

Features

Native Canadians: urban transition

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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, craggy marked face, and a brush cut, talking to friends along the way. He was triumphantly waving a \$5 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 published 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

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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;

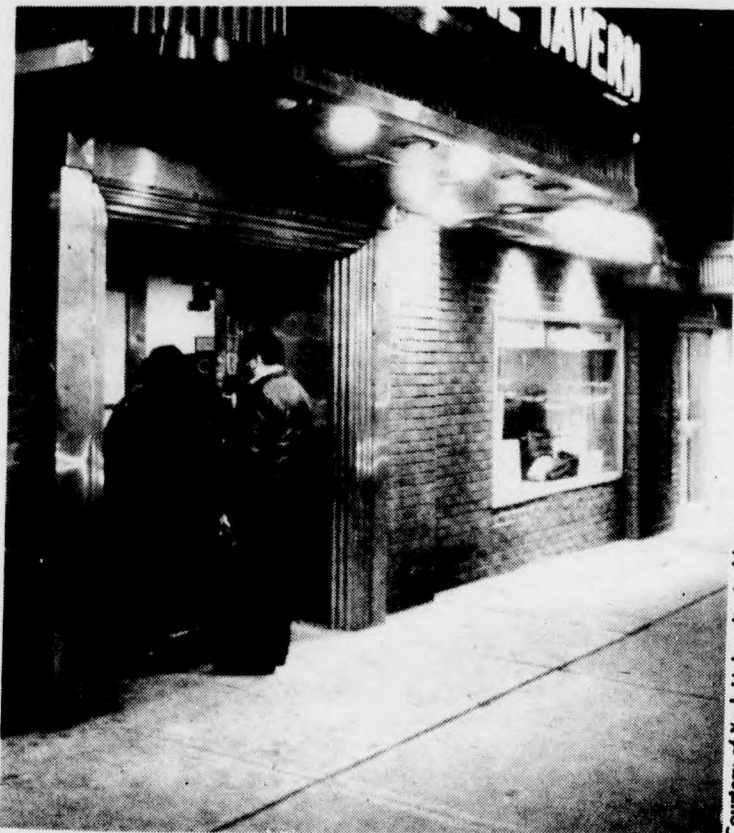
A great social change is going undocumented.

- 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 enrolment 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.



Courtesy of York University Archives

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

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