Radical Migrations Through Anishinaabewaki

Manidoo-minising

ALAN CORBIERE

DYLAN MINER: *Tell us a little about yourself and what you do?*

ALAN CORBIERE: I am an Anishinaabe from M'Chigeeng First Nation on Manitoulin Island, Ontario. I was born in Toronto but my parents moved us all back to the reserve in 1975. My primary and secondary education was on the reserve. I then left to go to attend the University of Toronto, where I attained a Bachelor of Science in Environmental Science. Afterward, I was accepted into the Masters of Environmental Studies program at York University in Toronto. I met my wife in Toronto and we have three children and are raising a nephew as well. Currently, I am the Executive Director of the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation (OCF). I have many tasks here, such as proposal writing, report writing, fundraising, historical research, Ojibwe language research and overseeing cultural, artistic and museum programming.

DM: *Can you talk a bit about the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation. What is its primary mission? Why and when was it established?*

AC: The Ojibwe Cultural Foundation was established in 1974 by five communities on Manitoulin Island and one on the north shore of Lake Huron. The OCF mandate is "to preserve, revitalize and further enhance the language, culture, spirituality and traditions of the Anishinaabe people by representing the needs being expressed by the member First Nation communities of the Robinson Huron Treaty area." Although the language has been updated, the current mandate stays true to the original intent of the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation. After many years of being located in an old store and in portable units, the OCF finally opened up a new facility in 1999. The new facility, named by the elders "Enaamjigeyaang—Our vision," includes a healing lodge with a fireplace, an art gallery, a rotunda for

gatherings, and a museum to exhibit Anishinaabe heritage. The OCF also hosts cultural programming and workshops to achieve its mandate. Significant programs in the past, which have been re-established, include the annual Summer Art Camp, an Elders Conference, as well as monthly art exhibits by local artists and an annual summer museum exhibit. The art and museum exhibits are usually tied to school programming that is offered to our constituent members.

DM: ***Manitoulin Island has a history of being a hotbed of Anishinaabeg art-making and cultural maintenance. From the development of the Woodlands school by figures like Daphne Odjig to the work of Carl Beam and others, why has Manitoulin Island maintained this trajectory?***

AC: I think, others may disagree, that there are a number of factors that contribute to this. The principle factors include history, population, and location. The elders say that Manitoulin Island is a special place, even a sacred place for the Anishinaabeg. The great chiefs of the past were reportedly buried here on the island. There are legends still told of the exploits of Nenaboozhoo (Nanabush) running through Manitoulin and leaving various marks. There are also culturally and historically significant places such as Dreamers Rock located adjacent to Manitoulin on the Whitefish River reserve. Located nearby Manitoulin, as well, are the Bell Rocks, which give the name to the islands adjacent to Manitoulin—LaCloche islands and the LaCloche mountains on the north shore of Lake Huron opposite Manitoulin. The name Manitoulin comes from the word Manidoo, meaning "spirit" in Anishinaabemowin. There are different etymologies of the word Manitoulin but all agree that it refers to the spirit that is on Manitoulin. So I believe that one factor that contributed to Manitoulin being a "hotbed" of cultural maintenance and art is the fact that spirit is here, the spirit of the Anishinaabeg, the great spirit, and the spirit of the great chiefs of the past, the spirit of Nenaboozhoo, and the spirit of the land.

The next factor is history. Manitoulin Island has been known also as Manidoomnis, Odaawaa-minis, and has been claimed by the Ojibwe and Odawa people. History reveals that the Odawa were settled on Manitoulin in the 1600s and 1700s and then re-settled in 1830s along with the Ojibwe and Potawatomi. In 1836, after the War of 1812, the British negotiated a treaty with the Anishinaabeg to have Manitoulin set aside as a refuge for all Anishinaabeg. The goals of the British were to corral all of the Anishinaabeg onto two big reserves, one of which was Manitoulin. The British promised education, provisions, as well as secured tenure to fishing and hunting rights. Many Anishinaabeg took the offer to move to Manitoulin in the 1830s and 1840s. The Anishinaabeg's goals were similar. Realizing that the British and the United States would no longer engage in war, many of the former British allies decided to move into their "Great Father's arms." The second factor that led to many Anishnaabeg moving to Manitoulin, particularly Odawa from upper Michigan, was that a treaty signed in March of 1836 with the U.S. was unilaterally changed. The Odawa, after negotiating a treaty, thought

that they had secured their homelands forever, but when the treaty reached the U.S. Senate for ratification the senate added in a removal clause. This was the era of Andrew Jackson's removal policy. With that news, the Odawa and Ojibwe Anishinaabeg from upper Michigan decided to move to Manitoulin rather than face removal after five years of the treaty.

The Manitoulin Treaty of 1836 was then negotiated and sealed in August 1836 (after news of the changed clause in the March 1836 Treaty with the United States government). Manitoulin Island then served as the place to carry out an earlier treaty called the Covenant Chain. This treaty was tied to and manifested by the annual delivery of presents. The annual distribution of presents was held on Manitoulin from 1836 to 1854. The distribution of presents was annually attended by up to 2,500 Odawa, Potawatomi, Ojibwe, Menominee, Winnebago (Ho-Chunk), Sauk, and even some Sioux. The British announced the plan of the "model community" and invited the people to move to Manitoulin. This basically concentrated the population on Manitoulin and it then had a population that would have a critical mass to maintain our language, customs, history and traditions. A smaller population surrounded by non-Native people would likely not have been host to the cultural revitalization and maintenance that Manitoulin is noted for. This concentration of people, some of whom were Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Heathen (Pagan), and others practiced syncretic forms. So the factor is population density because someone in the crowd will continue to tell legends, someone will maintain ceremonies, someone will continue to practice Anishinaabe medicine, and many have continued to speak Anishinaabemowin. So the historical fact of trying to concentrate the Anishinaabeg onto one island served to create an "island" of people who could maintain their customs, language, and traditions.

DM: ***In Mid-Michigan, we've been involved in an oral history project with elders who migrated to Lansing to work in the automotive industry. Many of them came from Manitoulin and maintain strong connections to the island and tribal governance. Why has Manitoulin maintained such a vibrant continuity across generations, while other reserves in Ontario and Michigan have faced language maintenance issues?***

AC: I believe this has been answered by the question above but one other factor that I will mention is that the British (Canadian government) came back to have the island ceded. The majority of the island was then ceded in 1862 but the Wikwemikong band did not accept the treaty—they resisted and have since been called the unceded band. Resisting and saying "no" has had a profound effect upon the people of Wikwemikong and even the rest of the island population. This added to the psyche of the people to maintain their traditions and language in the face of English hegemony. The ancestors who said "no" actually influenced a number of generations and their temperament has been passed on to their descendants.

DM: ***What artists, projects, organizations, and institutions are presently***

active on the island that outside audiences should pay attention to? You have an important event coming this year, would you like to discuss that?

AC: The Ojibwe Cultural Foundation hosts art exhibits by local Anishinaabe artists all summer long. Starting in May we host one Anishinaabe artist for a month-long exhibit. We usually have an exhibit that lasts for the entire summer. This past summer we had an exhibit called "N-nisidwaamdis: I recognize myself" which was about Anishinaabe self-portraiture and included works by Norval Morrisseau, Daphne Odjig, Barry Ace, Nadia Myre, and Travis and Bewabon Shilling. We are also currently hosting an exhibit in our museum called "Gashkibidaagan: Medicine pouches of the Anishinaabeg." This summer the OCF will host a commemoration of the 175th anniversary of the 1836 Manitowaning Treaty. The commemoration will also have a museum exhibition, and an art exhibit. The actual day, August 9, 2011, will start with a sunrise ceremony and recital of a wampum belt and then speeches by chiefs and dignitaries followed by a feast to honor the chiefs who signed the treaty. The feast will be a clan feast to honor the clans as well.

Other organizations on the island that have programming and exhibits include De-bah-jeh-muh-jig Theatre group located in Manitowaning, Ontario, and the Wikwemikong Heritage Organization (WHO), located in Wikwemikong, Ontario. Individual artists also have their art galleries, such as Blake Debassige (Kasheese Studios), Blair Debassige (Nimkee Art Gallery), Ann and Anong Beam and the late Carl Beam (Neon Raven Studio), and De-bah-jeh-muh-jig also has an art gallery in their studio space.

DM: ***Manitoulin has an important historical role within Anishinaabeg society. How does this influence what you are doing and the importance of future projects?***

AC: The above answers have alluded to Manitoulin's importance, historic and contemporary, and the OCF plans to showcase the best of the Anishinaabeg, whether it is art, history or heritage. Our goals are to teach our own people primarily but a secondary goal is to educate non-Native people about the Anishinaabeg. As the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812 approaches, the OCF will be involved in various projects that showcase the Anishinaabeg's contribution to those endeavours. The OCF also continues to assist in the language revitalization movement by creating print and digital materials.