

The relationship between the Natives and the white settlers in Buchanan

Gerald Nadeau, Transcript

“The Natives and the people when they first came here, they seemed to be dependent on each other. Because they depended on the Natives to learn the things the natives knew and sometimes, to get help from the Natives. And the Natives never seemed to feel that they were less important than the white people because they needed each other for the same reasons. Because the Natives, they made... for sickness, somebody would go to one of those native women, the older women, and they would get cures made up for what they had. And if you wanted snowshoes, you had to go to the Natives to get them, because they could tan the hides, and if you wanted deer-skin mitts, you’d have to go to a Native again. And if you wanted help and the Native was your only neighbour, if you could work the way that the Native wanted to work, you could get him to help you. That meant he would come when it suited him, not when it suited you. They were able to live together quite well.

I’ll show you after the rocking chair that this old girl used to sit on. And she said that when she was just a small girl, her mother had two cows, and she used to make butter, and in the springtime when the grass was good and the cows would milk better she’d have extra butter, and some days there’d be 20 canoes coming down the [Ottawa] River, at one time, in one group. And all the women would be paddling, and all the small kids had a little paddle, and she said she’d see all the little faces along the gunnels of the canoe, wanting to see the white people, because some of them had never seen white people. And they’d all get lined up and peek over the top of the canoe. And then they’d come in, and the men would get out in the water, about waist deep. They’d come in, and some of them had been there before, and they’d want to buy butter. She’d have the butter in wooden bowls, and they’d take the butter down on the rocks, and they’d eat the butter just like candy, with their hands. Yep, butter to them was like candy. But the men were the only ones who got the butter, because the women and the small children stayed in the canoe with the dogs.

And she said they used to be going to Fort William and the smoke would be so heavy from so many campfires, it was just like a fog, up in the trees. And everybody came with whatever dogs they had left from the year before, and they turned them all loose. And the dogs would fight and they’d breed, they’d bark and they’d run, it was a holy terror the first week when they’d all come in. The women would fish and cook and the men would sleep most of the summer. And every day the priest would say a mass and he’d have to be paid for it. So this was how they got the money from the Natives. If somebody had died in the bush the year before, you could have a mass said for them even though they were buried out in the bush where you’d never see them again. But they were then taught that this new religion, you could just request and the guy was in heaven as soon as the mass was finished. So a lot of them were, how would you put it, taken? Because their beliefs were just about as sound as what they were being taught.

Then in the fall they said that they were down there one time and this guy had a young family and his wife had died in the bush and he had spent the summer in Fort William. And they were ready to go back up to I guess Kippawa or Temagami or Temiskamang maybe... but he had to have a mother for those children. Because a man alone couldn't look after small ones in the bush. So one of the guys had a daughter who wasn't married, and I think you could picture somebody being maybe a little on the slow side, or god knows why. But it didn't matter. When the bargain was made between the person who lost his wife and the father who had this girl who was not yet married, she would be up going with this other family when the fall came. So they happened to be there the time that the father brought the girl down to get her married by the priest who was there. And it took two of them to hold her while the marriage was going on. She couldn't speak no English but the father knew a little, and the old fella told me the words he said: Whatever her name was, he used her name, and he said you're going to marry unto one Joe Mackenzie. Joe Mackenzie was the native who had lost his wife and had the small children. So when the ceremony was over, it was legal. They put her in the canoe and pushed out, and that was it. It was survival at a time when he could have lost his small kids if he'd have went into the bush with no one to care for them. It's a strange thing when you think back but when you see today's world, you know, how often do you see separations and other things which don't work."