

# Building Reconciliation at the U of S

Department of Archaeology and Anthropology and Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics

## 'Indian and White': Forty Years of Ethnic Interaction in a Northern Plains Community

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*John started school with me in Grade 1 and he disappeared after a few weeks you know, we didn't know what to think, he quit school, that'd be nice. But he had been nabbed by some bureaucrat son of a bitch and taken away to residential school. They were still doing that in the seventies, didn't tell the parents. He was downtown and some bureaucrat pulls up throws him in the back seat of the car and takes him to Le Breat. I mean that was happening all the time. It's maybe why old Tom was a sort of truant officer telling all the Indian kids to get to school, get back to school to prevent kidnapping. So there was a lot we didn't know, now we're all more aware. MC 11*

### INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In 1975, anthropologist Niels W. Braroe published *Indian and White: Self Image and Interaction in a Canadian Plains Community*. This book was based on research conducted in Maple Creek, SK and focused on social relationships and ethnic interaction between members of Nekaneet First Nation (NFN) and settler community members. Braroe (1975) found that NFN members were considered by town residents to be an impoverished segment of society and were marginalized from social and economic opportunities. This current research analyzes the changes in interethnic interaction that have occurred in the area as identified by participants in the 40 years since Braroe's publication.



NFN and the community of Maple Creek have changed dramatically in an economic sense since Braroe's (1975) research. NFN has gained entry into the regional economy through various business ventures, including casino development, and has increased its reserve land base ten fold. The town of Maple Creek has similarly transformed itself from an agricultural trading center to a multicultural and economically diversified community that is considered exemplary in the region. In some ways, Maple Creek recognizes the unique history of interaction between First Nations members and settlers, and has attempted to pay tribute to that, reflected in the town's logo. However, the town also clings to its settler heritage, as reflected in the Maple Creek motto: *Where Past is Present*. It is in this context that we explored how much of the past is actually present, particularly in terms of ethnic interaction. Specifically, we have aimed to answer:

- 1) How has ethnic interaction between First Nation and Settler community members changed since the 1975 publication of *Indian and White*?
- 2) How do First Nation and Settler community members retain their distinct identities while interacting in this multicultural community environment?

### RESEARCH SETTING

Maple Creek, SK

- Located in Southwest Saskatchewan, nestled in the Cypress Hills
- Population 2,100
- Ranching and farming community with some tourism



Nekaneet First Nation

- Treaty 4
- The Reserve is located about 40 KM Southeast of Maple Creek
- 160 Band Members on Reserve, 460 total

### METHODS

Ethnographic research was conducted over 5 months of fieldwork in the Maple Creek (May to October 2015). The first author resided with a local woman in the town of Maple Creek and attended multiple community functions occurring in town and on Reserve. Public events (e.g., rodeos, Battle of Little Big Puck Hockey Game) were attended where interactions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members were observed. Informal conversations with community members provided insight on the changes that have occurred over the past 40 years. Thirty-three semi-structured interviews were also conducted with consenting community members. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded for themes, then analyzed using a grounded theoretical approach.

The goal was to understand from the participant's perspectives how the how/if ethnic interaction has changed since Braroe's research in (1975).

### RESULTS

Community events:

- Community events depict a more multi-cultural environment than in the past.
- This has opened up spaces to demonstrate pride in being Aboriginal. Yet it also confines the definition of being Aboriginal to a settler perception. Nonetheless, Aboriginal residents continue to challenge the definitions ascribed by settler residents, expanding settler understandings of modern Aboriginal peoples.
- Importantly, Aboriginal residents of Maple Creek and members of NFN fill leadership roles in the planning of community events which is a major change from Braroe's day.
- The Battle of the Little Big Puck is a 35 year old tradition, an annual hockey game played between members of NFN and cowboys from the Maple Creek area. As one councillor from NFN said:

*"We dress up in the 3rd period like Indians because we are Indians. I want a kid to see that and be proud; be proud that he is an Indian like me."*

- This event is also described as a level playing field. Nekaneet has more wins than the cowboy team. This is not an accurate depiction of other themes explored in the research. Participants would desire more of a level playing field in economic, educational, and social activities.

Economic:

- There are few positions held by Aboriginal peoples, most are entry-level positions
- Some participants discussed on-the-job harassment or racist banter occurring at work.

Educational:

- Local schools have hired 2 Aboriginal teachers or liaisons, and incorporated aspects of Aboriginal cultures into the environment and curriculum yet schools are still seen as a place of much exclusion of Aboriginal community members.
- Aboriginal mothers and grandmothers described mistreatment of their children and grandchildren by teachers and principals.
- It is important to continue to educate settlers, and continue to improve the curriculum in Canadian History that illustrates the abuse faced by Aboriginal peoples.

### CONCLUSIONS

- In the 40 years since Braroe's work, Aboriginal community members have sought innovative approaches to improving their social, economic and political positions in Maple Creek. Some, but not all settler community members have also supported and even participated in this endeavour, but not always representing Aboriginal peoples the way many see themselves.
- Aboriginal participants identified local problems and posed solutions to their experiences in interethnic interaction. Key changes desired include: Aboriginal representation on the school board, achieving more professional opportunities in positions of higher status for Aboriginal peoples, and the creation of an Urban Reserve and/or aboriginal owned businesses in Maple Creek.



### REFERENCES

Braroe, N.W. 1975 *Indian and White: Self-Image and Interaction in a Canadian Plains Community*. Stanford University Press.

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### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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