

TOPIC--Animal Rights Activism; Systematic Genocide or just another method of Assimilation?

My Dodem (spirit name) is Mahigan. It means Wolf. It is who I am.

I have been asked if trapping is still an important part to Aboriginal people's income and culture. Firstly, I will refer to the original people of this land as what they called themselves prior to European contact, Anishnabae, it simply means the people. Secondly, I am not going to get into statistics and figures. I will discuss why trapping is important, and always will be, for me. I do not intend to pretend that I can do justice to a culture that has been on this land (Turtle Island) for countless generations in a few minutes. Here is my story.

I was born in the 50's in Mattawa, a small community in Northern Ontario. Both my parents are of mixed native and European ancestry. They both came from trapping families. My grandmother (memere) on my father's side is Algonquin. Her family comes from the islands in the Ottawa River some 60 miles west of Ottawa. Memere did not speak Algonquin. Her father did. He was Anishnabae. He spoke French, English and Algonquin. Memere's family name used to be Outajawadjiwi and her people's name Kitchisiripini (means from the big waters). I say used to be because there was a time in our history when the Government registered Anishnabae people. Like many other families, the people doing the registry had difficulties writing most of the Anishnabae family names so they simply asked the people to pick good French or English names. That would be more convenient. That explains why many Anishnabae family names today are Fleury (French for blossom) or for example, my friend mister Johnston. The Johnston's got their name because when they were asked to pick a name the grandfather really liked his Johnson outboard motor. So he picked Johnston. Easy to remember, easy for people to write.

I asked my father one day why Memere always got upset when people called her "une sauvagesse" (the French word for Savage). Savage is the word many people used to identify Anishnabae back then. My Dad explained to me that it was not a good thing in those days to be Anishnabae. He said that Memere denied her ancestry to protect herself and us. He went on to explain that admitting you are Anishnabae meant not getting a job, not being able to buy beer and wine at the liquor store, not being able to get a loan to buy a house. So

I asked the obvious. Dad, are we Anishnabae? He said yes, we are mixed, French and Anishnabae. But don't say that in front of Memere. For me that explained why Dad always let the Anishnabae people in Mattawa know when to come get food, beaver meat, when we had some to share. I remember the families coming to our back window and we would hand over the beaver after we had taken the furs from them. Warm memories of smiling faces.

What I did not understand then, but do now, is this. We are half breeds. When I grew up they were the scum of the scum. Not real Anishnabae. Not real French. Back then the Government had a plan to get rid of the Anishnabae people or "problem", as they were called, through Assimilation. I was a product of this System.

Memere did not learn the Algonquin language of her father so she could not pass it on to me. The way Assimilation was to work was this. Take away Anishnabae's language, take away their pride, their way of life. Take away their culture by removing their children from the household and raise them in boarding or residential schools. But they had not taken everything away from Memere.

Memere knew how to trap. She showed her son, my Dad, how to prepare animal skins to sell to the fur market. She showed us, perhaps maybe without her knowing (but I suspect this was her way to secretly pass on her knowledge of her culture) how to live from the land.. What was left of it.

But back to my childhood. I learned how to trap, how to respect the land, the animals. I learned that I was not above all things as a human but that I was merely a part of this amazing web. From this I myself had my own family and raised them with what the land had. I raised them from the profits made from killing animals. I never questioned if it was right or wrong. I just knew it was my way.

Then I started working for the fur industry. Because I spoke both of Canada's official languages and I enjoyed telling people about my way of life, I was asked to go to places like Montreal and Toronto to tell my story. I was surprised by the way some of the people that came to talk to me treated me. Most of the general public were interested and pleased to meet a "real live trapper". But some were not so pleased with my way of life.

In Montreal a lady came to me. She was accompanied by a camera. She asked to speak with a trapper. After introducing myself she asked if I had a leg hold trap. I did not. So out of curiosity I asked why she wanted a trap. Her reply is still very vivid for me. "Because I would trap you by the foot and hang you from that beam", she pointed to a section of the building we were in that was open for about 15 stories high, "and watch you bleed to death." I was shocked and hurt that a human being claiming to be humane towards animals would want to do something so senseless to another animal. One of the human kind. Her own species. Cannibalism came to my mind.

I responded by holding back tears and saying to her I wanted no harm for her. She left with the camera following. My way of life was under attack. My culture was under attack. I was confronted with many other such episodes by animal rights activists, but more disturbingly for me, the majority of the general public who seemed to act out of misinformation and fear.

So a few years went by and then it happened. In the early 90's Society as a whole for whatever reason started to buy less fur. So much that I could not sell enough pelts to make enough money to provide for my family. So I did what society wanted me to do. I stopped trapping. I could not afford to anymore. Emotionally and financially.

That's when I almost died.

The doctors treated me for a heart condition for four months. I was on blood pressure controlling pills. The Nitro inhaler was held tightly in my fist wherever I went. I could barely put one foot in front of the other to walk. I was being prepared by the medical team to expect a By-Pass surgery soon. When the Cardiologist went into my heart he realized that there was nothing wrong with my heart. At least physically. I did have a heart condition though. I suffered from a broken heart due to lack of identity. I had lost my way of life. My culture. Trapping.

So now that I had identified the problem. To make a long story short. I decided to change direction. Society wanted me to stop living from the land so I thought, Ok. I'll educate myself and get a real job. One in an office somewhere. I went back to school. In 1997 I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Geography. I moved to southern Ontario and got a job in an office. Finally, I thought. A real good job. All I

have to do for the rest of my life is talk to people and repeat the same thing over and over. Now I fit. Perfect. Good little Anishnabae.

Not. I started feeling empty inside again. My chest pains were returning. This time I recognized what was happening. I started having dreams. Re-occurring Visions. I quit my good paying secured job with a great pension plan. Off I went on my vision quest.

I was gone for two months. Travelled all across Turtle Island to Tofino and back. This is when I got the message that I could do something that would be more culturally appropriate for someone part Anishnabae like me. I went back to my trap line. To the land. With the help of the spirit world and all of the knowledge passed on by my Grandparents and Parents I started to build a birch bark canoe. I had never built a canoe before. It just came. Every step of the process came to me. All of the materials that are needed to build a canoe, birch bark, cedar, spruce roots, spruce gum were there.

Today, I demonstrate my craft to many people. I am recognized as an Aboriginal Artist by the Ontario Arts Council(I'm just a trapper). When I speak about my canoes and way of life at Universities, High Schools, Elementary schools, Powwows, people want to learn about my culture. There seems to be a thirst to know more about Anishnabae way of thinking and living. People encourage me to continue doing what I do. They tell me that it is a lost art. That I should teach it and document it so that society does not lose this part of who we are. I agree with them.

The most often question people ask me is this. Where did you learn this?

I learned it from the trapline.

The canoe is what I do. It is an important part of Anishnabae way of life and culture. There are many other parts of Anishnabae way of life that are worth saving. They have been protected from loss through the process of Assimilation by our Memeres. Take away the trapping and take away this knowledge. Consider the TOPIC.

So now I ask you this question. ----How important is trapping to the original people of this land? The Anishnabae and their descendants.

Mahigan