

Eagle Feather

Celebrating First Nation Achievers in Manitoba

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PREPARED
BY INDIAN
AND
NORTHERN
AFFAIRS
CANADA

FIRST NATIONS' FUTURES BUILT ON BUSINESS



First Nation communities in the 21st century are forging a future for themselves as entrepreneurs. Successful, locally-owned businesses are the pillars of strong, self-sustainable economies and communities. More and more, First Nations are taking ownership of the economic engines that will drive them towards a prosperous future.

At every opportunity, First Nations are building up their own businesses, improving services to their own people and ensuring their long-term economic stability. The

far-reaching goal is not just survival or sustenance, but for First Nations to become economic forces within Canada.

The Government of Canada is committed to aiding First Nations reach their full potential.

Indian and Northern Affairs Canada is proud to profile a few of the Manitoba First Nation people who are investing in their communities in this issue of *Eagle Feather*.



Canada

Life on the lake

First Nation fishers make their way on the water



The Goldfield operates out of Matheson Island and collects fish from several fishing stations around Lake Winnipeg

Lake Winnipeg's riches are never still, but neither are the fishers who make their living from them. They are in constant movement, fighting waves, hauling up nets, searching out their next spot. The lake provides pickerel, sauger and whitefish, but in return it demands hard work and patience. Above all,

it demands respect.

Lake Winnipeg is large for a freshwater lake, approximately 23,750 square kilometres, but it is shallow too, only about 12 metres deep on average, and susceptible to sudden changes. Fishers know the lake can be generous, but also dangerous.

"There's only two reasons they don't come in early: They're in trouble or they're getting lots of fish," said Shirley Cochrane, looking out over the lake from McBeth Point.

Fishers in the north basin of Lake Winnipeg have been using the fishing station at McBeth Point, located approximately 80 kilometres northwest of Fisher River Cree Nation, for as long as anyone can remember. Ten years ago Fisher River Cree Nation purchased the McBeth Point Fishery and the venture continues to thrive.

Over 40 per cent of the 3,500 Manitobans who work in the province's commercial fishery are First Nation members. For many First Nation communities commercial fishing is not just a crucial industry, but a way to earn a living that connects fishers to their land and ancestors.

Cochrane, 64, and her husband John Cochrane Sr., 70, have been out on the lake most of their lives. She spends most of her time nowadays helping to keep the fishing camp running, but she's also done her share of fishing over the years and knows what it's like to haul in nets in good weather and bad.





She has also gathered a lot of memories at McBeth Point.

"My man's been fishing over 50 years. We married in '62. I worked here, brought out my first born when he was a month old. I made a stove out of stones so I could make bannock," she said.

For several weeks of the year roughly 150 people live at the McBeth Point Fishery (60 of them fishers and the rest processing plant workers, cooks or other family members helping out). The fishery brings in almost \$2 million worth of fish every year.

In an earlier age it took a week of hard paddling to get from Fisher River Cree Nation to McBeth Point, but now it can be done in two hours or less.

Approaching the man-made harbour, modest but well-kept shacks can be seen along the

rocky shoreline. The fishery has a diesel generator that runs 24 hours a day, seven days a week whenever the camp is in use. It gives the camp electric light, but most importantly it powers the ice makers and refrigerated storage for the fish.

Inside the fishery's processing plant fish are gutted and their heads cut off, then they're graded medium or large, placed in tubs and packed in ice so they can be loaded into trucks or onto the Goldfield, the Freshwater

Fish Marketing Corporation's main fish boat. The Goldfield operates out of Matheson Island and collects fish from several stations on the lake, including Catfish Creek, McBeth Point, George's Island and Berens River. From Matheson Island the fish is trucked down to the Freshwater Fish Marketing Corporation's plant in Winnipeg.

A few of the fishing boats at McBeth Point have covered roofs, but most are 20-foot (6 metre) or 24-foot (7.3 metre) aluminum, open-hulled boats. They're equipped

with radios, lights and, most importantly, global positioning systems for navigation. Fishers usually have 16 to 20 nets and each fisher has a license with a quota. When that quota limit is reached their season is done. Fishers on Lake Winnipeg can have a summer license, fall license, winter license or all three.

A license will bring in approximately \$20,000 worth of fish, though Walter Sinclair Jr., president of the McBeth Point Fishery, estimates a fisher's take home pay is about \$8,000.

Sinclair Jr. said some fishers venture out 30 kilometres or more in search of fish, though in fall you can find good fishing closer to the fishery, and most do, motivated by high winds and even higher gas prices.

"There's only two reasons they don't come in early: They're in trouble or they're getting lots of fish"

Sinclair Jr. said the fishing has been good, especially for pickerel, unquestionably the most valuable and sought after fish in Lake Winnipeg. He estimated the catch is about 90 per cent pickerel this year. There's some sauger too, but hardly any whitefish, though with the price for whitefish so low Sinclair Jr. doesn't mind that.

Sam Murdock has grown up on Lake Winnipeg. He works as chief of staff for the Southern Chiefs' Organization but hasn't given up life on the lake. He's held onto his fishing license.

"It's the fresh air, the water. And of course it's a living. You do it right, you can make a good living at it," he said.

Cochrane said she loves the peace and serenity in camp. "There's no cars, no stress. Only the birds and the wind to worry about," she said. "It only gets stressful if that wind gets up and your men are still out there. You have to know where your men are at all times."

If one fisher is not back in everybody knows. Fishers go out at first light and sometimes earlier, especially in the early summer, and usually come back into the harbour by early afternoon. Though that depends on the weather. There are times when the wind and waves keep fishers away from their nets for several days, leaving them on the shore restlessly eyeing the skies on the horizon.

"We try not to get caught, but sometimes you can't help it. It comes fast," said Sinclair Jr. of the

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Travers looks out over the lake as he describes the storm that nearly sank his boat

temperamental storms Lake Winnipeg is known for.

Murdock's cousin, Sam Travers, is an experienced fisher who got caught in a sudden storm with six kilometers of lake to cross in an open-hulled, six-metre boat. He was spun about in winds gusting up to 30 knots (55.6 kilometres per hour).

"And that's a big wind," said Travers. "The waves were at least fifteen footers. Maybe eighteen. That was last week. It came in seconds, the blink of an eye. The only thing that

was on my mind was my family."

Travers managed to reach the safe harbour of McBeth Point, but fishers are not always so fortunate. In June 2001 a storm claimed the lives of three First Nation men fishing out of the McBeth Point Fishery. Murdock had just missed the storm, but tried to go back out to help his friends, nearly drowning himself in the process. A wall of water turned his boat around, threw Murdock to the floor of his boat and left him no choice but to return to shore.

Every fisher has harrowing stories, but most of the stories told out here

elicit laughter and jokes. Poking fun at each other is the most popular sport at McBeth Point.

"We play cards. Sometimes moose hunt. And lots of sleep. Especially these older guys," said Travers, laughing and gesturing at Sinclair Jr.

Travers pointed out Sinclair Jr.'s mock snake, an old green strap tied to a string. Sinclair Jr. loves to tug on the string and startle friends.

"He's got me a few times with this already. He knows I hate snakes," said Travers.

Sinclair Jr. said everyone is always telling jokes and stories. He added the elders in camp especially have interesting stories to tell about earlier days.

There is a sense of closeness at McBeth Point. There are lots of related family members around, but even those not related by blood or marriage feel a kinship forged on the water.

"It's like one big family around here. Everyone pulls together, helps each other out," said Cochrane, adding some fishers haul in other's nets if someone is running behind, and

everyone in camp helped when a fishing boat sank last spring – pulling it out of the water and cleaning it up.

Cochrane said like fishing, cooperation is part of her people's tradition.

"It's in your blood. The fish is in your blood. That's the way it is."

"The waves were at least fifteen-footers... The only thing that was on my mind was my family"



McBeth Point Fishery's president Walter Sinclair Jr

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eaglefeather@inac-ainc.gc.ca

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1 800 O-Canada

(1 800 622-6232)

Fire drills hone skills

Manitoba First Nations well represented at competition

Hard at work, these firefighters draw on their training, moving in unison with a focus earned through constant preparation. Every second counts. Their practised moves and calm but urgent manner are carefully noted by observers.

Abruptly, their task completed, the firefighters relax, joke with each other and get ready to watch the competition.

Protecting your community from fires is a heavy responsibility, but on this windy September day no lives or properties are at stake – these firefighters are

participating in the National Aboriginal Firefighters Competition.

The Manitoba Association of Native Fire Fighters and the Aboriginal Firefighters Association of Canada together hosted the 15th annual National Aboriginal Firefighters Competition on Sept 17, 2005 in Winnipeg. Six teams from across Canada took part in the competition, the first time the nationals have been in



it's not hard to explain the success of fire crews from Sagkeeng First Nation and from across Manitoba.

"They're very motivated. They practise and practise," he said.

The Sagkeeng firefighting team beat out 17 other First Nation firefighting crews at the provincial competition July 30 to represent Manitoba at the national event. Both the provincials and nationals this year were held in the parking lot at the Canad Inns Stadium.

The competitions are physically demanding all-day contests consisting of four different events, selected from a list of 16 tasks that simulate real-life firefighting scenarios. At the nationals the tasks were the bucket target relay, breathing apparatus relay, the dual attack line and firehose rolling.

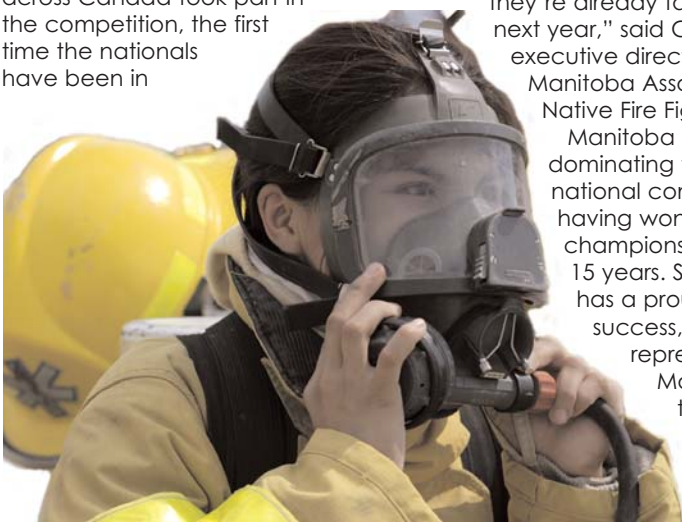
Smith said the provincial and national competitions give First Nation fire departments an opportunity to test and hone their skills. They also build camaraderie and working relationships among departments from across Canada.

Winnipeg since 1998.

Team Manitoba, represented by six members of the Sagkeeng First Nation fire department, finished just 10 points behind newly-crowned national champs Team Saskatchewan - good for second place.

"Everyone's always vying for first, but second is pretty good. And they're already talking about next year," said Curtis Smith, executive director of the Manitoba Association of Native Fire Fighters.

Manitoba has been a dominating force at the national competition, having won the championship 10 times in 15 years. Sagkeeng also has a proud tradition of success, having represented Manitoba three times and winning two national titles. Smith said



First Nations taking charge



Mississippi Air flying high

In an earlier age, it was European explorers who depended on First Nations people in order to travel through the unspoiled but difficult terrain of this country. Gradually, as we entered the age of trains, trucks and airplanes, transportation (in the north and elsewhere) became a business run from large urban centres.

Now, however, we have come full circle and First Nations are beginning to again oversee the transportation routes to the north. The new pioneers are First Nation-owned interests such as Mississippi Airways/Mississippi Air-Care.

Mississippi Airways/Mississippi Air-Care is a soaring success and the only 100 per cent-First Nation owned air service in Manitoba. Its name was changed from Beaver Air Services last year to better reflect its ownership - the Mississippi Cree of Mathias Colomb Cree Nation.

"It's a season of change, it's a time for First Nations to step into their destiny," said Joel Molin, general manager of the company. "We take pride in our First Nation ownership."

Mississippi Airways/Mississippi Air-Care is part of a growing trend of First Nations taking the reigns of their own future by turning the



provision of essential services into businesses that build on self-reliance and drive the economy of northern Manitoba.

Mississippi Airways is the passenger and cargo flights division of the company, while Mississippi Air-Care provides the air ambulance services. Up to three-quarters of Mississippi's business has historically been from its air ambulance services, though the passenger and cargo services market is growing, especially with the company's recent expansion into Thompson. Mississippi is based out of The Pas, with passenger service linking Mathias Colomb Cree Nation, The Pas and Thompson. In addition to First Nation people, regular clients include the provincial circuit court and Manitoba Hydro.

First Nations people have in the past been end-users or customers of northern services, but are now becoming investors and decision-makers. Just as importantly, said Molin, local job and career training opportunities

are flourishing. In the air service industry, thanks to companies like Mississippi, First Nations people can be found working as pilots, engineers, flight dispatchers and administrators.

"We have the resources, manpower and technology, we can look after our own needs and reap the rewards," said Molin. "We want to keep the revenues and employment here rather than have it go south."

Success is nothing new for Mississippi, but 2005 has been an incredible year. The company has gone from approximately 24 employees up to 60 (14 of whom are First Nation members). It expanded operations to Thompson last April, opening a new hangar out of which Skyward Aviation once flew.

Molin said no one wished ill of Skyward, but the timing couldn't be better for Mississippi.

"We were poised to go into the Thompson market regardless of the competition, but Skyward left the scene as we entered it," he said.

Mississippi (then known as Beaver Air Services) was purchased by Mathias Colomb Cree Nation in 1987 for \$200,000. Service was sporadic and ticket prices unstable, and the band wanted to ensure the community had a reliable, competitively-priced air service that understood the needs and challenges of Manitoba's north. The company began with a vision, hard work and a fleet of three single-engine Cessnas.

Today the company has assets of \$6.5 million. The fleet consists of two Beechcraft Super King air ambulances, two Piper Chieftain Navajos and a Cessna Grand Caravan. Mississippi also recently leased two more Piper Chieftain Navajos and another Cessna Grand Caravan to handle the demand from Thompson.

Molin said the heartbeat of the company is its caring attitude, which is an asset that has never changed since the beginning.

"This is a company that looks after its employees first and foremost. When you have people happy to come to work it rubs off on the customers," he said.

of northern transportation

Keewatin Railway: lifeline to north

First Nation-owned transportation is thriving in the air, but it is also gaining momentum along the ground. The Keewatin Railway Company, a joint First Nations venture, is poised to take over the ownership and operation of the Sherridon Line, which runs from Sherritt Junction, north of The Pas, to Lynn Lake.

It's an opportunity to spur economic development in the North, create jobs for First Nation people and also to better meet the needs of the communities served by the line.

In the spring of 2002, Hudson Bay Railway Company - a subsidiary of OmniTRAX based out of Denver, Colorado - announced its intentions to stop operating the Sherridon Line. The line is literally a life line for Mathias Colomb Cree Nation - the only means of all-weather surface transportation between the community and the rest of the world.

"For Mathias Colomb it was absolutely essential to keep the rail line, to make sure it doesn't disappear," said Paul Power, one of Keewatin Railway Company's directors.

The Sherridon Line takes passengers to and from Mathias Colomb First Nation and The Pas, brings essential freight like food, fuel and building materials into the community and brings logs from the area down to the Tolko mill in The Pas. The rail line employs 15 to 20 people, but approximately 65 jobs in the forestry industry also depend on it.

Power said the costs of having to fly in all supplies and transport people by air could have been crippling to the community.

Faced with that daunting

possibility, in the summer of 2003 the leadership of Mathias Colomb Cree Nation contacted War Lake First Nation and Tataskweyak Cree Nation about the situation and together they pooled their efforts into turning a problem into an opportunity. A few months later an ambitious business proposal to create a First Nation-owned railway, which would be one of only two in Canada, was born.

In April 2004 the three First Nations created the Keewatin Railway Company to purchase the Sherridon Line for \$6.95 million. Later in 2004 Opaskwayak Cree Nation joined with the other First Nations.

Transport Canada contributed \$5.2 million towards the purchase price and the Province of Manitoba \$1.25 million. Keewatin Railway Company,

which is a limited liability company comprised of the four First Nations, will contribute \$500,000.

Indian and Northern Affairs Canada contributed \$249,640 for start up costs such as technical analysis, business plan development, negotiations and community consultation, while Western Economic Diversification put \$50,000 towards development of the business and operating plan.

The transfer of the line should take



place this fall. The Hudson Bay Railway Company will continue to operate and maintain it for a two-year, transitional period under contract to the Keewatin Railway Company. During that time Keewatin Railway Company will train its employees to take over operations and maintenance. First Nation members will be involved in all facets of the railway, including management, administration and physical operations.

Keewatin Railway Company is making the final revisions to its business plan for the Sherridon Line and preparing for the take over, but Power said the company is already pursuing a goal further down the tracks; building partnerships with Hudson Bay Railway, opening discussions with VIA Rail on operating rail passenger services in northern Manitoba and, eventually, owning the line all the way to Churchill and its port on Hudson Bay.

"This is the first step in a chain, in transferring ownership of the railway system in northern Manitoba to First Nations," said Power. "It's like an NHL franchise, first you get a franchise and then you build it up."

Lands of opportunity

Questions and Answers about Treaty Land Entitlement

Anna Fontaine, Director of Lands directorate in Manitoba, discusses treaty land entitlement and what it means for Manitoba First Nations

What is Treaty Land Entitlement?

Between 1871-1910 Canada signed a series of numbered treaties with Manitoba First Nations. These written agreements provided a designated amount of land to all signatories along with other things. At the time most First Nations received the full amount of land agreed to. However, some did not. There are 27 First Nations in Manitoba found to have treaty land entitlement. These First Nations are working with the Government to access this land.

What does this mean for Manitoba?

First Nations found to have treaty land entitlement are working with the Government of Canada to meet this obligation. As a result, Canada has set aside \$1.3 million acres of land and payed out \$74 million. The bulk of this land comes from unoccupied Crown land with the balance to be purchased from willing sellers. Currently over 10 per cent of the land has been converted to reserve. There continues to be more proposals that are moving towards conversion.

What benefit is there for increasing reserve land?

First of all Canada is willfully fulfilling a long-standing moral and legal obligation. Treaties are formal agreements between nations and carry the weight of law.

However, there are economic benefits for all involved. New reserve land provides access to economic opportunity otherwise lacking for most communities. These benefits include access to natural resources in the North and urban services and consumer markets in the south. As progress is being made in reserve creation many communities are moving closer to self-sufficiency. The gap between many First Nations and their neighbouring communities is closing.

What role does a First Nation have in the TLE process?

First Nations have a significant role in the TLE process. They are responsible for selecting or acquiring the land as an initial step. They also must ensure that any third parties' interests, such as Manitoba Hydro or Manitoba Telecom System, are accommodated in a satisfactory manner. The First Nation may also have to address municipal concerns when required. Canada is committed to working with the First Nations to assist when requested.

