

Never surrendered

Local Algonquins are the only native group outside B.C. that has never signed a treaty. They once fought Mohawks with bows, but are now armed with lawyers and genealogists to stake a land claim that is already having an impact on Eastern Ontario. Tim Naumetz uncovers the past of the land Algonquins say they ...

Tim Naumetz, The Ottawa Citizen

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Algonquin elder William Commanda is 94 years old and rides in a wheelchair. When the rain begins pounding down on the aboriginal summer solstice ceremony on Victoria Island, two strangers standing beside him snap open their umbrellas to preserve his braided silver hair and his black shirt.

They become drenched themselves to protect him, as though he consists of sugar and might dissolve in the downpour.

But Elder Commanda -- whose original Algonquin name is Miskidu and says "in summer, there are so many miskidu that sometimes you can't live with it, you know what is miskidu" -- was in no danger of disappearing.

Like a million descendants from the original nations of Canada, he is, in sense, here to stay.

"We must be together," Miskidu whispers after the sage, cedar and sweetgrass have been burned and the many pipes have gone around the small circle. "We must make the rivers clean again."

Miskidu lives on the Quebec side of the Ottawa River, along with several thousand other Algonquin who migrated back to the region after marauding Iroquois warriors forced their ancestors eastward late in the 17th century to the Montreal area and Trois Rivieres, Que., to convert to Roman Catholicism and seek shelter in Jesuit and Sulpician missions.

Miskidu's Algonquin cousins on the Ontario side are not as numerous, but they are at the centre of one of the largest and potentially most historic land claims in Canada's history.

The claim covers 36,000 square kilometres, including the front lawn of Parliament Hill, and could touch the lives of the one million Canadians who live and work within the borders of the vast area.

Formal negotiations have not yet started, but the government's legal obligations to consult with the Algonquin before relinquishing or developing vacant government property halted in its tracks a massive residential development at former Canadian Forces Base

Rockcliffe. With Algonquin leaders requesting a role based on the land claim, the project is on hold, possibly for years.

Aside from the scope of the claim, history will also be written because the Ottawa River Algonquin are the only first nation east of British Columbia that has not signed a treaty with succeeding French, British and Canadian authorities or reigning monarchs.

"It's one of the most complicated claims in Canada," says Toronto lawyer Robert Potts, prominent aboriginal claims negotiator leading the Algonquin bargaining team.

TRADE WARS, INTRIGUE AND BETRAYAL

The closest the Algonquin came to any form of treaty with Europeans may have been a peace accord they reached with the French and Mohawks in 1645. But it didn't turn out very well.

The French wanted to expand their fur trade and end hostilities with the Mohawks and other Iroquois nations. The Algonquin and another nation, the Montagnais north of the St. Lawrence, wanted peace as well as trade with the French. But the Iroquois had been engaged in intermittent warfare with everyone else in the talks for decades.

Unknown to the Algonquins, French governor Charles Huault de Montmagny struck a secret side deal with Mohawk chief Kiotsaeton, who had wanted Montmagny to exclude the Mohawk's old enemy, the Algonquin, without telling them. The Algonquin had only recently driven the Mohawks and other Iroquoian bands out of the north to their redoubt south of what is now called Lake Ontario.

Jesuit priests advising Montmagny found a compromise: The peace treaty would cover only Algonquins who agreed to convert to Christianity, but the Algonquin would not be aware of the condition.

Within a few years, the Mohawks had decimated the Ottawa River Algonquin, massacring some, taking others captive, forcing others northward. The attacking Mohawks did not ask the Algonquin about their religion.

Seventeenth-century Roman Catholic priests who accompanied French explorers and traders and were ready to sacrifice themselves to convert tens of thousands of pagan Indians in the thick eastern forests of North America recorded their experiences in diaries that became known as the Jesuit Relations. They suggested early conflicts between Indian nations and bands were almost gallant sporting encounters, with few dead and weapons of bows and stones. But by the 1600s, with the advent of French, Dutch and English trade offering iron weapons, flint, cloth and blankets for bountiful furs, competition for these miracles became fierce. Grudges were long.

French explorer Samuel de Champlain described the kind of incident that undoubtedly contributed to enmity between the Iroquois and Algonquin. He witnessed a horrible scene after his Huron and Algonquin allies tortured an Iroquois captive.

"Our Indians kindled a fire, and when it was well lighted, each took a brand and burned this poor wretch a little at a time," Champlain wrote. "Sometimes they would leave off, throwing water on his back. Then they tore out his nails and applied fire to his membrum virile. Afterwards they scalped him and caused a certain kind of gum to drip very hot upon the crown of his head."

Champlain ended the captive's suffering with a shot from his arquebus, at the invitation of the Huron and Algonquin after they saw he was repulsed by the torture.

Following the Mohawk rout of the Algonquins in the 17th century, their river, which they called Kitchissippi, Great River, became known to the French as the "Outaoaus," later Ottawa in English, after a Georgian Bay nation that took up trade with the Europeans through the same route. Their name Outaoaus meant "traders" in the Algonquin language.

Sold out and 'schooled'

Two centuries later, thousands of square kilometres covered by the current land claim, including the heartland of former Algonquin territory on the Ottawa River, were sold to the British.

But it was not the Algonquin who sold the land, it was the Mississauga Indians of the Ojibwa nation in southern Ontario.

And, everyone seems to agree, they had never even been to the place.

In fact, according to a report in the 1847 journals of the Provincial Parliament of Canada, the Mississauga surrendered vast tracts of territory to the British Crown between 1792 and 1818, sweeping up in an almost unbroken length of vast parcels from the Niagara Peninsula to the Ottawa River. At the time of the first surrender, the Mississauga population on Lake Ontario was less than 500, and that was before a smallpox epidemic decimated them.

The Mississauga surrendered the tract of land now covered by the Algonquin claim in 1817 in return for an annuity of 642 British pounds, according to a map of all the Mississauga surrenders recorded in the parliamentary journals. The British purchased the land from the Mississauga despite Algonquin presence in the territory for years and the Algonquins' petitions for reservations throughout the late 1700s.

The charts mapping out the Mississauga surrenders are contained in a commission report to the Provincial Parliament on "the affairs of the Indians in Canada" that reveals the prevailing attitudes of the day, an odd combination of racial paternalism and social engineering.

"They (Indians) are sensible of the superiority of the whites, and of the disadvantages under which they themselves labour, from their want of knowledge," the report says. "The chief obstacle to the advancement of the race are their want of self-dependence and their habits of indolence, which have been fostered, if not created, by the past policy of the government, their ignorance or imperfect knowledge of the language, customs and mode of traffic of the whites, and that feebleness of the reasoning powers, which is the necessary consequence of the entire absence of mental cultivation."

Sowing the seeds for a future disaster the commissioners had no way of anticipating, they urged the government to establish separate mission schools for the Indian children, where they could learn trades and basic skills to fit into white civilization.

"Their education must consist not merely of the training of the mind, but of a weaning from the habits and feelings of their ancestors, and the acquirements of the language, arts and customs of civilized life," the report urged.

a slow resurgence

The Algonquin on the Ontario side of the Ottawa River did not get any of their former territory back until 1864, following a century of life at missions near Montreal. Their ancestral area was settled by lumbermen and their families who cut swaths through Ottawa valley pine and oak for the British navy, and later waves of settlers after the War of 1812.

The British had purchased the land from the Mississauga despite Algonquin presence for years, as they filtered back from Montreal to hunt and fish. The Algonquin had also petitioned for their own reserves throughout the late 1700s, but when they finally got some land they had to buy it from the British.

They received only 668 hectares (less than seven square kilometres), which became the Golden Lake reserve near Algonquin Park.

The old Algonquin territory now under claim stretches from Pembroke in the north -- where Ottawa River Algonquin once levied tolls on Huron canoe fleets heading downstream to trade pelts at Montreal -- and reaches south taking in most of Algonquin Park and southeast to Kingston and then back up in the northeast to Hawkesbury, near the home of another major Algonquin band that welcomed Champlain 400 years ago.

Negotiators on all sides are playing down contention in the current land claim, but where lines will be drawn in the vast claim area remains to be seen. Robin Aitken, the lead federal negotiator, says nothing has yet been conceded other than recognition that the Algonquin likely have a right to aboriginal title in Eastern Ontario.

"That doesn't mean the Algonquins, at least from the government's point of view, own all the land, far from it," he says. "I think when it comes down to a controversial issue, say a

sensitive subject matter, we would look to the Algonquins and say 'well, based on traditional use, do you have any arguments there?'"

As well, the original Algonquin nation is divided along the interprovincial border between Quebec and Ontario.

The Algonquin on the Quebec side are in the first stages of their own claim, to be taken to the Quebec government. But Victoria Island, which Miskidu and his Quebec Algonquin have occupied for 15 years, is on the Ontario side of the river.

The Quebec claim will likely include Morrison Island on the Ottawa River near Pembroke. Once the fortress of the main Algonquin nation on the river, it is on the Quebec side of the provincial boundary. Skeletal remains and artifacts unearthed on Morrison Island and once displayed at the Museum of Civilization have been returned to Algonquin leaders in Quebec.

The government of Ontario recognized the existence of the Algonquin claim over the Ottawa River valley and its watershed in 1991, followed by the government of Canada in 1992.

"It's really the uplands and drainage area to the Ottawa River," says Mr. Potts. "That's where the Algonquins were hunting and fishing and trapping, since time immemorial I guess."

Mr. Potts is leading a team so organized, thorough and controlled that it could tie old French governor Montmagny into knots and even, perhaps, fend off the clever subterfuge of the Jesuit priests.

The Algonquin team has retained a planning and engineering firm, an economic consulting firm, an accounting firm to manage a trust agreement over government funding, and even a genealogist who audited and confirmed the authenticity of a growing list of people, now about 6,000, with Algonquin heritage in Eastern Ontario.

Mr. Potts alone speaks for the negotiating team, and told a journalist it would not be possible to interview, for instance, the genealogist who confirms Algonquin descendants.

There is a surprising candidate for their ranks.

Don Boudria, the longtime former Liberal MP and cabinet minister from eastern Ontario, disclosed his Algonquin ancestry during an informal discussion about the land claim in a parliamentary cafeteria.

Mr. Boudria's father, who died when Mr. Boudria was only four years old, was an Algonquin descendant through his mother's family in Maniwaki.

But he shrugged off suggestions he might take part in the claim. Because his mother, with a young family to support, quickly married again, he had no subsequent contact with his father's aboriginal side of the family.

"When you lose one parent when you're very, very young, you disconnect more than you should with that part of the family," explained Mr. Boudria, who lined his office walls with a collection of first nation artifacts and mementos during his career in politics.

But for Mr. Boudria's old haunt, Parliament Hill, history has come full circle, its dominion under claim by a people who say they never gave it away.

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36,000 Square kilometres covered by the claim.

6,000 Approximate number of people so far who have had their Algonquin ancestry confirmed and are part of the claim.

1991 Year the government of Ontario recognized the existence of the Algonquin claim. The federal government followed a year later.

642 British pounds received as an annuity by the Mississauga Indians of southern Ontario for surrendering Algonquin territory in 1817.

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Sources and further reading Literature:

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