

Cat's dancing disease in Ontario north

Kenora poisoning rivals that of Minamata

KENORA (CUP) — While Kenora, Ontario festers on the poison of racism, the native people are dying of the poison of mercury.

Two Japanese experts on Minamata and Niigata, Japan, mercury poisoning) say the situation at two reserves near Kenora is grave and shocking. They found symptoms consistent with early mercury poisoning. Cats at White Dog and Grassy Narrows reserve are dying the same bizarre deaths as cats in Minamata and Niigata, Japan, before the disease showed up in humans a few years ago.

"If you don't start action you will have a more serious problem that we had," Dr. Jun Ui, professor of urban engineering at the University of Tokyo, told a public meeting at the University of Toronto in late March.

Dr. Masazumi Harada, of the University of Kumamoto, and chief medical investigator of Minamata Disease in Japan, termed the situation, shocking, and pleaded, "Please don't repeat the mistakes we made in Japan."

DANCING DISEASE

Dr. Harada showed a film of Japanese cats writhing in un-

controllable spasms, or trying to walk on hind legs that wouldn't respond. Many cats in that country dragged themselves to the sea and drowned themselves.

Before the disease was dubbed Minamata Disease, people of that town called it "cat's dancing disease".

INVESTIGATIONS

After their investigations in the north, the two experts spoke at the University of Toronto's Medical Science Centre along with Chief Andy Keewatin. They told the people there that they should organize support to force the Canadian government to release all its reports on mercury poisoning and stop the companies from further pollution.

"I think that in the Dryden (Kenora) area it is worse than it is in Japan. Here, there's not as much mud and the mercury lies on top longer, while in Japan the mud covers it up and it's coming out of the various river mouths," said Jun Ui.

"If it was this bad in Japan, people would actually be taking matters into their own hands."

People can contract mercury poisoning by eating the game in

the area — fish, ducks and even deer — that drink the polluted water and eat the poisoned grass along the shore. The disease, which attacks the central nervous system, has no known cure; it makes people act as if they're drunk.

In 1956, when Minamata Bay in Japan was polluted with heavy metals, the people of Minamata took the struggle into their own hands and won an anti-pollution law which places the burden of proof on the company to show that it was polluting.

SAME FISH

The two scientists pried out of Ottawa officials the information that a cat brought into the area and fed the same fish the native people eat developed Minamata disease within 100 days. The Canadian government has said that the official results will not be released for one and a half years.

Ui said the pulp waste in Dryden was incredible, in a country that had been described to him as a paradise of green forests and blue lakes.

"All of us were surprised with the Standing Committee for Mercury Pollution in Ottawa. Some

members of the government are irresponsible and indifferent in their attitude. Some know nothing of mercury at all," he said.

In July, 10 White Dog and Grassy Narrows people, some of whom are sure to have mercury poisoning, were brought to Tokyo by the Minamata Patients' Federation, composed of Japanese victims of the disease. There they will see medical experts, doctors who know something about the disease.

CATS POISONED

A week earlier, professor Tadao Takeuchi announced from Kumamoto that brain specimens of two cats, one from each reserve, showed both cats had been poisoned. One of the cats had died exhibiting all the classic symptoms of mercury poisoning, and the other cat was killed before the disease itself had time to finish it off.

At the same time, the governor of Kumamoto prefecture in which Minamata lies, added 15 more persons to the list of 723 known victims of the disease. One hundred and twenty persons on the list have already died.

Government experts have traced the source of the mercury in the affected English and Wabigoon River systems to the Dryden Chemical Company. The company says it will be converting to a non-mercury system later this year "if the equipment comes in time." However, in cases of mercury poisoning, the mercury remains in the water for generations, and people already affected who as yet have not begun to exhibit outward symptoms of poisoning, can not be helped."

BOTTOM SLUDGE

Ian Ramsay, director of the Environment's Thunder Bay office, confirmed that the mercury in the bottom sludge is expected to be a problem "for nobody knows how long." He thinks the Kenora "problem" is going to be a longer, stretched-out version of the Minamata tragedy.

Dr. Peter Newberry, a retired

Canadian Forces physician, who has been at the reserves since last November, tells of one 35 year-old man with high mercury readings — once a man with hopes of playing professional hockey — who now has an uncontrollable quiver in his upper lip, difficulty pronouncing some words, and is unable to balance on one foot with his eyes closed.

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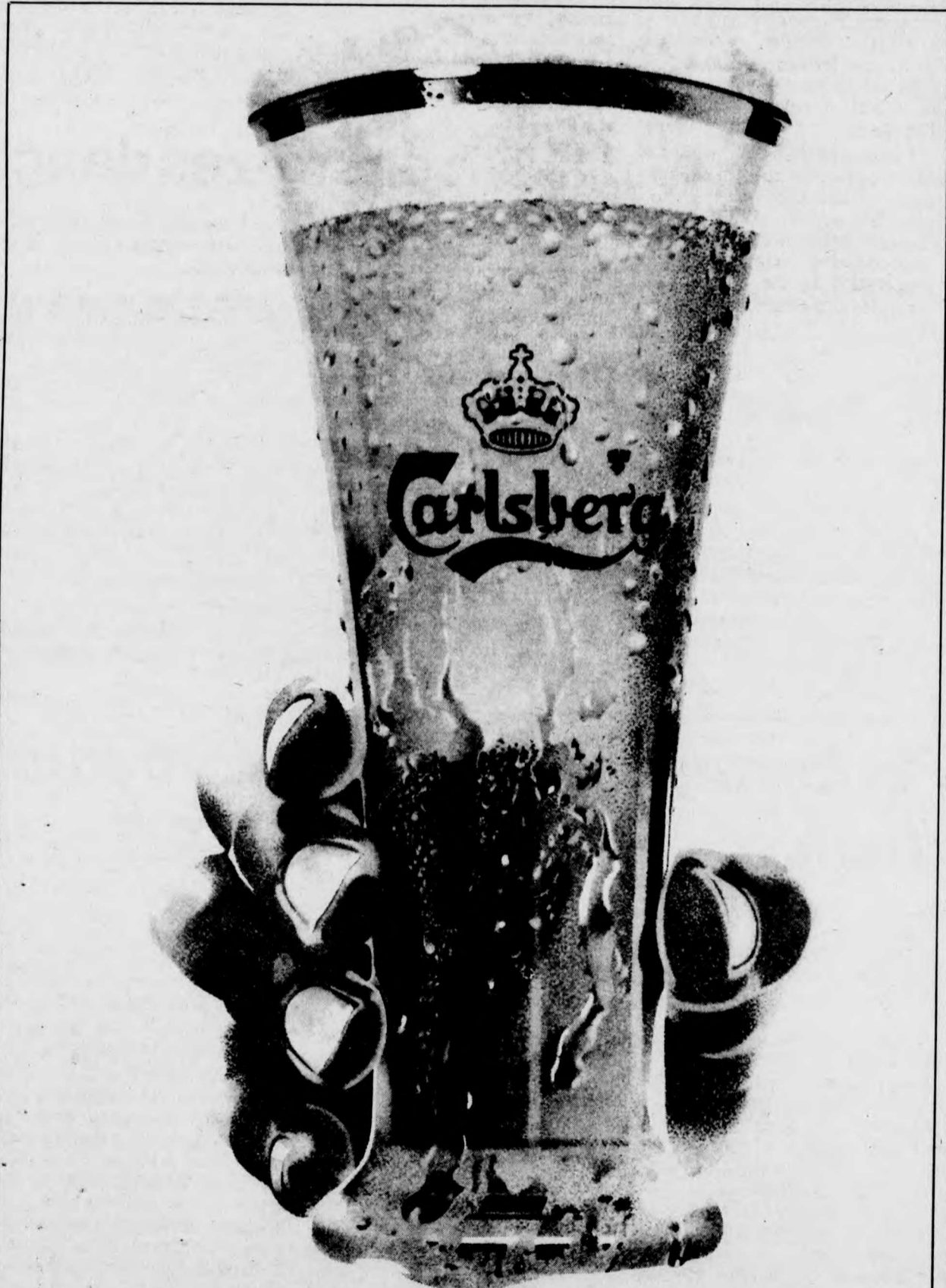
Grassy Narrows is just 50 miles from Kenora. Its only commercial food supply is the Hudson's Bay Company's store, where food prices are about twice the rates of Kenora. A dozen eggs are \$1.65, bacon \$1.85 a slab pound, apples \$2.35 for five pounds. The Indian Affairs Department had rejected a plea from Grassy Narrows for help in starting a non-profit co-operative store — the Department ruled such a store would be unfair competition for the Hudson's Bay Co.

The Ontario and Canadian Governments continue to sidestep the issue. On April 30, the Ontario government offered the Indians community freezers and access to uncontaminated lakes so they may fish to stock the freezers. Recently, the standard don't-eat-the-fish letters sent to residents of the two reserves were withdrawn. The universal advice now is not to eat the fish.

Ontario Cabinet ministers, notably Health Minister Frank Miller, repeatedly told the Ontario Legislature last fall, that "we told the Indians to stop eating the fish." Actually, there were three letters. Severely poisoned persons were told no more fish, while those less-severely poisoned were advised to eat smaller fish, and to fish in waters with lower mercury counts.

POLITICIANS

The politicians and their scientific hired hands were still saying they lacked proof that the mercury is damaging Indian health. "We are getting more cautious," they now concede.



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