

Rising Tide at Chapel Island

by Silver Donald Cameron

ISLE MADAME, NS --

"There's no unemployment in Chapel Island," says Lindsay Marshall. "None. Everybody who wants to work has a job."

This is a stunning statement. We are at a literary festival at the Delta Hotel in Sydney, N.S. Lindsay Marshall is an award-winning poet, a vivid and funny public speaker. But he is also the Chief of the Chapel Island band, a Mi'kmaq community about 80 km away. Unemployment on Canadian reserves normally runs at 80% or 90%. But here is the Chief saying there is no unemployment at all in Chapel Island. I want to see this for myself.

Fast forward a few weeks to July 26, the feast day of Ste. Anne, who is the patron saint of the Mi'kmaq nation -- and of Canada, in fact. The Chapel Island band consists of 406 souls, 60% of them under 25, living on 1288 glorious acres of Bras d'Or Lake shoreline. On the weekend of the Ste. Anne Mission, however, Chapel Island's population swells to as much as 8000, because the reserve includes Chapel Island itself, a wooded island which has been a sacred site to the Mi'kmaq for hundreds of years. People gather here from the whole Mi'kmaq domain, which includes all of Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island, most of New Brunswick and parts of Quebec. Individuals come from farther afield: New England, Ontario, British Columbia, wherever their destinies have taken them. One Boston foundry used to close for three weeks so that its mainly-Mi'kmaq work force could get home for the Ste. Anne Mission.

The hillside opposite the island is covered with tents, campers and motorhomes; on the island side, the chapel is surrounded by nearly 200 tiny plywood summer camps, each occupied by a family. The weekend is about sociability and spirituality, and its high point is an open-air Mass Sunday afternoon in honour of Ste. Anne. The Grand Council meets the following day, and by mid-week the people will be scattered again. Meanwhile they play games, repair their camps, cook, eat and go out in their boats. And they visit, drifting in and out of one another's camps as their needs or wishes move them, drinking endless cups of tea and chatting in Mi'kmaq. They must be among the most relaxed and sociable people on earth.

The semi-hereditary Grand Council, headed by Grand Chief Ben Sylliboy, has mainly ceremonial and spiritual functions -- though when the whole Mi'kmaq people speak, they do it through the Grand Council. Daily and local affairs, however, fall to elected band chiefs like Lindsay Marshall, 38, who was re-elected in June. He is much concerned with issues like housing, education, policing and economic development. The Grand Council runs the Mission weekend, so he is free to take me on a tour.

The road signs are in Mi'kmaq, the only official language on the reserve. Take that, Canada. Here is the new \$2.9 million school, just being completed, kindergarten through Grade 8 -- big gym, spacious library, high-tech wiring -- with the Mi'kmaq eight-pointed star inlaid in the foyer. It won't be just for children; it will house adult education courses too.

"You have to run the band like a business," says the Chief. "You know, \$4.8 million passes through this reserve every year, and only 9% of it stays here. That's not good enough. But we've paid down the deficit and balanced our books, and we haven't cut back services. We're doing things."

Here is the police station, just completed. Here are the convenience stores, the gift shops, the gas pumps, the gambling machines, and the new outfitting business, all benefitting from the reserve's tax-free status. For any business start-up, the band will pay the wages of the staff for 16 to 20 weeks a year. Here's the

recreation and education centre. This construction project is the new chapel, designed as an addition to the community hall. Here's the ice-cream shack, run by students during the summer.

Band members fish for lobster and snow crab, and the band is building a tuna boat. Some work in forestry. Many of the parents who use the reserve's day-care centre are in school, getting their high-school equivalency or pursuing higher education. The Chief believes passionately in education. The University College of Cape Breton in Sydney is his own alma mater; it graduates more Mi'kmaqs than any other institution in the region. The Nautical Institute in nearby Port Hawkesbury has just graduated its first Mi'kmaq ship's officer.

"Next winter, the people that aren't working will be back at school, or qualified for EI," says the Chief proudly. "But right at this moment, everyone's working. There's no unemployment in Chapel Island."

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