Claire Waindubence

NOKOMIS:

THREE WOMEN OF MANITOULIN

Penelope Glasser

Dans cette entrevue, l'auteure nous fait connaître trois femmes autochtones de l'Ile Manitoulin, toutes les trois dans leur cinquantaine, et représentant, à leur façon, l'esprit de Nokomis, la grand-mère, la femme âgée source de sagesse et de stabilité sociale. Chacune de ces trois femmes a réussi à faire en elle-même la synthèse des croyances traditionnelles et imposées, et a atteint une grande confiance en soi. Elles sont, chacune, un exemple pour les autres, ayant un rôle important dans leur communauté au service des leurs.

Though Manitoulin Island has always been a place of unique spiritual importance to the Anishnabec of the region, and in spite of its tranquil, lake-studded beauty, the five Indian reserves scattered across its length have been plagued by the same problems that characterize reserves across Canada — poverty, alcoholism, domestic violence and neglect, petty crime, and a pervasive inertia accompanying high unemployment suggest, to a superficial observer, a totally dispirited people.

Change is happening slowly. The revival of interest in heritage, resurgence of ancient crafts, development of new arts, and new political activity aimed at justice and self-determination have been accompanied by talk of spiritual renaissance. To an outsider this can sound like rhetoric, an image fabricated out of desire, but not truly lived. Within the reserves, however, are people who, without benefit of official support or organization, have lived lives of courage and integrity.

Near the centre of the traditional native value system is the concept of Nokomis, grandmother, aged woman as source of wisdom and social stability. Many cultures cherish a similar image, but on the reserves of Manitoulin there are many women who do not diminish in social role or status with advancing years. Rather they develop, both in personal autonomy and community leadership. Only a portion of their energies can be attributed to the freedom from childcare that age can bring, since the extended family is a part of reserve life. Most participate to some degree in raising their grandchildren.

No human being is "typical," and the three women whose stories follow are very different in many respects. They share native ancestry, backgrounds of deprivation, current economic uncertainty. All in their fifties, they are aging and creating fulfilling lives, never discouraged by trying circumstances. Together, they do represent a principle.

The decision to speak openly with a non-native, and to allow the bare facts of a private life to be made public, was made quickly and with grace. All spoke with candour and humour, and the presence of pleasant but wary adult children expressed both the respect they enjoyed and the privilege I was being awarded.

Edna Trudeau, Maime Migwans, and Claire Waindubence embody the spirit of Nokomis in uniquely individual ways. Each has achieved her own synthesis of traditional and imposed beliefs, used as a buttress for a firm sense of self. This sense has served these women well and now stands as an example for others, since each is prominent in her community and devoted to her people.

EDNA TRUDEAU

"I was born illegitimate, so the other children told me I wasn't made by God. They said I was a child of Satan." At fifty-three, Edna Trudeau still lives on the relatively isolated Wikwemikong Reserve where she was born and grew up. Since the arrival of the first Jesuits, it has remained under the influence of the Roman Catholic church. In spite of early taunts, Edna says she felt and still feels herself to be God's creature. She is active in the church, which has organized a Homemaker's Club that sews for the needy. She sings in a choir that acts as a "music ministry" and travels through Ontario and into the States. Religious pictures adorn the walls. As well, Edna has faith in her own dreams and visions and remembers those of her childhood. At a recent mass she attended in the United States she was pleased to see the ceremonial drum included, and sweetgrass used in conjunction with holy water, as representing a related principle.

Although various medical problems make it impossible for Edna to walk more than a few yards, she also travels occasionally to demonstrate her skill at quillbox making. She is expert at the painstaking "tufting" technique, a recent innovation in the craft. As a child she learned to work with birchbark out of necessity, from her mother and aunts. Childhood play ended at the age of ten, when the winter coat she needed for school was held C.O.D. and toy birchbark canoes provided the means of retrieval. For Edna and her sister, it was a lesson in control. "We could see the change right away. We raced making canoes." Craft was a hedge against hunger, though a small one. For an entire winter's work, the family would receive a hundred dollars when they took it across Georgian Bay to market it to craft shops or pleasure boats.

Edna has nine children, eight of them sons, five of whom live at home. Two grandchildren live with her and her husband as well. The atmosphere is relaxed. The young men drift in and out. One, in his late twenties, is returning to university to become a counsellor. Between occasional jobs, there is welfare. Edna's large boxes bring good prices now, but since they require much time and work, few are made, though her hands are always busy. Her husband is employed. There is no hydro, no telephone, no luxury, but there is central heating and food. Edna remembers wintering in an uninsulated house while her husband was in a lumber camp. Morning and night, she and the boys lay down together to pray. "God was my only refuge. It's what made me a stronger Christian. No person could help me. The store wouldn't give me credit for food. Even the church couldn't help me. We got through on prayers."

The school Edna attended in her hard-earned coat did not ease her own childhood. Punished for speaking their own language, the children were always silent. "We played ball on the playground without anybody speaking. I don't know how I got into grade eight, being scared all the time." No longer afraid, Edna is busy earning through her careful craft and aiding the less fortunate on

Edna Trudeau

the reserve through her needlework. In two years she will be old enough to qualify officially as a community Elder, a position she looks forward to enthusiastically. Her face radiates peace of mind.

MAIME MIGWANS

A typical day for Maime Migwans begins with a cup of coffee at 5:30, followed by three or four hours of sewing or quillwork, breakfast, and a two-kilometre walk to the post office and general store. Like most rural communities, West Bay has no public transportation, so she walks back as well, perhaps stopping to visit a friend or relative. Once home, she makes lunch and resumes work.

Since she was widowed ten years ago, after more than twenty-two years of marriage and thirteen children, craftwork has become both a source of pride and an absolute economic necessity. At that time a basket that took all night to construct would sell for three dollars. Now the prices more closely reflect the labour, but black-ash baskets require a great deal of material preparation and hard physical effort, and Maime is one of the very few in the area who still makes them. All her work is excellent, and she is also very diversified, working with birchbark, sweetgrass, porcupine quills, black-ash splints, leather, and moosehair. She also sews and quilts, and works on a voluntary basis with the local Elders' Association, often cooking for community-sponsored events. Fishing and berrying are pleasurable breaks in routine, and also food sources. Sometimes she still must request credit at the local grocery store, and she relies on her sons' hunting skills for meat.

Maime learned her skills during a fairly traditional upbringing as one of sixteen children at Byng Inlet on the Cape Croker Reserve. At thirteen, her father's ill health prompted a move to Toronto, where for more than four years, until her first marriage, she worked a seven-day week as a live-in domestic. She did not mind the long hours then, for, as she points out, at fifty-eight she still takes few days off.

Though widowhood has been difficult, marriage was also hard. "Now I can do what I want with nobody to boss me around," she says simply. The "bossing" in her long second marriage included violent physical abuse from a man sadly thwarted in his own ambitions. "Why do you think my face looks like this?" It is not an easy subject.

Maime Migwans with Dolores Contre

It is Dolores Contré, the wife of Maime's eldest surviving son, who first indicates Maime's plight, and that it is a commonplace. Clear-eyed, articulate, the product of a reserve upbringing, acquainted with genuine hardship, the possessor of an academic degree in art and education, she is now returning to a more traditional way of life with no illusions. Her admiration for the older woman with whom she lives is obvious. Maime, she explains, represents the unconscious preservation of a culture, a way of being wherein knowledge is atmospheric and organically assimilated, and daily necessity pushes the individual to a recognition of the interdependence and co-existence of material and spiritual reality. Problems on the reserves are a result of the repression of that cultural awareness, she seems to suggest, and of the assimilation of a purely materialistic outlook. She is as candid about her own future as she is about Maime's past. "Sometimes I'm afraid," she admits. "I know the future will be hard. But I don't like it too easy. It can cut you off. The riches for me are that I'm staying in contact with nature. There's so much to learn."

Maime is a regular church-goer, but incorporated into her daily life are patterns that are native and specifically personal. Medicine follows prayer, burning sweetgrass may accompany spiritual communion. All activity is automatically sacred. Craftwork begins with a request for assistance, for blessing. "I ask every morning for help during the day," says Maime. "Don't you?"

CLAIRE WAINDUBENCE

"It wasn't until I turned forty that I finally woke up. There was a lot to be done. I started to figure out what the connections were. You don't take things seriously when you're young. The facts are always there, but you go your own way." Claire Waindubence's hands are busy making a bead necklace as she talks, taking advantage of time sitting still, but by instinct and purpose she is a woman who works with words and ideas. For the years since her fateful birthday, she has been collecting the legends of her people and, as a jokingly but accurately self-described "philosopher," has been weaving them into a fabric of meaning and moral value. Recently, in St. Catharines, she began to make her knowledge and information public. Native youth is her primary target audience, and further talks, radio broadcasts, and written material are planned.

Claire lives in Sheguiandah, where in she was born fifty-seven years ago. The years from six to eighteen were spent at a residential school in Sault Ste. Marie, for at six months she was abandoned by parents who had "problems." Her early years were, as she describes it, those of a stray kitten, fed but not nourished by the charity of people who did not have enough to feed their own.

Finally, on the recommendation of the Anglican minister who had occasionally provided cocoa or soup, she was removed from the reserve.

Life in the home was Dickensian with a Canadian twist: child inmates were both poor and native. The children worked the accompanying farm, but the milk from the Holsteins and vegetables from the gardens were sent out on trucks. Christmas was represented by an orange for each child; every Sunday saw four church services. Corporal punishment was merited by laziness, rule infractions, speaking a native tongue. Boys and girls were rigorously separated, and though the girls scrubbed cement floors — Claire's first period arrived while scrubbing and she was sure she'd torn an internal organ — the brutality toward the boys was worse. "The big ones toughed it out, they learned, but I'd hear the little ones screaming. I know some of them as men. Their bodies are still scarred from those beatings."

The forbidden pleasure she sometimes snatched was sketching birds or scenery. Today a son is an artist. Her dream was to be a doctor. "But that was to dream of being the man in the moon. I wanted to go up north and help those poor native people — I didn't really know I was one of them." At last, when she was thirteen, an Irish couple arrived and provided some affection to a hundred love-starved kids. Claire still responds to an Irish accent.

Then, at eighteen, Claire was sent "home," and it was "another shock, a trauma, coming here." She joined the army briefly, worked as a translator and later, uncomfortably, as a welfare administrator on the reserve, a job she quit when she found herself becoming judgmental, "when I knew where the money was going, and I worried about the children." She took a crash course in accounting and today is a woman of many skills. For her planned book she does research in museum archives as well as through personal interviews. It is to be "a reminder of the past, which was a great past. We don't need more sensationalism. We need a message for the future." Claire believes in a higher power that is not church-defined.

"White people see stereotypes in a reserve situation," Claire states calmly. "I've been a prisoner of two cultures, but because I'm Indian and was raised by whites, I have two points of view. The Europeans brought certain advantages, but they wanted to own the native body and soul. They couldn't, and that was a turning point for both." Claire points out that spirits broken and resentments harboured are inevitably paired. Today, in spite of her own bitter schooling, she feels native people cannot retreat, though they may choose alternative ways to employ their learning. "I stress education because it makes people know their equality. My people are finally waking up — it should have happened a century ago."

Claire has twelve grandchildren. During her husband's recent illness, she took on all chores. She has no intention of retiring her goals. "I have a message, and I'm not done yet. I don't like spineless people. They won't stick up for their rights or for what's right. I never wish. I do."

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