

THE INDIANS

With a history that dates back thousands of years, Canadian Indians form an important and distinct part of Canadian society. Christopher Columbus misnamed them "Indians" in 1492 when he thought he had arrived in India. Today Indians are succeeding in reminding Canadians they were once free self-sustaining nations with their own forms of government. Canadian Indians are in a period of transition as they pursue a cultural, social, political and economic revival.

In Canada, there are currently more than 440 000 registered Indians; when "registered," the individual is recognized under federal law as being an Indian, entitled to certain rights, privileges and benefits. About 60 per cent of registered Indians live on specified areas of land, called reserves, set aside through treaties or the Indian Act for their use and benefit. There are over 2 200 reserves across Canada for the 600 bands. Most are in rural areas, many are isolated and some are not inhabited.

Origins

Most anthropologists agree that the North American Indian migrated over the Bering Sea from Siberia, 10 000 to 30 000 years ago. When the European explorers and settlers arrived, Canada was populated by a diverse range of aboriginal peoples who, depending on environment, lived nomadic or settled lifestyles, were hunters, fishermen or farmers, were warlike or peaceful. They shared — and continue to share — a deep and spiritual relationship with the land and the life forms it supports. Each Indian culture had distinct spiritual beliefs and ceremonies, many of which have been carried down through the generations by Indian elders.

The Newcomers

No aspect of Indian life remained untouched by European contact, which began in earnest in the 1600s. Initially, several Indian "nations" forged trade and military alliances



Young Indian in native costume

with England and France who were struggling for control of the New World. In return for European goods, Indians provided their military skills, furs and other resources.

The newcomers also brought Christianity and disease to North America: missionaries weakened traditional spiritual beliefs and epidemics devastated aboriginal populations.

Early Indian Administration

Britain gained control of most of North America in 1760 and, three years later, issued the Royal Proclamation that reserved lands for the Indians and prescribed that only governments could deal with Indians on land matters. This prompted a series of land-cession treaties under which Indians gave up their claims to specified tracts of land in return for lump-sum cash payments and other benefits. From 1830 on, settlement on reserves in parts of what is now eastern Canada began under government guardianship; Indians effectively became wards of the state. Treaty-making continued in northern Ontario and the western provinces until 1923.

Post-Confederation Period

With Canadian Confederation in 1867, the new federal government was given legislative authority over "Indians and lands reserved for Indians." Passage of the first Indian Act in 1876 gave government great powers to control Indians living on reserves. Many of the restrictive provisions of the 1876 Act are still in place.

Over the next century, efforts to assimilate Indians into the white man's world included a process called "enfranchisement," whereby Indians renounced their aboriginal title to land in return for other rights and benefits, for example, the right to vote.

By the late 1940s and 1950s, it was evident that the Indian infant mortality rate was high and life expectancy was low. Several experiments in educating Indian youth had failed and housing standards on the reserves were poor. Problems associated with alcohol and unemployment were also widespread.

However, by the mid-1960s, there were signs of change in social and economic conditions. Health services were enhanced and Indian children had