

Native Canadians in Urban Transition: The Chaos and Pathos

Why do natives come to the big city, and what happens to them when they get there? Eugene Zimmerbner of the Excalibur examines the problem in Toronto.

Eugene Zimmerbner

Walk to the corner of Spadina and College Street, just on the edge of the garment district and Chinatown, and a partly illuminated sign says you've arrived at the Silver Dollar Tavern. Walk through two sets of heavy wooden doors, down a flight of stairs and you enter a large, low ceilinged, ill-lit beverage room with plain, sturdy wooden chairs and tables.

What makes this beverage room with a raunchy country and western band unique is that almost all the people are Native Canadians. As a policeman told me, "The Silver Dollar is the Indian place."

Inside, drinking cheaply-priced draft and talking to an Indian named Ed, I watched an old Indian walk in with a big smile, craggly marked face, and a brush cut, talking to friends along the way. He was triumphantly waving a \$5 dollar bill.

A couple of hours later, walking out of the tavern, I noticed the same old Indian sitting on the curb, passed out. Picking him up and getting his address, I put him in a taxi and sent him home.

While most Torontonians may not notice it, the Silver Dollars is one of the few outward signs of a great social phenomenon taking place: Native Canadians consisting of Status and Non-Status Indians, Metis and Inuit, have been leaving reservations and rural areas of Canada and are migrating to the urban centres. More and more, Natives are becoming an urbanized people.

In a devastating report released by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs this past summer, *Indian Conditions: A Survey*, it states that the off-reserve Status Indian population has grown from the level of 42,000 in 1966 to 77,000 in 1976. This means approximately 30 per cent of all Status Indians live off-reserve. By the mid 80s, some estimate this figure could rise to 60 per cent.

The Federal government has only a direct responsibility towards status Indians as defined in the Indian Act. So the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs does not publish comprehensive statistics on non-status Indians, Metis or Inuit. But those involved with Native affairs estimate there are as many Natives in urban centres as status Indians. This makes a total of 150,000 Native Canadians in our cities.

Indian affairs has abundant information documenting the conditions of status Indians on reserves. A summary of this information was contained in *Indian Conditions*, and even in its bureaucratic prose it makes for powerful reading:

- The percentage of violent deaths among Indians is three to four times higher than among the national population;
- An estimated 50 to 60 per cent of Indian health problems are alcohol-related;
- The strength and stability of family units appears to be eroding, as evidence by increasing divorce rates, births outside marriage, children in care, adoptions of Indian children by non-Indians and juvenile delinquency;
- Use of social assistance and welfare among Indians has increased from slightly more than one-third of the population to slightly more than one-half in the last 10 to 15 years;
- Indians and other natives continue to be over-represented in jails and penitentiaries by more than three times their proportion of the total population;
- The quality and availability of serviced housing has improved but Indian housing lasts about 15 years compared to 35 years for non-Indians. There is a need today for about 11,000 houses to relieve crowding and replace unsatisfactory houses;
- On the average, 50 to 60 per cent of Indian Housing has running water and sewage disposal, up from 25 per cent 15 years ago, but in some areas (such as Manitoba and Saskatchewan) as little as 10 per cent of housing is serviced;
- University enrollment has risen from 57 in

1963 to 2,700 in 1979, but participation is less than one-half national levels.

The picture the report draws of status Indians on reserves stands as an indictment against the federal government's programs and policies over the years.

While Natives have been migrating to the cities in greater numbers, no level of government has been documenting this migration or what happens to Natives once they arrive. A great social change is going largely undocumented.

For example, it is impossible to get exact figures on how many Natives live in Toronto. A researcher for the Ontario Task Force on Native People in The Urban Setting who is compiling demographic information for the Ontario government, said no up-to-date statistics exist.

Rob Howarth did say that 1976 statistics estimate that there were between 18,000 to 27,000 Natives in Toronto. Natives at the Native Canadian Centre on Spadina Ave. believe there are approximately 30,000 Natives in Toronto, but this is just an estimate.

The failure in trying to obtain statistics about the Native's life in the city starts there. Noting the high proportion of Natives in prison, I contacted Legal Aid to find out if Natives use the program when they are arrested. Public information officer John Beaufoy said there is no way to find out how many Natives use the program because ethnic origin is not noted. When Barbara Walker of Toronto's Social Services Branch was asked how many Natives collect welfare, she said they also do not note a person's ethnic origin. Neither does the Addiction Research Foundation.

While government agencies may not know if Natives face problems or ask for their services, Robert Holota, director of the counselling unit and a community worker at the Native Canadian Centre, knows obstacles Natives face in the city. He gained his street smarts living in Toronto for the past eight years after leaving his reservation.

Sitting back in his chair, smoking a cigarette, Holota talks about the Native's experiences in the city in a matter-of-fact tone. Young Natives come to Toronto unprepared to live and work in an urban environment. They don't get adequate education on the reservation and possess few job skills. Coming from a rural environment with extended families, Natives are isolated by the city with its emphasis on individualism. They don't receive much guidance in living and working in the big city.

"Indians who have a sense of self-sufficiency do okay in Toronto, but there are a lot of Indians who have grown up dependent on the federal government and its welfare," said Holota. "These dependents find it very difficult to make it on their own because the federal government doesn't take care of them off reserve."

This lack of inbred self-sufficiency on the reserve is one of the main reasons there is so much alcoholism among Natives, according to Holota. It gives them a way of escaping from their problems.

"Some Indians coming to Toronto are already alcoholics. It isn't the city that turns them to drink," said Holota. "This need to drink with other Indians makes the Silver Dollar an important Indian institution in Toronto."

The lack of self-sufficiency allowed by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs raises Wilson Ashkewe's anger. As one of four native employment counsellor specialists in Canada manpower offices in Toronto, Ashkewe is an example of a new Native class of government bureaucrats that developed in the 70s after the federal government allowed Natives to take over their own affairs.

"Indians are big business," said Ashkewe, shaking his head. "The government may have originally wanted to help Indians with programs but then it grew and grew. The bureaucrats just wanted to protect their jobs and construct programs for their idea of an Indian. They didn't want us to become self-sufficient because they would lose their jobs. We had to fight this."

He echoed Holota when he said that if Natives are going to make it in Toronto, they must learn self-sufficiency. They must get away from the dependency taught on the reserve "where he expects the government to

take care of him when he comes here."

Not only will it help the Native cope with the city but the quality of life on the reserve will also improve.

Holota said in his matter of fact tone that Natives still face racism but he tries his best to not send them to job interviews where he knows the employers are racist. Mark Nakamura of the Ontario Human Rights Commission said the commission receives few complaints of racism but this does not mean Natives are not being discriminated against. He said there are several reasons why Natives may not complain.

Overcoming the identity of "Indians"

John Trudell is from the Sioux Nation of Santee, Nebraska. He is a spokesperson for the American Indian Movement. Trudell was at the University of Saskatchewan for the recent Human Rights Conference. Vye Bouvier of the Sheaf, the student newspaper for that university, interviewed Trudell.

Sheaf: What is the American Indian Movement?
Trudell: The American Indian Movement is no different from Geronimo and Tecumseh. This generation's resistance is an extension of five hundred years of genocide.

Sheaf: Is this Indian movement an "American" movement?
Trudell: All the indigenous people of the northern part of the hemisphere identify as Indians. The land base is America. The reality is that we are indigenous to this hemisphere.

The reality is that we are not Indians. Most people can't relate to that. "Indians" have been in existence for 488 years. Before 1492, nowhere on this continent was there an "Indian" walking around. Before Columbus we referred to ourselves as "people." "People" have been on this land base for thousands of generations. Only since we became "Indians" have things started going "down the tubes," so to speak. We all identify as "Indians."

The American Indian Movement is a name of convenience. One of the steps to freedom is to overcome our identity as "Indians." "Indians" never were on this continent.

Sheaf: What are you working on within the American Indian Movement?

Sheaf: Speaking only for myself, I am working to drive out the American government. It is spiritually, morally, and economically decadent.

Next to radiation, it is the biggest threat to the survival of the people on Earth. It is even the cause of radiation. The American government is on a suicidal path. This government has no spiritual values, no respect for life. The American government is the enemy, not only of indigenous people, but of all people on this planet.

Basically, my objective is to see the American government fall. And for the indigenous people to survive that falling. The only way we can survive that falling is as nations, not as individuals. That will only be possible if we maintain our spiritual and moral identity as indigenous people.

Sheaf: How can you see our people surviving economically?

Trudell: We will survive economically by accepting the fact of poverty. As well, we must reduce the amount of money that goes to the liquor dealer and bring it back to be used for our people's well-being. Collectively, more than 60% of our economy goes into the purchasing of alcohol or alcohol related things.

When we deal with reality, the American government will fall. When people struggle for their own values collectively, they provide the power to bring it down. At one time there were the Roman Empire, the Dark Ages, the Nazi regime. Every one of them fell. The two hundred years the American government has been in existence is really not much time when you look at the total history of the planet.

The American government would wish us to adopt their lack of spiritual values. When we take that code, we are lost. Only the earth and the sky last forever, the American government does not.

Sheaf: Do you have any use for the media?

Trudell: The way the media is structured, it is more of a liability. It is controlled by the people who oppress us. They will never tell the truth about our oppression. They will tell half-truths and make misrepresentations. This will not help us in liberation. Their only interest is in dollars and in making more dollars. Let's deal with it realistically, the media isn't interested in "saving" us.

Sheaf: How are native people on the North American continent going to communicate with each other?

Trudell: Honestly. We must devise the means of communication. We must communicate honestly whether it means TV, the telephone or the printed word. We must not change our message and start lying to ourselves.

Sheaf: Do you think that native people should try to understand more about present day technology?

"There may be a lack of trust of governmental institutions, they may not be aware of the Commission's existence or people who face discrimination may not feel it worthwhile to pursue. Natives don't need the aggravation," said Ashkewe.

While some Natives coming to the city are transients, moving from place to place, others have come to the city to stay. Ashkewe said Natives who decide to settle in Toronto have a chance at a good occupation, especially since the federal government has initiated affirmative action programs in six of its departments.

Trudell: The problem with technology is that the whites don't understand the implications of it. What we should understand about technology is that it is in the hands of industrialists. We have to understand how white society functions. White society has to understand technology.

We have to understand that white people have not changed in five hundred years and that when they bring something into our villages, whether it is machines, alcohol or textbooks, they are contributing to our mental breakdown. Whites talk from the two sides of their face. The most corrupt of white people come with the "community boom mentality."

It is not the machinery but the religious and financial corruption that we have to worry about.

Sheaf: How much of technology should we accept?

Trudell: The advance of technology stamps out the remnants of our old way values. Accept nothing that is a desecration to the earth, to our way of life. So far no one has used technology properly. We must maintain our relationship to the land.

Trudell: I mention "white people" a lot. I would like to make the point that I am not racist. However, I am not going to lie or make excuses for white people and their lack of action to correct problems that exist. The things that this industrialized society has done to us, were done in the name of white people. White people have to accept this reality, just as we have had to accept it.

Sheaf: What is the Leonard Peltier cause?

Trudell: Peltier is a symbol of the resistance that indigenous people are putting up. The government's objective is to break and smash all resistance. At this particular time in history, a lot of the resistance is in direct opposition to the energy corporation programs.

Peltier is in prison for standing up for his people's rights. The governments and the corporations do not want the idea of resistance to spread. Wherever there are natural mineral resources, there will be mineral resources land grabs, and there will be Leonard Peltier. Peltier is a prison of war.

The mass of the citizenry are political prisoners. Peltier is an example of the extreme that governments and corporations will go to smash any resistance.

Sheaf: Where should young native people look for direction?

Trudell: Young native people should look to elders. I don't think that it's a matter of ourselves getting into politics. It would be more correct for us to follow a way of life. "Politics" is something that the invaders have imposed on us. It is common knowledge how fucked up "Indian politics" are.

Sheaf: Do you think that native people should accept government funding to operate their organizations?

Trudell: It is up to native people whether they want to accept these funds. But they have to understand; they are not given these funds to exercise their sovereignty. As a matter of fact, the way funds are given is structured so that organizations receiving these funds end up looking out for their own individual jobs and needs rather than the best interest of the people. In simple terms, it amounts to no more than bribery. I don't say this to pass judgement on any organizations in Canada. But the people of Canada know what the reality is.

Sheaf: Do you see any value in universities?

Trudell: Of all the Indian people I have seen being assimilated into institutions of higher education, I have seen none of those individuals return to serve their communities. I have heard many native individuals talking about going back to help their people, but in the end I've only seen them help themselves.

Sheaf: If universities have not proven to be good training grounds for young native people — how then should these young people obtain the training for a livelihood?

Trudell: The university graduate does not go back to the community because the community cannot afford the salary of someone with a "paper." I see nothing wrong with accumulating this knowledge and taking this knowledge back to the community to help their people; even if it means living in poverty — with the rest of the people.

Settling down in the city and giving up the idea of being a transient is considered losing one of the traits that makes a person an Indian. "I decided that I wanted to get a good job. I like the idea of owning my own home, my own cottage, my own car," said Ashkewe. "Because I settled down, some think they are more Indian than I am. They call you a white apple."

Toronto will have more "white apples" in the future. A recent survey conducted by the Native Canadian Centre showed that of the 181 families interviewed, representing a total of 701 Natives, 90 per cent have lived in Toronto for at least two years, and 47 per cent have lived in the city for at least 10 years. When asked if they planned to settle in Toronto and make the city their home, 65 per cent of the people said 'yes.' Another 25 per cent said 'no,' and 10 per cent were not sure whether they wanted to stay or not.

Family stability might appear to be a problem but the Centre received names for the interviewees from agencies, so it is not a scientific survey. But of the 181 families, 11 had a single parent.

being Indian. "Trying to teach children what it means to be a Native in the city could be most difficult. When I asked Natives what it meant to be a Native in Toronto, they could not really answer the question. What they did say is that the urban Native is in the process of defining himself as he becomes a part of the urban scene."

Ashkewe said the Native in Toronto is not sure of himself in this environment that attracts him from his reserve, whether for jobs or simply to see the bright lights.

"The Native has three choices before him," said Ashkewe. "Separation, assimilation or integration." Natives can completely separate from the white man, they can totally assimilate and become a white man with red skin or they can learn to integrate themselves, taking the best from the white man in learning to survive in an urban environment while still keeping the best of being Indian.

Holota said he is optimistic about the Native's future in the city. Already he sees the community developing and strengthening its economic and political power and pushing for



the Native's fair shake in the city. Once Natives learn self-sufficiency, they will kick the drinking habit and the sad, tragic stories of death that periodically come from Kenora will disappear.

"Sure, I'm optimistic. There's no point in what I'm doing if I'm a pessimist," said Holota.

Ashkewe also sees a lot of reasons for being optimistic about the Native's future in the city. While interviewing Ashkewe in his office, he received continuous telephone calls from other Native employment counsellors. They established a new program for Natives where they would be taken right into the workplace and learn the requirements of the job and then receive pre-training in that occupation.

He had lined up a number of unemployed Natives to take the program to help them find employment. Unfortunately for the program, these unemployed Natives found other jobs for nine, seven and six dollars an hour while they were waiting to take the program.

As I left Mr. Ashkewe, he was running around with a smile on his face, trying to find other Natives to fill the program.