

Mennonite-Ojibwe Relations in Manitoba: Memories and Reflections

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Introductory Note

In the Conference on the History of Aboriginal-Mennonite Relations, held in October 2000, the Ojibwe community of Pauingassi, Manitoba, was the focus of an afternoon session. Besides the papers of Patricia Harms and Alvina Block (this volume), we had invited Charlie George Owen, a distinguished Elder from Pauingassi, to speak. Unfortunately, he could not attend for health reasons. However, Roger Roulette, a linguist who has translated for him on many occasions, and Margaret Simmons, a Southeast Tribal Council educator who has worked with him for several years, were able to come in his place. They shared what he had told them about some of his experiences, and also reflected on their own work and lives, both in Pauingassi and as Ojibwe or Anishinaabe people. The following text, lightly edited, was taped by Maureen Matthews and transcribed by Donna Sutherland.

The Session

Roger Roulette: [We] went to visit Charlie George [Owen] on Wednesday, Maureen [Matthews] and I, and we asked him about some of his experiences of the people that went to Pauingassi. I guess they were Mennonite. What was interesting is that they were there, I guess they were summoned, because of how the younger people were straying from the right kind of life that they had. And one thing he said was that when the missionaries got there, they were welcomed because of the work that they would be doing. And then he said, "so they started baptising people." I said, "Did you get baptized?" He said, "No, not the older ones, we didn't get baptized." He started naming all the old people. And I said, "So, why not?," and he goes, "Well, the missionaries thought that we had our own way of, I guess what you would call a way of life." So it was unnecessary for them to be baptized, according to the missionaries. But they did help out, they'd go to the church to sit in on the sermons, and whatever. So I asked him, "I wonder why didn't you guys get baptized?" "Why," he said, "you know, because we have our own way, we didn't necessarily have to get baptized." But they basically left them alone to do what their job was, whatever that was, and that was to sort of, I guess, teach the younger people. But the old people, I guess, apparently supported their effort nevertheless. But that was interesting on Charlie George's part, where the missionaries deemed them not necessary to be baptized because they had their own kind of baptism, I guess, ritual.

Maureen Matthews: Margaret Simmons has been involved partly through our translations [with Charlie George Owen] and partly through her involvement with the school, and Margaret can tell you a bit more about the history of the school in Pauingassi. It was started by Henry Neufeld, and he built a little log school, but there was a subsequent school built by Indian Affairs and it's been a contentious issue in the community always. [*Editor's note:* Henry Neufeld, who was in the audience, founded the Mennonite mission in Pauingassi in 1955 and served there until 1970.]

Margaret Simmons: I was hired by the Southeast Tribal School Division fourteen years ago to go on a mission as an education consultant/advisor, a totally different mission from that of Henry Neufeld, whom I admire. And, he is very well respected in the community. My whole mission to that community was totally different, and it was an educational mission. I went there with a degree in my back pocket, a teaching certificate, and travelled regularly to that community. I am there to bring an upgrading of the students and so on. Southeast Tribal School Division had a school there since 1981. And, I went there and I am not embarrassed to say, obviously now I am wiser, I am older. I was just a young career person at that time. Very knowledgeable, book-wise, well read, but obviously very narrow-minded at not seeing the ways of the Anishinaabe because of being raised outside the community and leaving my community [Berens River] at such an early age and I was always in a different cultural setting aside from my own reserve.

Truly, my visits to Pauingassi have opened my mind and my eyes in many, many ways that yes, as Anishinaabe people we can live in both worlds. It wasn't through a book that I learned this, it was through speaking with the elders, Charlie George Owen, and St. John Owen, Jacob Owen, and the others that have passed on. They were not book learners, they have lived the road and, very wise people and I have come to realize that not all people have to have a degree in their back pocket to be smart, that these are probably some of the smartest people I have ever met and

have guided and shaped my life in so many ways. They have given me confidence to come here and talk about them because I can feel their presence and they are an encouragement with what they have taught me. The things they have taught me I will carry on for my whole lifetime because they have enriched me in so many ways. Truly, these fabulous people of Pauingassi have adopted both ways, where they're very traditional and cultural and yet, very religious. They have adopted the Mennonite ways, their prayers, their church, and so on into the community and yet, when you speak to them in their home, they have not forgotten their traditional cultural ways.

Roger Roulette: I grew up in MacGregor, Manitoba and predominately surrounding MacGregor, they're all Mennonite - farmers. My relatives, we lived in a village, and there was nine old people. They followed a really - the same kind of life the Pauingassi people have - they followed our own religion and so on, so forth. They worked with the Mennonites; in fact they had a good relationship with them, they grew up with them. And when we were growing up, we never were short of anything. The farmers always had work for the people in the village if they chose, and the kids always used to come to the village and come play baseball. What our old people used to do for us is they used to take us out of school for sometimes a couple weeks to about three months. They would tell the principal and teachers that we're taking these kids out for a few weeks or whatever to take them to the bush and teach us about different things. The funny thing is, the Mennonite kids knew where we were camping, so they would arrive in trucks with their football - baseball gloves, bat, and all that - to come and play baseball with us.

There wasn't a day that passed that some Mennonite child would be at our village, you know. We grew up with them, and we learned our English from them, their broken English, and our broken English. Because they spoke their language - we spoke ours. So when we started getting together, we had this mixture of language. They learned some of our words and we learned some of theirs. And the whole thing was - that the old people basically grew up with the old people of that surrounding area, so what was really nice about it is that nobody - they were devout Christians basically - but they never came to convert anybody in our village. In fact, priests used to come and get advice from our old people. And, we had a great relationship with them. Every Christmas they would drop off a turkey for each house - the farmers. At harvest time they wouldn't hire anybody, except for our village. Even the kids used to go help out with the harvest, you know, different farms. And, we'd get bags of potatoes and what not, all the surplus they would give us - to the village, so we were never short of anything.

The women used to work - my mom, my aunts - used to work in town as home makers. So, there was a real trust with the community of MacGregor, our community and the farmers. In fact, if any of the Native kids were seen in town they'd be sent home or taken home, that was the kind of relationship they have. They don't have that now, because the younger people have strayed, and they don't have that trust now with the Native people. But when I was growing up, everybody looked after everybody and that was, I think, a perfect upbringing, to have that. And we never knew what other people knew as racism - we never knew that till I came into Winnipeg. But, the kids that we grew up with we still talk today, in fact, a couple of my relatives married Mennonites, so I'm related to them too, as well. (Laughter.)

Margaret Simmons: Pauingassi - through numerous interviews, personal contact, visiting homes, I have, Maureen, Jennifer, I have learned a lot of lessons. I sat down

one evening with the late Jacob Owen, Maureen and I, and began to interview him for some of the projects that we had been working on, and a particular one was about Thunderbirds. So, I explained to him the purpose of our visit - to Jacob. And, he didn't proceed to tell us about Thunderbirds - for about an hour, perhaps longer; we didn't measure time, you do not measure time when you are taping, or listening, or learning from an Elder. You do not measure how long you have been there because what they have to share with you, what they have to give you is just so valuable and you will always cherish that. And it is through that frame of mind when sitting with these Elders, time was not important. You give them that time for them to share with us.

So he did not begin to tell us about Thunderbirds. He told us Scriptures, verses. This man, the grandfather, the father knew probably from the first verse of Genesis, probably to the end. And it was just remarkable! This is a non-educated person [not like] in our book world sitting in a classroom in a University, and how he had managed to accomplish, to master such a complex book. It was a truly remarkable time of sharing, just sitting there. Maureen had no idea what she was missing. (Laughter.) We still haven't interpreted the whole session, so she doesn't know what she missed. But it was really remarkable, he spent all that time talking and teaching us. I don't like [calling] this lecturing or sermoning, he was actually teaching us. After he finished, I was just sitting there astounded, thinking I am here to learn about Thunderbirds and this man is talking about the Bible. You know, two hours later or whatever, and we still haven't got one word about Thunderbirds. So, should I argue with him? No, you do not argue with an Elder. I just sat there and consumed his view, this became very interesting to me, very interesting. And this had been, after working with, of course, Charlie George [Owen], who I say is the world's accomplished philosopher, and who had been our education advisor, our school board member, any time that we wanted advice or didn't know what to do, he was always there for us.

So, to continue my story with Jacob, so we sat there and listened to him; and at the end when we thought it was enough what he had said, what he wanted to say to us, he continued on to tell us his encounter with the Thunderbird. And Maureen has the tape about the story of how he encountered the Thunderbird. And that's probably one of the most - the moments in my life that I realized - Yes, you can live in both worlds - be happy, be knowledgeable, be accepting, have your values, your morals, respect, dignity. You can have all that. And it became more profound to me after that, when on our travel back, I started thinking about that moment that we had spent - I'm sure it must have been about 6:00 [when we came] - Maureen? I think we finally left about 11 or 12:00. And it became more profound as we were travelling home, with what my late father had told me. When the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry visited his home - our home - I happened to be there at the time when they came over. And he said, "accept - don't judge. Everybody was given to pray." And he says, "Respect that. If you see somebody praying, join them. We are all praying to God." He says, "We may do it in a variety of ways. I am Anishinaabe, I am a Christian Anishinaabe."

And as I put those words after our visit with Jacob, it even made more impact and it started making sense. That - yes - perhaps I too, I did and I can live in both worlds. I am an Anishinaabe woman, and yet I also go to church and I pray and I don't see anything wrong with that, and yet I also have my traditional beliefs from my upbringing. And these - these are some of the things - I don't have much time left - I better shorten it.

But, these are some of the very important profound impacts that these people in that community have given me. I have not been able to sit down and read a real book besides Hallowell's, a book on the Pauingassi people [*The Ojibwa of Berens River, Manitoba* (1992)]. But I do make a point, now, that every time I go to Pauingassi, it is not only an education mission, because they are also educating me in so many ways. They have given me a lot of their wisdom, they have shared a lot of their knowledge and their beliefs, and their traditions, and their culture. And I really do thank them from the bottom of my heart for how they have guided me - from fourteen years ago to where I am. I totally have a totally different viewpoint of a lot of things because of their cultural and their spiritual teachings. Miiigwech [Thank you].

The Question Period

[A question period followed, in which discussion centred on living in two worlds (or in one, or three). The following transcript is incomplete, as the questions and comments were not all audible on the tape.]

Question: I've often regretted...that I wasn't born Native.... Is it possible for us White folks - can assimilation go both ways?

Margaret Simmons: A very good dear friend of mine, Blain Klippenstein - you notice the last name (Laughter) - lives in both worlds. And he has accepted both worlds. In fact he says he's now more Anishinaabe; and I believe there is a young gentleman here - Glen Hostetler [son of Henry Hostetler of Red Lake, ON, and teaching in Little Grand Rapids, MB] - I really do believe he's able - he has adapted to live in both worlds. I don't know if he is still here with us, if he can just raise his hand if he still is. There he is - way back there. He is almost three quarters Anishinaabe. (Laughter) **Comment:** I know for a fact that I am living in both worlds. I was brought up Mennonite and Blackfoot....I am very proud, my upbringing, who I am.

Margaret Simmons: As people, we all have beliefs, we all want to go to the good place. Some say, "Good, happy hunting grounds." (Laughter). And then - still - listen to the vocabulary what the Elders use. They may use their words from their language, and you go and speak to a non-native person - their vocabulary. But we are all wanting to really - go to that same place.

Question: In reference to Rudy Wiebe's story yesterday about Broken Arm [Maskepetoon, Plains Cree chief] and how - when he dreamt that he went to heaven - he went to a place that - you know, didn't belong to him - he didn't feel comfortable in, and he was given another chance in his vision to go back to the way of life that - or the Happy Hunting Grounds - right? Keeping that in mind, I have heard reference to the [image of] two boats here - the two ships, the canoe and the boat - and whenever a person puts their feet in both boats, usually what happens is they end up doing the splits and fall in the water. (Laughter). So, in reference to what he said yesterday, does one live in two worlds but choose one over the other in order to satisfy the spiritual needs?

Margaret Simmons: If you are well, healthy, you don't do splits. (Laughter)

Roger Roulette: To answer that, the Mennonites that I grew up around with – and I didn't know all of the older people but they [Ojibwe] used to talk to the old people. They used to take them to the bush to show them what they do in terms of what their practices are. They used to go with them too. And for that reason, that's why they never bothered to [try to convert us] - because they knew what they were doing, how they prayed and how they did it. So that's how - it's not two worlds, it's just one. What you're doing is, you're sort of melding these ideas together to make a better you, you know.

Question: Could you address that more fully? I'd like the response about two worlds as one, and could you give us a little bit of specific about how that has worked for you?

Roger Roulette: Well, a good example would be when I was going to school. The bus would come and pick us up and I'd go to school and I'd speak English all day there. I read, write, whatever, and hang around with all the rest of the kids. Then, go back - the bus drops us off - I go do whatever it is I do in our village. You may think that's two worlds but it isn't, it's just me, having an experience growing up, and that's only one world. You know what I mean?

Comment: I'd like to say that I agree with what our sister has said about how our people take in, it's just a way of life for us. You know, I go back and I listen to what my - whatever I heard from our chief at our home.... We had conflict once with the [Roman Catholic] Church - people practising our ways. The majority of our people walked out of the church and we all called it the "Old man's spirit house." Can you mention what your - where your thoughts are right now? The Old man told us in our Kwakwala language that he believed very strongly that when the people went home, the father, the most highest chiefs would come and take them home. He would be celebrating, he would be doing the....., the celebration that when you become a Hamatsa it's the four songs sung, and you are in celebration, and he went through the motions of all of the different ways of honouring the Creator. And I agree, you know, think - really think about it. Here, thinking, we are just about religion and First Nations and other races.

It is be healthy, keep a good balance, remember who you are physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually. Knowing that every one of us has a feminine side and a masculine side. We need to keep that all balanced. Not just during season, not just during celebrations, or during grief but every single day.

Margaret Simmons: Yes, he had just mentioned about the spiritual and emotional, and this is what I am going to comment on. And on the other things I was going to add when I mention two worlds. I can go and eat and sit down in a very classy, fancy, expensive restaurant and eat with my utensil working my way in. (Laughter). And I also can go to a home in the community and just take a bannock and start eating with a cup of tea. And so on. But also in a sense, one world - emotionally, spiritually and so on. But also culturally be able to adapt both ways, and a lot of Anishinaabe are now, and have in the past been able to do that. And one of the other comments I wanted to make is when this [gentleman] said - wellness.

Comment: I am going to make this more complicated. I live in three worlds. (Laughter) Basically, I identify myself as Christian, although I'm Mennonite - a branch of Christian understanding But I've found my roots in the Old Testament. My Native people say, "That's not your testament, that belongs to the Jews." But I

think it belongs – in many ways - to Aboriginals. I read the *Psalms* 24, 1 and it says, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein.” I think we have been denied a lot of that as Christians, and I see Aboriginals when Europeans came to this country, stepping back and saying, “The earth is the Lord’s, it’s ours, it’s yours, let’s live together in peace”; and in much of our Christian understanding we have fragmented it and said, “It’s ours. We know how it belongs to us and the rest of you have to become like us in order to have a parcel of it.” A big part of our error. I appreciate very much what I’ve learned from my Aboriginal friends.

Margaret Simmons: In closing, I thank you for listening. I guess my kids are in a very confused state. Their father is a Jewish man. (Laughter). They are very confused, thank you, you just reminded me. But I love them and with that they are going to grow to be very healthy young adults. So thank you.

Jennifer Brown: Thank you very much, everyone.