

Introduction:

'The True Realization of Chief Shingwauk's Vision'

On a summer afternoon of cloud and sunshine, on a lush lawn that stretched down from the main college building across the busy road to the water's edge, a crowd representing many ages, backgrounds, and races gathered for the ceremony. The weather had been threatening all day, but fortunately the rain held off and the afternoon of speeches and reminiscences enjoyed bright, at times hot and humid, sunshine. The opening session of Shingwauk Reunion 91, the second gathering of former pupils and staff, was conducted by a mature student of Algoma University College, which was housed largely in the former residential school building. He called in turn on a number of dignitaries representing three levels of government, the Church of England that had operated the Shingwauk residential school, and Indian bands and organizations.

Representatives of the federal and provincial governments made the type of speeches politicians usually delivered on such occasions. Bud Wildman, the provincial minister whose government not long before had pleased Aboriginal organizations throughout Canada by recognizing and affirming their peoples' inherent right to self-government, was received particularly warmly by a crowd that treated everyone civilly. While reiterating the province's resolve to settle grievances and implement Indian self-government, Wildman warned that progress would take time. Bishop Peterson made a careful, neutral, graceful speech that hinted at ecclesiastical realization of past wrongs while still emphasizing positive aspects of Christianity's contribution to the history of relations between Indians and immigrants in Canada. He was noticeably cautious in commenting on a local Indian band's allegation that the Church of England had failed to discharge its trust obligation

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to the Indians on whose behalf it had held the land on which the ceremony was taking place.¹

Chief Darrel Boissoneau of the Garden River reserve a few miles to the east, the band that had launched a claim against the Incorporated Synod of the Diocese of Algoma, injected a jarring, determined, and yet optimistic note into the proceedings. The chief informed the gathering that his band would soon ask the governing board of Algoma University College, on which they had recently been given representation, to rename the institution 'Shingwauk College.' He explained that his band was prepared to work with Algoma College and the Anglican Church. 'With the cooperation of the university here as well as hopefully the cooperation of the Anglican Church, we can achieve mutually a teaching institution for our people,' he said. What he and his people had in mind was an institution that would promote the preservation and enhancement of Native culture. 'There may well be an entirely Native component of this university that is dedicated to those things. But I hope educationally it remains integrated as an institution that serves both Native and non-Native people with a first-class education.' Chief Boissoneau and the people he represented were also determined to see the creation of the institution they wanted and needed. 'This is not federal land nor provincial land nor, for that matter, university land,' he said. 'The land upon which we stand is the Shingwauk dream.' And while the local Ojibwa were 'here to work with Algoma University,' they were also 'here first and foremost to fulfil and complete the dream of Chief Shingwauk.'²

Chief Shingwauk's dream, to which the chief of Garden River referred and on which the Shingwauk 91 school reunion was based, was the vision of the 'teaching wigwam.'³ In 1832 Augustine Shingwauk accompanied his father, Shingwaukonce (Little Pine), and several other leaders of the Garden River Ojibwa by canoe to York to see the king's representative. Their purpose was to consult with Lieutenant Governor Colborne concerning 'what we should do about religion.' They were troubled and confused by the contradictory messages and suggestions to which they had already been exposed. 'We had been visited by several different Black-coats, and their teaching seemed to be different one from another. The French Black-coat (R.C. Priest) wanted us to worship God his way; the English Black-coat wanted us to follow his religion; and there was another blackcoat who took the people [,] dipped them right into the water, and he wanted us all to join him. We did not know what to do.' As a result of that pil-

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grimage, Colborne arranged to have the Church of England in 1832 dispatch a young missionary, who ministered to the Ojibwa and married into their nation. The close link between the Ojibwa of Garden River and the Anglican Church had been established.

When the tie was broken in 1871, it was the Indians who took the initiative to have it restored; in the process they articulated the long-term strategy that their leaders had been developing since the first foray in 1832. This time it was Augustine Shingwauk who made the long journey by canoe, and now also by 'fire-ship' and 'fire-waggon,' to Sarnia, London, and Toronto. He explained to Protestant clerics that Garden River, to which the Anglicans had ministered for forty years, was now without a Christian missionary. He asked them to redirect a young English cleric, E.F. Wilson, to his people. The Indian Committee of the Church of England gravely considered Shingwauk's request. 'They talked a long time and wrote a good deal on paper; and I was glad to see them writing on paper; for I thought surely now something would be settled, and my journey will not have been in vain; and I was still more glad when they told me that they thought Wilson would come to be our missionary and live among us. I said to them, "Thank you. Thank you greatly. This is the reason for which I came. I thank you for giving me so good an answer. And now I am prepared to return again to my people."⁴ For Chief Shingwauk, the words were far more than a mere formula.

Augustine Shingwauk was grateful because he thought the results of his journey meant the realization of a strategy that the Ojibwa of Garden River had developed for adjusting to the new Euro-Canadian society. When the Anglican missionaries in Toronto asked Shingwauk to address them further, he took the opportunity to enlighten them on the Indians' reasoning. At Garden River, he explained,

we were well content, for we had the Gospel preached to us now for forty winters, and we felt that our religious wants had been well attended to; but when I considered how great and how powerful is the English nation, how rapid their advance, and how great their success in every work to which they put their hands; I wondered often in my mind – and my people wondered too – why the Christian religion should have halted so long at Garden River, just at the entrance of the Great lake of the Chippeways [Superior]; and how it was that forty winters had passed away, and yet religion still slept, and the poor Indians of the Great Chippeway Lake pleaded in vain for teachers to be sent to them. I said

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that we Indians know our Great Mother, the Queen of the English nation, is strong; but my people are weak. Why do you not help us? It is not good. I told the Blackcoats I hoped that before I died I should see a big teaching wigwam built at Garden River, where children from the Great Chippeway Lake would be received and clothed, and fed, and taught how to read and how to write; and also how to farm and build houses, and make clothing; so that by and bye they might go back and teach their own people.⁵

Shingwauk obviously identified the Christian religion and European schooling as the source of the newcomers' strength and success. He wanted a 'teaching wigwam' so that his people could, by learning European ways, adapt to and thrive in the new age that was coming to their lands. Having explained his people's aim, and with promise of aid in the person of E.F. Wilson in hand, Chief Shingwauk prepared to depart. Before he could make his way back to Garden River, however, he was prevailed upon to make speeches to various church groups in several towns.

In spite of the chief's growing anxiety to get home to harvest hay for his cows for the winter, he delayed his departure in order to carry out a fundraising tour in southern Ontario. The effort did not always go well. In one emporium, or 'selling wigwam' as he described it, the people 'did not seem to care much about the poor Indians in the far north.' He and missionary companions called there three times, 'and each time sat a long time waiting to be heard, and saw much money thrown into the money box; and yet, after all our waiting, they would only give us half a dollar to help Christianity to spread to the shores of the Chippeway Lake.'⁶ At another evening meeting at a crowded 'teaching wigwam,' Chief Shingwauk unwittingly gave offence by mentioning that he 'belonged to the Queen's Church' and suggesting that if his audience 'were wise they would be members of that Church also.' One man – 'a Scotchman,' according to Shingwauk's host – 'did not like me saying [in] my speech that I thought people were not doing right unless they belonged to the Queen's Church; he thought I ought to love all Christians alike.' The objection mystified the Ojibwa. 'Is it not true that the English religion is good? Do you think the Queen does wrong in belonging to the Church of England? Why do you fly the Queen's flag from the top of your prayer wigwams and yet refuse to join her in her worship? I feel ashamed of you.'⁷

Eventually Chief Shingwauk made his way back to Garden River and

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his hay crop, to be joined soon afterwards by an Anglican missionary who established and expanded the Church of England mission there. Wilson inherited a mission consisting of a church, a parsonage, and a small log schoolhouse. Soon he and the community decided that the educational effort should be expanded. Funds were raised in England in 1872 by means of another speaking tour by Chief Buhkwujjenene, with Wilson serving as interpreter. The first boarding institution, the Shingwauk Home, was completed and opened in September 1873, only to be destroyed by fire six days later. The following year a new location was selected on the north shore of St Mary's River, closer to the village of Sault Ste Marie. The new Shingwauk Home that opened in 1875 expanded through the 1880s and 1890s, adding a hospital, a structure for industrial instruction, and numerous farm buildings. A Wawanosh Home for girls was also set up a few miles away to run much as the Shingwauk did. Not even the departure of the disillusioned Wilson in 1893 terminated the experiment in residential schooling, although Shingwauk experienced frequent problems and occasional disasters. The Wawanosh and Shingwauk operations were combined on the latter's site, and in 1934 a new Shingwauk Hall was constructed to replace the dilapidated and deteriorating structure from the nineteenth century. Finally, in 1971 the Shingwauk ceased to operate as a residential school under the aegis of the government of Canada and the active management of the Anglican Church. In its place, and still making use of the 1934 Shingwauk building, Algoma University College developed. Its grounds were the site for reunions of former students and staff in 1981 and on a warm July day in 1991.

Most of the reminiscences and discussions at the second Shingwauk reunion were devoted to the less happy parts of the residential school legacy. During the exchange of views that followed the formal opening ceremonies on 4 July, numerous returning students took the opportunity to emphasize that residential school experience for them meant dark as well as sunny memories. Throughout the reunion – in intimate discussions in 'healing circles,' during the opening festivities, and in private conversations with other former students and outsiders – they complained of the rigidity, the harshness, and the coldness of life in a boarding institution operated by people who frequently did not appreciate or respect Indian ways. They bitterly recalled enforced attendance, non-Indian staff who denigrated Aboriginal culture and mistreated them, inadequate food and excessive chores, runaways and beatings, and, perhaps most persistently, the way in which their resi-

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dential schooling experience at Shingwauk had failed to prepare them to be successful after they left the school. Many of the returned students spoke of wasting years and decades in alcohol, drugs, and violence before they managed to put their lives back together, confront the pain that had been driving them to harm themselves, and get on with the business of living. Unspoken was the knowledge that people attending the reunion were the 'success stories'; among the absent were the thousands who never overcame the pain and self-destruction.

For some former students at Shingwauk 91, the source of old pains was put before them starkly and offensively. During the informal reminiscing on the first afternoon, a former missionary teacher spoke at length of what she regarded as the positive aspects of Indian residential schools. She suggested that boarding institutions had been selected to educate Native children because early missionaries recognized that the very best schools in the United Kingdom and Canada were private boarding schools. She spoke in patronizing language that assumed the superiority of Christianity and European learning. Implicit in many of her remarks was an apparent belief that the blessings of the Christian religion were such a boon to Native people that the residential school that was a means of promoting it had to have been a positive force. Following her intervention, the master of ceremonies responded in dignified but emphatic terms. He stressed that there was another point of view about the role of missionaries and Christianity in the residential schools, and he emphasized that many former students had a view of their experience that was very different from the previous speaker's. When the former missionary moved again towards the microphone, the presiding student said quietly that it would not be appropriate for her to speak a second time. She persisted in her efforts to speak once more; he pronounced the opening ceremonies concluded. The former missionary, still wanting to continue the discussion, said loudly that she was prepared to debate the nature and worth of the residential schools with anyone who disagreed with her. She was, she proclaimed, willing 'to take on anyone in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ!'⁸

During the following two days of the reunion, the missionary champion was a persistent observer of proceedings. At healing circles she sat with other non-students in an outer ring of chairs, but unlike them she constantly made notes and used her tape recorder to capture as much of the proceedings as she could. The former students treated her with civility, if with reserve; and only rarely did anyone give any sign by ges-

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ture or comment of disapproval of her presence, her activities, or her views. But still her behaviour served to underline for many the intrusive and insensitive quality of the non-Native people's role in the history of residential schooling.

The Shingwauk reunion was not just a time for sad memories and painful reminders of Christian insensitivity; it was also the occasion of many happy souvenirs. Former students joked with one another about the way in which the passing years had brought increased girth and grey hairs as well as greater maturity and nostalgia. One man claimed the distinction of being the only male ever to have run away from the school accompanied by six female students. Others had amusing stories about elaborate but abortive attempts at flight, tales of defying the rules to get together with students of the opposite sex, narratives of outsmarting the staff, and even a saga of how a student and his companions had made homebrew liquor right under the nose – literally – of the school's carpenter. In private interviews, students told in some cases of the way they had chosen to come to the Shingwauk school, and in others of the way the boys' dormitory was conducted under a reign of terror and violence by the big boys.⁹ The three days of the Shingwauk reunion were a kaleidoscope of memories – painful, joyful, wistful, angry, grim.

The feature of the Shingwauk reunion that promised the most constructive outcome, both for the gathering itself and for the entire residential school experience, was the point that the chief of Garden River made on the first afternoon. Chief Darrel Boissoneau argued that residential schools were an experiment in cultural genocide that should never have taken place, and he contended that Indians needed a healing process to get over the damage that was done to them by these schools. Part of that process involved taking control of their own lives and well-being. And part of that self-empowerment, in turn, was the assumption of control of Native education by Native peoples. The land on which the reunion was taking place, he reminded his audience, was Indian land: not government or church property, but Ojibwa land. And he promised that on this land there would arise an Indian post-secondary institution that would reflect Aboriginal values and be controlled by Indians. Such a university would be, he said, 'the true realization of Chief Shingwauk's vision of a teaching wigwam.' In 1981 and 1991, former students had come to Algoma College as guests. At the next reunion in 2001, Chief Boissoneau declared, they would come to their own institution – to Shingwauk University.¹⁰

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Chief Boissoneau, the former missionary, the master of ceremonies – all those attending Shingwauk 91 – were participants in a symbolic statement about the history and significance of residential schools for Native children in Canada. The woman missionary, who so badly offended former students and embarrassed non-Native observers by her behaviour, represented both the best and the worst of the Christian evangelical impulse that was the principal force behind the establishment and operation of boarding schools. Her lifetime of service in Indian schools, as well as her words, conveyed her sincere belief that teaching in these schools was beneficial to the Indian students, but her bumptious and presumptuous attitude towards them spoke volumes about missionary assumptions concerning European superiority and Aboriginal inferiority. The politicians, with their careful speeches, represented the generations of Canadian bureaucrats and cabinet ministers who, since the 1880s, had attempted to provide Inuit and Indian children with the minimum of schooling that was politically acceptable to non-Native voters at the lowest possible cost. The Anglican bishop stood for the ambivalent modern church leadership, proud and respectful of the generations of missionary volunteers who had staffed the schools, but embarrassed and somewhat hurt at the twentieth-century rejection of them by the people to whom they, and he, ministered.

Above all, the Indian participants at the reunion at Sault Ste Marie in July 1991 represented a variety of Native influences on the schools, as well as a plethora of the schools' effects on Aboriginal children and their families. On the grass in front of the direct descendant of what Shingwaukonce and Augustine Shingwauk had referred to as 'the teaching wigwam,' they discussed what that institution had meant for them. Although the residential school had in the nineteenth century begun life as the product of both Indian initiative and European cultural aggression, it had gradually become the vehicle of the newcomers' attempts to refashion and culturally eliminate the first inhabitants' way of life and identity. Shingwauk had wanted a 'teaching wigwam' so that his people could learn to adjust to new ways, especially economic ways, but in operation the mission and school at Sault Ste Marie had oppressed and attempted to assimilate them. The results of the emergence of the residential school as an instrument of attempted cultural genocide, a development that had caused the first principal of Shingwauk's 'teaching wigwam' to give up in disillusionment, had been numerous and mainly negative. The residential school had disrupted

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Native families and individual identity. It had severed the ties that bound Native children to their families and communities, leaving semi-assimilated young people and shattered communities. In far too many cases it had driven its young products into destructive byways from which far too many never emerged alive. But, paradoxically, the same institution could also number among its survivors strong, if angry, women and men who had put their lives back together, who now knew who they were as First Nations people, who were implacable in their demand for recognition and restitution for the suffering they and their ancestors had suffered, and who, as the chief of the Garden River Ojibwa proclaimed, were determined to achieve what he called 'the true realization of Chief Shingwauk's vision.'

Clearly, these residential schools were strange, often perverse, and puzzling institutions. They had a long, if not always honourable, history. They had had a pervasive, if not universal, impact upon Native people in Canada. They had wrought a complex, mixed effect on both Indigenous and immigrant peoples in Canada. How had it all happened? What had set the stage for the gathering of Chief Boissonneau, the politicians, the bishop, the former students, and the woman missionary at Shingwauk Reunion 91 on that warm July afternoon?

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