

10. How They Endured: Some Conclusions and a Look at the Future

Without question, the major trend in Lake Superior Chippewa history during the last three hundred years has been their domination by whites—fur traders, miners, lumbermen, farmers, townbuilders, missionaries, BIA bureaucrats—who showed little respect for the integrity of Chippewa culture or the Indians' right to be consulted about policies and programs affecting them. Whatever sociopolitical independence the Chippewas retained in their dealings with French, English, and American fur traders ended in 1854; the BIA assigned the bands to small reservations and launched a full-scale war against Chippewa culture for the purpose of "civilizing" them and training them to become self-supporting farmers, capable of assimilation into the mainstream of American society.

Several themes are evident in Chippewa economic affairs. Since the prosperous days of the fur trade, tribesmen have been dependent on the white man. Before 1854, they needed his superior tools, weapons, utensils, and other manufactured goods. After the Chippewas were on reservations, they relied heavily on annuities from Washington, lumbermen to clear their land, BIA money managers, and off-reservation employment. Such New Deal agencies as the CWA, CCC-ID, and WPA helped them survive the depression years of the 1930's. For two decades following World War II, white businessmen, white tourists, and white bureaucrats (federal, state, and local) continued to dominate tribal economies. Chippewa poverty and maladjustment to the prevailing economic system went hand-in-hand with such dependence, as attested by the Meriam Report, James's study of New Post, federal field surveys in the mid-sixties, and the BIA's April, 1975, data on high Indian unemployment and low earning power. In part, Washington's goal of self-sufficiency failed because of still another economic theme: failure to consult the bands about developmental programs. In 1906, Superintendent Campbell judged the Indians too financially inexperienced to be trusted with their own money, but stated that the "proper thing to do is to teach them gradually how to handle it, and how to make

themselves self-supporting."¹ Nevertheless, with the exception of the Collier years, the BIA persisted with its suffocating financial paternalism well into the 1960's.

Chippewa economic self-determination during the last decade has finally begun to disprove the old notion of Indian incompetence. The Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 guarantees the tribes an effective voice in economic program planning and implementation. Although Chippewa reservation developers still face century-old problems of poverty and dependence on government grants, they are now charting their own course toward free enterprise. Jim Hull is hopeful about the EDA tourist complex at Grand Portage, writing, "this development will be only the first of several which will ultimately cause the phaseout of public subsidies and the establishment of a sound, permanent, self-sustaining community."²

Until the mid-1960's, Chippewa living conditions showed little improvement. Tribesmen settling on their allotments in the late nineteenth century forsook the birch-bark wigwam for permanent log and frame dwellings which housed one to three families each. The persistence of poverty and the Indians' reluctance to move to better town sites resulted in the situation found by 1913 at Odanah: rotted sidewalks, odorous outhouses, backyards covered with stagnant water and refuse, and floodwaters which annually spread raw sewage from open privies throughout the town.³ Twenty-five years later, Odanah's turn-of-the-century homes were even more deteriorated (a four or five-room frame dwelling was valued at \$325) and still overcrowded (1.62 families per home).⁴ By 1966, living conditions remained shockingly substandard at Odanah and elsewhere. Such houses offered "shelter, but little of the dignities or comforts of modern life."⁵ Thanks to HIP, HUD, and the Public Health Service-Indian Division, many of the shelters have been replaced by modern ranch-style houses which meet minimal federal standards for comfort and safety. Moreover, tribal leaders demanded and now play a greater role in reservation housing programs. Gone are the days when passive Chippewas settled for a "take it or leave it" house of poor design built by a low-rent housing contractor with inferior materials. Though a few families still live in dilapidated houses along the Bad River, it is the modern town of New Odanah, a few miles away, which symbolizes the great change in Chippewa living conditions.

Crowded, unsanitary, and poorly ventilated homes nurtured communicable diseases. By 1900, quarantines and vaccinations reduced smallpox epidemics, but tuberculosis and venereal infections raged unchecked on all reservations. At Bad River, 130 of the 898 persons there had tuberculosis in 1915. Shortly after the turn of the century, hereditary syphilis killed nearly one-fifth of all Chippewa children before they were six months old.⁶ The BIA battled these conditions as well as Indian alcoholism (a legacy of the fur trade era) with inadequate facilities and understaffed and underpaid health care personnel. Widespread Indian misery due to illness and a low standard of living was noted by the Meriam Report in 1928:⁷

The survey staff found altogether too much evidence of real suffering and discontent to subscribe to the belief that the Indians are reasonably satisfied with their condition. The amount of serious illness and poverty is too great to permit of real contentment.

During the New Deal and postwar decades, the rate of tuberculosis and venereal infection dropped significantly. Infants were inoculated against smallpox and diphtheria, BIA contract doctors periodically examined and immunized school age Indian children, and Chippewa adults received free medical care. Nevertheless, because of persistently poor living conditions, dietary deficiencies, neglect of personal hygiene, wariness of white medical personnel, and transportation difficulties, those Chippewas living at New Post, for example, continued to suffer from a high incidence of tooth decay, dental infections, pregnancy and birth complications, and infant mortality. By the 1970's, better housing coupled with modern water and sanitary systems markedly brightened the Chippewa health picture, though little progress has been made in the fight against alcoholism and youthful suicides. As was the case with economic development and housing programs, tribal leaders played an important part in improving the delivery of services via CHRs and reservation health clinics. The Indian-managed facility at Keweenaw Bay, which provides "preventative, curative and rehabilitative services,"⁸ thus represents both the progress made in Indian health care over the last century and the power of Chippewa self-determination.

Chippewa education also has improved noticeably since the early days of white contact when missionaries and Indian agents designed curriculums to "civilize" Native American youngsters and prepare

them for assimilation. "Put into the hands of their children the primer and the hoe," the House Committee on Indian Affairs predicted in 1818,⁹

and they will naturally, in time, take hold of the plough, and, as their minds become enlightened and expand, the Bible will be their book, and they will grow up in habits of morality and industry, leave the chase to those whose minds are less cultivated, and become useful members of society.

Indian parents refused to support the programs thrust at them; thus, educators in mission, government boarding, and public schools were plagued for decades with irregular attendance, many dropouts, and low scholastic achievement. Chippewa families must have been pleased when New Deal BIA educators downplayed assimilation and encouraged cross-cultural education and vocational training for rural life both on and off the reservations.

Then World War II intervened, and the postwar era returned to a coercive assimilation strategy with total disregard for both the Indians' cultural heritage and his right to be included in educational decision making. Predictably, the results were disastrous: a "dismal record of absenteeism, dropouts, negative self-image, low achievement, and, ultimately, academic failure for many Indian children," as the Kennedy Report described it.¹⁰ To remedy the situation Senate investigators recommended an approach first advocated by New Dealers and already employed successfully by the Petersons at Grand Portage, the involvement of Indian parents in the education of their children and the inclusion of Indian culture, history, and language in public school curriculums.

Since 1969, the Indian Education Act and the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act have underscored the federal government's commitment to a national policy of educational excellence for Indian children. Equally appreciative of the fact that education for young and old alike is an important key to self-determination, Chippewa parents are now deeply involved in designing programs to meet the special needs of their children—be it advising the Minnesota State Department of Education, producing classroom materials like "The Ojibwe: A History Resource Unit," acting as home-school coordinators or instructing at DIAC's *Bizindun*. Likewise, Chippewa children have responded positively, as evidenced by the recent dramatic decline in high school dropout rates and the improvements in their academic performance.

The revitalization of tribal councils, also fostered by federal self-determination legislation in the 1970's, is a significant departure from the politically submissive posture which Chippewas had assumed since the seventeenth century, when they were economically dependent on powerful French, British, and American fur traders and needed their leadership. Following the halcyon days of the *voyageur* and *coureur de bois*, the Lake Superior Chippewas sold their hunting grounds, and federal Indian agents took on many of the traders' political and economic functions. By 1900 the bands were as much the wards of Washington as they had once been of the American Fur Company—financially reliant, politically powerless, disorganized, and out of touch with each other. The word used most frequently by BIA bureaucrats to describe them was "incompetent." Finally, in the 1930's, when Washington altered its entire approach to Native American affairs, the Indian Reorganization Act encouraged the Chippewas to assume limited self-government, charter tribal organizations as federal corporations—generally to take the initiative in establishing and implementing reservation policies and programs.

Though important first steps toward political independence, these movements languished until the mid-1960's because of inadequate federal funding, the persistence of BIA paternalism, misdirected educational thrusts, and the debilitation of poverty. Then, thanks to OEO and other antipoverty programs, federal monies flowed onto the reservations with the understanding that the tribesmen would operate the new projects themselves. Early successes boosted Chippewa confidence; tribal councils contracted to carry out more and more BIA functions; local Indian political leaders became powerful advocates for their people. "Go to any meeting involving Indian business now," St. Croix historian Lolita Taylor proudly wrote in 1973,¹¹

and you will find young Indians planning and administering their own programs. And, because of that, housing is progressing, small industry is entering the reservation, tribal halls on the reserve house offices, and council rooms are buzzing with activity.

Political power on the local, state, and national levels was further strengthened by the formation of DIAC, GLIC, and the Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan. No longer anyone's wards, the Lake Superior bands, brimful of self-determination, have come of age politically.

In summary, there is little question that the long war waged by white Americans against traditional Lake Superior culture has succeeded in many areas. Only a handful of tribesmen on each reservation practice the old ways of living, constructing homes, curing the sick, educating the young, and worshipping the supreme being. Only bits and pieces of a woodland way of life remain.

On the other hand, the federal government has failed miserably in its numerous and costly attempts to make the reservations economically self-supporting and their Chippewa inhabitants ready for assimilation into the American mainstream. Ironically, when this was fully recognized in the early 1930's, the BIA viewed what was left of Chippewa culture—language, arts and crafts, distinct personality characteristics, tribal cohesiveness, a close spiritual bond with Kitchigami land, a strong sense of ethnic identity—as a great source of strength for Indian people which ought to be nurtured if the bands were to survive and prosper. The resistant remnants of a shattered culture have assumed great importance. They are the firm foundation upon which rest the plans of present-day tribal leaders for economic development, better living conditions, a more efficient delivery of health services, cross-cultural education for all ages, and self-government. For the first time in three hundred years, white domination is no longer the major theme of Chippewa life. The chains of BIA paternalism have been broken. The possessors of many federal and state contracts, confident in their administrative ability, proud of their Indian heritage, and organized politically, the Lake Superior bands are determined to chart their own courses.

Most leaders talk optimistically about the future. Economically, the Chippewas are better off than ever before, claims Darrell Blacketter of Fond du Lac, and life will improve, thanks to self-pride and self-determination. Rex Mayotte of Bad River feels that the Chippewas are on the verge of an era of tremendous development and are learning how to play a more meaningful role in white society. Whatever the outcome, there is no question in the mind of Minnesota Chippewa author Don Bibeau that his people will endure:¹²

It is hard to be an Indian during these times and to bring together our yesterday with what we are today. There is pain of memory which cuts through the quick of our lives and makes it difficult to love. We are still Indian in spite of a thousand treaties and missionaries with their black frocks. There is nothing and no one who will keep us from our ways and our songs. We have endured and will yet endure. . . .

... We will endure because we are Indian. And being Indian is not simply

living in the forest, or mountains or plains, or skin, features, or beads, or sense of history, or language or song: it is living in peace within the great cycles of nature which the Great Spirit has bestowed upon his children, and it is living within the tribal fold. What some others may call "community." And it is good! It is good to live within the Tribe here on this reservation in these lands of our fathers. And so it has been from the most ancient of times.

THE
CHIPPEWAS
OF
LAKE SUPERIOR



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