

Building Bridges From a Mnjikaning Fish Fence Circle Perspective

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In September 2002, the Mnjikaning Fish Fence Circle launched an exciting new educational video “Journey to the Fish Weirs”, at the annual gathering of the Simcoe County Historical Association in Orillia, Ontario. By bringing together First Nations people, historians, archaeologists, environmentalists, and elected officials to celebrate the importance of an ancient and sacred place, this educational initiative did indeed bridge cultural divides. Ontario’s newly-appointed Lieutenant Governor, himself a person of Aboriginal heritage, set the tone for the day’s celebrations.

Introduction

Residents of Ontario are familiar with “Casino Rama”, the native-run casino located near Orillia in central Ontario. The Biblical name, “Rama”, was chosen by a surveyor to designate lands to be set aside for the native people of this area many years ago, and they have been known as the Chippewas of Rama for over one hundred years. More recently, the community has renamed itself the “Chippewas of the Mnjikaning First Nation”, returning to their own language for inspiration. “Mnjikaning” is an Ojibway word meaning “the place of the fish fence”. As this paper shows, “the place of the fish fence” is more than a place where a wooden fish weir exists; Mnjikaning is, in fact, a sacred place.

The fish weirs at Atherley Narrows between Lakes Simcoe and Couchiching (Figures 1 and 2) have been known for generations but were not extensively reported upon in the archaeological literature until about 35 years ago (Johnston and Cassavoy 1978; Kenyon 1966). To accommodate the increased traffic going through Orillia to the Casino and also to meet the increased traffic demands of cottagers and vacationers travelling along this route to various locales, the Highway 12 bridge over the area where the waters narrow between Lake Simcoe and Lake Couchiching had to be expanded in the early 1990s. At the same time as the expansion of the bridge became an issue, Parks Canada was also grappling with the issue of deterioration of fish weir stakes in an area directly under the bridge, which is part of the



Figure 1. The location of Mnjikaning Fish Weirs National Historic Site of Canada, near Orillia, Ontario (courtesy Parks Canada).

busy Trent-Severn Waterway. The site, which was designated of national significance in 1982, was being impacted by erosion, modern fishing pressures, and increased boat traffic (Figure 3). The decision to remove one area of wooden stakes, through underwater archaeological excavation, was controversial at the time; partly in response to the tensions that arose following the removal of over 120 of the maple, birch and cedar stakes by qualified Parks Canada underwater archaeologists, the Mnjikaning Fish Fence Circle (MFFC) was formed in 1993 and incorporated in 1996. The purpose of the Circle is “...to honour the spirit of

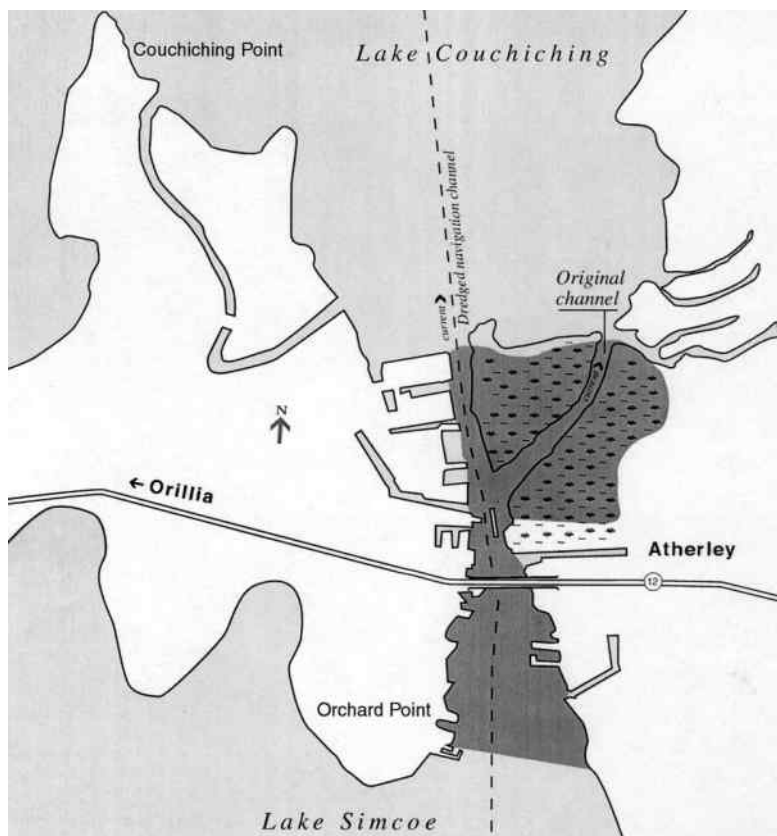


Figure 2. *The known extent of weir stakes at the Mnjikaning site (courtesy Parks Canada).*



Figure 3. *Parks Canada marine archaeologist measuring wooden weir stakes (courtesy Parks Canada).*

the sacred area known as the place of the fish fence (Mnjikaning) by fostering—through education, social and co-operative experiences—the traditions taught there of healing and harmony among all nations.” (Mnjikaning Fish Fence Circle 1999). Its members are drawn from native and non-native communities and represent municipalities, First Nations, other organizations and the general public.

The stakes that were subsequently removed went through an extensive preservation process in Parks Canada’s conservation laboratory in Ottawa, where they remain today until a local repository capable of storing them is designated. Occasionally, some stakes are loaned for display. The ones found under the bridge are not among the oldest on the site, being in the range of 75 to 350 years old. The stake alignments of greatest age, up to 4,900 years old, are still in the water in another part of the channel, preserved in layers of protective silt. Thus far, no other wooden fish weirs have been found so well preserved in Canada.

Records of Mnjikaning as a Special Place

Our first written record of the use of fish weirs occurred almost 400 years ago on the first day of September 1615, when the French explorer, Samuel de Champlain left Huronia with a “Wendat” or Huron war party to journey southward to attack

the Iroquois. While resting at the Atherley Narrows, Champlain observed and described the series of wooden fish fences in the water and the method of fishing which the Hurons employed there.

...we set out from the village [Cahiagué] on the first day of September and passed along the shore of a small lake [Lake Couchiching], distant from the said village three leagues, where they make great catches of fish which they preserve for the winter. There is another lake immediately adjoining [Lake Simcoe], which is twenty-six leagues in circumference, draining into the small one by a strait [The Narrows], where the great catch of fish takes place by means of a number of weirs which almost close the strait, leaving only small openings where they set their nets in which the fish are caught... [Biggar 1922:56-57].

In the original French text this description of the weirs reads: "... par le moyen de quantité de palissades, qui ferme presque le destroit, y laissant seulement de petites ouvertures, où ils mettent leurs filets, où le poisson se prend..." (Biggar 1922: 56-57).

Just as important as the written record, is the oral history of the Anishinaabe people, where it is told that their nomadic ancestors visited the area during a long migration from the Atlantic coast and learned the weir operation from the Hurons:

As our people journeyed outward from the Great Falls, we discovered the Huron Nation fishing at the narrows. We spent considerable time with the Hurons learning all the techniques. We stayed long enough to gain the Huron's trust and we were given gifts symbolizing our new relationship.... [After several winters] the Anishinabek decided that we should continue to move westward seeking the place where the food grew on top of the water [wild rice] [Douglas 1998:5-6].

Later, the Anishinaabe people returned to settle in the area and became the custodians of the weirs. Their stewardship continues to this day. Despite the modern intrusions, the fish still congregate there in spring and fall. As a traditional meeting place for Aboriginal peoples, the weirs location was one where stories and goods were exchanged, treaties were made, spiritual ceremonies were held and festivities were enjoyed, all at the "place of the fish fence".

The Objectives of the Mnjikaning Fish Fence Circle

To accompany its Mission Statement, the MFFC formulated three main objectives, which were adopted in 1999 (Mnjikaning Fish Fence Circle 1999). The objectives of the MFFC are to participate in the preservation and protection of the Mnjikaning Fish Weirs National Historic Site at the narrows between Lakes Couchiching and Simcoe; encourage and foster an understanding and awareness of the site and of its importance to the native cultures that existed here for thousands of years, and to build on this understanding in order to create a closer harmony among all cultures through the development of an interpretive/learning centre; and conduct educational seminars for the public and teaching sessions for school children about this meeting place of fish and people and about the spirituality, technology, social organization and activities of the people who gathered at this sacred site.

In 2001-2002, to realise these objectives, the MFFC members commissioned three young men from the Mnjikaning community to make a video that would educate the general public and meet the requirements of the "new" educational curriculum in Ontario. This video, entitled "Journey to the Fish Weirs", contains film of Parks Canada's underwater archaeologists on-site and a number of story-tellers, singers, drummers and artists who narrate the history of the weirs from different individual perspectives. An event was needed to be the launch pad for the public release of the video. The request to MFFC from the Simcoe County Historical Association (SCHA) to host its Annual Fall Barbecue and Gathering, was the perfect opportunity.

The Visit of the Lieutenant Governor

The SCHA oversees 14 affiliated groups in Simcoe County such as the MFFC, the Barrie Historical Society and Fort Willow. On a limited budget and with the help of a small but dedicated Organising Committee, this event took place on Saturday, September 21, 2002, on the day of the Fall Equinox. About 200 people attended including members and friends of the affiliated organisations, the general public, and many families of the Mnjikaning First Nation. It was a resounding success, made more so by the presence of Ontario's 27th Lieutenant Governor, the Honourable James K. Bartleman, our province's first Aboriginal Lieutenant Governor and a member of the Mnjikaning First Nation since 1985 (Bartleman's Aboriginal mother lost her status upon marriage to a White person; he applied to regain his Aboriginal status under federal Bill C-31).

Since the BBQ could not be held under water, we chose the Stephen Leacock Museum grounds as a setting. The day's official events began at 10 o'clock with the first of four showings of the Fish Weirs video. However, about 50 people arrived an hour early to participate in an outdoor pipe-teaching ceremony that was conducted by Ralph King, a member of the Mnjikaning First Nation and also a fire fighter. The final part of that ceremony, a prayer to the four directions, was delivered in Ojibway by Merle Assance-Beedie, an Elder of the Chippewas of Beausoleil First Nation, member of the MFFC, and member of the Barrie Friendship Centre. Merle also was one of the storytellers who introduced the third showing of the videotape.

I had the very great honour of meeting the Lieutenant Governor as he arrived at the grounds of the Leacock House with his aide-de-camp, Jay Hope, precisely on time for the luncheon. As he approached the platform for the official speeches, the Thunder Women and Biidaban Singers from Mnjikaning First Nation greeted him with drumming and singing. Also greeting him was Mark Douglas, a MFFC member whose father Ivan Douglas, a former Chief of the Mnjikaning First Nation, had been close friends of the Bartleman family for many years (Figure 4). Our



Figure 4. Mark Douglas, left, with Lieutenant Governor the Honourable James Bartleman (courtesy MFFC).

honoured guest described to us just how appropriate this setting was. He grew up nearby and his Aboriginal grandmother and two of his aunts worked for the Leacock family. He spoke eloquently of his Aboriginal heritage and promised to spread the story of the weirs far and wide in his travels. This entire speech is on the SCHA's web site at www.simcoecountyhistory.ca.

Building Bridges

Casino Rama donated funds to help defray expenses associated with the meal, which consisted of corn soup, fried scone, a choice of venison sausage, chicken breast, or a beef burger on a bun, bean salad, wild rice pudding, tea or coffee. Entertainment during the BBQ luncheon was provided by the Orillia Folk Society. The Lieutenant Governor was relaxed and clearly enjoying himself as he chatted with many in the crowd.

Figure 5. *Paved walkway and ceremonial space under bridge, Atherley Narrows, with the Grandfather Rock at right background (courtesy MFFC).*



Figure 6. *View east past old railway bridge towards undisturbed channel and area of weir stake concentrations (courtesy MFFC).*



The Chief and Council of the Mnjikaning First Nation supplied the community's large school bus that, throughout the day, transported groups about two kilometres east to the site at the Narrows, where tour guides gave detailed explanations. First, the bus parked under the bridge where a temporary site has been prepared for visitors and for spiritual ceremonies. The Grandfather Rock was recently placed there as a focal point (Figure 5). Then the bus journeyed a short distance to where an historical plaque has been placed and where some stakes are still visible near the old iron railway bridge (Figure 6). Tour guides for the day were Mark Douglas, Jay Cody (a former curator of the Stephen Leacock Museum) and Mary Lou Kirby, President of the MFFC. The final bus shuttle of the day took people to the new hotel at the Casino, to view the multi-media show in the lobby that tells the story of the Mnjikaning

First Nation and the people of the fish weirs in an excitingly creative way. It is presented every hour on the hour—a show not to be missed. Bill Shilling, a Director of the MFFC, who in his youth filmed for the National Film Board (e.g., “The Loon’s Necklace”), played a consultative role in this project.

Parks Canada and its Aboriginal Affairs Advisor for Ontario, Sheryl Smith, supplied partial funding for the honoraria given to those participating in the ceremony, dancing and singing and for the gift of the drum. The drum was handcrafted by Brenda Miller, one of the “Thunder Women” and was presented to the Lieutenant Governor by Sue Anderson-Kelly (Figure 7), a Director of the MFFC and member of the OAS, a member of the Mnjikaning First Nation, and one of the “Thunder Women”.



Figure 7. Sue Anderson-Kelly presents a hand drum to Lieutenant Governor the Honourable James Bartleman (courtesy MFFC).

The recently re-elected Mnjikaning Chief, Sharon Stinson-Henry, brought her welcome from the First Nation (Figure 8). Remarks were also made both by the Warden of Simcoe County, Dr. Tom Garry (who is also the Mayor of neighbouring Ramara Township) and by the M.P.P., Garfield Dunlop. All complimented the MFFC for work well done. The SCHA provided major funding for the day, contributed a display, and organized the sale of the BBQ tickets. People enjoyed the beautiful setting as they ate, viewed the video, toured the site and visited with one another. Others purchased items from the native crafts that had been provided by the Orillia Native Women's Centre, or toured exhibits set up by the MFFC and the Orillia Museum of Art and History.

Before he and his entourage departed, the Lieutenant Governor posed in the kitchen of the Stephen Leacock Museum where his grandmother had been the cook. In another room, he



Figure 8. The Honourable James Bartleman with Chief Sharon Stinson Henry of the Chippewas of Mnjikaning First Nation (courtesy MFFC).

assumed the pose of Stephen Leacock himself, as he imagined his aunts in their jobs as Leacock's maids.

Conclusions

As I trudged across the lawn for seemingly the hundredth time that day, I reflected upon the bridges built, the connections made, the potential partnerships formed to assist the MFFC in realizing its goal of establishing an interpretative/cultural centre. These words of our Lieutenant Governor went through my mind:

The great significance of the fish weir story is the fact that the history of the native people is now partly the common history of the area. White and native people can share a common history—a history based on the equality and multiculturalism of the Ontario of today.

He has promised to spread the word about the fish weirs in his travels throughout the province and the rest of Canada. With this promise and his help, I am confident that the fish and the weirs site, just as they did 5,000 years ago and as they did again on September 21, 2002, will continue to draw people together.

Acknowledgements. In the programme for the event we recognised the co-operation and contribution of many groups and individuals. The creators of the video were: Dean St. Germain, a very talented young man who performs the “Bear Song” in the video; Keesic Douglas, a director of the MFFC, son of Mark and the one who took all the photos of the day; and, Travis Shilling whose late father Arthur Shilling was a noted native artist. Travis supplied the artwork in the video and he and his brother, Bewabon Shilling, had some of their art on display in Swanmore Hall where the video was shown throughout the day. Christine Douglas, wife of Mark, and one of the Biidaban Singers, made the wild rice pudding. Kevin Wassegijig, Director of First Nations Affairs, accepted our thanks on the Casino’s behalf. Other groups who donated supplies were

the Pepsi Bottling Group in Orillia, Spirithawk Consultants from Ottawa, and the National Library of Canada. Members of the Orillia Folk Society who performed were Jimmy Harris, Brooks and Cooper. OAS member Glen Kearsley, also a SCHA member, was present at the SCHA display along with the Past-President, Doug Hamilton, and Susan Downs, currently a Director.

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