, the Indigenous Rangers program piloted in Australia in 2007 and a growing network of similar initiatives in Canada. The Indigenous Guardians Toolkit, developed by The Nature Conservancy of Canada in conjunction with Indigenous partners, counts more than 45 communities conducting Guardian activities across Canada. The 2017 federal budget includes \$25 million over five years to fund more pilots.

Under the wispy morning fog, the Guardian Watchmen, Webber, Clyde Tallio and I set out onto the choppy waters of North Bentinck Arm. As we travel, Clyde Tallio narrates the Nuxalk history and place names of his territory. Below us, on the seafloor of the ocean-flooded valley of North Bentinck, lies the house of the chief of the undersea world, Q'umakwa, whose name we do not say out on the water.

While Clyde tracks our patrol through linguistic history, Ernie uses an app on his standard issue Guardian Watchmen tablet to collect data. Last year, the Nuxalk Guardian Watchmen traversed 14,723 kilometres of territory on 139 patrols. They are well on their way to exceeding those numbers this year. The data they collect is uploaded to the cloud where First Nations policy-makers combine it with science,


Like biblical plagues, these calamities led to the creation of Nuxalk laws, or, as Tallio puts it: **'the way of being, being at the place.'**

analytics and traditional Indigenous governance systems. Indigenous governance and environmental science often advance in tandem. The Nuxalk Guardian Watchmen recently helped to wrap up a bear study that advanced knowledge about bear behaviours and populations

in their territory.

The Watchmen are often the only authorities out on the land. They rarely encounter BC Parks or Fisheries and Oceans Canada rangers because those understaffed agencies can't afford regular patrols. As a more constant and reliable presence, the Watchmen are



A young man with short brown hair, wearing a dark grey hoodie with red accents and khaki pants, is sitting on a log in a lush green forest. He is looking down with a contemplative expression. Behind him stands a tall, slender totem pole, the Snuxyaltwa, which is intricately carved with several figures and faces, some painted in blue and red. The forest is dense with tall evergreen trees and vibrant green foliage, creating a serene and natural setting.

Clyde Tallio of the Nuxalk Nation  
pauses to reflect at the base of the  
Snuxyaltwa totem pole, which his  
people erected to reassert rights to  
their ancient homelands.





increasingly called upon to uphold not just Indigenous and environmental laws, but also public safety. Just three days earlier, the Nuxalk Watchmen rescued three teens who capsized their kayaks near the mouth of the Bella Coola River. And last November, they recovered the body of a man whose houseboat was ripped to pieces by a ferocious windstorm.

Later in the season, the Watchmen encounter sport fishers, wildlife viewers, commercial trawlers and professional prawners. They give the visitors they meet a friendly reminder that this is Nuxalk territory and ask that all respect the Nuxalk way. Before the British Columbia government banned the trophy grizzly hunt in 2017, the Watchmen would run into bear hunters on occasion. When they did, they did not shy away from expressing their opposition. Now that resident grizzlies are mostly safe from people, local residents need to be protected from the bears who wander into town. A month after I depart Bella Coola, a grizzly sow mauls a man in his backyard. The Watchmen sometimes assist with bear patrols, aiming to minimize human-grizzly run-ins. Through their actions, the Guardian Watchmen are steadily building a case for Indigenous governance of this coast. And among the public, the Guardian Watchmen are gaining favour with fishermen, tourists and the locals they encounter on patrol every day.

As we near the end of *Ats'aaxlh*, or South Bentinck Arm, where the Taleomy and Noeick rivers converge into the inlet at Taleomy Narrows, we approach the ancient village of Talyu, the home of Clyde and Ernie's Tallio ancestors, the Talyuunc "Descendants of the Queen of the Undersea," a Nuxalk borough that included the homes of not only the Tallio

Clyde Tallio (TOP), one of fewer than 10 fluent speakers of Nuxalk, joins Nuxalk Coastal Guardian Watchmen member Keith Windsor (MIDDLE) and Chief Council of the Nuxalk Wally Webber (BOTTOM) on a patrol.



but also the Hans and Snow lineages. An Indian agent evicted the last of the Snow family, who maintain the hereditary title of *Snuxyaltwa*, “The Light of the Universe,” in the 1930s. He threatened to take the children and prosecute the parents if the family did not relocate to Bella Coola. Loggers burned what remained of the village not long after. Interfor, a logging corporation, clear-cut this part of South Bentinck Arm in the 2000s.

We board a dinghy to make our way to shore. In a clearing at the edge of the forest, a massive totem pole rises amid the trees. As the Nuxalk reassert rights to their homelands, they have erected poles like this one — traditionally used as grave and boundary markers — throughout their territory. In 2009, the Snow family hosted a potlatch to raise this pole, carved by Harry Schooner and his assistants, to reassert rights to this place. The pole tells the *Snuxyaltwa Smayusta*, or origin story, depicting the loon, the whale, grizzly, thunderbird, sun and angel Yulm, the eldest of the four mythic Nuxalk carpenters who helped Creator make the world.

We gather around the pole, peering up at its intricate carved and painted black, blue and red designs. Windsor runs his hand over a fresh gash on Yulm’s belly, where a grizzly has marked its own claims. We linger awhile. Clyde takes a seat at the base of the *Snuxyaltwa* pole and lights a cigarette. He bows his head, looking down between his feet at the muddy turf of his ancestor’s home and exhales.

**AS CLYDE TALLIO** and I crest Thorsen Creek trail on that May morning, we approach the last of the rock carvings. Tallio points to his favourite: a dancer with wide eyes and circular orbs fluttering above his bulbous cranium. Tallio tells us that these circles symbolize the

dancer’s strivings and achievements. “The Nuxalk word for human being is *Tl’msta*,” he says. “*Tl’ms* means to awaken, to aspire, to achieve, to accomplish, to be aware, and then *ta* means real thing: a real human being awakening, becoming aware, aspiring to achieve and accomplish.”

Beyond the *tl’msta* figure stand carvings representing the spirits of the next world, or *si’ukws*. *Si’ukws* are like a cross between patron saints and platonic forms. They care for particular parts of the world — the mountain, the forest, the trees, the rocks — but they also epitomize emotions and ideals like anger, laughter, medicine and the hunt. Nuxalk spiritual leaders came to this place to learn their dances. “As you go through their story and understand them and learn to connect and dance with these beings, you’re able to learn more about yourself and what it means to be human,” Tallio explains.

These rocks inscribed with epistemologies that have endured across millennia gesture at something more permanent than paper edicts, digital currencies and national governments, connecting Tallio and me to the hands and truths of the First Peoples of this place: another way of being, another potential. Tallio and the Nuxalk are set on carrying this, the imperative of their history, their roots and their people forward.

There will be tension, undoubtedly, as residents of the Bella Coola Valley and lawmakers in Victoria and Ottawa reckon with these resurgent Nuxalk, their renewed authority, their hereditary leadership and their Guardian Watchmen.

But there will be cooperation, too. Three weeks after I depart Nuxalk

territory, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau travels to Prince Rupert, B.C., a port town north of Bella Coola, to sign a reconciliation agreement with 14 coastal First Nations, including the Nuxalk, promoting collaboration in the management and protection of the coastal ecosystem.

“The First Nations of the Pacific North and Central Coast have been protecting Canada’s waters for millennia,” Prime Minister Trudeau says in a statement. “Working together, we will protect and preserve the Pacific North Coast, and we will advance reconciliation along the way.”

Climate change, igniting boreal forests, melting mountaintop glaciers, warming North Pacific waters and shift-

ing political currents will undoubtedly complicate this unfolding story. But whether this new geological age marks a catastrophe, a beginning or both is not yet written in stone.

At the crest of the trail, the threshold where we greet carvings depicting spirits of the next world, there is a bowl worn into the rocks and marked with the four directions, where visitors can pray and ask for blessings. One by one, Tallio and I touch the water in the bowl,

asking for blessings as we step out into the uncertainty of the next world that lies beyond. Someday, maybe the Nuxalk will dance the stories of these ancestors, the ones who survived the catastrophe of colonization and navigated the turbulent waters of self-determination and reconciliation to restore their way of being to this world and this place. 🌐

The program provides more than just employment. The Watchmen are enacting a simple but potentially revolutionary principle: **the return of territories and resources to Indigenous protection.**

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*Julian Brave NoiseCat (@jnoisecat) is a contributing editor to Canadian Geographic. He is a member of the Canim Lake Band Tsq’escen in British Columbia.*

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Read more about the Nuxalk Nation’s self-determination at [cangeo.ca/nd18/nuxalk](http://cangeo.ca/nd18/nuxalk).





## Buffy Sainte-Marie

The Cree singer-songwriter explains what makes Saskatchewan's Qu'Appelle Valley so special to her

I'm originally from Saskatchewan, but I didn't grow up there, didn't have a consciousness of it until I was reunited with family in the Qu'Appelle Valley. My favourite season in the valley is summer because it's so very beautiful. I remember sunsets that were blue and purple and red, and a landscape golden with mustard and wheat. To have all that flat prairie and then see those rolling hills with those spectacular colours has always given me not only a sense of home and family but also of holiness.

I've always been interested in people's relationship to the creator, and when my dad and I would talk about that, he would always start by saying, "We'll go to a clean spot," which we'd do, then we'd pray and then we'd talk. But it wasn't like some stiff movie-Indian thing — it was always this precious, gentle, almost feminine feel for the mind behind all nature. There's so little that has been properly described to non-Indian people about our relationship to the land through a sense of the sacred, and that was something I always loved discussing with the people who had been raised with teepees and buckboards, the people who were old when I was young, as we sat surrounded by coulees where there was sweetgrass growing.

I've written quite a few songs about this area, but I think "Soldier Blue" has lyrics apropos to my dad's idea of going to a clean spot to enjoy the connection with nature:

*Yes this is my country  
Young and growing  
free and flowing sea to sea  
Yes this is my country  
Ripe and bearing miracles  
in every pond and tree 🌿*

—As told to Harry Wilson



What's your favourite Canadian place?  
Tell us on Twitter (@CanGeo) using the  
hashtag #ShareCanGeo.



Or share it with us on Facebook  
(facebook.com/cangeo).









## Tanya Talaga

The award-winning author and journalist on her connections to the shores of Lake Superior at the Fort William First Nation, Ont.

From the top of Mount McKay — known as *Animikii-wajiw* in the Ojibwa language — you can see the Kaministiquia River, which starts north of Thunder Bay and winds its way over Kakabeka Falls and then wraps around the mountain. From up there, you can see the grain elevators that stand alongside the river and the Sleeping Giant, *Nanabijou*, sticking out into *Gichigami*, or Lake Superior, that moody wild beast of a lake, where it can be sunny, bright and beautiful one minute and all rolling clouds, gusts of wind and torrential rain the next.

The whole area has been a meeting place for Indigenous Peoples for a very long time, before the city of Thunder Bay existed and before the country of Canada existed. My family still goes back for powwows held on the mountain.

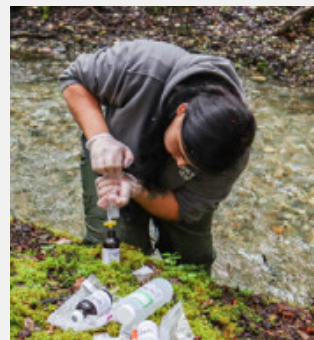
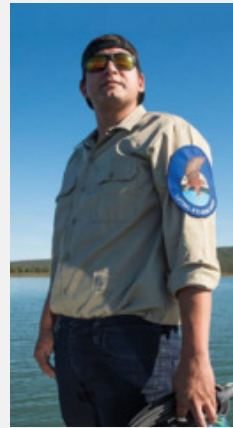
My mother grew up nearby in Raith, on the traditional territory of Fort William First Nation, my grandmother's reserve. There, it's all about water. It's a remarkable place that you can feel more than you can see because it's the Arctic watershed, the place on Turtle Island where things split and all the water goes north to Hudson Bay or south to the city. The rivers are the highways of the past, so when I'm there I'm reminded of that. It's magical.

I don't remember the first time I went to the mountain — I would have been really young. But seeing my kids there when they were smaller, seeing them running around on top through the tall grass, reminded me of the generations that have been there and will continue to be there. It's a place of spiritual significance for the Ojibwa. It's a place that means a lot to my family. It's a place that absolutely touches me; it makes me feel peaceful when I'm there — I feel very happy and whole. 🌿

—As told to Jensen Edwards



# **INDIGENOUS GUARDIANS ARE CARING FOR LANDS AND WATERS ACROSS CANADA**



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# INDIGENOUS VOICES

*Canadian Geographic* has selected outstanding Indigenous stories, as shared in the pages of our magazine, for this beautiful special edition. From coast to coast to coast, across these lands that we now call Canada, this issue celebrates stories from **the original people of the land** — from a Quebec Cree community's triumph over forced relocation to the *kakiniit* (Inuit tattoos), once banned and that are once again worn with pride, to the revitalization of Michif, the language of the Métis.

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