Stoney Point Reclaims Land and Voice

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Background on Stoney Point

In 1942, the Canadian Department of National Defense invoked the War Measures Act to seize the land of the Potawatomi people of Stoney Point Reserve and established an "advanced infantry training center." Many of the displaced native people were crowded onto the neighboring Kettle Point Reserve. The rest scattered throughout Ontario in search of homes and jobs, often in unfamiliar and hostile urban areas.

The relocation was supposed to be temporary, the Canadian government stating that "if at the termination of the war, no further use of the area is required by the Department of National Defense, negotiations will be entered into with the Department of Indian Affairs to transfer the lands back to the Indians at a reasonable price." However, in 1946, the infantry training center closed, and the land was not used again until 1960 when it opened as a six-week summer training camp for military cadets.

Meanwhile, the Stoney Point people petitioned unsuccessfully for the return of their land until finally, in 1992, the federal government admitted the reasons for its continued occupation of Stoney Point land were "spurious and without substance." It had, however, already negotiated a $2.4 million settlement with the Kettle Point Reserve, refusing to recognize the Stoney Point people as a separate community.

The leadership of the Kettle Point First Nation cooperated in the government's plan to extinguish the distinct voice and identity of the Stoney Point First Nation by changing its name to "Kettle and Stony Point."

In May 1993, 50 years after the relocation, a group of Stoney Point people including some of the original residents entered the military grounds and, setting up tents and shelters, re-occupied their Stoney Point homeland.

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STONEY POINT, Ontario—Marcia Simon's home is the barracks building that, until July 1995, was the Catholic chapel at Camp Ipperwash, a Canadian army military training base located in southwestern Ontario, 120 miles from Detroit, on the Lake Huron shoreline.

Simon actually lives in the small rear section of the building heated by a wood stove she and her son installed. The room is cluttered with files, boxes and crates containing documents on everything from the history of the Stoney Point reoccupation to translations of native teachings. Besides doing speaking tours and interviews to tell the Stoney Point people's story, Simon is transforming the chapel into a native cultural resource center and library.

It's February and when she opens the door to the spacious, unheated main chapel, a blast of cold air rushes in. Inside, the walls are posted with more news clippings and photos, and surrounding several tightly-packed bookshelves are more crates of books and unassembled shelving units. Simon figures the former confessional boxes can be used as study carrels. "See," she knocks on the interior paneling, "already soundproofed."

Back in the living quarters, a friend from Toronto's Anti-Racism Coalition is photocopying and organizing news stories and reports while a VCR copies a documentary on the native standoff at Gustafsen Lake in British Columbia to be sent to the First Nation people on Walpole Island 50 miles away in Lake St. Clair.

Center of Their Struggle

For Simon, a teacher of the Ojibwa language, "the recovery and teaching of the old ways" is at the center of the Stoney Point community's struggle for self-determination. This means educating themselves and others about their own history and about other native movements as well. She sees the many groundless charges brought by local police as a tactic by the government "to keep our people's time and energy tied up in the courts," obstructing the community-building work so vital to their movement.

Simon cites the multiple charges of forcible detainment and entry stemming from the infamous night of September 6, 1995 when police opened fire on unarmed Stoney Point protesters, wounding two and killing her cousin, Dudley George. Forty-three of those charges were withdrawn by the Crown on the first morning of the trial, when the government acknowledged it had no legal basis for winning its case.

A month prior to the shootings on July 29, 1995, and two years after the initial native reoccupation of the surrounding grounds, about one hundred members of the Stoney Point First Nation moved onto the Ipperwash military barracks on the southwest corner of the reserve, evicting approximately twenty military personnel. The Stoney Pointers mistrusted the federal government's promise that the land would be returned as soon as negotiations for environmental cleanup were completed, seeing it as another in a series of stalling ploys.

As military surveillance and harassment continued, tensions ran high and patience ran out. A young Stoney Pointer finally asserted their land rights by driving a bus through the door of the army drill hall. The action succeeded in bringing attention to the Stoney Point people's demand for an immediate and serious response to their claim. After the bus was rammed from behind by a military jeep, and the driver and passenger sprayed with pepper gas, two Oneida First Nation conciliators advised military withdrawal as the only reasonable solution to the standoff. The following morning the front page of the Toronto Globe and Mail featured a photo of Marcia Simon shaking hands with the base commander as he surrendered the compound.

Then, on September 4, after the adjacent Ipperwash Provincial Park was closed for the season, the Stoney Pointers moved onto the park land, where their ancestral burial grounds are located, to recover the rest of the territory lost over the last sixty years. The next day, recently elected right-wing Ontario Premier Mike Harris held a high-level meeting with various provincial officials and police in which, according to the Toronto Star as well as several independent sources, he ordered them to "get the fucking Indians out of the park, even if you have to use your weapons." In a scenario too reminiscent of the setup at Pine Ridge, the Ontario Provincial Police began a massive buildup of force including snipers, a riot squad and a tactical response unit armed with machine guns. The OPP also contacted the Canadian Army for assistance requesting fifty gas masks, and night-vision goggles, one hundred bulletproof vests, two Huey helicopters and two Bison personnel carriers.

On the following evening of September 6, a neighboring "Kettle and Stoney Point" band councilor, publicly hostile to the Stoney Pointers (see chronology this page), was involved in a confrontation with the people reoccupying the park. At 8:19 p.m. he made a complaint of assault to the OPP. The police responded with a force of over 250 armed personnel against the approximately 35 unarmed Stoney Pointers present. Eye witnesses say that after 40 riot police broke formation and attacked the protesters, a Stoney Point youth drove a bus between the two groups in an attempt to separate them. It was then that police opened fire, injuring the bus driver. Dudley George, some distance from the bus, was mortally wounded.

Scene of Police Violence

Though the state had brought in every imaginable kind of military vehicle, no ambulances were provided. Dudley's brother and sister had to drive him to the hospital themselves in a '77 Chevy, which soon developed a flat tire. When they finally reached the hospital, both brother and sister were immediately arrested and jailed for attempted murder. By the time they were released the next morning their brother Dudley was dead. Back at the scene of the violence, Stoney Point witnesses counted 50 empty liquor bottles around the campfire where police had assembled the evening before.

Marcia remembers that night as terrifying, tragic and bizarre. She wasn't present at the scene of the shootings, but knowing a serious confrontation was developing, she and her mother drove toward it, hoping, as elders and women, to help maintain calm. But they soon met Stoney Pointers driving toward them and away from the disturbance, yelling frantically for them to turn back, saying, "the cops are shooting everything up, and some people have holes in them."

Marcia immediately headed toward the nearest phone booth to call for ambulances, since telephone service at the former base had been unlawfully cut by authorities after the takeover. Her mother looked back to see the police cars in pursuit and guns leveled at them. But, Marcia says, "I figured once they saw I was only trying to call for medical help, they'd withdraw their guns."

Once inside the phone booth, however, she turned to see police aiming shotguns at her from all directions. To her desperate demand for ambulances and media coverage for protection, the operator replied that she would connect her with the police. "It's the police that are shooting us!" Marcia cried. She was grabbed violently from behind, thrown on a cruiser's hood and forced to the ground. She was handcuffed so tightly that circulation was cut in her wrist, still healing from bone graft surgery. The officers rained angry threats on her mother when she urged them to loosen the cuffs on Marcia's wrist. "They were so enraged," Marcia recalls, "I was afraid they were going to blow her away."

Without officially arresting her, police took mug shots, fingerprinted and jailed her. From her cell she could hear officers listening to calls from the injured who were trying to get to the hospital. "They were monitoring them, but they wouldn't help them."

In the morning, never having been informed of the reason for her arrest, Marcia was not allowed to walk home on the threat of being charged with escaping custody. Instead, the OPP inexplicably drove her around back roads before finally turning her over to Kettle Point police for release.

The experience left her traumatized and grief stricken at the loss of her cousin Dudley, who she had "sort of adopted as a son." "They targeted him," she says, "They knew he was the heart of our movement." In fact, friends overheard police threatening Dudley the day of his death, saying that he would be the "first."

Marcia tried to return to her job teaching Ojibwa in the Ontario school system, but it was too soon after the traumatic experience. She was not provided with counseling and support usually offered by the school system and unable to continue working under the emotional stress, she reluctantly resigned, with no one to replace her. Since September of last year she has devoted her time to telling the Stoney Point people's story in interviews and on speaking tours. She believes this work is crucial in order to counteract the negative propaganda campaign waged by the military, police, provincial government and powerful local opposition groups in their attempt to isolate and criminalize the Stoney Point movement for justice and self-determination.

Ironically, one of these antagonistic groups is the leadership of the neighboring "Kettle and Stoney Point Band," which is posed against them in competition for the Stoney Point land. This "internal" conflict, between native peoples arises, as Marcia describes it, from an "externally-imposed situation." She is referring to the fact that after the Stoney Point people's forced removal in 1942, government documents began referring to the Kettle Point band, on whose reserve many Stoney Point families became refugees, as the "Kettle and Stony Point Band" (note the "e" dropped from Stoney).

This lumping together of the bands' names was part of an underhanded and unlawful strategy to extinguish the Stoney Point First Nation as a separate self-determining people. In this case the tactic has been first to merge, then divide and conquer. Now government negotiators exploit resentments between the communities caused by years of forced overcrowding on the swampy lands of Kettle Point.

Not all Kettle Point members are hostile to the Stoney Point people's movement to reclaim their land and distinct identity. Some, after all, are relatives and life-long friends. However, the Kettle Point leadership and council has shown disdain for the underlying issue of justice by colluding with the federal government for their own self-interest. Now, when negotiations are held for the return of the confiscated land, the Canadian government recognizes only the "Kettle and Stony Point Band" council. In fact, there is no actual representation from the people of Stoney Point. Here is the familiar colonial policy of designating as native spokespersons a few individuals willing to make deals brokering land and political power, which in effect, marginalizes and silences voices of opposition.

Along with animosity from the Kettle Point leadership, the OPP and the Ontario government, Stoney Pointers face the enmity of a local "property rights" hate group formed under the acronym, ON FIRE (Ontario Foundation of Individual Rights and Equality). At a rally, they called for charges of criminal negligence to be dropped against the OPP officer who shot and killed Dudley George. Members distributed a brief at the rally titled, "The Ipperwash Protest—An Unfinished Drama," written by John C. Thompson and produced by the Mackenzie Institute for the Study of Terrorism, Revolution and Propaganda, a powerful right-wing think tank with links to many reactionary organizations, including the North Ameri can World Anti-Communist League, Citizens for Foreign Aid Reform, as well as the Canadian Armed Forces.

In an earlier brief, "The Legacy of Oka," Thompson recommended that the Canadian state hire, equip and train police as a counterinsurgency force to avoid "prolonged negotiations" in any further confrontations with First Nations.

In light of the drastic police actions at recent native reclamation protests, such as the standoff at Gustafsen Lake, British Columbia and Stoney Point, it appears that Canadian officials are heeding Thompson's recommendations.

In the midst of these ongoing threats and challenges, however, Marcia has recently become a grandmother. Her hopes for the Stoney Point people are seasoned with a realistic sense of humor that characterizes the resiliency of their movement. "Potawatomi people never take anything for granted. We know you have to expect the unexpected and be ready to act spontaneously because things can always backfire. Sometimes you have to turn things on their heads, eat your dessert first," She laughs. "That's being true Potawatomi."

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