

Champlain's abandoned allies

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BARRIERE LAKE RESERVE, QUE. - Samuel de Champlain wrote fondly of his adventures with the Algonquins, the native allies who helped the founder of Quebec navigate the dangerous white-water rapids of the New World and fought at his side against the Iroquois.

“I wished to help them against their enemies,” the French explorer recalled in his journals of his 1609 encounter with more than 200 Algonquins as he explored the St. Lawrence River. “They had asked all the Indians I saw on the river's bank to come to meet us for the purpose of making an alliance with us. ... And that they now besought me to return to our settlement, for them to see our houses, and that three days later we should all set off on the war-path together.”

On the war path they went, winning the first battle of the Iroquois Wars at what would come to be known as Lake Champlain. The explorer famously sketched the battle, depicting himself in the heroic lead defeating the Iroquois with the Algonquins – as well as Montagnais and Hurons – backing him up with bows and arrows.

This summer, Champlain has come to the fore again, as rock concerts, fireworks and foreign dignitaries toast the 400th anniversary of his founding of Quebec City. His Algonquin allies, however, are now even further in the background.



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David Thusky plants trees after a clear cut has come through the land off the reserve. (*Ashley Fraser/For The Globe and Mail*)

Photogallery

- Champlain's lost children



“They're celebrating, but what most of the [Algonquin] people are looking at ... is 400 years of misery,” says Algonquin elder Hector Jerome, a long-time activist on the Barriere Lake reserve, three hours north of Ottawa.

Small dirt roads line Highway 117 in northwest Quebec, jutting off into the dense, green forest. There are no signs or mail boxes. But hidden just behind the trees are pockets of Algonquins living in hand-built shacks, lacking running water or electricity.

There is no room for them at nearby Barriere Lake, where mouldy houses with plastic-sheet windows and plywood floors often shelter as many as 16 people each.

Tillis Keyes, a 17-year-old with an interest in poetry, sits at his kitchen table on the reserve and points to the large, plastic-covered window frame behind him.

“It's been like that for four years,” he says.

While native groups across Canada face challenges, politics and history have left the Algonquins outside of the support system and legal status that most other tribes have gained. Their traditional territory covers a huge swath of land on both the Quebec and Ontario sides of the Ottawa river, but the Algonquins have never signed any treaties to trade land rights for structural support.

As a result, while their northern neighbours such as the Cree and the Inuit receive millions each year in natural-resources revenue, many Algonquins in this region live off the land – and welfare cheques from Indian Affairs.

Though the federal government is constitutionally responsible for status Indians such as the Algonquin, Pierre Nepton, a senior Indian Affairs official for the department's Quebec region, points a finger at the Quebec government when asked why the Algonquins do not have the same deals as the Cree and Inuit when it comes to forestry and hydro revenue.

“It's under provincial jurisdiction,” says Mr. Nepton. “It's clear in my view that the province should answer that question: Why?”

Conquered and divided

Quebec's official website for the 400th anniversary contains a biography of Champlain's accomplishments, but makes only passing reference to the native role. Huron leader Max Gros-Louis has been featured in official events, but there is little reference to the Algonquins, who are now scattered across western Quebec and Ontario's Ottawa Valley.

The French quickly abandoned Champlain's alliances in the early 1600s. Without the support of French firearms, many Algonquins were killed by Iroquois from the south.

Colonization then brought disease, and competition for game. The early forest industry flooded the rivers with logs flushed downstream. (The old \$1 bill illustrated how the Ottawa River was once covered in logs floating downriver from Algonquin land.)

By the 20th century, Quebec's push into hydro power created massive reservoirs that swallowed up the smaller lakes the Algonquins once depended on for fishing.

Add the decades of the residential schools, when their youngsters were shipped by rail for 10 months of the year to schools as far away as Kenora in northwestern Ontario, and their mere survival as an Algonquin-speaking community is itself an accomplishment.

Benjamin Nottaway, the former chief of the Barriere Lake band, says he's determined to preserve the language for the Algonquin children and is pushing to have it taught in the reserve school.

“They're still going to have their mother tongue,” he says.

However, political divisions among the Algonquins have made it harder for them to demand their rights with one voice. The Ontario-Quebec border is the biggest divide. Ontario Algonquins have a reserve on the south shore of the Ottawa River at Golden Lake, but others throughout Eastern Ontario are part of a huge ongoing land claim (which includes Parliament Hill).

In Quebec, there are at least nine separate communities of Algonquins. One of the largest, Kitigan Zibi, is adjacent to the town of Maniwaki. Perhaps because of its larger land base and proximity to an urban centre, it has become a rare success story, with well-kept houses and several businesses.

The community of Barriere Lake, however, has been particularly hampered by a bitter internal leadership dispute between two groups, since at least 1996.

One camp lives primarily on the reserve and still supports the former chief, Mr. Nottaway; the other group is made up of band members who live off the reserve and support current chief Casey Ratt. The band chooses leaders through a process that involves community elders rather than by secret-ballot elections – but the elders are also divided.

Jolyanne Pronovost, a spokesperson for Quebec's aboriginal affairs minister Benoit Pelletier, says Quebec has had to slowly work with each community on resource issues because of the divisions. “With the Cree there was a consensus among the communities,” she says. “That we can't have with the Algonquins.”

As for the 400th anniversary, Ms. Pronovost says the decision was to recognize the role of all aboriginals, rather than to name specific tribes.

Vandalized traditions

As Mr. Nottaway conducts a tour of Barriere Lake, a constant drone can be heard from the massive generator that powers the community. The stench of diesel hangs in the air.

Signs that the leadership dispute has heated up again can be seen in the smashed windows of houses and old mini-vans. There are children everywhere, including some playing in the large hole left after a house burned down last month. The fire triggered a criminal investigation – Mr. Ratt, the current chief, lived in the house.

“It's bad and it's getting worse every week,” says Mr. Nottaway, who believes Ottawa and the Quebec police have conspired to remove him and his councillors from power.

Though an outside mediator concluded last year that there is no possible reconciliation between the rival clans, Ottawa is holding back millions in planned renovations on the condition of leadership peace.

However, both sides agree that they want to keep pushing for a cut of natural-resources revenues without surrendering their land rights.

Though the leadership feud consumes the attention of both camps, there are still signs that some Algonquins have preserved many of their traditional ways.

Mary Whiteduck, an elder who lives proudly just off the highway in a hand-built cabin, still ventures deep into the woods to her traditional trapping and hunting grounds in spite of her 68 years.

Wearing a beautiful pair of moccasins she made herself from moose leather and beaver fur, the small, grey-haired woman shows off the smoker she uses to dry meat for the long winters.

“Right now I'm not using it because I have a hard time to kill a moose,” she says, but adds, “I even smoked a bear last year.”

Ms. Whiteduck bemoans the impact of large-scale forest clearcuts on her community's traditional ways, but she has tried her best to gather and preserve the culture and history of the Algonquins.

Asked about the 400th-anniversary festivities going on in Quebec City, she says it is news to her.

“We were never invited anywhere. Let's put it that way.”

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