

Native Caanadians: Urban Transition

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by Eugene Zimmerebner

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 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

• 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.

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

"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

Many Indians grow up dependent on welfare.

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

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.

"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

"They call you a white apple".

affirmative action programs in six of its departments.

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, 111 had a single parent.

When asked 'where does your family income come from?', 82 families said social assistance (welfare or mother's allowance), 75 families said both social assistance and employment, 6 families said employment insurance and 2 families said student allowance and employment. So there seems to be an equal reliance on income from employment and social assistance and other forms of support.

cont'd on page 11



Carl Ray: "Man eater of the underworld" (1975)

Courtesy of the McMichael Canadian Collection

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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 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.

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 an 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.

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-